



'CHINA RE-ENGAGES WITH DALAI LAMA: HOLLOW GESTURE'

Jayadeva Ranade

Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

Beijing decided to recommence negotiations with the Dalai Lama after a fifteen month hiatus just as the Tibetans were getting ready to celebrate 'Losar' and the Chinese prepare to usher in the new 'Year of the Tiger'— both on February 14. The ninth round of talks, from Jan 27-31, 2010, were held as the situation becomes more complex and the US and the West begin to apply pressure on China on a variety of issues, including Human Rights and Tibet. While the US, UK and Canada expressed 'strong support' for the resumption of negotiations, China responded by publicising the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership's views on Tibet through a series of official media reports on a couple of high level meetings. An official Chinese spokesman urged the Dalai Lama to 'cherish this opportunity and respond positively to the request of the central government'. These suggested that the Dalai Lama's representatives were left little room for manoeuvre. It is clear that there has been negligible forward movement during these talks.

Buoyed by self-confidence stemming from its perception of a heightened international stature and adhering to its policy of assertiveness, Beijing opted for an unyielding posture towards the Dalai Lama and the Tibet problem.

A 5-member delegation led by the Dalai Lama's special envoy, Lodi Gyari, left New Delhi for China on January 26, 2010. Prior to its departure the delegation, which included Kelsang Gyaltzen, Bhuchung Tsering, Tenzin Phuntsok and Tenzin Atisha, was briefed in Dharamsala on January 22 by the Kalon Tripa Samdong Rimpoche and the Dalai Lama. It is pertinent that despite Chinese requests to replace some members, the composition of the Dalai Lama's delegation remained unchanged.

The Chinese carefully arranged the backdrop for negotiations in the months preceding the talks. Buoyed by self-confidence stemming from its perception of a heightened international stature and adhering to its policy of assertiveness, Beijing opted for an unyielding posture towards the Dalai Lama and the Tibet problem.

Initial steps included conviction of a Tibetan monk for alleged illegal possession of arms. In late December, a Tibetan film producer, Dhondup Wangchen and his friend were sentenced to six years' imprisonment. They were charged with causing 'instability' because their film, 'Leaving Fear Behind', featured interviews with Tibetans who spoke of their love for the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader. The Chinese authorities had, since the March 2008 riots, adopted a pro-active propaganda policy. The Standing Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) People's Congress took the initiative in foreign propaganda. It dispatched seven groups comprising 47 persons to the US, UK,

France, Japan, Canada and other countries to clarify the 'true' picture in Tibet. Official reports claimed that these missions had 'broken the Dalai clique's monopoly on public opinion in some countries', 'deeply exposed the rebellious political nature, religious hypocrisy, and deceptive practices of the Dalai, made a strong counterstroke against the Dalai clique's

slander and attack, and expanded the international influence of Tibet'. This propaganda was reinforced by China's tough posture towards those countries whose leaders received the Dalai Lama. Separately, the central government's propaganda apparatus had since November begun publicizing the benefits accruing to the people of Tibet from the developmental projects launched in TAR. The American movie 'Avatara' was also suddenly withdrawn from twenty cinema houses across China, ostensibly on the ground that people had been offended by the portrayal of a stronger country and people dominating the weak. There is speculation that the withdrawal could have been prompted by the uncomfortable similarity between the theme of the movie and plight of the Tibetans and Uyghurs inside China.

There has been no easing of controls internally and armed personnel continue to patrol cities in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan majority areas elsewhere in the neighbouring provinces. A report in China's official media, commenting on the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s annual

A report in China's official media, commenting on the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s annual troop rotation in Tibet, revealed that authorities could now send troops directly to various locations inside Tibet from the Chinese mainland facilitating control.

troop rotation in Tibet, revealed that authorities could now send troops directly to various locations inside Tibet from the Chinese mainland facilitating control. The drive to ensure compliance with the policy to register the qualifications of monks, nuns and 'living Buddhas' has been intensified in recent months. Websites operated by NGOs and cadres with more liberal viewpoints, associated with the late Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang and Vice Premier Xi Zhongxun, father of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, were also shut down in the past few months as the conservative viewpoint on handling minorities began to gain ascendance.

The enlarged meeting of the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee (CC), convened in Beijing on January 8 to discuss Tibet, is significant. This was the first such meeting held in nine years. It was also the first time the Politburo met to discuss Tibet since the riots in March 2008. The importance of the meeting is easily gauged from the fact that Hu Jintao, who combines the posts of CCP CC General Secretary, Chairman of the Central Military Commission and China's President, presided over the meeting and Premier Wen Jiabao, Vice President Xi Jinping, widely tipped to be Hu Jintao's successor, and Li Keqiang, tipped to take over as the next Premier, attended. The policies adopted at this meeting have, therefore, been endorsed by the successor leadership. This includes the new appointments in TAR.

At this meeting Hu Jintao launched a rare personal attack on the 74-year old Dalai Lama. He has normally avoided such direct attacks. In his speech at the Politburo meeting, Hu Jintao accused the exiled Tibetan leader of engaging in 'Tibetan independence' activities and 'sabotaging' social stability in the Tibetan region. He warned that his government would take 'substantial measures' to ensure 'normal order' of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. In an unusually candid admission of the existing discontent in Tibet and influence exerted by the Dalai Lama,

In his speech at the Politburo meeting, Hu Jintao accused the exiled Tibetan leader of engaging in 'Tibetan independence' activities and 'sabotaging' social stability in the Tibetan region. He warned that his government would take 'substantial measures' to ensure 'normal order' of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet.

Hu Jintao said that Tibet faced 'special contradictions between people of all ethnic groups and separatist forces led by the Dalai clique'. Acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, he said 'these contradictions had made leapfrog development and lasting stability major themes of the work

on Tibet'. Hu Jintao exhorted the TAR Government to prevent and strike at 'penetration and sabotage' by 'Tibetan independence' separatists to 'safeguard social stability, the socialist legal system, national unity and ethnic solidarity'.

This Politburo meeting was followed by convening of the TAR People's Congress from January 10-15, 2010, where Beijing unveiled policies heralding tougher and more stringent controls over Tibet and Tibetans. Most obvious was the appointment of Padma Choling as Governor of TAR. This was promptly noticed by the Dalai Lama's establishment in Dharamsala. 58-year old Padma Choling, who served seventeen years in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from 1969-86 in the Tibet and Qinghai provinces and was TAR Deputy Governor since 2003, is reputed to be tough. He served as Secretary of the Party cell in the important TAR Party General Office when Hu Jintao was TAR Party Secretary from 1988-92 and has easy access to the Chinese President. He has been responsible for law and order in TAR since the 2000s and earned a reputation as a hard-line enforcer of Beijing's tough policy against the 'three evil forces', namely separatism, terrorism and religious extremism. In a six minute press interview on the day of his appointment, publicized by the official news agency 'Xinhua', Padma Choling declared that 'stability is of overwhelming importance'. He added 'we will firmly oppose all attempts at secession, safeguard national unification and security, and maintain unity among different ethnic groups in Tibet'. Padma Choling replaced 62-year old Qiangba Phuncog,

who has been appointed head of the TAR Regional People's Congress. Qiangba Phuncog was TAR Governor during the March 2008 riots and has apparently been blamed for ineffective handling of the riots.

Padma Choling's appointment will reinforce the policy being pursued by Zhang Qingli, the all powerful TAR Party Secretary. Zhang Qingli

also has a PLA background and is a hardliner. Just after the March 2008 riots in the Tibetan region, he was severely critical of the Dalai Lama and had described him as 'a wolf in monk's clothes' and 'a devil with a human face, but the heart of a beast'.

These meetings were followed by a high-level Tibet Planning Conference held in Beijing from January 18-20, 2010, which was also attended by Chinese President Hu Jintao. The meeting, the fifth ever held and attended by 362 persons including delegates from all Tibetan areas in China, approved a massive development package for TAR as well as Tibetan areas in the adjoining provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Qinghai. These areas were among those where rioting occurred in March 2008. The decision confirms that the Chinese leadership continues to be of the view that development and improvement in peoples' living standards will negate the Dalai Lama's influence and co-opt the Tibetans into accepting Chinese rule.

Hu Jintao described the slogan for the conference as 'Chinese characteristics, Tibetan flavour' (zhongguo tese, xizang tedian). Xinhua highlighted that Beijing had invested in excess of US\$ 45.6 billion since 2001 in TAR and that its GDP in 2009 is estimated at US\$ 6.4 billion. Hu Jintao promised TAR an influx of investment, technology and experts and fixed the target for growth of its GDP at 12 per cent. Schemes for TAR envisaged in the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) focus on infrastructure, tourism, mining and manufacturing. Shares of the few construction, mining and transport companies that operate in the TAR and are listed on the Shanghai Stock Exchange promptly registered a sharp rise.

Projects include construction of Nagqu airfield situated at 4,436 metres above sea level at a cost of US\$ 263.5 million. A circular subsequently issued by the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) on January 25 disclosed that 59 airports are being 'reconstructed' in the Region. It added that while only Lhasa, Qamdo and Nyingchi are currently linked with nineteen cities in the mainland and Kathmandu, the new airport in Nyingri Prefecture will become operational later this year. Separately, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) was credited with building the airports at Bangda, Ali and Kanding, described as among

Just weeks before commencement of the talks, the People's Daily on Jan 22 criticised the Dalai Lama for describing himself as a 'son of India' and sought to portray that he had ignored the interests of the Tibetans and China, his motherland.

the highest in the world.

Beijing's concerns and stance it would adopt during the talks with the Dalai Lama's representatives was evident in articles in the authoritative Party newspaper 'People's Daily', its Tibetan version and its subsidiary the 'Global Times'.

Just weeks before commencement of the talks, the People's Daily on Jan 22 criticised the Dalai Lama for describing himself as a 'son of India' and sought to portray that he had ignored the interests of the Tibetans and China, his motherland. It accused him of forgetting that 'Chinese Buddhism (had) played a very important role in the formation and development of Tibetan Buddhism and the Sakyamuni statue in the Jokhang Temple was taken to Tibet by Princess Wenchang of the Tang Dynasty....'. The China-India border dispute was brought into the spotlight by a People's Daily article. The day the Dalai Lama's representatives arrived in Changsha (Hunan Province), a People's Daily (Jan 27) article raised the issue of Arunachal Pradesh and questioned the Dalai Lama's loyalty to Tibetans. It asked 'will a guy who betrayed southern Tibet to India really care about the well-being of the Tibet people'. At the previous round of talks the Chinese had severely castigated the Dalai Lama for stating that Arunachal Pradesh was part of India. Later on Jan 30 the English-language 'Global Times', in an uncompromising editorial, cautioned that 'at the age of 75, time is not on the side of the Dalai Lama'. It claimed that China's 'progress had impressed the world' and that the Dalai Lama for 'his own sake needs to make the most of the opportunity provided by the current round of talks with the central government.' Progress, it asserted, is possible only when he gives up 'Tibetan independence', eschews separatist activities and acknowledges that Tibet is an inalienable part of China. The editorial attributed the West's

support to the 'Dalai clique' to 'mystification' of the issue and said 'more westerners have come to realise that supporting the Dalai Lama will be in vain and do them no good'. In conclusion the editorial warned that 'any unrealistic request from the Dalai Lama could only further delay his desire to end the 51-year old exile and return home'.

The Chinese side comprised virtually the same set of officials

The reference to 'southern Tibet' clearly signals that the Dalai Lama has been again castigated for stating that Arunachal Pradesh is part of India. During the border negotiations with India, the Chinese have cited the sentiments of the Tibetan people as justification for their claim on Tawang and the Dalai Lama's statement, that Tawang is part of India, undercuts that argument.

from the CCP CC's United Front Work Department (UFWD) as at the eighth round of talks. The Tibetans met UFWD Minister Du Qinglin for talks on Jan 30 and talks the subsequent day were led by Zhu Weiqun, Executive Vice Minister of UFWD accompanied by Sita, UFWD Vice Minister and TAR Executive Vice Chairman Nyima Tsering, who replaced Padma Choling.

The itinerary for the current round included a visit by the Tibetan delegation to Changsha (Hunan province) and then to Beijing for detailed discussions. The selection of Changsha, which is closely associated with Mao Zedong and regarded as a revolutionary communist base, is symbolic. Implicit is the message that communist China is not going to change its system of government. The Dalai Lama's proposal for 'greater autonomy' would, therefore, need to be revised to bring it in line with the existing Chinese constitution. The Tibet Planning Conference also effected a major policy change by framing plans for the 6.5 million Tibetans living in Tibetan areas outside TAR. While this indirectly acknowledged that Tibetan majority areas outside TAR continue to lag behind the rest of the country, it provides an additional reason to turn down the Dalai Lama's proposal for 'Greater Tibet'. The latter has been consistently opposed by the Chinese on the ground that it covers almost one-fourth of China's land area. The Tibetans, however, feel the Conference resolutions incorporate many of the points raised by them.

The demands that the Dalai Lama should give up activities related to 'Tibetan independence', drop the demand for greater autonomy, and endorse that Tibet is an inalienable part of China, have been reiterated.

During these talks with the Dalai Lama's representatives the Chinese have unambiguously delivered the messages, transmitted earlier by the official media. The reference to 'southern Tibet' clearly signals that the Dalai Lama has been again castigated for stating that Arunachal

Pradesh is part of India. During the border negotiations with India, the Chinese have cited the sentiments of the Tibetan people as justification for their claim on Tawang and the Dalai Lama's statement, that Tawang is part of India, undercuts that argument. In the context of reincarnation, the Chinese have reminded the Tibetans that Beijing has accorded recognition to the Dalai Lama since the Qing dynasty and that he remains subject to Chinese law. The demands that the Dalai Lama should give up activities related to 'Tibetan independence', drop the demand for greater autonomy, and endorse that Tibet is an inalienable part of China, have been reiterated. Notwithstanding the Tibetan assertion that the Dalai Lama has no personal demands, the Chinese would have sought to play on his sentiments and assure that he was free to return to China and spend his remaining days in peace, subject to his fulfilling these conditions. It has been made apparent that there will be no change in the Chinese position and that Beijing is waiting for the Dalai Lama's departure from the scene. The demands presented by the Tibetans, which included 'greater autonomy' and preservation of Tibetan culture and religion in the 'Cholka Sum' (Greater Tibet), have been rejected. The door for another round of talks has, however, been left open.

It has been made apparent that there will be no change in the Chinese position and that Beijing is waiting for the Dalai Lama's departure from the scene.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, AVSM, VrC, VM (Retd) Centre for Air Power Studies.

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Ms Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.