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Shaping a 'New Forward Policy' Tibet and India's Options

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The expression, 'forward policy' is still considered rather impolitic in the modern Indian context, but the reference here is not so much to the Jawaharlal Nehru government's ill-planned military endeavour as to a still earlier period of history. Francis Younghusband, the leader of the Lhasa Mission of 1904, wrote years later:

I am... for a forward policy in Tibet as elsewhere, though by forward I do not mean an aggressive and meddlesome policy. I mean rather one which looks forward into the future, and shows both foresight and forethought – a policy which is active, mobile, adaptive, and initiative.... This is the forward policy I would urge for Tibet, as for the frontier generally – far-seeing initiative to control events, instead of the passivity which lets events control us...

The historical context to Younghusband's words is important. He had seen the gains of the Mission slowly conceded or lost by his government in London in an attempt not to displease either the Russians or the Chinese. Nevertheless, he retained the optimism that the situation was not completely lost.

With due consideration for the changed historical and political circumstances, India too finds itself in a similar position today, with respect to Tibet. Successive Indian governments have been perceived as squandering opportunities and leverages in this regard, in order to build ties with and not antagonize China. India's acceptance of Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950, its official policy of treating the Dalai Lama as only a religious leader rather than also as a political leader and its acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 2003, among other things have all been roundly and variously condemned as mistakes, by the Tibetans, Indian political parties, and by the Indian strategic community. Yet, India cannot

now simply reverse its acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, either, for a whole host of reasons. What it can do, however, is on the one hand to ask China for cooperation in the renewal of the traditional relationship India has enjoyed with Tibet since time immemorial, and on the other hand, offer to cooperate with China in spurring economic development in Tibet. The current unrest in Tibet provides a window for both governments, to implement this cooperation.

I UNDERSTANDING THE TIBETAN PROTESTS

The protests that have convulsed China since early March this year have occurred not just in the TAR but also in Tibetan areas in the neighbouring provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu. The timing of the protests obviously had a great deal to do with the Olympics being held in Beijing in August, but 10 March, when the protests are supposed to have started, is also the anniversary of the failed Tibetan uprising of 1959. Between then and now, 1989 was the last occasion of major Tibetan protests against China. Clearly, the scale and spread of the latest protests caught Beijing by surprise but, conscious of the international sensitivity over Tibet, it did not crackdown on the protests immediately. Nevertheless, once they started getting out of hand, Chinese authorities followed a familiar script by clamping down with troops and blaming the "Dalai clique" for the unrest.

While, international attention on the protests in Tibet has focused more for issues such as 'cultural genocide' or matters of geopolitics, increasing economic discontent is also fuelling Tibetan grievances. China's Tibet policy in recent years has hinged a lot on ensuring greater economic development in the region to provide an

alternative discourse to that of 'splittism.' However while the TAR has been posting double-digit growth over several years now, Tibetans believe that such growth has been largely cornered by

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II

INDIA'S CONCERNS & OPTIONS

In its first official reaction to the Lhasa protests, New Delhi declared itself to be "distressed" at the violence and was bold enough to say that it hoped "that all those involved will work to improve the situation and remove the causes of such trouble," even as it reiterated Tibet was "an autonomous region of China." It is doubtful, however, if New Delhi considers itself as one of "those involved" that have a responsibility to "work to improve the situation." India needs to do just this and adopt a 'new forward policy' in Tibet that while not military in nature is not any less the bold for that.

Should India push for dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama?

Unnamed Chinese officials in Beijing and experts in Chinese think-tanks have suggested that New Delhi might be able to press the Dalai Lama into moderating his anti-China activity. Indian commentators too have suggested that New Delhi can play a role in facilitating dialogue between Beijing and the Dalai Lama. Such facilitation might seem like a good CBM for Sino-Indian relations. However, other advantages to India of being merely a facilitator – when India has

expended resources in the upkeep of the Tibetan refugee population and when the Sino-Indian boundary dispute remains an open sore – are not clear. Such informal talks have been carried out over several decades and it is doubtful they have ever needed any substantial Indian facilitation. From China's point of view, meanwhile, despite public statements about their willingness to engage the Dalai Lama in talks, its leaders have very little room for manoeuvre among their own people after having vilified the Buddhist leader for years, and continuing to upbraid him for the latest protests.

And if India would wish to move beyond and sit at the negotiating table along with the Tibetans and the Chinese, it is just as unclear why the Chinese would want New Delhi involved in what it considers an internal affair. Further, if three-way negotiations were to be pursued, the most likely option appears to be of bringing the Tibetans on board in the Sino-Indian boundary talks, as Tibetan activists in India have themselves demanded. No doubt, the Chinese will see in this, echoes of the Simla Convention of 1914. Besides the Chinese objections, what are the advantages for India?

There are several loose ends that need to be tied up first, particularly in India's relations with its Tibetan community and their government-in-exile, before India takes on the role of a facilitator or mediator between the Chinese and the Tibetans.

Can three-way negotiations be the bold step that would provide the breakthroughs for all concerned – for India and China on their boundary dispute, for China in its relations with ethnic Tibetans, and for Tibetans themselves in finding 'autonomy' under China more acceptable? Three-way talks would address the question of the place of Tibet in the larger rubric of Sino-Indian relations and the broad parameters for such an exercise are already available in the Dalai Lama's substituting his demand for 'independence' from China with the demand for "genuine autonomy" and in India's acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and the one-China principle.

Naturally, this is an exercise that will have implications elsewhere, for the parties concerned. In India, for example, the Kashmiris would renew their demand to be a part of the Indo-Pak peace process while for Beijing, its relations with the

Uyghurs in Xinjiang, too would come up for immediate reexamination. For the Tibetan community, meanwhile, being pitch-forked to the high-table could lead to pressures and differences of opinion that might fracture the unity that it has maintained so far under the influence of the Dalai Lama.

For China, three-cornered talks in the Tibetan case, and for India, in the case of Kashmir, would be difficult choices to accept, appearing to affect as they do treasured notions of sovereignty and national self-esteem. Nevertheless, perhaps, these are strategies that China and India would need to make to ensure that the Asian century does not remain mired in the problems of the previous century.

Resolving the Status of the Dalai Lama

New Delhi has just as much cause to open a dialogue with its Tibetan refugees on their aspirations, whether political or economic, as it has in pushing China and the Dalai Lama to come to the negotiating table. Nobody in India seems to have suggested the former. If as some say that India made a mistake in 1959 by asking the Dalai Lama to refrain from political activities and advocate that India ought to now give up this position and acknowledge the Dalai Lama's temporal leadership as well, then the first step is for New Delhi itself to open a political dialogue with the Tibetan government-in-exile. The difficulty of the undertaking would be immediately obvious. Not only is the Indian government several decades too late in starting the process, it has now to contend with an increased diversity of Tibetan opinion within the country, the possible impact of such talks on relations with China, and some uncomfortable questions that will need to be discussed such as the import of the increased Tibetanization of the various Buddhist monasteries along the Himalayan frontier, the impact of legalizing the informal trade along the LAC and the consequences of increased economic linkages between Chinese Tibet and India.

Further, the Dalai Lama's announcement in October 2007 of the possibility of his successor being chosen before his death, gives India another thorny issue to consider. What for example, happens if the chosen successor is a non-Tibetan Buddhist of Indian origin? There is perhaps, also a case for India to take a more

proactive position on the continuous Chinese denigration of the Dalai Lama. India has a substantial Buddhist population of its own that greatly revere the Dalai Lama and New Delhi must surely object to the kind of language the Chinese have used against the Tibetan spiritual leader. By making its feelings clear, India also ensures that Beijing does not continue to portray the spiritual authority of the Dalai Lama over Tibetans and other Buddhists who worship him as a subset of its own authority.

Trade or Tibet?

This is a false dilemma and India needs to get its priorities right, here. Bilateral trade with China and the Tibet issue are not necessarily connected except in that there are possibilities to improve the trading relationship through increased border trade. India cannot just yet, as China itself will not, allow its position on Tibet to be dictated by the nature of the bilateral economic relationship. Tibet is far too central to the Sino-Indian relationship, for both countries, even if it is not always openly acknowledged and while the economic relationship has gained prominence in recent years, it has also run into a rough patch given India's increasing trade deficit with China and the mismatched basket of goods being traded. And while voices in China pointed to the promising bilateral economic relationship as reason enough for

India not to interfere in Tibet, Chinese interest in bilateral trade was not sufficient enough to prevent them from delivering an obvious snub to India by not inviting its envoy on a trip arranged for foreign diplomats to Lhasa.

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economies to its east, today it survives largely on doles handed out from Beijing. And despite, greater population movements and infrastructure development encouraged by the central government, the Tibetan economy's level of integration with the larger Chinese economy is still quite poor. Against this background, it is important for India to engage China in the opening up of Tibet. Markets to its south provide Tibet with additional options besides those that lie eastwards in the Chinese heartland while Tibet's shortest access routes to warm waters and the outside world also lie in the southern direction.

III THE ROAD AHEAD

India can start its 'new forward policy' in Sikkim - through which Younghusband entered Tibet and Ladakh - where over 50 years later Nehru's policy met disaster. New Delhi should improve and build up physical connectivity infrastructure on its side of the border to facilitate easier access into and out of Tibet. Reopening of Nathu La in Sikkim was a first step that needs to be backed up by better infrastructure and an end to what is currently a short-sighted Indian policy of deliberate obstruction. Among the immediate connections that Ladakh and Tibet can reestablish is the Leh-Manasarovar pilgrimage route via Demchok that can be expanded to accommodate trade as well.

India could be given renewed access to access to Yadong (Yatung) and Gyangze (Gyangtse) to reestablish trading posts, and also new ones at Rutog (Rudok) in Western Tibet, close to the Ladakh border. Indeed, China and India already have a starting point for exchanges involving Tibet in their 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India, which provides a list of trading towns on either side, which could be opened to each other. Meanwhile, India should also welcome and cooperate in the extension of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway into Nepal as part of this process, and eventually in linking up its provincial economies bordering Nepal to the Tibetan economy.

With parliamentary democracy taking roots in both Nepal and Bhutan, Myanmar is the only non-

democratic state bordering Tibet and it too, was witness to popular opposition against the junta in September 2007. China will thus, increasingly need to consider the impact of developments in these countries on Tibet. Meanwhile, India should not shy away from making clear its interests in Tibet, since it has already acknowledged Chinese sovereignty there.

No doubt, China has worries about Indian influence in Tibet, but the targeting and destruction of ethnic Han property in the recent protests in Tibet indicate that there is only so far that Beijing can go pushing an economic line in a volatile political environment. With many Chinese businesses in the TAR thinking of shutting shop and tourism, a major contributor to the Lhasa economy, also likely to be affected, it is obvious that ethnic relations will continue to remain fraught, especially if Chinese nationalism also continues to be stoked. In this context, one positive way of allaying both Tibetan and Han fears is to use the intermediary of people-to-people contact from across the Himalayas. China must court businesses and tourists from India not just for economic reasons but also for cultural reasons and social stability in Tibet. An Indian consulate in Lhasa and easier access for Indian visitors to Tibet are imperative for this process to take off.

Tying Tibet's economic growth also to the Indian economy in addition to that of the rest of the Chinese economy, might alleviate the Tibetan fear of being under siege, whether religious, cultural or political. This calls for China to accept that its domestic ideal of a 'harmonious society' - like its external version of a 'harmonious world' - cannot be achieved without external cooperation. India remains the key, as it has always been, to any sustainable peace in Tibet. This is not a 'card' that India holds, but rather, a responsibility.



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