



'THE DALAI LAMA AND INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS'

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Mention of 'Buddhism' today conjures up images of ochre-robed Tibetan monks and Tenzin Gyatso, the present Dalai Lama. The rise in international profile of the Tibetan cause over the past three decades has, in its wake, generated a minor revival of the 'Mahayana', or Tibetan, version of Buddhism. This is due primarily to the current XIVth Dalai Lama, who despite having been dealt a weak hand, played it with considerable deftness all these years. He disarmingly advocated the cause of Tibet and its people in international forums and foreign capitals to garner adequate support to help build pressure on China to enter into a dialogue with his envoys. In the process, the Dalai Lama effectively became the 'face' of Buddhism for the international community. Award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 further enhanced his stature.

Material and other support from the US and West helped the Dalai Lama and his cause considerably. The bedrock of the movement that the Dalai Lama built to support the Tibetan cause was, however, the sanctuary afforded to him by India and consequent proximity to his erstwhile homeland of Tibet. It was this proximity which secured access to him for the Tibetans inside Tibet and guaranteed constant nurturing of the movement. This proximity ensured that the Dalai Lama's message filtered through into China and kept alive the faith, hope and aspirations of Tibetans inside China and the global Tibetan diaspora. Together these enabled the Dalai Lama to successfully build and maintain domestic and international pressure on the communist Chinese leadership. India's stance on the Tibet issue was valuable to the Dalai Lama's cause while retaining for India an undeclared element of potential pressure on China.

The Dalai Lama's endeavours benefitted him within the Tibetan religious orders too. As he gained in international stature, the XIVth Dalai Lama acquired a pre-eminent position among the

Tibetan Buddhist religious sects and emerged as the unrivalled leader of the Tibetans. This helped consolidate the Tibetan community in exile and facilitated his campaign for Tibet. It provided the Tibetans with a charismatic and venerated leader and prevented the emergence of any significant schisms within the Tibetan Buddhist communities. In India, his leadership ensured that the Tibetans lived peacefully with the local populace and were equipped to earn a livelihood.

The Tibetan movement and institution of the Dalai Lama are today, however, at an uncertain and critical stage. The changing geopolitical situation and China's rise as an economic and military power have coincided with the XIVth Dalai Lama's advancing age. China's increased influence in global affairs now threatens to impact adversely on the movement that the Dalai Lama has assiduously built since his escape to India in 1959 and this could have far-reaching consequences for India-China relations.

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Recognising the opportunity China has, after decades of patient maneuvering, initiated the 'end game' to finally resolve the Tibet issue and eliminate opposition by a Dalai Lama to its occupation of Tibet. Systematic efforts to undermine the current Dalai Lama's pre-eminent position and prestige within the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, reduce his influence among Tibetans inside China, and restrict his international support base, have been expanded by China and given impetus. The objective is to undermine the Dalai Lama's efforts of the past thirty years and dilute the awareness and material and diplomatic support with which he exerted pressure on Beijing and put China on the back-foot. It was to deflect this sustained international pressure that the communist leadership in Beijing had reluctantly commenced negotiations with him. It

had then decided to try and lure the Dalai Lama home to China and, failing that, wear him down through protracted negotiations intended to whittle down his demands.

China's policy was to wait out the Dalai Lama. Chinese Tibetologists calculated that Dalai Lama's on average do not live beyond 55 years – they were very wrong in this case – and assessed that the Tibetan problem would resolve itself soon thereafter. China's assessment continues to be that opposition would fade once the present Dalai Lama passes from the scene as the Tibetans would be leaderless. Beijing anticipates that, as in the case of the Panchen Lama, it would have the decisive say regarding the next Dalai Lama. It sought to prepare a legal basis for this through a regulation issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs in 2007. The Chinese communist leadership also decided, though as part of efforts to assuage popular discontent in the wake of economic reforms, to loosen controls on religious worship and in 2006 cautiously began describing Buddhism as a non-aggressive and old Chinese religion. Official endorsement of Buddhism, it was calculated, would later afford legitimacy to Beijing's claim to recognize the next Dalai Lama.

Beijing's tough new policy on Tibet became evident early this year on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the uprising in Lhasa and Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet on 10 March. These marked the launch of an intensified campaign against the Dalai Lama intended to show that his popularity was on the wane. The Chinese communist leadership, for which Tibet remains a high priority national security issue, crafted a multi-pronged propaganda and diplomatic offensive. China's wealth, at this time when the international economic crisis has shaken the world's developed economies, helped reinforce the campaign.

Under cover of a media black-out, large numbers of armed security personnel were deployed throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region and in Tibetan-dominated areas to suppress protests and demonstrations against Chinese communist rule. Only a minor rash of scattered protests resultantly occurred in March in smaller towns and Lhasa remained largely peaceful. The Dalai Lama's influence was evident, though, in this rash of protests and especially those that occurred at major

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monasteries like Drepung, Sera and Tashilhunpo. Chinese authorities for the first time used the state-controlled media to turn the majority Han population against the Tibetan minority.

On the diplomatic and propaganda front, the Chinese Communist Party leadership for the first time sent a delegation of Tibetan Buddhists, led by a 'living Buddha' of the Kagyu

sect, to the US to 'explain' the issue to representatives of the US Administration and Congress. Convening of the G-20 at the end of March indirectly benefited Beijing and gave it an opportunity to publicly flex its muscles on the issue. Beijing made a meeting between Chinese President Hu Jintao and French President Sarkozy on the sidelines of the G-20 dependent on France clarifying its position on the Tibet issue. Sarkozy had angered Beijing by earlier receiving the Dalai Lama at the Elysee Palace. France capitulated and assured that its official position regarding Tibet remained unchanged and it would not 'support Tibet independence in any form'. Earlier in October 2008, Britain, in a written statement by its Foreign Secretary, revised its ninety year-old position on Tibet claiming that the concept of suzerainty was no longer valid. This could adversely impact on the India-China border negotiations. More recently the US signalled its heightened sensitivity to China's concerns, when in February this year Hillary Clinton, during her first visit to Beijing as US Secretary of State, omitted any reference to the Tibet or Human Rights issues in meetings with Chinese leaders. Confirmation of the altered US policy became available when US President Obama dispatched two envoys to Dharamsala to explain to the Dalai Lama that he would not be received at the White House—for the first time since 1991— during his visit in October because he did not want to upset the Chinese before his trip the following month. These successive Chinese diplomatic successes have impacted on the Dalai Lama's campaign.

As part of the 'end game', China decided to expand and internationalise the campaign against the Dalai Lama so as to legitimize its claim to a leadership role in the Buddhist movement. In doing so, it has drawn the international Buddhist movement into the competition. Here it is a deadly serious struggle for leadership between China's communist leadership and the highest ranking personage of Tibetan

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Buddhism, the Dalai Lama. The outcome will not only affect the Dalai Lama's future and that of the Tibetan refugee diaspora, but usurp India's cultural space and sharply undermine India's traditional leadership in this realm.

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Beijing's initial move was to convene the first World Buddhist Forum in China in 2006. Buddhist religious leaders from 35 countries attended and the Chinese-nominated Panchen Lama was given international profile. After three years, the second World Buddhist Forum was held in Wuxi, Jiangsu on March 28, 2009 and was attended by over twelve hundred religious personages, including heads of different Buddhist sects, from over 50 countries. The Dalai Lama was again excluded, but this time labelled a 'disruptive element'. Representatives of Shugden Diety worshippers, opposed to the Dalai Lama were invited. The China-appointed 11th Panchen Lama's stature as second-highest ranking Tibetan Buddhist Lama was again sought to be reinforced by his valedictory address to the Forum.

This Forum was a major victory for an additional reason, namely, that its closing session was held in Taiwan. By agreeing to this, Taiwan became a joint organizer of the event indirectly supporting China's claim to leadership of any international Buddhist movement. In addition to sharing a common view on the border issue, including the disputed borders with India, the two entities now share a common viewpoint on Buddhism, especially, Tibetan Buddhism and China's role.

A crucially important aspect of this struggle between the Dalai Lama and China centers on the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, where he will be 'discovered' and his nationality. The Dalai Lama, acutely aware that his successor would take years to become a full-fledged monk and mature as a leader, will want to ensure that the momentum he has been able to build

is not lost. He would be keen to facilitate his successor's efforts to retain the pressure on China's leadership. He would also want his successor to be acknowledged by the heads of all Tibetan Buddhist sects as their leader and that of the Tibetan people and not just of the Gelugpa sect. Where the XIVth Dalai Lama's next reincarnation would be found is integral to this.

From the Tibetans' strategic geopolitical perspective, the Dalai Lama's reincarnation should ideally

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be of Tibetan stock and be accessible to the Tibetans inside China. The manner in which the Chinese dealt with the Panchen Lama's reincarnation, selected by the Dalai Lama in 1995, is a constant reminder of how the Chinese would act in a similar situation in the future. The

Dalai Lama's reincarnation would, therefore, have to be born outside China. Arunachal Pradesh, described by the Chinese as 'southern Tibet' and which has in history periodically been under Tibetan suzerainty, including at times sovereignty could, from the Tibetan point of view, be an ideal place for the reincarnation to be born. If he is of Tibetan stock it would afford the reincarnate Dalai Lama 'ethnic' and 'geographic' legitimacy in the eyes of the Tibetan people. He could, furthermore, conveniently locate himself in the monastery at Tawang, which was built by the Vth Dalai Lama. The symbolism would be immense for the Tibetan people who would recall that the VIth Dalai Lama, who was later defrocked for his errant libertine ways, was born in Tawang.

A reincarnate Dalai Lama born in Tawang, though handicapped in his efforts to acquire international acceptance and support by circumstances of age and time, would nevertheless be easily accessible to Tibetans inside China. He would be able to convey his message to them and be in a position to keep alive their aspirations and faith while staying outside China's clutches. This interregnum till the reincarnate comes into his own, will, however, severely test the efficacy and durability of the mechanism that the present Dalai Lama puts in place to assist his successor. It will simultaneously test the loyalty of the individuals entrusted with the task of teaching and training the young reincarnate Dalai Lama and their acceptability to the Tibetan refugee population. The latter will be an important determinant in continuance of the Tibetan movement as it exists presently.

The Chinese leadership would be acutely aware of the possibility of such a development and have been carefully assessing the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh. Fresh efforts have already been initiated to discredit the Dalai Lama by calling him a 'liar' and publicizing that a niece of his is a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese academics who traveled to India in October '09 and other interlocutors have all expressed the view that the Dalai Lama went to Arunachal

Pradesh at the Indian Government's instance. A punitive response was hinted. China will promptly further increase pressure on India on the border issue once it senses that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation could be 'discovered' in India and especially Arunachal Pradesh. It will try to exploit the latent discontent and factional disputes within the Tibetan Buddhist religious sects. Over 4000 kilometers long Himalayan belt, which stretches along the length of India's northern border with Tibet and whose inhabitants are mainly followers of Tibetan Buddhism, is a vulnerable region.

There are over 180 monasteries in this belt, each exercising considerable influence within their traditional jurisdiction. The entire belt does not, however, comprise only of adherents of the Gelugpa sect. For example, in the eastern stretches around and including Sikkim, the Karma Kagyu sect is predominant. This is led by the Gyalwa Karmapa, a position currently mired in controversy and with three prominent claimants for the position of the XVIIth Gyalwa Karmapa. There are lingering suspicions about the leading contender, Ugyen Thinley Dorje, who managed to 'escape' from Tsurphu Monastery near Lhasa and clandestinely arrive in India. He has been staying at Dharamsala and because of his visible physical proximity

to the Dalai Lama is viewed by many as a potential successor. This is a cause for some discomfiture to many Tibetan religious personages, including persons in the Dalai Lama's entourage. Other potential problem that the Chinese have attempted to stir is that of the Shugden Diety worshippers. This group favours worship of the Shugden Diety which the Dalai Lama has opposed since 1996.

Initial post-Dalai Lama phase will be one of some uncertainty for India. It will put to test India's ability to face enhanced Chinese pressure without withdrawing support to the Tibetan people or institution of the Dalai Lama. Such resilience will ensure for India a potentially powerful lever in managing relations with China. Failure to do so would severely weaken India vis-à-vis China and adversely impact on the border negotiations. India will also lose its cultural space and traditional dominance in international Buddhism, which will irreparably dent its 'soft power'. Minor concerns will be the monitoring of the almost one and a half lakh Tibetan refugees settled in India who will be adjusting to a new leadership and settling any internecine factional squabbles which might erupt within the various sects as also disputes between senior Tibetan leaders. Such a future scenario would also throw up fresh opportunities for India.



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