

The 17 Point Agreement Backgrounder

THE SEVENTEEN POINT AGREEMENT: BACKGROUND

In November 1950, with Chinese forces on its doorstep, the Government of Tibet in Lhasa sent an urgent appeal for assistance to the United Nations. Despite a series of diplomatic efforts, the appeal was unsuccessful. By 1951, with 40,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops already in Tibet, with the Tibetan army in disarray and with most of the two eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo under occupation, Tibetans had no alternative but to enter into direct negotiations with Chinese authorities. In a desperate effort to maintain Tibet's sovereignty, the 16-year old Dalai Lama appointed Kalon (Cabinet Minister) Ngabo Ngawang Jigme as his chief negotiating representative and mandated him to head a fifteen member delegation to China. The delegation was instructed to consult with the Kashag (Cabinet) and the Dalai Lama before concluding any agreement with the Chinese authorities.

On April 29, 1951, the Tibetan and Chinese delegations met at an army headquarters in Beijing. As negotiations proceeded, it became increasingly clear that the Chinese would not agree to any of the Tibetan positions, particularly their demand that no Chinese troops be stationed in Tibet. All negotiating positions put forward by the Tibetan delegation were rejected and delegates were threatened with physical violence and kept virtual prisoners by their Chinese hosts. Furthermore, the Tibetan negotiators were not given permission to contact the Kashag in Lhasa, nor the Dalai Lama who was stationed temporarily in Dromo, near the Indian border. Instead they were required to comply with Chinese positions, or risk immediate military advance on Lhasa.

Following days of debate characterized by continuous compromise by the Tibetan delegation, the agreement was finally concluded. It guaranteed, among other things, that the existing political system in Tibet would be maintained and that the authority of the Dalai Lama would not be challenged (see full text below). Final copies of the agreement were signed by both delegations on May 23, 1951 but without requesting or receiving approval from the Kashag or the Dalai Lama. As the Tibetan delegation did not have final authority to sign any agreement, they were not in possession of Tibet's official government seal. The seal appearing on the document is therefore a copy allegedly

forged in Beijing by Chinese authorities.

Before the Kashag and Dalai Lama were told of the agreement, Chinese officials announced "the peaceful liberation" of Tibet on Peking radio on April 27, 1951. The Dalai Lama describes his initial reaction to the announcement as one of "terrible shock". He decided nevertheless, to delay public repudiation until he had had the opportunity to consult directly with his delegates after their return from China. When the officials arrived in Dromo, they were accompanied by Chinese General Zhang Jingwu who managed to convince the Dalai Lama that re-negotiation of the agreement would be difficult now, but possible at a later date. On this premise, the young Dalai Lama decided to return to Lhasa with his ministers where he was immediately faced with an escalation of Chinese military presence. By September 1951, 3000 troops were stationed in Lhasa and that number quickly increased to 20,000. It would be 1959 before the Dalai Lama was free to repudiate the Seventeen Point Agreement - only after he had arrived safely into exile in India. At a press conference in Mussorie, India on June 20, 1959, the Dalai Lama said,

"The consent of the Tibetan Government was secured under duress and at the point of the bayonet. My representatives were compelled to sign the agreement under threat of further military operations against Tibet by the invading armies of China leading to utter ravage and ruin of the country."

While his repudiation officially nullifies the Seventeen Point Agreement, there is little question that it lacked any credibility from the outset. Chinese troops had already occupied Tibet's eastern provinces in the spring of 1951 and the agreement itself imposed further PLA troop deployment as one.