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India-Tibet Contemporary Relations and the Chinese Conundrum: An Analysis

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Abstract

India and Tibet share a deeply woven historical tapestry that has unfolded over centuries, characterized by a multifaceted interplay of political, cultural, and geographical factors. In the following discourse, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the contemporary dimensions of the India-Tibet relationship, unearthing its origins from ancient epochs and tracking its evolution to adapt to the intricacies of today's complex geopolitical landscape. This analytical endeavour illuminates the intricate dynamics that have shaped the ties between these two regions and extends its reach to illuminate the profound impact of this relationship on both regional and global political landscapes. This Research delves into India's active and influential role in the Tibetan cause, underscoring its pivotal position as a key advocate for Tibetan rights and autonomy on the international stage. Moreover, this paper shall navigate the broader context of Sino-Indian relations, emphasizing the pivotal role played by the India-Tibet relationship within this critical bilateral dynamic. This comprehensive exploration aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the enduring significance of India's engagement with Tibet and its wider implications in the contemporary geopolitical arena.

Keywords- India, Tibet, Geopolitics, China, Security, Culture

Introduction

Throughout history, the connection between India and Tibet has been marked by a multifaceted interaction of political, cultural, and geographical elements. India and Tibet have a lot of things in common thanks to the spread of Buddhism in these two countries, which also includes the travels of the Indian gurus which have influenced the Tibetan script. The Tibetan Buddhists have also contributed to the intermingling of the two cultures due to their pilgrimages to the holy Buddhist sites in India. Also, Tibet's greatest gift to India is the preservation and development of Buddhism based on the Nalanda tradition (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). According to the Dalai Lama, the best interpretation of Buddhist tradition based on Nalanda masters is only available in Tibetan language. The political dynamics of the region however, particularly changed since the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, have added a layer of complexity to their relationship. The primary objective of this research paper is to offer an all-encompassing examination of the contemporary dimensions of the India-Tibet relationship, ranging from ancient epochs to the current geopolitical landscape. Additionally, this paper examines the implications of this relationship on regional and international politics, including India's role in the Tibetan cause and its significance in the context of Sino-Indian relations.

Historical India-Tibet Ties

Prior to the colonial era, well-defined, straight-line borders were absent in the Himalayas due to distinct interpretations of sovereignty by various states and the impracticality and lack of purpose in precisely demarcating boundaries in thinly populated, high-altitude regions. Even in colonial times, the difficulty of establishing a border between British India and the Qing Empire is demonstrated by the existence of several different British lines, none of which provided a final answer as to where the border between Ladakh and Tibet lay (Pillalamarri, 2020).

Ladakh, with its predominantly Buddhist population, has had strong cultural and religious ties with Tibet. Buddhism played a pivotal role in connecting the two regions through trade, pilgrimages, and the exchange of religious texts. As a result, Tibetan Buddhism has exerted a prevailing cultural and religious influence in Ladakh over an extended period. This impact is readily observable in the architecture, artwork, and the presence of monastic institutions throughout the region. The teachings and scholarship of Tibetan lamas have significantly moulded and shaped Ladakhi culture. For centuries, the Himalaya saw a constant flow of the Tibetan lamas, pandits and yogis visiting the great Indian Viharas of Nalanda, Odantapuri and Vikramshala (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020).

The geographic contiguity of India and Tibet provided strong cultural integrity for extremely long periods of time as Tibet housed India's most revered Lord Shiva and Mata Parvati. According to legends, Lord Buddha travelled to this homeland of Lord Shiva. For Indians the Mount Kailash and Mansarovar Lake have always been and continue to be the ultimate destinations for Peace and Nirvana (Financial Express, 2020). Indian scholars and masters have played a highly significant role in the development of Buddhist ideas in Tibet. It is no wonder thus, that the first Buddhist Monastery in Tibet at Samye is known as Samye Mingyur Lhungyi Drupe Tsuklakhang was modelled on Odantapuri Tsuklakhang in Bihar in the 8th century (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). Around this time, scholars from India, Tibet and even China used to regularly hold debates to primarily discuss the ideals and ethos of Buddhism and the correct path to enlightenment. The Tibetan emperor also decreed that the doctrines of the Indian scholars must be studied and followed in Tibet.

During the colonial era however, the relationship between India and Tibet underwent significant changes due to the British Empire's involvement in the region as India politically went under British control while Tibet remained largely independent. This era spanned from the mid-19th century to 1947 when India gained independence. The British had control over Ladakh, this was the reason that Tibet and Ladakh, despite having so many historical, cultural and geographical ties ended up being two different political units, with Ladakh being associated to the Indian subcontinent and Tibet being considered as a region under the Chinese sphere of influence.

From Being Independent to Oppressed

China had always perceived Tibet as the *back door* to China, also as *lips of the mouth* (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). If the backdoor was opened and occupied by a foreign power, China could not feel safe and secured. Even before the CCP came to power, the previous nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek had proclaimed that Tibet was an integral part of China and the Shimla Agreement of 1914 was null and void which had proclaimed Tibet to be an autonomous region. He was however, ousted out of power by CCP forces led by Mao Zedong, but in terms of their stance on Tibet, CCP was no different from the Nationalist government. The Chinese Communist Party was swift and strategic enough that soon after gaining power, Tibet was invaded for them to further consolidate power. After the occupation of eastern Tibet's provincial capital, Chamdo, the People's Republic of China (PRC), on 23 May 1951, forced Tibet to sign the 17-point "*Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful*

Liberation of Tibet". The alternative, the occupying forces said, was immediate military operation in the remaining parts of Tibet (Zamlha, 2019). The 17-point Agreement holds significant historical importance as an authentic record that sheds light on the genuine dynamics between China and Tibet during a pivotal moment in Tibetan history, specifically concerning its quest for independence. Despite being imposed on the Tibetan government by communist China, it stands as a crucial testament to the historical reality that Tibet had no prior affiliation with China prior to the agreement.

The CCP under Mao Zedong, immediately after winning the Chinese Civil War in 1949 had declared their intention of "liberating" Tibet from imperialism and integrate it into the 'motherland'. This process had started with Chinese invasion of Tibet garrison town of Chamdo in Eastern Tibet (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). This invasion was followed by the Chinese forcing the Tibetan representatives to sign the Seventeen-Point Agreement in 1951. This agreement was also signed by the Dalai Lama to best accommodate the Chinese demands and had a clause of 'one country, two systems' (Zamlha, 2019). However, the Dalai Lama by 1959 revealed that the agreement was made under duress. Initially there was opposition from the Tibetans regarding this agreement but they gradually started accommodating it, however when Chinese became confident about the annexation of Tibet, they themselves started to violate the agreement they themselves imposed on the Tibetans.

After this agreement, the Chinese started building highways that would link China to Tibet (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). After entrenching, China then strengthened all its road networks connecting all border regions, including the ones shared between Tibet and India. The Xingjiang-Tibet highway, finished in 1957, traverses through the Indian region of Aksai Chin (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). This highway later became an important highway for military supply, which gave the PLA great tactical advantage over the ill-equipped Indian soldiers with poor logistical support. Many scholars thus speculate the reason for the Tibetan annexation was strategic rather than historical or cultural. Through capturing Tibet, China managed to take care of the so-called *back door* it had which made it vulnerable. Tibet has also been rich in minerals, the Chinese geologists have identified more than 130 minerals in Tibet, with significant reserves of worlds deposit of uranium, chromite, boron, lithium, borax and iron (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020).

By June 1956, the Tibetan residents of Amdo and Kham, in response to the confiscation of farmland, had become increasingly agitated. As land was taken away from more and more farmers, tens of thousands of them banded together to form armed resistance factions and initiated a counteroffensive (Szczepanski, 2019). The Chinese military's retaliatory actions

became progressively more ruthless, involving extensive mistreatment of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns. China claimed that a significant number of these religious Tibetans were serving as messengers for the guerrilla fighters. In 1956, during his visit to India, the Dalai Lama disclosed to Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that he was contemplating seeking refuge. Nehru offered counsel, suggesting that he go back to his homeland (Szczepanski, 2019). The Chinese authorities assured that they would delay implementing communist reforms in Tibet and reduce the presence of Chinese officials in Lhasa by half, but they did not fulfil these commitments. By 1958, up to 80,000 individuals had enlisted with the Tibetan resistance forces. In response to this growing concern, the government led by the Dalai Lama dispatched a delegation to Inner Tibet with the aim of initiating negotiations to cease the ongoing conflict (Szczepanski, 2019). Meanwhile, a flood of refugees and freedom fighters moved into Lhasa, bringing their anger against China with them.

The 1959 Uprising of Tibet

Prominent religious figures had inexplicably vanished in Amdo and Kham regions, leading to significant apprehension among the residents of Lhasa regarding the Dalai Lama's safety. Consequently, the community's concerns were heightened when the Chinese military in Lhasa extended an invitation to His Holiness to attend a theatrical performance at their barracks on March 10, 1959 (Szczepanski, 2019). On the designated date, March 10, approximately 300,000 Tibetan demonstrators gathered in the streets, creating a substantial human barricade around Norbulingkha, which served as the Dalai Lama's Summer Palace. This collective action was taken to shield him from the intended Chinese abduction (Szczepanski, 2019). On March 19, 1959, Chinese government authorities and military forces initiated an operation, followed by a Chinese military counter-response against the Tibetan population on March 20, 1959 (University of Central Arkansas, 2023). On March 25, 1959, Chinese government forces successfully seized control of Lhasa, leading to the casualties of approximately 2,000 Tibetan insurgents. The entirety of the Dalai Lama's bodyguard contingent was assembled and subjected to a public execution, as were any Tibetan individuals found in possession of weapons. In total, approximately 87,000 Tibetans lost their lives, while an additional 80,000 sought refuge in neighbouring nations (Szczepanski, 2019). The exact number of those who attempted to escape but did not succeed remains unknown.

Following the 1959 Uprising, the Chinese central government has progressively increased its control over Tibet. While Beijing has made substantial investments in infrastructure

development, especially in the capital city of Lhasa, it has also facilitated the relocation of a significant number of ethnic Han Chinese to the Tibet Autonomous Region. In the present day, the Dalai Lama maintains his position as the leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile, operating from Dharamshala, India. He promotes an agenda focused on enhanced autonomy for Tibet, rather than complete independence. Nevertheless, the Chinese government typically declines engagement in negotiations with him.

Contemporary India-Tibet Dynamics

After compelling the Dalai Lama to yield and commencing infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity with Tibet, China subsequently shifted its focus to diminishing Tibet's longstanding economic ties with India and Nepal. This included eliminating India's extraterritorial privileges in Tibet and securing India's recognition of China's annexation of Tibet. These goals were accomplished via the Agreement on Trade between India and China in April 1954, alongside a traditional exchange of notes (Sikri, 2011). During a period when India possessed strategic influence, it failed to seize the chance to secure a definitive and unambiguous acknowledgment of India's border with Tibet from China. While this is commonly referred to as the Panchsheel Agreement, it is important to highlight that the so-called Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are solely mentioned in the preamble and not in the main body of the agreement as India had sought (Sikri, 2011). Indeed, the Chinese inclination was for these agreements to consist of a simple joint press statement. Prime Minister Nehru, driven by idealism, purposefully magnified the political importance of the Agreement, envisioning it as the dawn of a fresh chapter in India-China relations, with the Five Principles as a guiding principle on which not only Sino-Indian relations but also the broader international community could be based (Sikri, 2011).

Nehru made the strategic choice to cultivate friendly relations with China, which had the consequence of compromising Tibet's established historical status as a *de jure* (rightful) nation. In alignment with the stance of British India regarding Tibet's role as a buffer state situated between India and China, the newly established government in Delhi endeavoured to acknowledge Tibet's capacity for entering into treaties. This recognition affirmed China's suzerainty over Tibet while stopping short of acknowledging full sovereignty (Lhadon, 2023). India's stance concerning Tibet and its border relationship with China was shaped by significant disparities in its approach. While India had deep historical and cultural connections with Tibet, its economic and political interests were intertwined with China's future (Lhadon, 2023). The

Tibet matter has frequently been marginalized by both the Chinese and Indian governments, who seek to foster a mutually advantageous relationship. India's efforts to accommodate China, dating back to the Panchsheel Agreement, have not been met with an equivalent response from Beijing. This is illustrated by the extended delay in China officially recognizing Sikkim as a part of India, which was only accomplished in 2005 (Lhadon, 2023).

Despite India not taking any hard stance on the Tibet issue, it has made sure to remind China time and time again about its support and relation vis-à-vis Tibet. Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to China in 1988 marked a significant turning point in Sino-Indian relations, as it was the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 34 years. This visit signalled a thaw in the chilly relationship that had persisted since the 1962 conflict. The primary focus of the visit revolved around addressing the longstanding border dispute, a complex issue deeply intertwined with discussions concerning Tibet. Rajiv Gandhi not only reiterated India's stance on recognizing Tibet as an autonomous part of China, but he also reaffirmed it (Lhadon, 2023). Likewise, during the 2003 meeting between Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Chinese leader Wen Jiabao, India restated its position that the Tibetan Autonomous Region is an integral part of the People's Republic of China's territory (Lhadon, 2023). Brahma Chellany however, argued that “China sees New Delhi as the key to its continued control of Tibet, whose traditional cultural and trade links were southward to India. By handing Beijing the formulation it wanted, India has opened itself to more Chinese pressure” (Lhadon, 2023). This not only diminishes New Delhi's remaining influence but also underscores how India's recognition perpetuates a historical trend of detrimental Indian actions toward Tibet that originated during Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's tenure.

It was only after Nyima Tenzin's death that Indian public discovered the existence of Special Frontier Force (SFF), a Tibetan army also known as Establishment 22 or Vikas Regiment, operating under the Cabinet Secretariat and the Indian Army (Lhadon, 2023). Journalist Ramachandran observes that the extensively covered funeral for Tenzin is commonly seen as a deliberate act to prompt Chinese leaders to recognize India's *Tibet card* and indicate India's readiness to employ it. In an intriguing observation, Brahma Chellaney highlights that there is nothing more potentially embarrassing for China than India's deployment of its SFF, predominantly composed of Tibetan exiles, to counter the most recent incursion by the PLA (Lhadon, 2023). During the Galwan Valley incident, Tibet received considerable attention within the Indian public sphere, with media outlets highlighting the Tibetan "political issue" and featuring discussions with Tibetan leaders and parliamentarians. In contrast, the Indian government's stance on Tibet remained relatively unaddressed in public discourse. The Galwan

clash underscores a pattern where Tibet remained a significant topic in Indian public discussions over the past decade, while it experienced marginalization and silence at the official level.

Tibet's Role in India-China Relations

India's territorial disputes with China predominantly revolve around two major regions, with a primary focus on Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. China asserts that Ladakh belongs to its administered area of Aksai Chin, while it regards Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of *South Tibet*. These conflicts have their roots in the historical backdrop of China's annexation of Tibet, India's cautious approach toward actively addressing the Tibet matter since the time of Nehru, and the persistence of policies established during the British India era in the region. The most recent manifestation of these tensions was witnessed in the clashes and casualties that occurred in India's Galwan Valley involving both Indian and Chinese military forces. These events underscore the ongoing significance of Tibet in the context of India-China relations and as a central concern in their disputes. The Tibet question and its struggle for autonomy would not have garnered momentum without the explicit or implicit backing of India. India's intent to sidestep the Tibet issue in the interest of developing good neighbourly relations has not had the desired results (Lhadon, 2023). The Galwan clash is one of the recent incidents that highlight India's oversight in comprehending the significant role Tibet plays in the dynamics of Sino-India relations. As long as India persists in addressing its border disputes with China while disregarding the historical, geographical, and political significance of the Tibet issue in shaping their bilateral relations, it will encounter persistent challenges in its rhetoric and foreign policy strategies (Lhadon, 2023).

In the context of India-China bilateral relations, Indian scholars and writers frequently refer to the term *Tibet factor*. This phrase is employed because the Tibet matter is intricately connected to the unresolved border issue between India and China, which has persisted as a point of contention despite numerous rounds of border negotiations over the past few decades (Lhadon, 2023). Nonetheless, the definition of the *Tibet factor* has evolved over the years, shaped by the prevailing geopolitical circumstances. The ongoing dispute regarding territorial boundaries appears to be enduring and resistant to change, almost as if it were frozen in time, with no room for adjustments. Consequently, what holds greater significance are the matters intertwined with the *Tibet factor* as fundamental components, yet their relevance fluctuates depending on the context in which they are presented (Lhadon, 2023). Hence, it is essential that in the future,

India formulates and implements a well-defined and resilient foreign policy regarding its diplomatic interactions with China, with the Tibet issue taking a central role in these discussions, rather than being a secondary consideration.

Conclusion

At present, Tibet and the Himalayas have become the borders of India and China which are deeply contested by both the modern states, leading to a militarisation and securitisation of these spaces. India's foreign policy concerning China has been structured around the conflicting objectives of enhancing mutually beneficial economic collaboration, which holds crucial significance for both nations, notably India, and the strategic imperative to counter China's growing assertiveness in border disputes and its expanding influence across the Asian continent. Amid this inconsistency, China has consistently advanced its agenda, often at the expense of India's national interests. This includes instances like their delayed recognition of Sikkim as part of India in 2005, nearly five decades after India accepted Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China. Additionally, China's ongoing attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the McMahon Line persist, and India's reluctance to place the Tibet issue at the core of its foreign policy has inadvertently reinforced this stance (Lhadon, 2023). There is also the question of *religious sovereignty* involves having control over the religious sites in a territory to legitimise a country's claim to that territory. For e.g., the Geluk Monastery located in Arunachal Pradesh is one of the holy sites contested between India and China.

China has sought to legitimise its claims over the Tibetan territory through invoking the ritual and concrete sovereignties that Tibet used to enjoy over Tawang (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). Beijing had highlighted the life and contributions of the 6th Dalai Lama keeping in mind his origins from Tawang, a region claimed by China as *South Tibet*. In current times, monks venture to monasteries in Karnataka for higher studies which were established by Tibetans who were forced into exile, these monasteries have strong linkages to the exile government of Tibet (The Tibet Policy Institute, 2020). This has made the ritual sovereignty much more active than before in the post-colonial period when the current states are entrenched in territorial issues. The historical post-colonial linkages that previously existed in the Tibet and Himalayan region are perceived to remain active and assertive, influencing the interactions between the post-colonial nation-states of India and China.

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