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A Himalayan Sojourn and China-India Chill

The latest visit by the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, to Tawang in India's Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as its own territory, has snowballed into a crisis in the complex relations between these two mega-state neighbours in Asia. Beijing tends to see this as Delhi's choice of courting a crisis that might only damage the foundation of their relationship. Indeed, their respective policies of 'One China' and a less-articulated 'One India' may now acquire a sharp competitive colour.

P S Suryanarayana¹

The People's Republic of China's (PRC's) "core" territorial interests and India's 'soft power' intersect at Tawang, a Buddhist monastic town, which nestles close to the un-demarcated Sino-Indian Line of Actual Control along the eastern sector of the disputed frontier between these two countries. Such an unusual geopolitical reality has emerged from the visit to Tawang by the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, from 7 to 10 April 2017. The picturesque Tawang dots the commanding heights of the snow-clad Himalayas in the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh, and the Dalai Lama sojourned there in serene spring weather.

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As is well-known, the Dalai Lama has been living in exile in India since he left the communist PRC in protest against Chinese rule in 1959. By then, Tibet was firmly under the control of the PRC, which was proclaimed as China's new state-*avatar* just about a decade earlier. Over time, Beijing has indeed come to characterise the current Dalai Lama as “not a purely religious figure”² but as someone deeply engaged in “anti-China separatist activities”.³ In the context of such a recent history, the fast-emerging result of the Dalai Lama's latest visit to Tawang is a *potentially* unpredictable crisis in the often-chequered Sino-Indian relationship. This grim possibility that this essay outlines is but a moderate view.

In this evolving situation, a high-ranking Chinese diplomat has told me⁴ that the constitutional status of Arunachal Pradesh, which is administered as an integral part of India, impinges on the “core interests” of China. In Beijing's view, the entire territory of historical Tibet, including its southernmost part, i.e. “Arunachal Pradesh”, belongs to China.⁵ In contrast, Delhi's position amounts to an almost-nonchalant projection of ‘soft power’ towards Beijing. In Delhi's view, the Dalai Lama, “a revered figure, a religious figure”, who was granted asylum in India following his escape from the PRC in 1959, enjoys freedom of movement within any part of India, including Arunachal Pradesh.⁶ Speaking on 9 March 2017, ahead of the Dalai Lama's latest visit to Arunachal Pradesh – his seventh to that State – India's spokesman, Ashok Bagley, asserted that “no political meaning should be attached to such travels or plans” as the Dalai Lama might undertake.⁷ Bagley was responding to queries about China's strong reaction to the impending visit, as it then was, by the Dalai Lama to Tawang.

Contrast India's position with the strong comments by the popular Chinese female spokesperson, Hua Chunying, even before the Dalai Lama reportedly received a joyous reception from the Buddhist devotees in Tawang. The Chinese position requires to be recalled at some length: “India's insistence on arranging the Dalai Lama's visit to the disputed eastern

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1451507.shtml; accessed on 6 April 2017.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1451770.shtml; accessed on 7 April 2017.

⁴ Author's conversation with a top Chinese official, who is intimately associated with Sino-Indian diplomacy, in March 2017, ahead of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's latest visit to Tawang.

⁵ Significantly, Chinese Foreign Ministry's female spokesperson, Hua Chunying, affirmed on 5 April 2017 that “Tibet related issues bear on China's core interests”, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1451507.shtml; accessed on 6 April 2017.

⁶ External Affairs Ministry, Government of India, http://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28125/Transcript_of_Weekly_Media_Briefing_by_Official_Spokesperson_March_09_2017; accessed on 11 April 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

section of the China-India boundary has gone beyond the scope of [India's] domestic affairs. . . . The Indian side has violated its commitment on Tibet-related issues, and escalated the boundary dispute. . . . We call on the Indian side to immediately stop its erroneous move of using the Dalai Lama to undermine China's interests, refrain from hyping up sensitive issues between the two sides and undercutting the foundation for boundary negotiation and bilateral relations, and take concrete actions to safeguard the overall interests of the bilateral relations".⁸

India's 'Pledge' on Tibet's Status

Annotated, China considers that India has "violated its commitment" to regard the entire historical Tibet as an integral part of the PRC. The relevant Declaration was signed on 25 June 2003 by India's then-Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the PRC's then-Premier Wen Jiabao. The Declaration contains this categorical passage: "*The Indian side recognizes that the Tibet Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the People's Republic of China and reiterates that it [i.e. India] does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India*".⁹

An Indian perspective is that Delhi has conceded that only the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region, not the historical Tibet, is a part of the territory of the PRC, not of China throughout its imperial history. This interpretation, inherent in the language of the Declaration, is significant, because the PRC traces its entitlement to Tibet, including "Arunachal Pradesh" to hoary history. Equally relevant to this context are the Dalai Lama's remarks about what he regards as tenuous links between the PRC and Tibetan Buddhism as also between the PRC and the likely issue of his successor.

Conceding that in the past the Chinese emperors had evinced interest in recognising the Dalai Lama, the Current Dalai Lama said that such a practice was prevalent only when the emperors considered themselves to be spiritual disciples. "If the Chinese government [now] wants to be involved in this they should first announce their acceptance of the theory of reincarnation. Then they should recognise reincarnations of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping [the PRC's deceased

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1451507.shtml; accessed on 6 April 2017.

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India, 25 June 2003, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_66335...; accessed on 11 December 2014.

paramount leaders] for [the current PRC leaders'] claim to have any legitimacy [over the issue of selecting the next Dalai Lama]".¹⁰ With these words, the current Dalai Lama joined issue with the PRC leaders who have, in recent years, enacted a number of regulations to govern the process of selecting the next Dalai at an appropriate time.¹¹

Apart from the issue of "reincarnation" of the present Dalai Lama, after his death, as the next supreme leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the idea of "emanation" or sudden appearance of the next Dalai Lama, even during the lifetime of the present Dalai Lama, has also emerged.¹² More importantly, Beijing keeps an eye on the India-based institution of the "Tibetan Government-in-Exile", originally constituted in 1960 with the current Dalai Lama as the helmsman, and now with an elected "Prime Minister". Indeed, ruffling China's feathers, the current "Prime Minister" of the "Tibetan Government-in-Exile", Lobsang Tobgay, was present as an invited guest at the ceremony marking Narendra Modi's assumption of office as India's Prime Minister in May 2014. Although the current Dalai Lama continues to wield real power over the Tibetan refugees all over the world, the elected "Prime Minister" of the "Tibetan Government-in-exile" is virtually mandated keep alive the 'movement' for the 'rights' of the Tibetan minority in the PRC.

In this sensitive context, the Chinese Spokesman's considered comment on the outcome of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's visit to Tawang at this time will be no music to India. The full comment deserves the attention of both authorities and analysts.

Chinese Spokesman Lu Kang was categorical in saying this: "Where the 14th Dalai Lama visited under the disguise of religion and with the indulgence of the Indian government is the disputed eastern section of the China-India boundary. You can't just call it the Indian territory. As for the commitment of India, the Indian government has made solemn commitment with the Chinese government on the boundary question and Tibet-related issues. *There're historical lessons of damage to bilateral relations when the Indian side broke its commitment.* I've made clear China's positions just now. *China is strongly against the Indian side's indulgence toward Dalai Lama's visit to the disputed section of China-India boundary and especially the*

¹⁰ Dalai Lama's official website, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2017/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-gives-buddhist-teachings-to-50-000-in-tawang>; accessed on 11 April 2017.

¹¹ For the PRC's regulations for selecting the next Dalai Lama, read, among others, Jeff M. Smith, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, USA, 2014, pp. 103-107.

¹² Robert Barnett, as cited by Jeff M. Smith in *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century*, Lexington Books, Lanham, Maryland, USA, 2014, p. 105.

*connivance of the provocative remarks by the Dalai Lama and specific Indian officials. We've lodged serious representations with India. What India has done will have negative impact on the efforts to properly settle boundary disputes through negotiations between the two sides".*¹³ (Emphasis added).

Beyond such a persistent Dalai Lama factor in China-India relations, amplified at least for the present by this Tibetan leader's latest sojourn in Tawang, two related issues must be of concern to these two countries as "rising powers", although Beijing is far ahead of India in comprehensive national strengths.

The 'Rising Power' Stakes

One of these issues concerns China. Beijing may have to evaluate the reasons why the people of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as its own territory through historical times, have apparently welcomed the current Dalai Lama despite his "anti-China separatist activities". While China can certainly take credit for not seeking to disrupt the Dalai Lama's sojourn at this time, there is also some scope for the argument that Delhi has demonstrated that its writ runs in Arunachal Pradesh and that the people in that area are not hostile towards the rest of India. This, in some ways, is in contrast with the enormous efforts that Delhi currently needs to keep its writ in good repair in the Kashmir valley, where the Modi Government has identified neighbouring Pakistan as the force behind some "anti-India" sentiments.

The other issue, which concerns India in this context, is all about the timing of the Dalai Lama's latest sojourn in Arunachal Pradesh. India's diplomatic relations with China had shown a general trend of an upswing for nearly two years since Modi's assumption of office, despite some occasional but genuine concerns on both sides. However, the state-to-state Sino-Indian engagement began to worsen soon after Delhi started insisting on Chinese support on two counts. Modi wanted the Chinese leaders to allow Delhi to become a member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) so that India could freely scout worldwide for the latest knowhow in all relevant areas including "enrichment" and "reprocessing" (subjects that fall outside the purview of this paper). Modi also wanted the Chinese leaders to allow the United Nations to

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mf_a_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1453181.shtml; accessed on 13 April 2017.

impose anti-terror sanctions on a Pakistani national who was already designated by the UN itself as an international terrorist who was also of serious concern to India.

At least one of the reasons for China's reluctance to oblige India on these two counts pertains to Beijing's "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership"¹⁴ with Pakistan which is known to view India as an all-weather rival if not necessarily an all-time foe. While the Pakistani national mentioned above is of obvious interest to Islamabad, China has to deal with the issue, too, of how best to help Pakistan, which is widely believed to be not on par with India for entry into the NSG at this stage.

Closely linked to such an Islamabad factor in the Sino-Indian engagement is Delhi's inability to persuade Beijing to desist from carving out the northern portion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through disputed territory that India regards as its own. In Delhi's perception, Beijing is now adopting double standards, considering that China had sought to block the Asian Development Bank's aid for a project in the "disputed territory" of Arunachal Pradesh. In a sense, therefore, Arunachal Pradesh has become a playground, in strategic terms, for India-China engagement or the lack of it. While this may partially explain the timing of Dalai Lama's latest sojourn in Arunachal Pradesh, his initially-delayed visit finally happened around the time of the Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent summit with the United States' new President, Donald Trump.

Surely the Sino-Indian relations were not of any particular significance to outcome of the Trump-Xi Jinping summit at this time. However, the Dalai Lama's just-concluded visit to Tawang could still turn out to be the first sign of a *potential* contestation between Delhi and Beijing over their respective sovereignty-considerations of "One India" and "One China".

India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj portrayed this emerging competition in stark political colour as far back as on 8 September 2014 itself. She briefed the media as follows: "When China's Foreign Minister [Wang Yi] was here [in New Delhi in May 2014], he was told, 'If we [Indians] believe in one China policy, you [Chinese] should also believe in one India policy'".¹⁵ The current bilateral atmosphere is much more darkly clouded; Beijing has

¹⁴ China and Pakistan routinely describe themselves as "all-weather strategic cooperative partners" in their bilateral diplomatic interactions.

¹⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Transcript of External Affairs Minister's first formal interaction with the media (8 September 2014), accessed at www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/23982/Transcript_of_External_Affair... (Accessed on 21 February 2015).

even refused to acknowledge the proactive cooperation that the Indian Navy rendered to the Chinese Navy in its latest successful anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden on 8 April 2017.¹⁶

Beijing’s “One China” policy is arguably the driving force of the country’s engagement with other countries for decades. This translates into an insistence that historical Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau – all three of which are already in the PRC’s fold, except for “Southern Tibet” – as well as Taiwan, currently a non-state entity outside the PRC, should be treated as parts of China as a single monolithic political entity in the global arena. At another level, the “One India” policy is proactively articulated by the present Narendra Modi Government. For Delhi, this translates into an insistence that the entire territory of the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, as well as Arunachal Pradesh and all other Indian States in the country’s North East, should be treated as integral parts of India as a single monolithic political entity on the international stage. In this context, it is prudent, however, to avoid hasty speculation about how Beijing might deal with India, which in the Chinese perception, has now chosen to court a crisis which could damage the very “foundation” of the bilateral relationship.

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¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1452560.shtml; accessed on 10 April 2017.