Since the breakdown of talks between representatives of the Dalai Lama and Beijing, the strategy of dialogue on the question of Tibet has widely been regarded as a failure. But should the abrupt halt to formal Sino-Tibetan political contacts be taken as a signal of the end of the strategy of dialogue as such? In her presentation to the Critical Issues seminar introducing the Tibet governance initiative, Dr. Tashi Rabgey, Research Professor of International Affairs at George Washington University's Elliott School, observed that this assessment of the past decades of dialogue is based on a misrecognition of the nature and dynamics of the Sino-Tibetan political engagement.

Drawing on her analysis in an early policy monograph she coauthored, *Sino-Tibetan Dialogue in the Post-Mao Era: Lessons and Prospects*, Rabgey contended that both sides miscalculated and brought expectations to the table that did not correspond to actual political conditions. As such, the direct political engagement of recent decades should be seen not so much as a dialogue process toward a negotiated settlement – as it is commonly regarded – but rather as a *de facto* process of examining risks and reducing uncertainties through institutional learning of mutual political stakes. This process, which Rabgey noted international relations theory would call the “prenegotiation” phase, is one that tends to be most effective outside the formal stage of political theater.

Building on this insight, Rabgey has led the development of an academic dialogue process on Tibet with policy researchers affiliated with the Chinese State Council in Beijing. Now in its seventh year, the Tibet Governance and Practice (TGAP) initiative has become an annual set of meetings on the challenges of governance in Tibet convened by a partnership of international organizations and officially hosted in the PRC by a research unit of the State Council’s Development Research Center (DRC). The TGAP process has included not only global scholars from leading research institutions from the US, Canada and Europe, but also respected Tibetan civic leaders from Tibet whose voices are marginalized inside the PRC.

Central to the TGAP process has been Rabgey’s argument that sustainable engagement and dialogue on China’s Tibet policy requires a reframing of the dispute itself. During the initial exploratory meeting in Oslo in 2008, Rabgey pointed out a fundamental tension in the two dominant modes of conceptualizing the nature of the Tibet issue – the global discourse of “human rights” and the Chinese state discourse of “economic development.” Drawing on the example of language policy in Tibetan rural education, she argued that both the rights-based and developmental discourses missed key dimensions of the lived experience of the majority of Tibetans in Tibet.

As an alternative, Rabgey proposed the paradigm of “governance” as an analytical framework that would make these dimensions of Tibetan collective experience more visible while placing the core problem of decision-making at the center of deliberations. Through the governance framework, attention would shift away from both the problem of individual entitlements of the rights-based discourse, as well as the predetermined notions of modernity of the developmental discourse, and focus instead on structures of governance in specific problematic policy areas – such
as language use, environmental protection or nomadic resettlement – as a means by which to trace circuits of power relations that shape decision-making and policy outcomes.

Accordingly, the early years of the Tibet governance meetings explored the feasibility of this governance framework and examined substantive policy topics. These discussions addressed education policy (University of Virginia, 2009), development policy (Oslo, 2010) and social business (Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, 2010). A milestone was reached at the 2011 meeting in Beijing when a new consensus was established for the launch of a forum on Tibetan governance. The inaugural TGAP Forum was convened in 2012 in Québec on *Tibetan Language Policy and Practice* in cooperation with Université du Québec à Montréal and McGill University. The second TGAP Forum was convened in Shanghai in 2013 on *Conservation, Resource Management and Local Governance in Tibet* at the Harvard Shanghai Center and co-hosted by the Harvard Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. In 2014, the TGAP process began exploratory discussions on multilevel governance as an emerging policy concept in comparative contexts.

Over these past seven years of engagement, the TGAP initiative has expanded the network of Chinese research and policy institutions willing to take a new look at the question of Tibet. These institutions have included the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Central Party School, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as well as major universities and thinktanks. With the acknowledgement that there are important areas of disagreement between stakeholders and that some topics are not yet reconcilable, the TGAP process has created an inclusive academic space in which contending points of view can be constructively raised and productively deliberated.

At a time when the entire region has been rocked by waves of self-immolations, the Tibet governance initiative has managed to quietly forge a new platform for Tibetan voices to be heard inside the PRC. The process has in fact sought to normalize not only critical Tibetan perspectives from inside the region, but also the possibility of Tibetan civic and scholarly engagement in policy dialogue on governance challenges with national-level institutions in Beijing.

At the same time, the focused and incremental approach of the TGAP process has also enabled the quiet discussion of some of the most contentious underlying issues in the Sino-Tibetan dispute – issues such as the scope of what should be defined as “Tibet;” the political implications of the distinct and growing sense of Tibetan collective consciousness; and the fundamental question of power sharing and regional autonomy in decision-making processes in Tibet.

In essence, then, the TGAP process has become more than a risk management strategy for the stakeholders involved. By sharpening mutual understandings of the political and institutional stakes involved in specific policy areas, the initiative has also begun the task of building the foundations of an institutional mechanism for identifying collective Tibetan needs and interests in the sustainable governance of the region. As such, Rabgey concluded, the Tibet governance process has essentially begun the task of shaping a policy agenda that can help structure prospective Sino-Tibetan dialogue on Tibet’s autonomous future.