



INDIA'S LINGERING CONCERNS OVER TIBET ISSUE

Sana Hashmi
Associate Fellow, CAPS

More than half-a-century ago, in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet to take refuge in India after the alleged human rights violations in Tibet. Intriguingly, over the years, India's Tibet policy has undergone remarkable mutations. For instance, prior to the signing of "Agreement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and Republic of India" in 1954, India had acknowledged Tibet's *de facto* independence'. However, subsequently, India modified its position on Tibet as it recognised Chinese suzerainty over Tibet. However, India since 2003, after the proclamation by Former Prime Minister of India, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, regards Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as an integral part of China even when the Central Tibetan Administration is situated in Dharamsala, India. The declaration says the Indian side recognised that the TAR is a part of the territory of the PRC and reiterates that it will not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. Many would argue that it was India's Himalayan blunder to reiterate the "One China Policy" of China; an integral part of which regards Tibet as a part of the PRC. Nevertheless, India's main objective behind recognising China's indisputable control over Tibet has been to strengthen India-China ties and resolve territorial dispute with China.

Even today, Tibet remains at the core of India-China relations. Geopolitically, Tibet's strategic location makes it critically important for China as well as for India so much so that the balance of power or 'equilibrium' between India and China is highly dependent on the status of Tibet. Historically, the state of Tibet acted as a buffer zone between the two countries. However, the buffer zone no longer exists and today India and China share boundaries. India-China common border is actually the border that Tibet had with British India prior to 1949. This implies that with

China being so close to India's border, India's national security is closely tied to Tibet, and Tibet under Chinese control has several implications for India.

The early phase of India-China boundary dispute erupted into open in 1949 when China under Mao Zedong started asserting itself and attempted to restore China's so-called glorious past. While one cannot overlook the historical injustices done on China during the Colonial times, which is not a justifiable explanation of China's territorial behavior with its neighbours. In fact, India and China's disagreements over differing perceptions with regard to the border led to the India-China war of 1962. The war not only affected the bilateral relationship, but has become the single biggest irritant in the relationship. Consequently, India is the only country with which China has not yet resolved its border dispute. Needless to say, had Tibet not been under China's control, there would not be any boundary question between India and China. However, the implications are not only confined to India-China border, infrastructural development in Tibet is a major concern for India. For instance, rail-road network in Tibet is far more developed than on the Indian side of the border.

Another crucial facet of Tibet under China's control is the issue of water security. Apparently, China has initiated a huge dam building programme and the alleged river diversion projects, mainly on the Brahmaputra. With Tibet under its control, China has the status of being the upper riparian for the major rivers like the Brahmaputra, Indus, Mekong, and Salween, with control over the water of all these rivers. As there is no formal water treaty between India and China, the methods and approach adopted by China go unscrutinised and China's policies could lead to severe water scarcity for countries like India, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Cambodia.ⁱⁱ Though, during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's maiden visit to India in May 2013, China promised to provide hydrological information at three Indian hydro stations twice a day, it has till date not yielded any constructive results for India.

ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR

[BORDER DEFENCE COOPERATION AGREEMENT: A NEW BEGINNING?](#)

[MAKING SENSE OF CHINA'S 'MARITIME SILK ROAD'](#)

[INDIA'S CONCERN OVER CHINA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR NEXUS](#)

[CHINA'S ADIZ: REACTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS](#)

In the contemporary times, one of the most fundamental points that makes matters even more complex between India and China is that China's Tibet policy is intertwined with China's territorial approach towards India. China continues to shut its eyes to the ongoing protests and incidents of self-immolation in Tibet while maintaining its claim on Indian Territory of Arunachal Pradesh more assertively by continuously calling it Southern Tibet. What worsens the situation is the point that while there already is a Beijing-Dharamsala deadlock, India-China border talks are also not heading in the positive direction. Though, in October 2013, during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Beijing visit, India and China signed Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA), trends indicate that China is not likely to resolve its boundary dispute with India unless and until the Tibet issue is resolved. It is widely believed that India-China differences over their protracted border dispute coupled with the presence of Tibetans in India do not augur well for the future of India-China relations. It seems China is not seriously considering a resolution of the Tibet issue or the border dispute with India and is simply buying time till the Dalai Lama passes away. Apparently, in the views of China, after Dalai Lama, Tibetan movement will lose its essence which, in turn, would weaken India's bargaining position on the border negotiations.

ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR

[BORDER DEFENCE COOPERATION AGREEMENT: A NEW BEGINNING?](#)

[MAKING SENSE OF CHINA'S 'MARITIME SILK ROAD'](#)

[INDIA'S CONCERN OVER CHINA-PAKISTAN NUCLEAR NEXUS](#)

[CHINA'S ADIZ: REACTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS](#)

One may also argue that India's policy towards Tibet lacks a long term and holistic perspective. There is certainly a need for India to revisit its policies towards Tibet so that peace along the borders is ensured. India has not taken much advantage of the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans in India for the past 55 years. It is observed on many occasions that India doesn't want to rake up the issue as it might lead to uncontrolled downward spiral in India-China relationship.

Not raising the issue of human rights violations in the TAR at bilateral and even at multilateral fora suggests that unlike the EU and countries like Australia, which keep on raising such issues in dealing with China, India is not sensitive towards the Tibet issue. Raising border

issues and not even mentioning Tibet gives confusing signals to the world and therefore, gives the impression that China might be justified in its dealings with India. India's strong stand on Tibet and its border issues will not only strengthen India's image as the largest democracy, but also reinforce India's policy vis-à-vis China and Tibet.

While it is true that India-China relations, sometimes, get strained because of the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans, one should not forget that as a responsible democratic country which believes in human values, it is but natural for India to give shelter to Tibetans in India. Now what needs to be done, however, is to explore a lasting solution to the issue. It is beyond doubt that the Dalai Lama's presence adds to India's standing in the global community as a democratic country. Nevertheless, it would not be prudent for India to ignore the Chinese approach towards Tibet, which, by and large, points towards India.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ M.K. Razdan and Anil K. Joseph, "India: Tibet Autonomous Region part of China", June 24, 2003, at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030625/main1.htm> (accessed on January 15, 2014).

ⁱⁱ Sana Hashmi, "China's Tibet Policy: Implications for India", *Air Power Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, July-September 2012, pp. 107-124.