

Tibet in China's Diplomacy: The Implications of the Trojan Horse Hypothesis

Pr. Robert Barnett founded and runs the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia, the first Western teaching program in this field. Before joining Columbia in 1998, Professor Barnett worked as a researcher and journalist based in the United Kingdom, specializing in Tibetan issues for the BBC, the South China Morning Post, and other media outlets. He was the co-founder and director of the Tibet Information Network from 1987 to 1998, an independent research and news organization based in London.

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The Trojan Horse scenario occurs when a country conceals a major demand within a minor issue in order to obtain disproportionate advantage from another country. The recipient country misreads the demand as a minor issue and miscalculates the cost of concessions. These concessions then expose the country to disproportionate vulnerabilities beyond the original issue and that country's potential for negotiation becomes more limited. Professor Barnett argues that since 1989, China has used minor issues

related to Tibet¹ as Trojan Horses towards competitor states, especially Western countries such as France, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States, in order to enhance its position at a global level. In this context, what is the role of Tibet in China's foreign policy towards the West? In focusing on the particular mechanisms involved in China's Tibet diplomacy, this report aims at defining alternative diplomatic choices for the West and promoting a more rational international decision-making process.

1- Tibet in China's southwest, Xinjiang in the northwest, and Inner Mongolia in the north are recognized by Beijing as autonomous regions.



The Trojan Horse Hypothesis

The hypothesis that arises from the Trojan Horse scenario is that a protagonist state gains diplomatically by making the most demands about the smallest issue, whereas the recipient state gains most by making the smallest possible concessions – or no concession at all.



There are two kinds of Trojan Horses: (1) the inducement-based Trojan Horse, presenting something pleasant and appealing to another country; (2) the demand-based Trojan Horse, insisting on another country's acceptance of the demand. An example of the inducement-based Trojan Horse is the Chinese "general principles first" negotiation strategy: the emphasis on the "mutual benefit" of the agreement is often required by China as an attractive guiding principle in negotiations, but if accepted in fact implies compliance by the other party. A country must be very careful when accepting this inducement-based Trojan Horse. As far as Chinese demand-based Trojan Horses are concerned, recent examples of demands include: demanding the US to refuse entry to Li Tenghui in 1995, pressing for a Norwegian apology after the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo in 2010, preventing Taiwan from joining certain international organizations and calling on heads of state to stop meeting with the Dalai Lama. These are small issues that China magnifies and presents as major ones in order to force concessions from competitor states.



The High Costs of Concessions

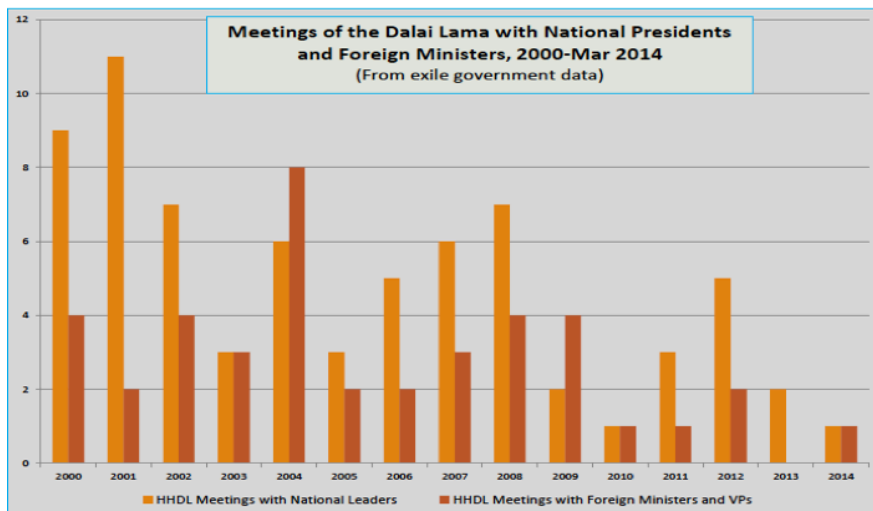
As far as the Tibet case is concerned, it has proven to be a dramatically successful strategy for China. Over the last 15 years, meetings between the Dalai Lama and National Presidents have significantly decreased (from 9 in 2000 to 1 in 2014), as have meetings with Foreign Ministers (4 in 2000, 1 in 2014).

According to Robert Barnett, conceding to China's demands on the Dalai Lama issue rapidly diminished negotiating space of several countries. After conceding to important demands on the Tibet issue in 2008, the British lost negotiating space and found themselves having to plead to China in 2012. Following the controversy surrounding the 2010 Nobel Peace prize, the Norwegians are in a similar position and they are still pleading for normalization. Nepal has lost all bargaining power in the face of constant pressure from China to control Tibetan refugees, and this despite accepting all previous Chinese demands. Therefore, why do governments concede?

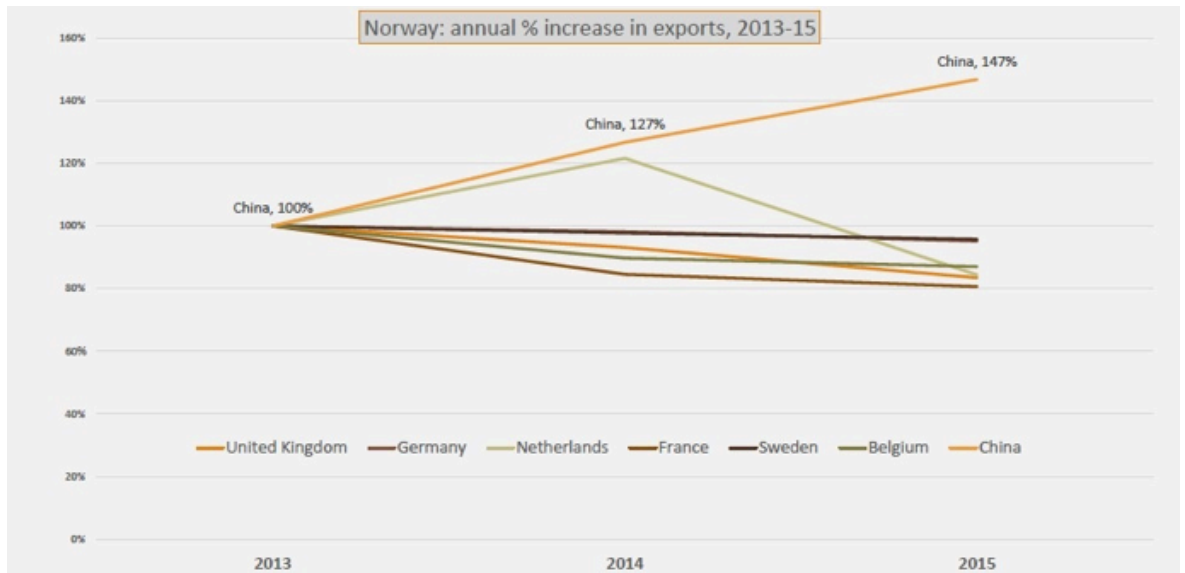


The Conceptual, Political and Economical Factors for Concessions

One of the factors involved is response inflation: the Chinese side says the people of China will be angered if the demand/gift is refused - if a country proceeds with a meeting with the Dalai Lama for example. It suggests that, although for Western countries the issue is inherently minor, the issue is in fact very important to China. This produces a conceptual polarity for the recipient government, that sees the issue as minor for them and major for China. An apparently coherent syllogism arises: this issue matters to China, it doesn't matter to Western countries, therefore Western countries can give China what it wants at no cost.



Meetings of the Dalai Lama with National Presidents and Foreign Ministers (2000-2015) Robert Barnett, 2016



Norway-China exports during the diplomatic freeze
Robert Barnett, 2016



UK-China trade after conceding to demands
Mission permanente de la république populaire de Chine aux Nations Unies, Press Communiqué between China and France, 2009.
Available at <http://www.china-un.org/eng/gyzg/t555932.htm>.

The second factor involved is the fear that there will be high political or economic costs for refusing concessions to China. However, figures do not seem to confirm such negative consequences. Political costs for refusal to concede seem to have been very minor until recently. The only sustained political costs occurred with Norway in 2010 – a partial diplomatic freeze – and with the United Kingdom in 2012. From 1989 to 2010, political costs for refusal appear to have been negligible. The Norway/UK punishment was the result of a chain of successive concessions to earlier Trojan Horse demands. As concessions are made, China’s relative strength increases and leads to the progressive erosion of the competitor state’s diplomatic capacities. Indeed, weak responses over time lead to greater punishment.

As far as economic costs are concerned, there is little evidence of significant impact of refusal to concede, even in the case of Norway. In fact, even though Norway has not apologized for the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize, bilateral trade significantly increased with Norwegian imports from China increasing from \$6 billion in 2014 to \$7.3 billion in 2015. Moreover, Norway was accepted by China as a founding member of the Beijing-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and China became the sixth largest recipient of Norwegian goods for the first time, with a value of \$2.7 billion².

The United Kingdom, which conversely made significant concessions, saw their exports increase at about half the rate in percentage terms of Norway’s China exports.

2- Lanteigne M., “Towards the Thaw: Seeking Clarity in China-Norway Relations, in *The Diplomat*, 2016. Available at: <http://the-diplomat.com/2016/01/towards-the-thaw-seeking-clarity-in-sino-norwegian-relations/>.



Effectiveness of a Trojan Horse

First, a Trojan Horse does not work with strong governments. The US was susceptible to Chinese demands until recently, but has become less so in recent years and has faced no costs or penalties for refusal to concede on Dalai Lama meetings. More significantly, though India has the Dalai Lama living in its country and provides schools and services for thousands of Tibetan refugees, the country is so strongly placed on the Tibetan issue that China does not make Trojan Horse demands, such as stopping meetings with the Dalai Lama let alone expelling the exile government. Trojan Horses are not used against states which know that they have real leverage in their China relations. Only weak countries or countries that consider themselves weak in terms of negotiating face Trojan Horse demands from China.

A critical way in which a Trojan Horse strategy is made effective is by making the issue appear to be about another related and much more sensitive issue. China presents small issues such as Dalai Lama meetings as if there were as important as taking a stand on the Tibet issue. However, whether an official representative meets with the Dalai Lama does not involve actual decisions about the Tibetan issue, nor does it represent a statement on the status of Tibet. The Tibet Trojan Horse is not about the Tibetan issue itself – major to China - but about demanding that foreign leaders not meet the Dalai Lama. The significance of meeting the Dalai Lama is in real terms extremely small since there are no military or economic implications.

Robert Barnett argues that China can actually gain from a failure with a Trojan Horse demand since it could then accuse a competitor country of being antagonistic or of interfering in national affairs. The smaller the issue, the greater the perception of diplomatic weakness if a country concedes.

Trojan Horse demands and response inflation are not used with major issues. There is relatively little response inflation over freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea, Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) overflights or other major strategic issues.

Several Trojan Horses have been ignored by Western powers at no cost. For example, the initial demand from China's Minister of Foreign Affairs concerning the 2010 Dalai Lama visit to the US was that he should be banned from entering the country but this was completely ignored by the American government and Western media.



The Strategic Foreign Policy Purpose of China's Trojan Horses

Western European responses to the Tibet Trojan Horse been marked by a more serious development, overcompensation - conceding more than required. Robert Barnett believes that between 2008 and 2009, France, Denmark and the United Kingdom made concessions to China that went beyond logical requirements. These were seen by them as necessary compensation for refusals to concede to earlier Trojan Horse demands on the Dalai Lama. On 1 April 2009, France and China issued a joint statement³ which reasonably conceded that France recognized Tibet as part of China, but went on to state unnecessarily that "France refuses to support any form of 'Tibet independence'". According to Professor Barnett, Denmark made a similar unnecessary statement a few months later, thus demonstrating overcompensation. Issuing an unusual single-issue public statement on an issue that was already clearly established in itself was an excessive concession, since it implied that they were making an apology to China. More significant was the British statement on Tibet in October 2008⁴, which Pr. Barnett considers a striking example of diplomatic miscalculation in recent British history: while it could be considered reasonable that it conceded that Tibet was part of China, this was the first time the British had ever done so, and it was done without asking any reciprocal concession from the Chinese side. In addition, it appeared to make a major unnecessary concession in addition by disclaiming Britain's 'previous treaty arrangements with Tibet.

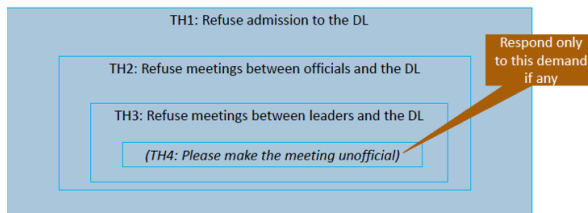
Although Trojan Horses use minor issues as their vehicles, they have important strategic purposes, such as reducing a competitor's long-term negotiating competency. Robert Barnett argues that China had a set of external policy objectives for Tibet such as 1/ Get all countries, especially the United Kingdom, to recognise Tibet as part of China 2/ Get all countries to refuse to meet the Dalai Lama 3/ Get neighbouring countries to ban anti-Chinese activities on their soil 4/ Get beyond-the-periphery countries to say they oppose Tibetan independence. China achieved a significant number of these major objectives, including the first. It has achieved the last one with France and Denmark.

3- Mission permanente de la république populaire de Chine aux Nations Unies, Press Communiqué between China and France, 2009. Available at <http://www.china-un.org/eng/gyzg/t555932.htm>.

4- UK Foreign Secretary David Miliband affirmed that Tibet was part of China although Beijing had rarely publicly demanded this concession. Until the statement, the British position on Tibet was a restatement of its historic "suzerainty" position, according to which Tibet was an "autonomous region in which China had a special position". This stance derived from its colonial history and was based on treaties signed with the Tibetan government - notably the Simla Accords of 1913-14 which established the boundaries between Tibet and British-administered India.

Responding to a Trojan Horse

Robert Barnett believes that a Trojan Horse (TH) usually has several other ones stacked inside it like a Russian doll: each one becomes apparent if the largest one is rejected. Thus, one guideline for response is to discard the large demands, and then identify and respond to the smallest one. He argues that a few months before the Obama-Dalai Lama meeting in 2010, Chinese diplomats privately admitted that they knew the demands of cancelling the meeting would be refused. For China, the real issue was that the meeting should be private and unofficial and consequently not held in the Oval office but in the Map Room⁵.



An example of stacked Trojan Horses
Robert Barnett, 2016

Responding to a Trojan Horse implies taking several steps: 1/ Identify the core issue within a chain of demands and discard those demands that are tactical attempts to get cheap concessions 2/ Respond to the demands of the issue itself, not to larger issues that are bundled with it 3/ Treat all demands as attempts to reduce one's negotiating strength 4/ Be proactive not reactive - Trojan Horse demands are a proactive form of symbolic politics, and the effective low-cost response is to use symbolic politics in return⁶.

Conclusion

According to Professor Barnett, the Dalai Lama issue points to a weakness in diplomatic capacity and decision-making ability in Western countries. This can be seen as a failure of institutional memory in how to handle unexpected negotiating strategies. The concessions

5- The Oval Office is the official office of the US President of the United States, located in the West Wing of the White House and the Map Room is its official home. The previous meeting of a US President with the Dalai Lama in 2007 had been public and official, a serious symbolic setback for the Chinese side.

6- In 2015, for example, the US used a "prayer breakfast" where religious leaders including the Dalai Lama were gathered to meet the US President, thus scoring a symbolic achievement at a relatively low cost. A meeting with the President yet gave the Dalai Lama recognition as a Presidential guest - and at an official event. In February 2016, a similar strategy was seen at the February 2016 UNHCHR event in Geneva where three Nobel Peace Prize recipients were invited to speak about human rights, as well as with the letter of the 12 western countries criticizing China for human rights abuses the following month.

made by Western governments on the issue also reflect a weakness in Western democratic systems whereby, short-term political appointees are able to overrule diplomats and advisers who in principle should represent long-term interests. Robert Barnett believes that overall negotiation with China should be based on a principle of robust consistency without being either passive or aggressive, and that Western countries⁷, should themselves seek to take initiatives in symbolic politics of this kind.

Questions and Answers

• On Western countries' need for China's help

Jean-Philippe Béja, co-founder of China Perspectives and Emeritus Research Fellow at Sciences Po, pointed out that politicians, often driven by short-term economic considerations, will accept concessions to China in order to protect trade ties and to solve several world financial or security issues – ISIS, North Korea. Even though he agreed that political positions do not necessarily match economic ties, he argued that most European leaders fear that by standing firm on the Tibetan issue, China will turn to other competitor countries. However, Professor Barnett reaffirmed that there was no credible evidence of significant economic loss following responses to China's demands, nor any proven link with China's help on international issues. He brought attention to the politicians' responsibility to represent this reality in their discourse in order to gain in principles. Western countries would gain negotiating space and respect by being more proactive and assertive. Furthermore, while carrying out excessive gestures could harm Tibetan people, silence damages their interests as well. Hence, our response to Chinese Trojan Horses must be skilled and calibrated.

• On Japan's knowledge for negotiating with China

Jean-François Huchet, former Director of the Hong-Kong based French Centre for Research on Contemporary China and Professor of Economics at INALCO, asked about the knowledge of Japan on Chinese symbolic politics and suggested that Eastern countries might be more used to this kind of diplomacy. Indeed, the Cold War created a context in which Western states did not think in terms of symbolic issues, but developed instead a mindset of "communism diplomacy", a diplomacy of bluster and inflated assertions. Robert Barnett explained that China has not been treated as a traditional Communist state in terms of diplomatic dealings since 1978-80, as if its liberal economy allowed diplomats to speak differently to China compared to other Communist countries. On the other hand, Robert Barnett stated that Japan has a historical knowledge of Chinese diplomacy: in 1976, in the midst of very important negotiations with China, a Japanese diplomat wrote an article describing the principles and strategies of Chinese diplomacy which is still useful today.

7- According to Pr. Barnett, Eastern Europe has a better understanding of the way a communist state's diplomacy works.