Journal of Peace Studies, Vol.8, Issue 1, Jan-Feb., 2001

Tibet Factor in the evolution of Sino-Indian Strategic Ties

Swaran Singh*

**Dr. Swaran Singh is Assistant Professor, CIPOD, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.*

> *"He who holds Tibet dominates the Himalayan piedmont; he who dominates the Himalayan piedmont threatens the Indian subcontinent; and he who threatens the Indian subcontinent may well have all of South Asia within his reach, and with that, all of Asia"*
> *-George Ginsburg & Michael Mathos[1]*

Tibet had always attracted attention as the critical buffer zone between the expanding empires-Mongolian, Russian or Chinese. To this, the Indian connection was added only in late 18th century when the expanding British Indian empire had reached Tibet's borders. Before this, India's contacts with Tibet had remained confined to cultural interactions and border trade, and this could be dated back to 7th century AD when Buddhism was officially patronised as the religion of the Tibetan Kings. China's contacts with Tibet may not be older but there were military conquests from the Chinese side from time to time. As regards Russia, although Tibet constituted only a small margin of the gigantic Russian empire, the Russians never overlooked developments inside Tibet and kept trying, in order to carry some influence on the ruling dispensations in Tibet. All this must have been, at least partly, because of the strategic significance of Tibet which kept unfolding itself as the modern technologies broke traditional barriers and made Tibet accessible to the outside world.

However, during the recent period, especially in the first half of the 20th century, the strategic interests of great powers in Tibetan plateau gradually became far more direct and explicit. Tibet also featured as a major issue at the local level, and emerged as the single most important factor in determining the Sino-Indian interactions and policy initiatives. And it is in this context of their complicated legacies and, therefore, their continuing preoccupation with the Tibetan issue during these last 50 years that this paper tries to examine the evolution of Tibet as a factor that still continues to overshadow Sino-Indian strategic ties.

The Historical Evolution

Historically, apart from being physically inaccessible, Tibet had always preferred to shun all external contact. It was only in times of distress that the Tibetans would turn to seek help from a whosoever was friendly, powerful and willing to help them. But India was the only exception to this rule. India and Tibet shared socio-cultural ties for centuries and the contacts between them remained in tact through the vicissitudes of history. The links between India and Tibet dated back to the time of Buddha. Tibet was the birthplace of Lord Buddha and as such Buddhists in India had kept the lines of communication open with Tibet. In addition to this, the favourable topography of Indo-Tibetan frontiers had greatly facilitated Indo-Tibetan interactions since the ancient times.

More credible records of their non-religious interactions go back to the 10th Century AD when King Skyeid Mgnon of the second Sakya Dynasty divided his kingdom amongst his three sons leading to territorial demarcation between what is presently India's Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh with Tibet. And it is that demarcation that has continued to define India's borders in what is today known as the western sector.

Later, during the 13th century, the Lamaism also spread to Mongolia and the powerful Mongols were allowed to assume the Protectorate of Lamaist Buddhism and exercise their authority in Tibet through Sakya Pandita- a relationship which flourished following Kublai Khan's conquest of China in 1279 but was gradually blurred during the next years [2]. The first recorded instance when the Tibetans voluntarily invited China's military help was in 1724 when they invited the Chinese forces against the Mongols and, in 1728, accepted Chinese *Amban* (Resident) and their military protection since 1728. Soon the Chinese became too powerful and in 1733, they put an end to the institution of King and combined both spiritual and temporal authority of Tibet under the Dalai Lama [3]. The last time the Chinese forces were voluntarily invited to Tibet was in 1790 to deal with a military aggression by the Gurkhali forces from Nepal.

The initial years of the 19th century witnessed the rise of Britain and Russia as global powers and, as the colonial onslaughts made China weak and vulnerable, Tibet soon became the buffer zone of the Anglo-Russian power projections in Asia. When in 1840, King of Punjab and Ladakh, Raja Gulab Singh, sent his general Zorawar Singh to conquer Tibet there was no Chinese presence to be seen, though Tibetan defeated Indian forces. In fact, it was in face of China's failure to restrain 'western' influences that beginning from the second half of 19th century, Tibet decided to break from its self-imposed isolation making a major shift and opting for a positive policy of equidistance [4]. From the British Indian side, following the failure of George Bogle who was sent to Tibet in 1774 as representative of East India Company's Governor General, Warren Hastings, the British tried to enter Tibet by using official permission from Peking which they obtained in their Chefoo Convention of 1876 after the end of Opium Wars.

But, since Tibet did not honour China's permission either, this finally resulted in the famous Younghusband expedition of 1905 and followed by the treaties of 1904, 1906, 1908, Britain apparently became Tibet's *de facto* suzerain power. Dalai Lama had meanwhile fled to Mongolia and the British succeeded in obtaining from Tibet unprecedented concession granting that:

- No portion of Tibetan territory shall be ceded, sold, leased, mortgaged or otherwise given for occupation, to any foreign power;
- No such power shall be permitted to intervene in Tibetan affairs;
- No concessions for railways, roads, telegraphs, mining or other rights shall be granted to any foreign power, or the subject of any foreign power.
- No Tibetan revenues, whether in kind or cash, shall be pledged or assigned to any foreign power, or subject of any foreign power; and
- In the event of consent to any such concessions being granted to any foreign power similar or equivalent concessions shall be granted to the British Government.[5]

But the British were perhaps least interested in annexing this 'worthless' piece of land and wished to keep alive the phantom of Chinese suzerainty. Accordingly, they signed another Sino-British agreement of 1906 thereby obtaining further concessions to lay down telegraph lines connecting

their trade centers in Tibet with India. And this time the British were in position to implement their mandate irrespective of the Tibetan sentiments. For this unsought recognition the Chinese even agreed to pay the entire war indemnity of Rs. 75 lakh which the British had earlier imposed on Tibet. But soon this British recognition also resulted in China trying to regain control over East Tibet and expeditions for this purpose had begun from 1908-1909. But guided by the changed ground realities, even the Dalai Lama clearly undermined China's authority and turned to Britain for assistance which, however, was denied.

This selective indulgence by outside powers, clearly undermined Tibet's policy of equidistance and on the new year's day in 1910 the Chinese armed forces entered Tibet. This was the first time when Chinese forces had entered Tibet without invitation from Dalai Lama. Once again, the Dalai Lama decided to flee and this time he took refuge in India. However, the crisis was resolved by the Chinese revolution of 1911 and taking advantage of the situation the Dalai Lama declared Tibet's independence in 1913. As always, no sooner had the new Republic re-asserted its claim over Tibet than the British offered them to mediate and this resulted in Simla Conference of 1913-14 which, though ended in stalemate, had yet created a wedge by formalising the division of Tibet into Inner Tibet under China and the Outer Tibet under Dalai Lama.

The British Intervention

During these early years of 20th century, the British intervention was particularly successful in propping up new concepts like "suzerainty" and "autonomy". The British kept playing China and Tibet against each other with such concept and obtained more and more concessions; often encouraging them to fight and then playing as a mediator between them. The significance of these concepts, however, was not realised at that stage and, for long, these concepts continued to have different meanings for different parties. Traditionally, the Chinese Kings had never exercised 'sovereignty' over Tibet in the western sense of the term: they had never directly ruled non-Chinese people and always allowed the local administrative structures to function under Chinese 'patrons', and the military presence was kept only occasional and minimal.

Similarly, the Tibetans had never been so fastidious about 'autonomy' or 'independence' and had remained contended with some sort of isolation; the nature of which kept on changing depending on their power equations with the powerful kingdoms at any given point in time. Later, the legal definition of "suzerainty" that was introduced by the British in their Simla Convention of 1914 was not very different from these existing realities of Sino-Tibetan relations. However, these legal distinctions became important as old conventions gradually gave way to the emerging new international legal system. It was in this context that British tactics of playing with words and other western concepts unruffled these oriental equations thus raising apprehensions and anxiety levels.

More than this, the British were also involved in arming the Tibetan resistance. A mission led by Sir Charles Bell in 1920-21 had signed an agreement to export to Tibet 10 mountain guns, 20 machine guns and 10,000 rifles with ammunition. The Chinese had already had the taste of British imperialism since their Opium Wars and their presence in Tibet made Chinese extremely suspicious of British intentions. Later, as the 13th Dalai Lama died on 17th December 1933, the Chinese succeeded in putting a pro-Chinese Abot, Ro-dreng Hutukhtu, as the official Regent in January 1934 and he was authorised to rule Tibet until the 14th Dalai Lama obtained majority.

Since this Abot was not only supported by the ruling elite, this stalemate again allowed Tibet to assert its policy of equidistance. For example, when the Japanese had captured and closed the Burma Road during the World War II, Tibet did not allow its territory to be used for supplies between China and British India.

The Communists rise to power

Soon, the Communist came to power in Peking in October 1949 and "liberation" of Tibet once again became a priority issue on Chairman Mao's agenda. As the first thing, year 1950 was officially designated as the year for Tibet's liberation. Though this was not the first time for Tibet to hear such threats yet in April 1950, Tibet appointed a seven-member mission, especially to establish contacts with the new Chinese Government. After the fall of Chamdo to the troops of Mao's People's Liberation Army (PLA), the 14th Dalai Lama took over full responsibility on 17 November 1950 and, at the age of 15, he shifted his set to Yatung on the Indo-Tibetan border. Also, not sure of the Chinese response, Dalai Lama's seven-member mission decided to settle preliminaries in India, if possible with the aid of Government of India. This made PRC all the more suspicious of external influence and the Radio Peking continued to warn Tibet against inviting outside intervention.

Meanwhile, the Press was reporting about China's mobilisation but all protests by India were rejected by China as interference in China's internal affairs. Tibet's complaint to the United Nations showed how Chinese forces had crossed Dre Chu river on several points from October 7, 1950. Chinese also captured the Tibetan governor on several points from October 7, 1950. Chinese also captured the Tibetan governor of Chamdo and took him to Peking where he was made to sign a "17-point Agreement" on 23 May 1951. Though Dalai Lama later described it as signed under military duress, this agreement had settled Tibet'' fate in favour of Peking. Apart from talking about the preservation of Tibet's culture and autonomy, it clearly put an end to the Indian presence thus re-establishing China's paramountcy over Tibet in the following terms:

- The local government of Tibet shall actively assist PLA to enter Tibet and consolidate the national defene;
- Tibetan people have the right to exercise national regional autonomy under the unified leadership of the Central People's Government;
- The Central People's Government shall conduct the centralised handling of all external affairs of the area of Tibet; and,
- In order to ensure the implementation of this agreement, the Central People's Government shall set up an Administrator of Civil and Military Affairs in Tibet.[6]

The next few years were spent in consolidating its position and in pacifying anti-China sentiments. And here, among other things, China opened negotiations with India and through the Panchsheel Ageement of April 1954, China's position in Tibet was finally legitimised. However, China was not still satisfied with being an unassuming patron and soon began to fiddle with Tibet's socio-political structures. In November 1956, the Dalai Lama visited India in connection with the celebrations of the Buddha Jayanti and reportedly asked Prime Minister Nehru if he could take asylum in India. Prime Minister Zhou En-lai had synchronised his visit to Delhi with that of Dalai Lama and, on Chinese assurance, Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa. This was followed by Mao

postponing all structural reforms in Tibet and keeping land reforms at abeyance, which gave the impression that Peking's promises were genuine. In reality, China was still extremely paranoid about Tibet's future and was only buying time to consolidate its existing position. China's attitude again hardened from the middle of 1958.

China's Security Concerns

Tibet was not too attractive a proposition for different Chinese emperors until its strategic location was early in the twentieth century. Geographically speaking, Tibet largely constitutes a high plateau of nearly half-a-million square miles, which is bound by the Kuen-Lun mountain in the north and by the Himalayas in the South. Access to Tibet from the Chinese side was, therefore, much difficult and restricted to only two routes: from Xinjiang from the northwest and Sichuan from southwest. Therefore, as long as the Chinese were unaware of Tibet's strategic importance this plateau had been ignored as "inhabited by tribes, which are among the least civilised in the entire world."[7]

By comparison, the routes through India's Chumbi Valley and Twang region were far more accessible and, until the People's Republic of China (PRC) finally built its own highways since mid-1950s, even Chinese had often accessed Lhasa from these Indian routes. Once China discovered the strategic importance of Tibet, they felt very uncomfortable with Tibet's India connection. Added to this was China's historical experience with British India, which had been the most influential actor in Tibet for nearly last 100 years. Moreover, the Anglo-American 'containment' policy had particularly made them suspicious about China's vulnerabilities if the "backdoor" of their mainland lay open for intervention.[8] Accordingly, despite its best behaviour, India was often described as the stooge of western imperialism, which also explains China's obsession with fortifying its strategic advantage in Tibet at all costs.

As recent research shows, Communist China's military takeover of Tibet was clearly based on their strategic calculations and had absolutely nothing to do with either China's historical contacts or its ideological fervour.[9] Historically, if Tibet had been a part of Middle Kingdom's tribute-paying system so were various other neighbouring countries like Burma, Korea, Mongolia and Vietnam. Why these other so-called vessel states were not "liberated" on the same historical grounds? Secondly, in case of Tibet, no attempt whatsoever was made to impose the communist ideology in a hurry. Instead, during the first 25 years, Beijing spent most of its resources towards the development of strategic and military-oriented transport and communication facilities. This was also the period when China most sincerely tried to sort out Tibet's borders and a series of agreements were made with Burma, Nepal and Pakistan while a similar package deal with India also appeared in the offing. With both Pakistan and Burma, Chinese had virtually agreed to the borders as defined by British colonial masters. The problem with India was that it insisted on recognition of McMahon Line. For China, it meant recognising Tibet's treaty-making powers that would jeopardise its military presence in Tibet.

Nevertheless, to start with, the Chinese were less sure about Tibet's western borders, which is where most initial intrusions took place. Pakistan had become the member of SEATO-an anti-China western alliance- and President Ayub Khan had made public statements during May-June 1959 for a joint Indo-Pak defence against the Chinese communist threat.[10] But the

events that followed made Pakistan China's closest ally while India turned into China's number one adversary in South Asian subcontinent. Apart from other legacies of the British Indian empire, PRC's security concerns were greatly heightened by the Indian decision to grant Dalai Lama asylum in 1959, followed by the Sino-Soviet split in 1960, Sino-Indian border war of 1962 and the Indo-Soviet friendship that made Chinese leaders very suspicious. Evidence is now available to show how Tibet issue had created internal dissension within the Communist Party of China (CPC) where leaders like Zhou En-lai, Lin Piao, Deing Xiaoping were determined to promote dialogue, while Mao was decided about banishing Dalai Lama. Consequently, despite all odds, China's pre-occupation with Tibet soon resulted in making over 97 percent of Outer Tibet counties accessible by motorable roads by 1975. PRC was by then finally in full control of the Tibetan plateau.

By 1975, the PRC had built its four major strategic highways (also known as Military Roads) which not only linked Tibet to the rest of mainland China but particularly its northern and western highway complexes cut through the entire plateau running almost parallel to its Himalayan borders at an average distance of about 35 kms. The longest of these four is the 1,413 mile-long Sichuan-Tibet highway, which has an average height of 13,000 feet and crosses through 14 high mountain ranges and 12 major rivers. But the Communists were still not satisfied considering that to go from Beijing to Lhasa by road it still took two weeks' time.

Accordingly, starting from 1955, China had completed 12 airfields in Tibet by 1963, once again all located next to their Himalayan frontiers. Most of these were used for carrying military personnel and other essential goods and, for long time, these air routes were not open for civilian traffic. During the late 1980s, PRC undertook a historic five-year experiment of flying 400 civilian aircraft sorties from various destinations in the mainland to Tibet airlifting PLA forces, and to support such a heavy air traffic the runway at Gonggar airport was expanded, making it the largest in China.[11] As of today China has 23 airfields most of which are located next to either Tibet's borders with India or its other military and administrative centres.[12] To add to this China also began deploying its nuclear weapons in Tibet from 1971 and Tibet plateau today is suspected to have between three to five nuclear missile sites.[13]

But apart from preparing to deal with its external enemies, China had also to deal with the continued resentment amongst the Tibetan population. According to a recently "discovered" 123-page petition, which was submitted by the Panchen Lama to Prime Minister Zhou En-lai during the summer of 1962, the author had investigated in detain China's brutal suppression of the 1959 Tibet rebellion.[14] To recall, Panchen Lama was arrested in 1964 and was not released from prison and house arrest until 1978, and he dies in 1989 in suspicious circumstances. In fact, until the early 1980s, Tibet witnessed preponderance of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in its administrative set up and during this period, even the conservative estimates put PLA's presence between120,000 to 300,000 troops.

All this had obvious implications for India where China's spectacular military build-up on its borders often sparked speculation on how China might expand itself to include other smaller states in the Himalayan region which included Burma, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim especially when Mao was on record for having made such remarks.[15] It was argued that it was only the growing international opposition as also internal dissidence to China's military take over of Tibet that had

restrained China from repeating any military adventures in the cis-Himalayas. Partly, this may also be because of China's forays into Korea and Vietnam though these examples only further strengthened speculations. The way Indian forces were taken by surprise in 1962 proved how Chinese had clearly thought through about using military means while the Indian leadership had still continued to count on diplomatic initiatives.

Sinicisation of Tibet

The term, *Sinicisation of Tibet* has generally been projected and analysed in its demographic ramifications. This primarily focuses on the influx of Han Chinese population into Tibetan regions thereby disturbing the societal and cultural balance of the Tibetans' ethnic fabric. However, one major problem in dealing with this debate is the contrast that continues to persist between the two diametrically opposite versions projected by the Chinese officials and Tibetans; especially those fighting for Tibet's independence or autonomy. In addition, the free access to Tibet was virtually closed until early 1980s and the process of change during these crucial first three decades still remains a mystery for most Tibetan experts as well as Sinologists.

According to Tibetan groups, nearly one-fifth of Tibetans had died in the resistance movement during these first two decades while many more languished in China's jails and labour camps. The Chinese side blames this on the brutal serf-system that had been prevalent during the rule of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, where over 95 percent of population consisted of serfs, who had no better living standards than what is obvious from the fact that during 1950s the average age of a Tibetan was only 36 years. According to the Chinese authorities the average life span has since increased and now it stands at 65 years.

The Information Office of China's State Council recently issues their second White Paper on Tibet titled *New Progress in Human Rights in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.* According to this document, as of today, the Tibetans constitute about 95 percent of the total population of China's Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). It explains how during the last 40 years (1953-1993), the total population of TAR has nearly doubled (from being under 1 million in 1950s to being 2.3 million by 1993). By the end of 1996, the population of TAR had reached 2.44 million. Similarly, it gives details of various special measures that have been taken and funds provided in ensuring the preservation of Tibet's special culture and religious practices. According to it, at present, TAR has 1,787 sites for Buddhists religious activities and over 46,380 Buddhists monks and nuns living in monasteries and all Tibetans enjoy religious freedom.

By contrast, Tibetan sources talk of Chinese authorities having destroyed more than 6,000 monasteries and taken control over religious monasteries and their activities. All studies from the Tibetans-in-exile and other Tibetan resistance movements continue to stress how Tibet has been dismembered by the Communist Chinese by merging large portions of their land into China's neighbouring two provinces of Qinghai and Sichuan. It is this basic premise which accords Tibetan studies a totally different profile compared to the reports from China on Tibet. According to Tibetans-in exile, Tibet's Amdo and Kham provinces have since been separated and merged with these two aforesaid Chinese provinces. As such, in these two regions the influx of Han populations have resulted in making Tibetans a minority in their own land. According to them, even inside

China's Tar, there remain difficulties in making correct projections about the influx of Han population.

Vast majority of this Han influx in TAR has moved on without obtaining the official residence permit which keeps them hidden in all official projections. Besides, the official Chinese projections also do not include large number of party and administrative officials posted in TAR as also the huge presence of People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police troops. Moreover, regardless of these statistics, the impact of Sinicisation has to be seen in terms of Han control in the political and military power in TAR as also their complete dominance in the economic life of major urban centres and lately, their increasing influence has extended not only into agricultural sectors but also cultural and religious lives of the Tibetans.

India's Limited Options

Despite India's granting diplomatic recognition to China on April 1, 1950 and defending PRC's interests at the United Nations where India was largely responsible for adjournment of the debate on Tibet resolution, the Chinese remained suspicious about India's assertions of its "interests" in Tibet. As a result, the first thing the Chinese forces did on their arrival in Lhasa in 1952 was to terminate India's political agency as also its trading, postal, telegraph and other facilities. To start with, they objected to the dispatch of replacements for the Indian guards at Gyantse and Yatung, seized the wireless sets of the Indian trade agent at Gartok and prevented him from proceeding to Rudok and Taklakot. Thus apart from militarily taking on China, India's options were now limited to either re-negotiating its trading rights with China or have no rights at all.

While the strategic importance of Tibet as a buffer zone had possibly increased following the coming of the communist regime to power in China, Nehru had not perhaps yet reformulated his defence of British Indian frontiers and kept making (what looked like) incoherent statements. Or perhaps he excessively trusted his Chinese friends. Broadly speaking, Prime Minister Nehru was virtually his one-man brigade dealing with India's Tibet policy and often he was not impressed by the criticism from leaders like J.B. Kripalani, Ram Manohar Lohia, Jai Prakash Narain and even from his deputy prime minister Sardar Patel. This may have partly resulted from Nehru's belief that none of these leaders knew as much about China's military onslaughts in Tibet.

As was later discovered, some of the most important information was not allowed to pass beyond Nehru's trusted lieutenants. However, contrary to the popular view, it was only after a great deal of resistance that Nehru agreed to hold formal negotiations, which began at Peking from December 31, 1953. This finally resulted in the signing of Panchsheel Ageement of April 1954 where India accepted China's suzerainty over Tibet. Thus, in the face of China's military takeover of Tibet, Nehru's Tibet policy can be broadly segmented in to three broad sections—resistance, vacillation and surrender.

Nehru's Tibet Policy

To start with, the Tibet policy of Nehru was clearly an extrapolation of the policy of British India towards Tibet. Very briefly, this involved recognising Tibet as an autonomous buffer state between India and China; recognising Chinese suzerainty but not sovereignty over Tibet, and

protecting Tibet's autonomy by recognising its treaty-making powers.[16] This policy thinking, that was particularly strong during 1947-1951, saw Tibetan delegates being invited to the Asian Relations Conference of March 1947, Indian Government extending formal assurance to Lhasa in September 1947 saying that all British treaties will be respected, and two years later an Indian army officer being sent to Lhasa as advisor to the Tibetan Government.[17] Later, when PLA forces marched in to Tibet in March 1950 Nehru vociferously protested China's invasion of Tibet. But at the same time, Nehru's speeches show how he had begun to realise that with China's strong hold in Tibet, India was not in position to forcibly 'liberate' Tibet and, therefore, had to look for alternative security paradigms.

This search for alternatives was an important force behind his rushing through series of defence agreements with Bhutan (August 8, 1949), Nepal (July 31, 1950), and Sikkim (December 5, 1950). It was in the same spirit that Nehru established the North and North-Eastern Defence Committee (1951), and visited North Eastern Frontier Agency (1952), Sikkim and Bhutan (1958), and Nepal (in 1954 and 1959). These regions and countries, according to this new thinking constituted India's inner buffer in which New Delhi would not tolerate any outside interference.[18] In his public speeches Nehru also offered these countries India's open support in defence in case of China's invasion.[19] But at the same time China's "17-point Agreement" with Tibet and the consequent military presence in Tibet had changed India's power equations and from early 1950s this had begun to transform Nehru's thinking about India's policy options in dealing with China's military presence in Tibet. And here, apart from strengthening India's inner ring of security threat from China was now sought to be neutralized through friendship and solidarity between India and China, and Tibet was to be sacrificed at the altar of India's perceived new security requirements.

The strategic significance of Tibet in India's security calculations had remained valid even after the British had left the subcontinent in 1947. Yet, given the new strategic equations, Nehru agreed to sacrifice Tibet that had been British India's outer ring of defence because he believed that China would now onwards respect India's Himalayan borders and will not intrude to its inner security ring of cis-Himalayan buffer states. Promises to this effect are believed to have been given too. But what made India's rational strategic sacrifice look like an irrational surrender were the follow-up development. For China soon began intrusions on the border and later laid claim to territories which India regarded as integral *terra irredenta* to its civilisational existence. And finally, with India deciding to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959, even the façade of positive spirit between China and India had died its natural death.

Ever since, while many in India have described China's actions inside Tibet as violation of *Panchsheel* spirit, in the sense that Tibet's autonomy had been severely compromised, China often described these reactions as interference in its internal affairs. These accusation have since changed the whole ambience in which the two sides had evolved those Panchsheel principles and this agreement was allowed to lapse in 1961. Since then, in the absence of any new agreement, the status quo that favours China has persisted. This has over the years only further weakened India's leverage on the Tibet question. One evidence of changed strategic equation is that the current of positive trends in Sino-Indian ties were once again propelled by India going one step further and recognising Tibet as an "integral part" of China, though the Chinese still continue to suspect India's intentions.

Current Trends

The 1990s have witnessed Tibet emerging, once again, as a major emerging, once again, as a major issue in international debates. Though, mostly it has been used only as an instrument for anti-China human rights campaigns by Western powers, this has brought back the spotlight on Tibet, reviving debates about Tibet's future. Given this new tenor and context, the criticism that India has been fighting shy in using its Tibet Card in Sino-Indian relations has become stronger and widespread and has created its own constituencies. This sentiment has also been result of the slow-pace of Sino-Indian CBMs that have not made much success during the later half of the 1990s. One indication of this growing estrangement on Indian side is presented by the fact that there was no high-level political visit from Indian side to China between May 1994 to June 1999.

Given this new context of Sino-India ties, the year 1994 can perhaps be described as an important year in India's Tibet policy and initiatives. The year witnessed All Party Indian Parliamentary Forum organising a World Parliamentarian's Convention on Tibet, which was attended by delegates from 25 countries that urged China to open negotiations with Dalai Lama without any pre-conditions.[20] This was followed by Dalai Lama's religious diplomacy being allowed to operate with few hindrances. At one state, His Holiness was seen visiting areas like Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Taiwan which happen to include territories where Beijing has not yet renounced its sovereign claims and at least legally speaking continues to consider them as part of the Chinese Republic.[21] But, at the same time, India has not joined hands with any of the Western anti-China bandwagons though it keeps striving for a more balanced approach for allowing a more objective debate on Tibet. At the same time, India has also continued to evolve its process of building confidence with the Chinese. The manner in which New Delhi has handled the recent arrival of 17th Karmapa, Trinley Dorji, from Tibet clearly reflects this new assertive yet balanced thinking which reflects India's Tibet policy for the future.

This lately pro-active attitude in India's Tibet policy seems to have come about from the realisation of various traditional strategic factors. These may include: (a) that a non-nuclear (if possible de-militarised) Tibet under Dalai Lama best serves India's security interests; (b) that rapid rise of China's military prowess may be currently focused on Taiwan and South China Sea but after sorting out those issues even a friendly China will have major implications for India's economic and security interests' (c) that in face of China's rise as a major power, India's leverage on Tibet is likely to decrease in future, and most important of all; (d) what happens after the 14th Dalai Lama is gone? All this means that time is a great premium, and India cannot afford to become a permanent loser vis-à-vis the Chinese who have already enthroned their own Panchen Lama.

Conclusion

To conclude, therefore, it seems apt to say that Tibet has always been like a *ping-pong* ball in the 'great game' of its powerful neighbours. Especially, for Sino-Indian strategic equations, apart from being the single most important factor in moulding their mutual perceptions and policies, Tibet has been indeed a critical issue in the evolution of their overall profile as two Asian powers. This has been particularly true of the successive Chinese regimes that have remained skeptical of India joining hand with intrigue-makers amongst Western countries. These Western powers had

earlier subjected China to their anti-communist containment campaigns during 1950s and 1960s and China has since become target of their human rights campaigns. This is partly because China has always sought to provide alternative system of governance and lately, its rapid strides towards emerging as the next global power has clearly disturbed the as yet West-dominated international power structures.

As regards Sino-Indian ties, their decade-long *rapprochement* has had its major impact on their mutual perceptions and policies and the two sides have since begun to strengthen their cooperation in other areas irrespective of the persistent Tibet question. Especially, India's decision to finally exercise its nuclear option— that had been held in abeyance for over 24 years—has clearly changed the conventional wisdom about building *security-through-buffers.* As their post-nuclear equations begin to unfold over the years, this new reality will surely begin to have impact on their understanding of Tibet's future as well. But despite these changing equations and their connotations, Tibet still shows all signs to continue to be the most critical determinant in the evolution of Sino-Indian strategic equations in the coming years as well.

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