

# INDIA'S TIBET PROBLEM

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The terrorist attack on Mumbai, and the growing internal crisis in Pakistan have pushed Sino-Indian relations off the radar screen of Indian concerns. But to leave it there would be extremely short-sighted. For only nine days before 26/11, Sino-Indian relations had deteriorated to the point where another border conflict looked distinctly possible. This is not a conflict that either country wants. But it could lie at the end of the road on which both are travelling today. Were it to occur, it would not be over the border between the two countries in the Himalayas, but over Tibet. When we talk of our border problem with China, we confuse effect with cause. The hardening of China's stand on the border since 2006, and its reiteration of claims to the whole of Arunachal Pradesh, can be traced to its growing problems in Tibet and its increasing tendency to blame India for them.

But does China have a problem in Tibet?

If we are to believe writers like N.Ram of *The Hindu*, it does not. According to him, this is a concoction of the reactionary, autocratic and oppressive clique that surrounds the Dalai Lama, to whom the Indian government is mistakenly giving shelter. China has liberated Tibetans from their serfdom, modernised, and educated them. Tibet has infrastructure that we in Delhi would envy. Only a fringe group of revanchists whose

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But China's actions belie its words. If the Dalai Lama is no threat to the Chinese in Tibet, why did Beijing react so sharply to the uprising in March last year? Why did it take out its anger on India? And why did it blanket not only the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) but adjoining areas of China with troops and riot police a full three weeks before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight to India?

Clearly, there is something that is worrying the Chinese deeply. Pretending it does not exist will not make it go away.

The fact is that China has always resented India's decision to shelter the Dalai Lama in 1959. Its leaders have never forgotten that the present Dalai Lama's predecessor, the 13<sup>th</sup>, had fled to India when the Manchus invaded Tibet and established a garrison in Lhasa in 1909, but had returned three years later to drive the Chinese Army not only out of present day Tibet but all the way across the Mekong river.

That victory enabled him and the present Dalai Lama to declare Tibet independent, sign a treaty with Mongolia, initial another with the British, and govern Tibet as an independent country for the next 37 years. It also put a severe dent into China's claim to Tibet on the grounds that it had ruled it continuously for 700 years. None of this would have been possible if India had not been conveniently close by. So when the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama also fled to India in 1959, China's leaders began to wonder if history was not in danger of repeating itself.

The Sino-India border war in 1962 was at least partially an outcome of their anxiety. It was intended to cut India down to size and minimise its capacity to act as a rallying point for pro-Tibet sentiment across the world. In this, it was spectacularly successful. China-India comparisons stopped after 1962. Only in 1988, after 26 years of non-communication did India succeed in convincing China that it had no intention of challenging its claim to Tibet and would

not allow its territory to be used as a base for insurgency in that region. On the Chinese side, the thaw was facilitated by the confidence that the country's bounding growth instilled in its rulers. This made them confident that modern education, rapid economic growth, and rising incomes would enable them to assimilate the Tibetan people into the Chinese mainstream over the course of time..

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### ERUPTION OF VIOLENCE

This is the belief that was rudely shaken when first Lhasa, and then towns in three other provinces saw a sudden eruption of unrest that amounted virtually to a mini-insurrection in March last year. Violence broke out on March 14, 2008, in Lhasa when the police tried to break up a demonstration by about 400 Tibetans who were protesting against the government's decision not to allow monks to stage a march four days earlier on the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight to India. In the ensuing disorder, the police opened fire and reportedly killed two Tibetans. The crowd vented its anger on the property and persons of ethnic Chinese who had settled in Lhasa. According to the Chinese authorities, this led to 18 civilian deaths, mostly of Chinese settlers, In the ensuing days, the disturbance spread to towns and monasteries outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, into Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan, all parts of what the Dalai Lama has consistently described as Greater Tibet. In all, the Chinese authorities claim that they arrested 1,315 persons. The Dalai Lama's people, however, have a very different tally. According to them, the Chinese security forces killed 220 Tibetans, injured 1,300 and detained nearly 7,000.<sup>1</sup>

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1. "The Dalai Lama Speaks out in a Blistering Speech," *International Herald Tribune*, March 11, 2009, p.1 (India edition).

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of China. This set off a furious hunt for causes that inevitably degenerated into a search for someone to blame.

India was immediately elected. Beijing blamed what it called the “Dalai clique” for launching a carefully planned plot to discredit China before the Olympic Games. It published a detailed account of how this had been hatched during meetings in Brussels, New Delhi and Dharamsala over the previous ten months. It claimed that seven India-based and

international Tibetan organisations had met in Delhi in January 2008 and issued a “Declaration of Tibetan People’s Uprising Movement” in which they had claimed that China and Tibet were two different countries. This, to Beijing, was clinching proof that while the Dalai Lama spoke of autonomy within China, what he was after was the vivisection of China to create an independent state.

But its anger with India stems from a deeper cause. This is its fear that its policy of assimilation is failing because India has enabled the Tibetans to keep their culture, religion, and state structure alive. From this, it is only a short step to regarding the Tibetan presence in India , and Dharamsala in particular, as an existential threat to China.

The desire to blame India is sharpened by an awareness that has been growing within the Chinese Communist Party ever since it carried out a detailed survey of Party-People relations in 2000, that rapid growth is not leading to greater social harmony in China, but its exact opposite. The number of mass protests, in which groups of peasants or workers have actually confronted the state after exhausting all other avenues for gaining redress, has grown exponentially after 1993. In 2006, President Hu Jintao admitted that this had become a critically important issue, and announced a radical shift of emphasis from growth to social harmony. By then, the number of protests had grown ten-fold and the number of people involved by sixty

times. The unrest in Tibet has, therefore, added a new ethnic dimension to a problem that already had the Chinese state deeply worried.

Yet another cause of Beijing's anger with India is its changed perception of the Tibetan autonomy movement. In the past two decades, this has undergone a transformation that no one could have foreseen even as recently as a decade and a half ago. The spread of the mobile telephony and internet across the world and across China has enabled Tibetans-in-exile to establish and maintain continuous contact with Tibetans within China. It has also linked up Tibetans living all around the world. This has eroded the capacity of the Chinese state, as indeed other states, to manage discontent by isolating the discontented from each other. On the contrary, the Tibetan nationalist community is no longer just a group of refugees who sought shelter from Chinese oppression in India and other countries, and would like nothing better than to find a political arrangement with Beijing that would enable them to return and live in peace. It has instead become a new kind of nation – a nation without a geographical territory – but one that is capable of raising awareness and coordinating action across international boundaries. Tibet, in short, is slowly emerging as a 'virtual' nation – perhaps the first of the internet age – with Dharamsala as the seat of its 'virtual' government.

China also fears that this virtual government - in- the- making is slowly passing into the hands of younger people who feel fewer inhibitions against resorting to violence than their elders. Beijing's information from Dharamsala showed that three of the seven organisations were youth and women's organisations and a fourth was an organisation formed by former prisoners of the Chinese authorities. This was a clear sign of how far power had shifted away from the traditional leaders. Beijing's anger with India stemmed from the sanctuary that it was providing to these newer, more violence prone organisations.

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This accounts for the sudden eruption of anti-Indian rhetoric on Chinese internet sites immediately after the March 2008 riots. While officially Beijing maintained a freezing politeness towards New Delhi, it gave full rein to semi-official and non-official websites to vent their wrath. But the anger was a mask for its growing consternation. Faced with a movement that was becoming more international, more integrated and more determined to push for independence, but unable to concede that its own failure to assimilate the Tibetans might be responsible, it had elected India to be its scapegoat.

#### **BEIJING IS NOT WHOLLY TO BLAME**

Although it has produced no concrete evidence of the Dalai Lama's involvement in the so-called March 10 plot, Beijing cannot be blamed for being deeply suspicious of his intentions. Although the Dalai Lama has steadfastly maintained that he wants only autonomy within China, two elements of his demand make the Chinese suspect that he is not sincere. The first is that through eight rounds of talks from 2002 till November 2008, the Dalai Lama has steadfastly maintained that autonomy needs to be granted not to present day Tibet (TAR) but to Greater Tibet. This includes the TAR, the whole of Qinghai, the southern part of Gansu Province, the western part of Sichuan Province and the northwestern part of Yunnan Province. In all, this makes up about a quarter of China's territory.

To do this, he proposes the separation of the Tibetan dominated areas from the provinces to which they presently belong, and their unification with the TAR to create a "single autonomous administrative unit."

The second key element of his proposal is "the right of Tibetans to create their own regional government and government institutions, and processes that are best suited to their needs and characteristics."

## CONTENTS OF GENUINE AUTONOMY

The Dalai Lama wants the administration, thus, created to be responsible for eleven subjects that will include not just language , religion, culture and education, but also protection of the environment, the utilisation of natural resources, economic development, trade and public health.

The Dalai Lama's proposal may only be a wish list or an initial bargaining position designed to start a negotiation, and not a declaration of what he would be prepared to settle for. But it contains two poison pills that Beijing finds impossible to swallow. The first is the need to redraw the boundaries of four provinces. The second is the creation of a second political system within the same country, in which power does not flow down from the state to the people but flows up from the people to the state. It is very doubtful whether any government in the world would be able to make such wrenching changes in its Constitution, except over a considerable period of time. But it is all the less feasible for the Chinese state, which embodies not only the totalitarian traditions of Communism but also the absolutist traditions of the Confucian state that preceded it. Beijing cannot believe that the Dalai Lama can be so naïve. So it has concluded that he is devious, and that his demand for genuine autonomy is only the thin end of the wedge in a push for eventual independence.

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## INDIA ASLEEP

New Delhi seems singularly unaware of the peril into which it is being dragged by the changing equation between Beijing and the Dalai Lama. It has been dismayed by the rapid deterioration of its relations with China in the past two years, but is at a loss to understand why this is happening. For 12 years, after Prime Minister Narasimha Rao signed an Agreement on Peace and Tranquillity in the Border Regions in 1993, New Delhi firmly believed that the border dispute would die out as economic interdependence developed between the two countries. This belief became stronger when China dropped claims to Sikkim.

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So there was consternation when, on the eve of President Hu Jintao's visit to India in 2006, the Chinese Ambassador in Delhi asserted China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi's first reaction was the predictable one of denial: it dismissed the Ambassador's statement as an expression of his personal views and a diplomatic gaffe. It only realised that the remark had been made in deadly earnest when Beijing began to go back on tacit agreements arrived at during the previous round of talks

on the demarcation of the Line of Actual Control in the Himalayas, began an aggressive patrolling of its definition of the line in the following year, and refused a visa to an official serving in the Arunachal Pradesh government who was to visit China as part of an official Indian delegation.

New Delhi's failure to link this change with China's growing problems in Tibet arises from the vast asymmetry in the importance China and India attach to Tibet. To India, the Tibetans-in-exile remain refugees who sought political asylum, and have now only to be discouraged from taking hostile political actions against China from Indian soil. Beijing, however, regards them as a well-knit insurgent group based in India, that skilfully mobilises international sympathy and uses the internet to reach Tibetans within China, to foment an insurgency. To understand how seriously Beijing views this, one has only to compare its problem in Tibet with India's problem in Kashmir. Both the Tibetan and Kashmiri communities are of the same size—about six million. But while Kashmir Valley accounts for only 0.13 percent, or 1/800ths, of India's land area, Greater Tibet accounts for a quarter of China's.

Whatever excuse New Delhi had for not understanding China's predicament in Tibet should have disappeared when Chinese think-tanks and internet sites launched a tirade of accusations against India of conspiring with Tibetan "splittists" to endanger China. New Delhi sought to placate Beijing by asking the Dalai Lama not to indulge in political activities that would hurt



India's relations with China. Mr Pranab Mukherjee reiterated publicly, "He is a respected guest in India....but during his stay in India, they should not do any political activity, any action that can adversely affect relations between India and China."

But somewhat surprisingly, New Delhi has still not fully realised that there is a link between this, and its growing disagreement with Beijing on the border issue. As a result, it has continued to send out confusing and contradictory signals that have irritated the Chinese and may have deepened their distrust of India. Thus, barely a fortnight after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made his first visit to China in January 2008 to smooth out misunderstandings on the border and solicit China's support for India in the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, Dr. Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh and declared that it was an integral part of India.

Barely six month later, in July 2008, India's Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee assured his Chinese counterpart at a Russia-China-Brazil-India meet in Yekaterinburg that India truly regarded Tibet as an integral part of China. But less than three months later, he too visited Arunachal Pradesh and declared that its status, as a part of India, was "not negotiable".

Mutual incomprehension reached a dangerous peak in November 2008, only days before the terrorist attack on Mumbai, when India ignored a warning from a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Office given with reference to a forthcoming grand assembly of Tibetan leaders in Dharamsala, that China expected India to "ban activities aimed at splitting Chinese territory." India allowed the Dalai Lama to go ahead with a meeting whose avowed purpose was to chart a future course of action after China's summary and contemptuous rejection of his blueprint for genuine autonomy two weeks earlier. To India, it was apparent that the Dalai Lama had called the meeting to retain control of the Tibetan movement and steer it away from violence. But China saw it as the provision of another opportunity for the "Dalai clique" to work out strategies for fomenting insurrection in Tibet.

The six-day meeting did reaffirm the Dalai Lama's continuing leadership by endorsing, once again, his peaceful "middle way" for achieving autonomy.

But by reserving the right to start agitating for independence if his efforts failed, it in effect issued a veiled warning to China that the Tibetans' patience was not inexhaustible and the Dalai Lama was not irreplaceable.

China's warning to New Delhi and the Tibetans' warning to Beijing have eliminated whatever little room remained for New Delhi to continue playing ostrich. This is not a problem that will go away if it pretends that it does not exist. On the contrary, if the Sino-Tibetan stand-off, continues every passing day will make India's position more precarious, and increase the temptation in Beijing to repeat what it did in 1962.

### **A POLICY FOR TIBET**

But what change should Delhi make to its present policies? Beijing has made no overt request, but members of Chinese think-tanks, and Foreign Ministry officials who have spoken to Indian journalists, have made it clear that Beijing would like New Delhi to stop the government-in-exile from functioning out of India altogether.

So long as India remains a democracy, and so long as the Tibetan movement remains non-violent, no Indian government can accede to this demand. Nor can it accept China's assertion that every outbreak of unrest in Tibet is the work of the "Dalai clique" operating out of Dharamsala, and not of the failure of its own policies in the Tibetan region. But India can, and should, give Beijing an undertaking that it will investigate its allegations concerning the March 2008 riots and take firm action to prevent plots from being hatched against China on Indian soil.

But so long as the basic issue of Tibet's status within China is not resolved, and Tibetans continue to press for autonomy from their sanctuary in India, such reassurances by New Delhi will not reverse the deterioration of relations that has set in. In fact, if the Tibetan movement passes into younger, pro-independence hands, it can only worsen.

For China's anxiety can only worsen. It knows only too well that in the current information age, Tibetan leaders-in-exile can issue orders, accept donations, buy arms, and beam messages to Tibetans within China, from

anywhere in the world. Their cause enjoys widespread support from people across the world, if not from their governments. In such circumstances, even closing down Dharamsala will not necessarily help India to allay China's suspicions, for with thousands of kilometres of common frontier, India will find it hard to convince Beijing that it is doing all it can to deny them a base of operations in India.

However, should Beijing and the Dalai Lama be willing, there is a good deal that New Delhi can do to help them reopen their dialogue on terms that are acceptable to both parties. It is perhaps the only country that can do this, because of its unique position as the de facto protector of the Tibetan national identity for half a century—a status that is being recognised even as I speak — and because no other country has even a fraction of our experience in devising innovative solutions to the problem of accommodating ethnic minorities within a nation-state without endangering its unity.

### **A STRATEGY FOR NEW DELHI**

The starting point would be to persuade the Dalai Lama to make three amendments to his blueprint for genuine autonomy. The first is to drop his demand to create a Greater Tibet and limit his proposals to the TAR. This does not mean that Beijing cannot replicate it in parts of the other four provinces, but that should be taken up in a second phase if it proves successful in the TAR.

The second would be to reduce the number of subjects to be devolved upon the administration of the TAR from the present eleven to four: religion, culture, education and personal and customary law.

The third, and in many ways most important, would be to drop the demand for an immediate shift from the present system of “government from above” to “government from below” and to propose a time-frame within which it should be carried out.

New Delhi should not find it too difficult to persuade the Dalai Lama that this is the best way to go. At the Dharamsala conclave, he admitted that the

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failure of the eighth round of his talks with the Chinese had made it necessary to look for a new approach. His observation after the conference that "India has been too cautious" on the issue of Tibet, should, therefore, be read as a call for help — an invitation to Delhi to shed its reticence and help him find one.

The reduction of the number of subjects from eleven to four should also not prove an insurmountable obstacle. Despite Chinese assertions to the contrary, the Dalai Lama's primary concern has never been the creation of a Tibetan political unit, but the safeguarding of the Tibetan ethnic and cultural identity. For that, it is crucial for Tibetans to control the above four subjects. Reducing their demands to these four does not mean that the new Tibetan autonomous administration will have no say in other important issues such as the protection of the environment, the development of infrastructure and even on economic and trade policy so far as these affect the TAR. But in these areas, its role could be advisory and consultative rather than executive. The extent to which Beijing will heed its suggestions and warnings will depend on the degree of trust that develops between it and the TAR administration. This will require time and patience.

Lastly, although phasing the reforms over a number of years would make them vulnerable to future changes within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, therefore, place a question mark over their continuation, the Dalai Lama's acceptance of the need to do so will reflect a sensitivity to China's internal constraints that has been absent from the dialogue. It will, therefore, go a long way to reassure Beijing that the Dalai Lama does not have a hidden agenda behind his overt proposals.

Beijing's reaction to an Indian offer of good offices is likely to be more complex. It will first need to shed more than a century of suspicion of any initiative on Tibet that originates south of the Himalayas. But if the

statement made by Zhu Weiqun, the head of the Communist Party's United Front Work Department, who led the team that examined the Dalai Lama's proposal, is to be taken at face value, China has not altogether closed its doors on dialogue and may still be receptive to a proposal that does not "aim at revising the Constitution so that this separatist group could actually possess the power of an independent state." So Beijing may welcome a proposal that takes the form described above, for it will allay its suspicion that the Dalai Lama intends to split China, disrupt its internal balance and lay the foundations for creating an independent state.

Limiting the demand for autonomy to the above four subjects will reinforce the case for reopening the dialogue with the Dalai Lama because the devolution of power in these areas to China's minorities is already envisaged in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC). These are subjects that Beijing would, therefore, be least wary of ceding to a Tibetan authority.

But what China would find most reassuring would be an offer to phase in autonomy on the lines described above over a period of several years, for this would not only allow it to make the changes incrementally but to harmonise them with political changes that President Hu Jintao is already contemplating in his bid to contain social unrest in the country. Since he became the General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Jintao has launched four major programmes of reform. The first, launched in 2004, was to root out corruption in the Party. The second, termed the "third rectification" was to weed out older, less educated cadres in the Party and replace them with younger ones; 170,000 cadres were replaced in 2005. The third, also launched in 2005, was to improve the health, education and other services available to the peasants, lower the burden of agricultural taxes and increase production incentives. The last and most recent has been to start feeling his way towards political reform.

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The two key elements of this are to set up an independent judiciary , to make local elections at the village and township level genuinely competitive and to extend the election of officials up to the county level of local administration.

These were long standing demands of liberals within the Communist Party, but had been stoutly opposed by the leadership till the 17<sup>th</sup> Party conference in October 2007. But Hu Jintao had only done so in order not to appear to be taking important decisions without consulting the Party. Within two weeks of the end of the conference, the Central Party School in Beijing published a collection of essays titled *The Fifteen-Year Assault: A Research Report into China's Political Reform 2006-2020*. The book carried long essays on both subjects,. This and its title gave a clear indication of both the direction of future political reform and the time period over which the central leaders intend to carry it out. A proposal by the Dalai Lama to merge the political changes he wants in Tibet into the changes that the Chinese leadership is considering for the whole country, is likely to receive a much warmer reception than his proposal for genuine autonomy received at the beginning of November.