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Great-Power Rivalries, Tibetan Guerrilla Resistance, and the Cold War in South Asia: Introduction

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Great-Power Rivalries, Tibetan Guerrilla Resistance, and the Cold War in South Asia

Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies* explores the impact of the Cold War in South Asia and specifically in Tibet, a large, mountainous region best known for its forbidding terrain, natural beauty, Buddhist culture and traditions, and history of domination by external powers, especially China. During the first few decades of the Cold War, Tibet was a fulcrum of great-power rivalry. The articles below, as well as an earlier article in the journal by John Kenneth Knaus,¹ shed valuable light not only on the experience of Tibet itself but also on the role of guerrilla warfare, separatist movements, and external intervention in Cold War conflicts. Initial versions of the articles were presented at a two-day international conference at Harvard University organized by the Harvard Cold War Studies Project in April 2002. Following the conference, the authors revised their papers and submitted them to the journal for review. Ten papers, including the one by Knaus, were eventually accepted for publication. Seven are appearing in this special issue, and the full collection will be published next year by Rowman & Littlefield as an edited book.

Background

Tibet enjoyed four decades of de facto independence in the first half of the twentieth century, from 1911 to 1950. Neither the Chinese Nationalist government [End Page 5] nor any foreign country ever formally recognized Tibet as an independent state, but Tibetans controlled their own domestic and foreign affairs during these years without interference from Beijing. This situation lasted until late 1950, roughly a year after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized power in Beijing, drove the Nationalist government into exile on the island of Taiwan, and established a new People's Republic of China (PRC). The leader of the CCP, Mao Zedong, ordered the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to reassert control of Tibet, an operation that began with incursions into the Kham region in southeastern Tibet in October 1950. Through a combination of military and political pressure, the Chinese authorities gradually tightened their political, economic, and cultural hold over Tibet and compelled the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and national leader of Tibet, to sign a "Seventeen-Point Agreement" in May 1951 that treated Tibet as an integral and permanent part of China.² The relinquishment of Tibet's independence was a bitter setback for the Dalai Lama and his followers, but the Tibetan leader had been left with little choice after the Tibetan government's urgent appeals to the United Nations and to the major Western governments had failed to elicit any support. Although Tibet was supposed to receive a good deal of cultural, political, and economic autonomy under the Seventeen-Point Agreement, the Chinese authorities regarded that provision as a purely temporary measure—as indeed it proved to be.

Over the next eight years, the PRC attempted to consolidate its dominion over Tibet, though with only partial success. Periodic outbursts of mass unrest, notably in 1956 and 1958, highlighted the deep resentment that many Tibetans felt toward China for its increasingly heavy-handed presence. In March 1959 a large-scale uprising against Communist rule broke out in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. Mao sent additional units of the PLA into Tibet to crush the rebellion and impose a harsher regime. The operation caused extensive bloodshed and forced the Dalai Lama and his advisers to flee to neighboring India, where they set up a temporary government in the Kangra Valley town of Dharamsala, some 200 kilometers west of the Tibetan border. (The Tibetan government-in-exile, known as the Kashag, has been based in Dharamsala ever since.) Although the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) actively supported Tibetan guerrilla forces against the PRC in the late 1950s and 1960s, the United States in subsequent decades accorded far greater priority to its relationship with China than to Tibet. At no point—even when [End Page 6] the ...

SPECIAL ISSUE

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1. John Kenneth Kraus, "Official Policies and Covert Programs: The U.S. State Department, the CIA, and the Tibetan Resistance," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Summer 2003), pp. 54–79.

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