



Alternative Strategies for India towards Tibet Between Assertion and Measured Silence

Bhavna Singh

Research Officer, IPCS

While many significant issues have been examined by Chinese and Indian leaders in their foregoing dialogues to normalize relations, the Tibetan question continues to lurk in the dark. The Indian government for its part has been intermittent on its approach to the status of Tibetans in India. While the 2005 visit of Premier Wen Jiabao had elicited hopes of reflection on the Tibet issue between the two countries, the December 2010 visit reflected total red carpeting. The growing disinclination of the two sides to discuss the matter is contextualised best in the burgeoning economic relationship between the two Asian powers.

The reservation from mentioning the 'One China policy' in the joint communiqué signed between India and China at the end of the latest Chinese visit also perhaps reflects a rethinking from the perspective of Indian foreign policy agendas. The maintenance of the status quo not only prevents the 'internationalization' of the Tibet issue but also fits in the larger policy goal of attaining a permanent seat in the UN Security Council by India. Given India's geopolitical circumstances, there are only limited options that are available to its leaders. This paper explores a practicable solution to India's Tibet conundrum through the prism of core interests and political and economic bargaining amongst the three concerned parties.

I CHINA'S CORE CONCERNS: 'MIGHT IS RIGHT'

The Chinese attitude to Tibetan Autonomous region (TAR) has been and continues to be governed by an intense fervour of nationalism evident in its territorial claims and its attempts to include TAR into the mainstream through economic development. The Chinese White Paper on Tibet states that regional ethnic autonomy was established in Tibet after 'peaceful liberation' of Tibet from the 'clutches of the feudal lords' in 1965. Since then China has maintained Tibet as a core concern along with Taiwan. Within the ambit of its minority policies, China has endeavoured hard to modernize and

change the mindsets of the Tibetan people through a policy of 'patriotic education'.

Two major concerns explain the current trust deficit between the Chinese government and the Tibetan people: first, the dispute over the Dalai Lama's successor, which posits a choice between a successor appointed by the Chinese government who will work in the interests of the mainland and a leader appointed by the Dalai Lama himself representing the interests of the Tibetan community and second, the economic grievances resulting from amassing of several development benefits by the Han migrants marginalising resources for the local Tibetans. The discrepancy between action and rhetoric on part of the Chinese government in delivering the promise of regional and cultural autonomy (laid out in the White Papers of the Chinese government) becomes transposed in terms of continuous rebellion against the State by either violent or peaceful means from time to time.

Moreover, the issue of the Dalai Lama being provided asylum by the Indian state is a constant irritant to political dialogues between the mainland Chinese authorities and the Tibetan leadership. The Chinese government perceives any show of discontent as antithetical to State interests and often blames Dalai Lama for instigating separatism. The Chinese government also believes that there is a consistent attempt by the separatist groups to mislead the international community, pretending to speak on behalf of the "Tibetan people", and denigrating the implementation of the democratic reform to promote social progress as "destruction of culture and religion" and "infringement of human rights." The prospect of loss of territory if TAR is given autonomy is unimaginable for the Chinese, whose growing economic might among other reasons, is encouraging an assertive stance in this matter.

China also maintains that Tibet is strictly a domestic issue and no other country has the right to interfere in this regard, hence the international community

restrains from commenting on Tibet's sovereignty status while criticising the human rights situation and the lack of cultural and religious freedom in this region.

With regards to India, the Chinese government claims the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, labelling it as "Southern Tibet" and the Aksai Chin, which the Government of India strongly refutes. The December visit of the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is significant in terms of the two sides vowing to strengthen confidence-building measures and avoid tensions along a vast disputed border in India's northeast. The Chinese leadership has on its own initiative brought out sensitive matters on the table which reflects that they are willing to acknowledge Indian concerns but are not willing to take any substantial measures to address those concerns.

II TIBETANS: 'SANDWICHED'

The Tibetan community most often finds its position compromised in the face of its domineering claimant. The 'middle way approach' of the Dalai Lama has so far not provided any considerable advantage for Tibetans. The Tibetan sensitivities can be observed more vividly through the various factions working under the auspices of the Tibetan Government in Exile and youth organisations which incessantly spread awareness about the Tibetan cause.

The December 2010 visit was yet again seen by the Tibetan youth as an opportunity to bring to fore their grievances. The Tibetans were aware that this was the first visit of a high-profile Chinese leader since the protests of 2008 in Tibet and thus wanted the Chinese government to take into account the fact that the conditions of Tibetans in Tibet and the situation of political prisoners had become extremely critical. The Tibetan Youth Congress organized a protest rally after obtaining official permission from the Indian police. The demonstrators exhibited a radical approach demanding "Free Tibet Now" and "Tibet's independence is India's security" and even burned an effigy of Wen Jiabao.

Citing several consecutive events, the Tibetan Youth Congress issued a memorandum to the Government

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of India giving opinion to its discomfort with the state of Sino-Indian bilateral developments, especially on the issue of Tibet. Moreover, Tibetans garnered support from several non-governmental agencies and youth associations amongst the Tibetan expatriates. Their efforts are not only a part of the larger struggle for re-acceptance of Dalai Lama in China but also recognition of the rights of other Tibetan émigrés in case of their return to the TAR. The Tibetans are embittered by China's successive attempts at discouraging international support to the Tibetan cause.

The following opinions from the Tibetan youth help in clarifying their position and bringing the issues of concern to the fore. Dhondup Dorjee, the ex Vice-president of the Tibetan Youth Congress stated that "it is high time that India takes a stand on Tibet... if India is aspiring for a UNSC permanent membership, it should also take greater responsibility on the issues of human rights and not shy away from confronting these concerns... We are especially concerned as no other country besides India provides for a permanent refugee status, and in fact under the Indian constitution several of the Tibetans living in India are today eligible for Indian citizenship. Tibet shares a more spiritual relationship with India and we expect the Indian government to put forward our cause in front of the Chinese premier, which has not happened so far."

Tibetan activist and writer Tenzin Tsundue in his writings and interviews emphasizes the state of affairs in Tibet, a militarized zone today instigating constant fear, and criticizes the 'settlement of nomads projects' which has led to destruction of livelihood for the local inhabitants in the TAR. He expressed his disappointment with the rejection of 'genuine autonomy of Tibet within the People's Republic of China' proposed by the Dalai Lama and the lack of political dialogue between the two sides.

At the same time, the de facto prime minister of TGIE or Kalon Tripa, Samdhong Rinpoche outlined the issue of Tibet as being "intertwined with the boundary problem between these two countries. There needs to be a political will in both India and China to resolve the boundary dispute... Until the question of Tibet remains unsolved it is wishful thinking to hope for a lasting peace in the region."

While there is unanimity on the need for greater Indian role on the Tibet issue, internal dissensions in the Tibetan community in exile are becoming increasingly visible. There is increasing bifurcation amongst the youth and the older generation of leaders in terms of the approach to be used to advocate the Tibetan cause. While so far the Tibetan community has managed to garner international support due to its non-violent nature, if the Tibetan youth began to resort to violence it is likely to

undermine the support that their cause receives. Moreover, the urgency for settlement of the Tibetan issue during the lifetime of the current Dalai Lama seems no longer feasible because of the Chinese strategy of waiting him out.

The Indian government's support can go only as far as allowing peaceful demonstration of grievances as was done in December 2010. The visit of the Chinese Premier was paralleled by the Dalai Lama spreading his spiritual messages around various parts of the country (Himachal and Sikkim). However, this does not really mean empathy with the Tibetan cause. Rather the Indian government is aware that as compared to the 2008 scenario, Tibetan opposition to this visit does not elicit grave concern from the Chinese authorities. Moreover, geopolitical exigencies have forced India to consider the growing economic might of its neighbour which it cannot afford to disregard any more.

III

EXPLORING INDIA'S OPTIONS: 'SILENCE IS GOLDEN?'

The TAR has provided a geographical safeguard for India as a buffer region, but in terms of supporting a refugee population India has depended on and buttressed the international outcry for upholding democracy and safeguarding human rights in the region. Meanwhile, India's concerns on Tibet and the Tibetan community in India are driven by a host of political, economic and cultural factors.

Politically, India grapples with the question of how far to link the Tibetan issue with Indian parallels of Kashmir or whether to link them at all. Since the Panchsheel Agreement, 1954 and the 1993 and the 1996 agreements related to the boundary issue India and China have sought to resolve the border but have not succeeded so far. The second concern derives from framing a future policy for the Tibetan community in context of the rising discontent amongst the Tibetan youth. It is possible that in a post-Dalai Lama scenario the Tibetan youth might become unmanageable for the Indian government.

Economically, the Tibetan community, with its population of 1, 20,000 people, is being provided for by the Indian state which requires continuous mobilization of resources. The illegal trade occurring in the border areas with the neighbouring Indian states causes alarm to the Indian government. Thus the larger worry then is how far and till when is India willing to sustain this population on its territory. And if Tibet is to be used 'as a card' against China, then till when is India willing to bide its time?

Culturally, India endeavours to preserve the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with which it has strong linkages. There is also a constant effort to manage and

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strengthen people-to-people contacts between the Tibetan community and border areas in India, in terms of education and employment opportunities. India has also justified its asylum to the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader and not as a leader of the TGIE.

There are myriad opinions amongst the Indian community on how to seek solutions to the above-mentioned political, economic and cultural concerns which can be broadly categorized in two binaries:

Option I: Wait and Watch

Srikanth Kondapalli, Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, JNU, believes that the fact that the Indian foreign ministry has identified Kashmir at an equivalent position of core concern to that of Tibet and Taiwan for China is in itself a new trend. "Though Clause Number One of the joint communiqué mentions that China and India would abide by the previous agreements, however there was no explicit mention of their position. It points towards two possibilities: either diplomatic negotiations have broken down between the two sides on the issue or China is contemplating a quiet step back on its various assertive stances especially the stapled visa issue."

At the same time, the situation is much more favourable to the Tibetan community as first, they have been allowed to demonstrate freely unlike during the earlier visits of Chinese officials. Second, the reluctance to use the word Tibet in the document gives them a certain leeway. The ground realities on both sides also affect their perceptions and are a reflection of the power reality. It is also a testament to the fact that there is much more confidence in the Indian side to address the Tibet issue as compared to previous overtures. However, he warns against jumping to a conclusion that India has jettisoned the "one China policy".

Alka Acharya, Associate Professor, Centre for East Asian Studies, JNU, also believes that one should not equate Tibet and Kashmir at the same level. Though she differs on the outcome of how to construe the verbal signals between the two countries, she does propound a more careful treading of the Chinese

attitude. "If the Chinese give consent to upholding the earlier agreements signed in 2003, 2005-06, then it should be taken as a reiteration of their position. There has been no reversal of the policy and one should not stretch the preference of not mentioning Tibet to any other significance. The visit had mixed outcomes as certain fundamentals governing the bilateral relationship were upheld providing complete satisfaction while there was reluctance and concern. The current developments on Tibet can be fraught with dangerous consequences for the Tibetan community if minutely observed." One should further await gestures from the political leaderships of the two countries to reach a conclusion on the issue.

According to C Raja Mohan, a leading Indian strategic analyst, the Chinese authorities have reluctantly taken into account Indian sensitivities which has led to an understanding on show of "mutual respect and sensitivity for each other's concerns and aspirations." In his words "China and India remain deeply divided over the critical issues of territorial sovereignty, regional security and global governance. Nonetheless, the evolution of India's policy on Tibet and its position vis-à-vis China reflects a balanced and cautious approach devised to accommodate the interests of both entities."

Option II: India needs to Assert

This view is mostly endorsed by the defence community which believes that India needs to adequately assert its stand in the international forums. Brig Gurmeet Kanwal, who heads the Army think-tank the Centre of Land Warfare Studies, is of the opinion that "the unstable security relationship and lack of progress on the resolution of the territorial dispute have the potential to act as a spoiler and will ultimately determine whether these Asian giants will clash or cooperate for mutual gains. China's political, diplomatic and military aggressiveness at the tactical level is hampering further normalisation of relations." Thus, the Sino-Indian relations would shape up depending on how far India is able to assert its independent agendas.

IV THE WAY AHEAD

Most strategic analysts, however, agree that India's position is much constrained by its inability to match China in military and economic terms. Chandrasekhar Dasgupta, former ambassador opines that the joint communiqué's dispensing with the standard reference to India's "one China" policy and its recognition that the Tibet Autonomous Region is an indication of India's position remaining unchanged. He states that it would have hardly been appropriate to reflect these sentiments at a time when the "Chinese position on Kashmir had

suddenly become more opaque."

Hence, future policy formulation will have to be extremely sensitive to the complexities involved. While any irresponsible remarks from the Indian community can destabilize the engagement process between China and India, it is equally necessary for India to voice its core concerns. As put forward by Nirupama Rao, the Indian Foreign Secretary- "The challenge is to find the right balance and maintain a kind of steady equilibrium in taking the relationship with China forward". With the increasing gamut of economic relationship between the two giants, the Tibetan community will have to evaluate and reconsider several of its stands and present its agendas accordingly.

Measured/calculated silence would be in fact the best strategy given the current dynamics. Neither does India have any incentive nor the resources to rake up the Tibetan issue again and again in the bilateral talks. It is also significant that the issue itself does not get red-carpeted and the momentum of deliberations needs to be kept up. With the final goal of the Tibetan community being a return back to its mainland the transfer process would have to be with minimal conflict and endangerment of lives. This however has to come at a significant equivalence of India amassing gains in Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir.

For this purpose it is time that India learnt the ways of the Chinese and use them to its own advantage that is mould Deng Xiaoping's slogan of 'hiding our capabilities and bidding for time' for the purpose of developing Indian capabilities and bidding time. A practicable solution on the Tibetan issue and the Tibetan community in India will be worked out only in a scenario where India becomes indispensable to China and gains certain leverage in military and economic terms and is in a position to exert on behalf of the Tibetans. Since, this is unlikely to happen anywhere in the near future 'measured silence' will be golden.

Select Interviews:

Dhondup Dorjee, ex Vice-president, Tibetan Youth Congress; **Lobsang**, Tibetan Youth Congress, General Secretary; **Srikanth Kondapalli**, Professor at Centre for East Asian Studies, JNU; **Alka Acharya**, Associate Professor at Centre for East Asian Studies, JNU; Brig. **Gurmeet Kanwal**, Director Centre for Land and Warfare Studies; **Amb. Chandrashekhar Dasgupta**, Distinguished Fellow at TERI



**INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND
CONFLICT STUDIES**

B-7/3, Safdarjung Enclave, New
Delhi, India, 110029
Tel: 91-11-4100 1900