

# ISAS Brief

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## The Third Tibetan Uprising: India's Response

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Tibet remains a complex issue in India's relations with China. It has a historical context, a sensitive humanitarian dimension and contemporary political imperatives. All these impinge on the unresolved, conflict-prone border issue between the two Asian giants. Keeping this in mind, India has been diplomatically correct and politically cautious in responding to the 2008 Tibetan uprising. This uprising has gone much beyond the arson and rioting in the Tibetan capital Lhasa, affecting not only other parts of Tibet but also other regions of China such as Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan. In its scale, the uprising is comparable to the one in 1959 which led to the Dalai Lama's flight and it is much bigger than in 1988 which was strongly suppressed by Hu Jintao, who then was in charge of Tibetan affairs.

In the statements made by India's Minister of External Affairs, Pranab Mukherjee, and the official spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs, India felt "distressed by the reports of the unsettled situation and violence in Lhasa and by the deaths of innocent people. We would hope that all those involved will work to improve the situation and remove the causes of such trouble in Tibet, which is an autonomous region of China, through dialogue and non-violent means". On the attempts of the Tibetan refugees organising a march to Tibet to protest against the hosting of Olympic Games by China, the official Indian position was that the "Tibetan refugees are our guests in India. All those in India, whether Indian citizens or foreigners, are subject to the law of the land regarding the crossing of our borders, marches or demonstrations. Like our other guests, Tibetan refugees, while they are in India, are expected to refrain from political activities and those activities that affect our relations with other friendly countries." Even before the outburst in Lhasa, Indian police had, on 10 March 2008, disallowed the Tibetans organising demonstrations and launching marches to Tibet. About a hundred Tibetans were arrested.

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There has clearly been an attempt on India's part to separate the humanitarian support to the Tibetan refugees from their political and anti-Chinese activities. At the same time, there has also been an attempt to disapprove of the violent means both by the Tibetan protesters and the Chinese authorities in Lhasa. India even asked to get the cause of disturbances and violence "investigated independently". New Delhi's position on the Tibetan protest has not pleased the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama, in his "constructive criticism", called it as "over cautious". Tibetan agitators strongly disapproved it saying, "India supports China too much. We are struggling but they don't let us. It's because India is afraid of China".

India's stand has however, been appreciated by the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao who expected India to "follow the agreements reached between the two countries and handle this issue in a correct way". This was done while blaming the "Dalai clique" for "Tibet independence" activities. The Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, Zhang Yang, went even further in cautioning India against any "irresponsible words or acts" on the evolving Tibetan situation. After explaining the Chinese account of arson, looting and violence in Lhasa, he said that there was no "crackdown" and added, "we hope that the Indian friends can see clearly the nature of those instigating and conspiring activities of the Dalai clique, which aim at splitting China and disrupting the Beijing Olympic Games".

India's official position is in conformity with the broad political consensus that exists in India on the Tibetan issue. The opposition Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) strong reaction and parliamentary walkout on the Tibetan question, with isolated demands for raising the question in the United Nations, need not be taken as a breach of this consensus. While in power before 2004, the BJP had also followed a similar approach and its current deviation in this respect seems to be a reflection of its "oppositional role" in the (expected) election year. Foreign Minister Mukherjee even taunted the BJP on its parliamentary antics by saying, "What have they done to change this policy". The United Progressive Alliance government's left supporters are obviously in agreement with this.

The evolution of India's Tibet policy can be traced back to its pre-independence perspective, inherited in a large measure from the British. In the first Asian Relations Conference convened by India in March 1947, prior to its formal independence, Jawaharlal Nehru invited Tibet as an independent country. He accommodated Chinese objections to the flying of independent Tibet's flag at the venue of the conference, but in his speeches, Tibet was equated with other independent countries like Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Myanmar (then Burma), etc. But the Indian position started shifting after this conference, perhaps in response to the Chinese arguments against Tibetan independence. In a position paper prepared in the foreign office on India's stand on Tibet, it was underlined that India "could not afford to prejudice her relations with so important a power as China by aggressive support of unqualified Tibetan independence". India opposed Chinese military intervention in Tibet in October 1950 but refused to sponsor Tibet's appeal to the United Nations against this intervention. Dictated by India's incapability to challenge the Chinese militarily in Tibet, Nehru decided to follow the British formulation of "Tibetan autonomy under Chinese

suzerainty". This was the basis of the April 1954 Agreement with China on Tibet under which India agreed to withdraw all its extra-territorial rights in Tibet enjoyed by the British during the colonial period. In this agreement, the Chinese side had committed itself to respect Tibetan cultural and religious autonomy.

Even while endorsing Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet and accepting not only Tibetan refugees, that number around 120,000 now, but also a Tibetan government in exile, India sought to differentiate between Tibet's political rights and its cultural and religious identity, with the Dalai Lama as its spiritual head. India has also kept itself discreetly distanced from efforts by other countries to harass China militarily in Tibet from the Indian territory, like the arming of Khampas by the United States. India has, however, been sore that the Chinese have neither sincerely respected the Tibetan autonomy nor made genuine and sufficient efforts to resolve the Tibetan issue through dialogue with the Dalai Lama. The Chinese leadership has not fully honoured its own 17-point Agreement of May 1951 to "Liberate Tibet Peacefully" which was imposed on the Tibetan delegation. A dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese authorities was encouraged by India and others during 2002-2005 wherein Dalai Lama had gradually shifted his position from "independence" to "meaningful autonomy". In 2005, there were even hopes that China may let the Dalai Lama visit Tibet, at a place other than Lhasa, to pave the way for gradual resolution of the issue. However, the hardliners in Beijing prevailed.

The thrust on "Tibetan autonomy" in India's position has been gradually diluted under the imperatives of improving relations with China and the compulsions of Chinese assertive stance. During the suppression of Tibetan uprising in 1988, India's reaction was mild as the then-Prime Minister was planning a visit to China to break the ice in bilateral relations. Rajiv Gandhi's visit in December 1988 opened up the dialogue on the border issue. India's reaction to the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests in 1989 in China was also cautious and politically correct. Subsequent developments led to confidence-building measures between the two countries, through the agreements in 1993 and 1996, to ensure that the border issue would be resolved through dialogue and without recourse to force. In 2003, when Prime Minister Atul Bihari Vajpayee visited China, even the word "Chinese suzerainty" was dropped, accepting Tibet as a part of "Chinese territory". During Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh's visit to China in January 2008, Tibet did not even figure in the official documents or speeches. China was happy with India's reiteration of "one China" policy. Not only that, in preparation of this visit, the government of India restrained its ministers from attending Dalai Lama's felicitation ceremony in November 2007, as such an attendance would be "not in conformity with the foreign policy of the government". With smoothly growing economic engagement and expectations of China's support for Indo-United States nuclear deal as well as the United Nations Security Council membership, New Delhi finds it prudent to avoid irritating the Chinese with the Tibetan question. More so, the international community is also moving cautiously on Tibet. Both the United States and the United Kingdom have asked China to start negotiations with the Dalai Lama. Both the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao have, in principal, agreed to talk, though one wonder if and when the talk

would really take place. No other Asian country has come out strongly against China on the suppression of the third Tibetan uprising.

While New Delhi has not rejoiced Beijing's huge embarrassment and not sought to take any political advantage of it, the third Tibetan uprising cannot be resented as an unwelcome development. Any dusting-off of the so-called Tibet card, howsoever blunted it has become, is advantageous to New Delhi in border negotiations with China, particularly at a time when the Chinese leaders have chosen to reassert their claims on Arunachal Pradesh. Tibet is a party to the 1914 Shimla Agreement between India and China that drew the McMahon line. China refuses to accept that line but Tibet and the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile continues to endorse it. Following the recent controversy on Arunachal Pradesh and Tawang, India's foreign secretary had gone to *Dharmshala* to brief the Dalai Lama. The Prime Minister of the Dalai Lama's exiled government in India, endorsing India's position, said in an interview after the current Tibetan uprising,

“We have continued the legitimate government of the Dalai Lama, which is now 367 years old. That government has agreed to McMahon line and Tawang and other issues were agreed on the basis of the watershed principles. The watershed principle said that whatever water comes to this side belongs to India. It was very clear demarcation...If Chinese say that because the sixth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang, it belongs to Tibet then if one Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia, can I say Mongolia is a part of Tibet?”

No one in India can afford to fritter away such a strong support by abandoning the Tibet issue all together. Indian media has taken a much stronger position against China on the Tibetan issue. They have criticised India's position as being too soft to please the Chinese and asked for an urgent and serious review of its Tibet policy. There is no indication of the government thinking of reviewing its Tibet policy at this moment, but New Delhi may not be averse to the positive side of the Tibetan question. That is why India continues to host the Tibetan cause, in howsoever a diluted manner under the prevailing political constraints. It is to keep the Tibetan issue alive that India pays 10 crores rupees (raised from the earlier amount of one crore rupees [one crore rupees are equivalent to 100 million rupees]) annually for the upkeep of the Tibetan refugees and for the running of the Dalai Lama's government. Even in the heat of the present controversy, India has allowed the United States Congresswomen and Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to visit the Dalai Lama in *Dharmshala* on 21 March 2008, ignoring the Chinese displeasure and discarding the risk that such a visit may invite the charge of Indo-United States collaboration against China on Tibet. She is the third highest ranking United States official and a staunch supporter of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan freedom.

India has also looked with disapproval the Chinese charge of “conspiracy by the Dalai clique” in Tibet, because the uprising indeed seems to be beyond the Dalai Lama. The Chinese blame on the Dalai Lama is self-defeating as it exposes the fragility of the

Chinese control in Tibet and their inability to anticipate such a development. On his part, the Dalai Lama has publicly confessed his inability to stop the violence and even offered to “resign” if disturbances did not stop. The third Tibetan uprising is a serious indication of the ground slipping from under the Dalai Lama’s feet with regard to the Tibetan issue. The Chinese refusal to deal with the Dalai Lama, and his as well as the international community’s helplessness in forcing China to change its stance has frustrated Tibetans and led to the rise of militancy among the Tibetan youth, both inside and outside Tibet. Tibetan youth organisations in India have been carefully studying the South Asian militant movements like the Maoists of Nepal and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam of Sri Lanka for the past couple of years. India certainly does not look forward to the militarisation of the Tibetan movement and irrelevance of the Dalai Lama’s “middle path”. Any isolation of the Dalai Lama from the Tibetan movement will force India to review its present position. It may be desirable for China to seriously proceed with moves to engage the Dalai Lama in seeking a negotiated and peaceful solution of the Tibetan tangle.

The Chinese government may succeed in putting the present uprising under its boot but the issue will not disappear. Who knows then, what would be the form of the fourth Tibetan uprising.

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