
Middle Path, Recent History, Present And Future of Tibet

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Introduction

Tibet issue, after Taiwan, is one of the most ticklish issues with China. What China wants is stability and economic development. The Dalai Lama has the same objective along with reasonable autonomy to preserve the Tibetan culture. These are not, on the face of it, conflicting intentions. However, the ongoing talks and international efforts have not resulted in any headway for resolution. The real issue of preservation of Tibetan culture and identity is much more complex than it appears.

Institution of Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama has had fourteen reincarnations and a history of more than 460 to 600 years, if we take into account the period beginning with third Dalai Lama. The

fourteenth Dalai Lama is in exile at Dharmshala in India since 1959 when Chinese had 'liberated' Tibet. The relationship of Dalai Lamas with the people of Tibet started with deep spiritual bond and later developed a political dimension. Tibet was sovereign in nature though at times under Chinese suzerainty when the Dalai Lama was young and Chinese representative at Lhasa was overpowering.

It would be in order to quote Sonum Dhondup, a Tibetan scholar based at Tibet, " Dalai Lamas, Tibet and Tibetan people are bonded by flesh and blood and no amount of downplaying or denunciation can destroy a bond so deeply intertwined with the faith of an individual, sustenance of an household and the artery of a nationality. All such attempts by various powers or systems have come a cropper and so shall those

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to come.”¹

17 Point Agreement of 1951

Chinese had made their intention to occupy Tibet clear in early forties but it started taking shape after Kuomintang were driven out. After communist had taken over Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) had offered to Tibetan authorities to send a delegation to Beijing to discuss terms of Tibet incorporation into PRC. The Government of Tibet stalled sending delegation to Beijing while seeking political and military support from West and India. China responded by unleashing the 'stick'. In Oct 1950 it invaded eastern provinces of Tibet and captured local Tibetan army and administration there in two weeks. The defeat and also the lack of support from India and West led Dalai Lama to finally send a delegation to Beijing in March 1951 and signed what was termed the 'Agreement of the Central Government of China with Local Government of Tibet.' The historical peace agreement affirmed unification of Tibet with China and granted a regional autonomy to Tibet. "It also legitimized the sovereign rights of the new Communist China over Tibet in order to facilitate the entry and

permanent settlement of the communist troops in Tibet.”¹ The agreement was the first Chinese model of 'one country-two systems' but Chinese did not execute it in letter and spirit. "The agreement ended the Tibetan claim to independence and de-internationalized the issue. It also gave to the Tibetan Government a unique higher status within PRC. It was the only entity incorporated by written agreement that left the traditional government in power internally.”² "It is a proven fact that the Government of Kashag headed by the Dalai Lama effectively exercised in actuality its legitimate right to rule over Tibet.”³

Strasbourg Proposal 1988

In 1979, Deng Xiaoping had said, 'Except for independence, all issues could be resolved through negotiations'. On 15 June 1988, after a prolonged debate within Tibetan establishment, the Dalai Lama announced in European Parliament what are known as Strasbourg proposals. These, in brief, centered on the point that Tibet enjoys genuine autonomy within the framework of the Peoples' Republic of China. PRC would remain responsible for Tibet's foreign policy. However, Tibet would be

governed by its own constitution. The government of Tibet would comprise a popular elected chief executive, a bicameral legislature and an independent legal system.

The middle path as offered by Dalai Lama at Strasbourg had mixed reaction at Dharmshala. For many of his followers, specially youths, (Tibetan Youth Congress) it was disappointing. It was almost treachery. They felt they have fallen into the hands of Chinese. He is not co-operating with Chinese but has given up the struggle for independence.

The Strasbourg proposal has two parts. The part one deals with history that Tibet was an independent country before it was occupied by PRC. The second part is forward looking and deals with future. The part one is not in conformity with Chinese view of Tibet history. Dalai Lama has himself stated, " We should not be bogged down by history. It might be a futile exercise." PRC blames that Dalai Lama is internationalising the issue. He should have first discussed the issue with them. " The essence of Strasbourg proposal is realization of Tibetan independence into two parts. One step is to realize their so

called high degree of autonomy so as to resume the Dalai Lama rule over Tibet, the second step is to realize independence for Tibet."⁴

The other major hurdle is the demand to restore whole of Tibet known as 'Cholka-Sum'. In some recent statements from Dharmshala restoration of whole of Tibet is reiterated as the bottom line. The Cholka -Sum is the original Tibet which consisted of three provinces, namely, U Tsang, Kham and Amdo. China had formed Tibet Autonomous Region by merging parts of original Tibet into the neighbouring Chinese provinces of Quinghai, Sichuan and Yunan. Almost half of population of Tibet lives in these regions which are now outside Tibet. Without going into the ethics of the issue with respect to 17 point Agreement where autonomy within the geographical boundary as defined at time was promised to regional government of Tibet, it may be pragmatic to assume that insistence for restoration of original Tibet would make the issue much more complicated. It would be prudent to negotiate Tibet as it exists today with minor changes.

On Going Talks

Five rounds of talks between the

representatives of Dalai Lama and the Beijing commenced from September 2002 till December 2006 have not yet focused on the basic question of status of Tibet. It appears to be a public relations exercise. However, optimists state, " These have brought us to new level. Today, there is a deeper understanding of each other's position and recognition of where the fundamental difference is." (Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari, Special envoy of Dalai Lama participating in the talks in his address at Brookings Institution Washington DC on 'The Current Status of Discussions between Dalai Lama and Govt of PRC on 14 Nov 2006.

Recent History of Shifting Chinese Policy on Tibet

We should understand the recent history, how the strategies were evolved on both sides over the years, and go beyond black and white arguments that contrast Chinese and Tibetan views, to understand the issues.

Mao's pro-Dalai Lama policy called 'gradualist strategy',⁵ i.e. gradually winning them over, envisaged in 1949-50 and led to 17 point agreement which ended Tibetan claim to independence. It

restored regional autonomy and traditional government in Tibet. The Dalai Lama in his visit to Beijing in 1954 expressed very progressive views regarding reforms and modernization. It appeared in early fifties that Tibet Government and PRC were well adjusted. However, later, Chinese overpowering of Tibet with massive induction of troops created suspicion in the minds of Tibetans. This had continued till uprising had taken place at Lhasa in 1959 and Dalai Lama had fled to India. The safety of Dalai Lama also appeared in jeopardy. For next twenty years Tibetan ethnicity would be minimized. "Within communist party they blamed the gradualist policy as one of party's (Mao's) greatest failure."⁶ It was argued that Dalai Lama had duped China leadership and if China had eliminated old system quickly there would have been no revolt and no Dalai Lama in exile.

In early eighties, the rise of Deng Xiaoping led to reexamination of Tibet issue. It became clear to leaders that hard line approach of last two decades has been a failure. Tibet was still very poor. Very large majority of Tibetans continued to worship Dalai Lama. This led Hu Yaobang and the Central Committee to launch a new strategy of

conciliation in which Tibetan ethnicity and culture would be allowed to function widely. It was like going back to same 'gradualist policy' of Mao where winning the Tibetans was the goal. The purpose again was to improve the economic and religious well being of Tibetans to make them 'satisfied' citizens of PRC. "The goals were to bring stability in Tibet and accommodation with Dalai Lama."⁷

"Besides, when the cultural revolution came to end, Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang knew they had to change lot of things in China. In their state of mind Tibet was one of those issues he thought could be handled easily. Around the time he went to Tibet, Hu Yaobang had actually made a secret visit to Tibet himself. After that he had said publicly, in Tibet, that in the last twenty years or so, Chinese seem to have done nothing for Tibet-in fact in some cases they might have regressed. Yu Yaobang went so far to say he wanted 80 or 90 percent of Chinese cadres to leave Tibet in the next few years and he apologized for all the wrong that had gone on in Tibet.

On another level, throughout the sixties and seventies, Chinese society was victim of their own propaganda machine that Tibetans

were grateful for the changes and welcome liberation. They decided to try and bring the representatives of Dalai Lama to see the improvements themselves. The Chinese had told the local Tibetans that they should greet them graciously and not to say anything harsh....In reality it was not the just opposite; it was extreme opposite. In Lhasa where ever we went thousand of Tibetans turned up without Chinese permission. It made them nervous."⁸

Like in 1950, there were hard line factions within the party including the army which were against this policy and had warned that it would end up in failure like in 1959. However, the events again had overcome the ongoing policy and the hard liners got the opportunity they needed.

"The failure of negotiations with the Dalai Lama government in the early mid eighties, the start of Dalai Lama 's international campaign in 1987 and the series of riots in Tibet in 1987-88 turned the tables as the rebellion in 1959 had. The pro-reform party secretary (Wu Junghua) was replaced and martial law was imposed. From then on we see a return to the domination of more hard line point of view where fostering higher levels of Tibetan

religion, language and culture are seen as counterproductive to China's interests. It also saw the view that Dalai Lama was acting duplicitously and was untrustworthy to work with. This new hard line policy promoted what we can think of as a "small ethnicity" model that treated the economic development as far more important than ethnic development and aimed at fostering a high degree of integration of Tibetans with the rest of China. This remains the policy today."⁹

"Also, in 1989 the Panchen Lama had suddenly died. The moderate faction had invited Dalai Lama at Beijing for the funeral and it was made clear that there would be political discussions. "The advisors of Dalai Lama were reluctant to accept, he would not be allowed to visit Lhasa, what would he do if he was treated badly. Besides the international Tibet campaign was flourishing so going later would give him more international support...Turning down the invitation was a grave error. In China the moderates were discredited, their policies had resulted in riots in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama refusing to visit Beijing. Hard liners who favoured more repressive policies now came to

power over Tibet."¹⁰

Present Situation

Chinese position on Tibet is that as long as he really abandons his stand for Tibetan independence and stops activities for Tibetan independence and for splitting China and declares in public that he recognizes Tibet as an inalienable part of China and also recognizes Taiwan as part of China, they would talk to him. Some in China believe that post Dalai Lama would dissipate the resistance and it is best to play the waiting game. However, both sides are aware that power vacuum could encourage radicals to take charge. Chinese officials maintain that China's security in Tibet can not be trusted to Tibetans. The only solution is assimilation and economic development. 4000 km long Beijing – Lhasa railway built at the cost of US 3 Billion would finally end Tibetan isolation. They have tried autonomy in the past and it did not succeed. Chinese believe Tibetans would exploit autonomy to revive Tibetan nationalism. If Tibetans are significantly outnumbered in their own country the separatists' elements would be hard pressed to stage a rebellion against Communist party. They feel their Tibet policy is successful. No

country in the world has recognized Tibetan independence. Only thing they have to do is more publicity as did on 50 years of 'Liberation of Tibet' and during inauguration of the railway line, at Lhasa in 2006.

"Since May 2006, the Chinese criticism of the Dalai Lama is unprecedented"¹¹ said Gyalo Thondup elder brother of Dalai Lama. Thondup is in contact with Chinese leadership for many years.

Dalai Lama has made it very clear that he is not seeking independence. "When we return to Tibet with a certain degree of freedom, that present Tibetan Administration in exile will be dissolved", said Dalai Lama on March 10, 2005. Tibetans also suspect that once in China he would be sent to Beijing in a decorative but inconsequential appointment as done for the Panchen Lama.

I have seen myself at Lhasa in 2003 two distinct societies. One developed and prosperous which has taken advantage of infrastructure and tourism boom. In this part of city one sees only Hans and Tibetans are selling their merchandise on the footpaths. The other part is Tibetan society, like in Jorkhang Monastery area, who have

missed the race of economic development. At Tibetan Refugees Reception Centre at Kathmandu it is evident that if almost all the young people escaping from Tibet then it is increasingly less for religion and culture but more for free education and decent employment opportunities.

Religion is coming back in China. Recent poll by East China Normal University have estimated that 31.4 percent of Chinese above 16 years have religious leanings which means roughly 400 million believers. World Buddhist Forum was held at Zhajiang Province in China in April 2006 which was unthinkable few years back. On 12 Nov 06 enthronement of 7th incarnation of Gungthang Rinpoche was performed at Amdo. The Chinese officials who attended the ceremony said that enthronement of the Rinpoche would add to economic development and social harmony. Here is an opportunity for China to trust Dalai Lama and make him a conduit for new energy of spiritualism emerging in China. Communism and Spiritualism both believe in equality of human beings and can coexist. A Tibetan saying goes, "Pluck the flowers while they bloom, rather than wait for them to wither away."

Dalai Lama continues to seek support from West. Bush Administration has shown much interest and has been encouraging China to talk to him. He has signed a law to present the highest honour bestowed by the US Congress. This caused outrage in China. During recent visit of President Hu to India it was learnt that he was urged to talk with Dalai Lama, which was a non-touchable issue so far. There are also expectations from President Hu, who has earlier served as Communist Party secretary at Lhasa to bring changes in Tibet policy.

Despite all the rhetoric, Chinese would not allow Dalai Lama to come back. They defile him at an every opportunity. They even claim that the reason photographs of Dalai Lama are not up in Tibet (even at Potala the photographs of 14th Dalai Lama are missing and instead are bundle of cloth on his seats.) But if Dalai Lama returned, the place would explode in joy; it would be a most momentous occasion in Tibet since he left in 1959.

It is certain that that the Tibetan position would become more intractable in the absence of Dalai Lama. There is no way that entire population would be able to contain

their resentment and anger.

The Dalai Lama's world view, his special bond with Tibetan people and respect he enjoys in international community, all make the person of Dalai Lama key to negotiated settlement and its implementation. Far from being a problem, the Dalai Lama is a solution. Phuntso Wangye, first Tibetan communist in the forties who led Chinese troops into Lhasa, has written a letter in 2006 to Chinese President that "Dalai Lama's demise would only radicalize young Tibetan hardliners frustrated with his middle way. Any notion of delaying the problem until after the natural death of Dalai Lama is not only naïve, but tactically wrong....The return of hundreds of thousands of exiled Tibetans could turn confrontation into harmony."¹²

National identity of Tibetans- Main issue.

The essence of Tibet issue is identity of the Tibetan people. If they lose their identity then there is no more Tibet issue. Tibetans would then be a minority nationality. Chinese policy is directed towards that end. Their ultimate goal is assimilation. Even Tibetan autonomy is a threat to national

security because autonomy as desired by Dalai Lama favors the preservation of national and cultural identity

Autonomy is a flexible concept. It provides marginal societies to attain cultural and political identity. There are differences in the interpretations of Chinese and Tibetans. Chinese autonomy theories derive from Marxist principles where local elections are ruled out and political structures have dominant central authority. The Dalai Lama's autonomy draws from liberal principles where ample scope is given to the development of culture, religion and institutions.

"In Chinese cultural ideology and Marxist Leninist doctrine the merging of nationalism is considered a natural and inevitable process. Chinese cultural ideology justified the expansion of China's boundaries and assimilation of non-Chinese frontiers. Autonomy under the dependant state system was a typical first step followed by increasing Chinese control, colonization and assimilation."¹³

Chinese policy on Tibet has varied from emphasis upon assimilation or upon autonomy as leftists or rightists dominated the scene.

Nationalist demonstration and riots in 1987 and 1989 marked the end of Chinese experiment with autonomy in Tibet. Since 1994 they have engaged on anti-Dalai Lama strategy and it appears they have no longer any desire to see him return. The 2004 Chinese white paper on Tibet has finally rejected the demand for negotiated autonomy of Tibet. China is bothered by international popular support of Dalai Lama but for it the national security is more important.

Future

The survival of Tibet issue would depend on preservation and promotion of the Tibetan identity and culture. It will depend upon continuation and strengthening of Tibetan institutions, education of Tibetan masses. It can be done by Tibetans only. The political support may be unlikely. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetans have the 'power of publicity.' Chinese do not like it. Dalai Lama is in unique powerful position today to ensure that the issue is not just smothered away.

How long should the current policy of negotiation by Dalai Lama last? This is a important question exercising minds of many people. It is already twenty years when Deng

Xiaopeng had taken initiatives in 79/80. Chinese have seen in hard line Tibet Policy adopted since 1992 that the costs far outweigh the benefits. They, as with other issues, play a very long game. Will there be another turn for rapprochement with Tibetans? May be that will be possible when real political liberalization with political reforms takes place in China. No body can

have a clear answer at the moment.

The European parliament recently announced a dead line of three years for Chinese to negotiate. After that it will reconsider its policy on Tibet. Tibetan Government in exile should consider a similar deadline after which it should reconsider its policy, including a possible self determination. ■

End Notes

1. Sonam Dhondup, Tibetan based scholar, '*Dalai Lama indispensable for Sino-Tibet Unity*', Tibetan Review, Delhi, Aug 2006, p28. Sonam said to be born in Kham Lithang and specializes in education. his original article in Chinese first appeared on web site www.chinesenewsnet.com, in May 2006. Translation in English was done by Dhondup Gyalpo, editor of 'Tibetan Review.'
2. Melvyn C Goldstein, '*On Modern Tibetan History: Moving beyond Stereotypes*,' edit, Alex McKay, '*Tibet and her Neighbours- A History*,' London, 2003, p219.
3. Sonam Dhondup, p 29.
4. Sun Wade, Spokesman, Chinese Embassy at Washington DC, Deborah Hart Strober, '*His Holiness the Dalai Lama-The Oral Biography*,' New Jersey, USA, p
5. Melvyn C Goldstein, p 219.
6. Goldstein, p224.

7. Tom Grunfeld, '*A Brief Survey of Tibetan Relations with the United States*', edit, Alex McKay, '*Tibet and her Neighbours- A History*', London, 2003, p 199.
8. Dr Tenzin Tethong, member of first delegation of Dalai Lama to Tibet in 1980, Deborah Hart Strober, '*His holiness the Dalai Lama-The Oral Biography*' New Jersey, USA 2005, p 241
9. Goldstien, p225.
10. Grenfeld, p 203.
11. Gyalo Thondup, elder brother of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan Review, Dec 2006, Delhi, p14. " I am extremely worried and concerned about this shift in the attitude of Chinese officials. All the past leaders never criticized Dalai Lama in this manner."
12. Quoted by Claude Arpi, '*China is a 20th Century Idea*', Pioneer March 27, 2007. The author argues that some recent news make him believe that things are changing in China.
13. Warren Smith, '*Transformation of Tibetan National Identity*,' edit., Alex McKay, '*Tibet and its Neighbours-A History*.' London, 2003, p207.