

Revisiting the Sino-Tibet Dialogue

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Abstract: This article explores the Sino-Tibet dialogue on Tibet Question in the context of the Middle-Way Policy (MWP) of the Tibetan Government-in-exile (TGiE). The series of dialogue held between two sides are chronologically analyzed. The outcomes of the dialogue are discussed with the help of primary data through collecting the opinions of exile Tibetans living in the settlements in India using survey questionnaire. Out of 58 Tibetan settlements, four are chosen based on administrative divisions set up of the TGiE: Dharamasala, Ladakh, Bylakuppe and Mundgod. Beside the sporadic dialogue between the representatives of the Dalai Lama and the Beijing, the fundamental differences have stalled the dialogue since January, 2010.

Keywords: Tibet; China; MWP; dialogue; talks; TGiE; Dalai Lama, Gyari Lodi.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Middle-Way Policy (MWP) is an approach adopted by the Tibetan Government-in-exile (TGiE) in India based on which the Sino-Tibet dialogue has been conducted to find a solution to the Question of Tibet. In 1959, People's Liberation of Army (PLA) of China marched into Tibet, following which the Dalai Lama and 80,000 Tibetans fled Tibet and took refuge in India and neighboring countries. For China, this was an act to liberate Tibet from centuries of theocratic feudal despotism, and reunite her with the motherland of which she was an inalienable part. But, to the Tibetans, it was an act of aggression on Tibet and against that claim of Tibetans that Tibet had always been politically independent of the Chinese state as well as culturally distinct from it (Bhoothalingam 2007). After three decades of intermittent nine rounds of dialogue and negotiations over the Tibet Question between the PRC and the TGiE in Dharamasala has reported that there are now no contacts between them since January 2010.

II. THE MIDDLE-WAY POLICY

The former *Kalon Tripa* of the TGiE, Samdhong Rinpoche had explained that the word 'Middle-Way' was borrowed from the principle of 'Middle-Path' in Buddhism which means renunciation two ends. The TGiE defined the MWP as a mutually-beneficial policy that is based on the principles of justice, compassion, non-violence, friendship and in the spirit of reconciliation for the well being of the entire humanity. This policy does not envisage victory for one self and defeat for others. (DIIR 2010) The TGiE is neither agreeing to the present forceful control of the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Tibet nor seeking separation from the 'One China Policy' (independent Tibet). The MWP demands a meaningful autonomy for Tibet under the constitutional provisions of Laws on National Regional Autonomy (LNRA) of the PRC. The Tibetan side believes that the Tibetan people's needs are, as set out in the 'Memorandum of Genuine Autonomy', can be met within the framework and spirit of the Constitution and its Principles on autonomy and that their proposals do not contravene or conflict with the 'three adherences'.

III. PHASES OF THE SINO-TIBET DIALOGUE

Deng Xiaoping, then president of the PRC contacted the Dalai Lama's elder brother, Gyalo Dhondup in December 1978 and were invited to Beijing to discuss the return of the Dalai Lama. (DIIR 2010) The preconditions put forth by the

Chinese side to open talks had paved way for the Dalai Lama to propose the MWP as the compromised approach in putting forth the demands of Tibetan people. The Dalai Lama in return offered a compromised demand of Tibetan seeking only meaningful autonomy not independence for Tibet. The Communist Party of China (CPC) kept the precondition to open negotiations in exchange for the Dalai Lama to acknowledge the CPC sovereignty in Tibet. It was a bold initiative from the Deng Xiaoping pragmatic leader as he dwelled on the urgent issue facing China, the Tibet and Taiwan. (Norbu 1991) Deng's precondition on talks was widely misreported to the Tibetan community as meaning "anything but independence can be discussed." This misconception has become virtually an article of faith in the Tibetan and Tibetan activist community. (Smith 2010) But, after the eight rounds of talks with the representative of the Dalai Lama, CPC leaders refuted that such statement was ever made by Deng Xiaoping. The unofficial contact was started in 1979 between the Dharamsala and Beijing but that lasted till 1993. The contact was resumed in 1982 between the representatives of the Dalai Lama and CPC leaders who were responsible for the Tibet Policy.

In April 1982, a delegation composed of three officials of the TGIE, led by Lodoe Gyari, was invited to Beijing to meet the Chinese officials. The Tibetan representatives proposed that all Tibetan cultural areas should be reunited into a single administration of Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and that this unified TAR should be accorded a higher degree of autonomy than the one currently being offered to Taiwan. They suggested a higher status of autonomy for Tibet than the one offered to Taiwan because Tibetans were a non-Chinese nationality. (Norbu 1991: p.357) The same officials representing the TGIE left for Beijing at the end of October 1984. However, the PRC officials refused to discuss any issue but they demanded an unconditional return of the Dalai Lama. The Chinese side complained that "while the Dalai Lama expressed his wish of improving relations with the central authorities some of his followers carried out activities advocating Tibetan independence." (Beijing Review 1984) In September, 2002 four Tibetan representatives of the Dalai Lama led by the special envoy, Lodoe Gyari, envoy Kalsang Gyalsten, Assistants Sonam Dagpo and Bhuchung Tsering visited the capital of Tibet, Lhasa.

The same group of Tibetans delegations made a second visit in May-June 2003. After the second visit, the Tibetan delegation reported that they thought that they had improved relations and confidence with Chinese leaders in dealing with representatives of the Dalai Lama and hoped that they created conditions for a dialogue on Tibet. Lodoe Gyari said that Chinese officials had "explicitly acknowledged the positive efforts made by the Tibetan leadership to create conducive environment for the continuation of the process." (Lodi 2003) However, in later statements Lodoe Gyari complained that there had been no actual dialogue and that, while the Tibetan side had tried to "create conducive environment for the continuation of the process," China had taken no corresponding actions. (Lodi 2003) The same delegations for the third time in September 2004 met ministers and Vice-Chairperson of China People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the leader of CCP United Front Work Department (UFWD), Vice-minister and head of the UFWD Nationalities and Religion Department and other Beijing officials. It was followed by fourth meeting between the officials of CCP UFWD at Chinese embassy in Bern, Switzerland on 30 June and 1 July 2005.

In the fifth meeting held from 15 to 23 February 2006 did not turn out to be as optimistic as it was in 2004. Although it included a day-long discussion with Zhu Weiqun, not only did the 'fundamental differences' remain, but Lodoe Gyari noted 'a major difference in the approach in addressing the issue'. Judging from the subsequent Chinese commentary and Lodoe Gyari's later talks at Brookings, the key differences highlighted in the meeting was the desire on the part of the Dalai Lama to merge all ethnic Tibetan areas into the TAR. (Womack 2007: pp. 443-46) Chinese leaders have been suspecting the Dalai Lama's commitment for the MWP since he had not accepted the Tibet as integral part of China. The initial conditions for direct negotiations with the Dalai Lama were that he declares that both Tibet and Taiwan were inalienable parts of China. However, at the fifth meeting apparently Lodoe Gyari raised the demand that the TAR be expanded to include all ethnic Tibetans. (People's Daily online 2010) In July 2008, during the seventh meeting, the Chinese representatives explicitly invited their Tibetan counterparts to present their views on the degree or form of autonomy that they are seeking. Accordingly, on October 31, 2008, Tibetan representatives presented the 'Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People' to the Chinese leadership. The memorandum puts forth in detail how the specific needs of the Tibetan people for self-government can be met through the application of the principles on autonomy contained in the Constitution of the PRC.

In November 2008, the 8th round of dialogue was conducted. During this meeting, the Tibetan representatives complained of lack of political will on the part of the Chinese leadership. The last round of meeting was held in January 2010 in Beijing when there was a rise in self-immolations of Tibetans in Tibet. Then, the Tibetan side repeatedly urged the Chinese counterparts to meet in order to address the tragic cases of self-immolations and the overall deteriorating situation in Tibet. They constantly urged the Beijing to meet as soon as possible in order to explore ways and means to diffuse and calm down the situation in Tibet. However, they are still waiting for a positive reply from Beijing.

IV. OUTCOMES OF THE NINE ROUNDS OF DIALOGUE

It is a dominant opinion in the Tibetan exile community and in Tibet that the MWP had not yielded any substantial outcome even though this policy had taken the centre stage in the Sino-Tibet issue for more than three decades. However, the fact is that the Sino-Tibet talks were going nowhere though both the sides had explained their demands but many fundamental differences remained the bulwark to find an amicable solution. There is saying in Tibetan, "Tibetans are ruined by hope, and Chinese are ruined by suspicion". This stereotyped mindset of the Chinese and Tibetans have been a common psychological hindrance in moving forward in the negotiation process. As Samdhong Rinpoche, former *Katri* in reply to an interview said that, there are two main reasons for the root cause of the difference of perceptions between the Dharamsala and Beijing. Firstly, the mindset of the Chinese leadership lacks the trust and confidence. With such mindset, Dharamsala could not convince the Beijing, no matter how sincerely the Tibetan side puts its faith in the PRC leadership, or, no matter how rational and reasonable the request is. The second is lack of political will in the PRC's leadership to find a solution to the Tibet problem. The leadership always suffers from the immeasurable fear that if they do anything with Tibet issue, it might bring more problems or may lead to the loss of Tibet. (Yantao 2010) In many ways, prospects for Sino-Tibetan engagement are better now than they have ever been. Greater access to information, increased professionalization, and three decades of experience with the hit-and-miss talks have prepared both parties for the development of more informed and serious relations. Nevertheless, prospects for a negotiated solution are still limited, as it is unlikely that the two sides can overcome their differences on the substantive issues. (Rabgay 2004)

Table No.1 indicates the opinion of the Tibetans in the study areas on the dialogues between the Tibetan and Chinese leaders to understand the general perception of Tibetans in exile. The survey reveals that 20.5% of respondents expressed their satisfaction over the outcomes of the talks between the representatives of the Dalai Lama and the PRC. Besides, there is still faith in the MWP as 92.0% of the respondents still support the MWP and 85.5% of them believe that the MWP is an effective policy to resolve the Tibet issue. In addition, 78.6% believes that the MWP receives strong international support. But, they have given different reasons for supporting the MWP. Firstly, it is most suitable policy for the Tibet issue. Secondly, they believe that the MWP is based on the principle of non-violence and the policy being proposed by the Dalai Lama. Findings of Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth on the study of strategic effectiveness of violent and nonviolent campaigns in conflicts between Non-State and State actors using aggregate data on major nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 has shown that the 53% of major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success compared with 26% for violent resistance campaigns. (Stephan 2008: pp. 7-44)

Table No.1 shows that 28.8% of respondents said the future of the MWP is uncertain which means they are not sure whether this policy will resolve the Tibet issue with Chinese government or not given the fact of the China's growing influence in terms of economic and military power in the world. Thus, only 36.4% of respondents are hoping that the PRC leadership will comply with the demands of Tibetan people in future. The emergence of China as a major international actor has been the dominant geopolitical event of the new millennium so far. In the last decades, China has emerged as the largest exporter of the manufactured goods to the USA with a favorable merchandise trade balance of approximately US\$ 266 billion (total Sino-US trade of US\$ 409 billion in 2008) causing it in the recent years to emerge as the biggest holder of US-dollar assets as part of its foreign exchange reserves (US\$1.95 trillion) (Guruswamy 2010)

Moreover, internationally coordinated receptions of the Dalai Lama by political leaders or even joint meetings are a possibility to reconcile economic interests with the demands to receive the Tibetan leader. Such a strategy may reduce China's scope to play one trading partner off against another. Nonetheless, with the increasing economic power of China and other emerging countries, the (ab) use of trade ties as a foreign policy tool is likely to gain in importance. (Fuchs 2010)

Table No. 1 The Middle-Way Policy- Survey during Feb- Oct 2014

Item	Yes % (n)	No %(n)	Don't know %(n)
The MWP is an effective policy	85.5(478)	6.3(35)	8.4(47)
Support for the MWP in exile	92.0(515)	4.3(24)	3.8(21)
Tibetan people in Tibet support the MWP	64.8(363)	9.5(53)	25.7(144)
Satisfied with the outcomes of the Sino-Tibet dialogue	20.5(115)	53.8(301)	25.7(144)
The MWP receives international support	78.6(440)	8.2(46)	13.2(74)
The future of the MWP is uncertain.	28.8(161)	47.7(261)	23.6(132)
The PRC will comply with the demand of the MWP	36.4(204)	34.5(193)	29.1(163)

Source: Data collected by researcher

V. CONCLUSION

The talks between the Dharamsala and Beijing were stalled till January 2010 on a number of fundamental issues. A situation of asymmetric stalemate existed when Although a standoff can persist indefinitely, the only path to resolution of conflict is negotiation. Even though the conflict between China and the Dalai Lama regarding Tibetan autonomy is not one between sovereign states, it fits the pattern of asymmetric stalemate. Current discussions between China and the Dalai Lama illustrate the importance of recognition of autonomy on the part of the stronger side and of deference on the part of the weaker side in resolving asymmetric stalemate. (Womack 2007: pp. 443–46) The current anomalous situation regarding Tibet has a correspondingly anomalous history. The ‘Tibet Question’, as the long-running contradiction between Tibetan autonomy and Chinese sovereignty is often called by Western diplomats and scholars, has seen a series of asymmetric stalemates, resolutions, and renewed conflicts. (Goldstein 1997)

There are two core demands Dharamsala has strongly put forth which the Beijing have refused to accept. The first is on the geographical extent of the autonomous Tibetan region and the second is on its form of governance in Tibet. Irreconcilable differences exist on the nature of autonomy demanded by the Dalai Lama and what the Chinese are willing to concede. This has stalled the moves for a lasting settlement of the Tibetan question, making way for recurrent periods of unrest. (Abraham 2008) On the geographical extension of the autonomy for Tibet, former *Katri* Samdhong Rinpoche clarified that at present, autonomous areas in various provinces are already having well defined boundaries. There is no need to change these boundaries. What is going to be changed is the administration. Those with several self-governments will be substituted by the one self-government and that self-government will be directly controlled by the central government instead of several provincial governments. One may argue that the administrative areas of those provinces will become smaller if autonomous areas within their province are governed by the one self-government. Yes, this may be true but if the provisions of LNRA are implemented in all sincerity then the provinces do not have much role to play in the autonomous areas. Therefore, the incorporation of autonomous areas outside the provinces or remaining within the provinces will not make much difference to the concerned provinces. (Bi Yantao 2010) For Beijing, the Tibetans demands of autonomy under single administration by integrating all adjoining autonomous areas dominated by ethnic Tibetan were seen as a potential threat to China internal security. Beijing leaders are wary that granting such autonomy to Tibet might pave way for an independent Tibet, which would then disintegrate the China’s multi-ethnic composition.(Shirk 2007: p.58) Beside the differences in the fundamental issue, progress has been made in the past four decades in establishing contact between China and the Dalai Lama and in pursuing a negotiated solution to the Tibetan Autonomy. So far no threshold has been crossed, but active negotiations imply that on both sides there are participants who consider a negotiated solution possible. The last round of talks which did not yield any substantial outcomes was held between the representatives of the Dalai Lama and leadership of Beijing in November 2010. Since then, the dialogue has been stalled till date. As a result the Lodoe Gyari, special envoy and envoys of Dalai Lama have resigned after criticizing the insincerity of leadership of CPC in past talks and indifferent attitude on the critical situation in Tibet where more than one hundred twenty of Tibetans have self-immolated since 2009.

At the same time, the new leadership in Dharamsala has welcomed the support of the Barack Obama, the president of US to the MWP beside the US’s de-facto recognition of Tibet as an integral part of the PRC. The *Sikyong* had stated in the official website of the TGIE that he welcomes the President Obama’s strong endorsement of the MWP and constructive dialogue without any precondition. The steadfast U.S. support for dialogue and preservation of Tibet’s unique heritage is

reflected both through the meeting between the Dalai Lama and Obama in 20 February, 2014 at the White House of US and through its Tibet policy and programs. (Radio Free Asia 2014) But, US president, Obama at a joint press conference with Xi Jinping at the sideline of the 22nd Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic leaders meeting in November, 2014 in Beijing stated that US is not in favor of an independence of Tibet. This stand of the US has further legitimized the Dalai Lama's sincerity in the demand of meaningful autonomy rather than so called, the separatist activities suspected by the CPC leaders.

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