

# ISAS Working Paper

No. 59 – Date: 1 June 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## The Tibetan ‘Uprising’ 2008: India’s Response<sup>1</sup>

S. D. Muni<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Tibet is a critical issue in the complexity of Sino-Indian relations. The criticality of this issue arises not only from the geo-strategic location of Tibet between China and India<sup>3</sup> but also from the historical context of evolving Sino-Tibetan relations, and the humanitarian and cultural dimensions of this relationship. The criticality of Tibet’s link with China’s far-flung and restive western region of Xinjiang and the unresolved nature of Sino-Indian border make Tibet a potential flashpoint of conflict between India and China, just as Taiwan is a potential flashpoint in China’s conflict with the United States in the South China Sea.

In the context of the Himalayas, the 1962 experience may be recalled when China’s military crossed the Himalayas to reach the Indian planes, with Tibet as one of the most proclaimed contentious issues between the two Asian neighbours. Developments in Tibet and its relationship with mainland China, therefore, impinge significantly on India’s security concerns and multiple considerations come into play when India is required to respond to any Tibetan situation.

This was clearly evident during the Tibetan uprising in March-April 2008. This was the third major manifestation of Tibetan revolt against Chinese control and authority. In its depth and spread, the 2008 Tibetan uprising compares with the first such revolt in 1959 which led to the flight of the Tibetan spiritual leader, Dalai Lama, and thousands of his Tibetan followers to India. The 2008 uprising was much bigger than the second such event in 1988 which was quickly and effectively suppressed by the present Chinese President, Hu Jintao, who was then in command of Tibet.

India became deeply involved in the Tibet issue in 1959 but its responses to the revolts in 1988 and 2008 were mild and carefully guarded. India’s response to the developments of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is a chapter in the forthcoming book, “The Tibet Issue and China’s Peaceful Development”, edited by Professor Huang Jing.

<sup>2</sup> Professor S. D. Muni is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isassdm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassdm@nus.edu.sg).

<sup>3</sup> It constitutes the most of 3,380 kilometre-long Sino-Indian boundary and holds most of the water resources flowing from the Himalayas to India.

2008 in Tibet can only be understood in the overall perspective of India's Tibet policy which has evolved gradually since 1947.

### **India and the Tibetan Question**

India has had strong historical and cultural relations with Tibet spanning centuries. According to a devout Indian scholar on Indo-Tibetan relationship, "The culture of Tibet is a glowing example of how the stream of Indian consciousness crossed the Himalayan frontiers and followed into far-off lands, transforming them body, mind and soul, into an eternity of love, peace and compassion through a community of ideas and institutions."<sup>4</sup> On the eve of its independence, India looked at Tibet as an independent country. There were good reasons for this, besides the Tibetan claims to that effect. While leaving Tibet in 1949, both the nationalist Chinese Representative and the British Counsel-General in Lhasa had acknowledged in their parting submissions that Tibet enjoyed an effective independence.<sup>5</sup> Not only this, Mao Tse-tung had stated that he owed to Tibet "our only foreign debt and some day we must pay the Tibetans for the provisions we received from them." This was to recognise the Tibetan assistance in food and shelter offered to Mao and his revolutionary cadres during the Long March. India was aware that, during the Cold War, Tibet had maintained a sort of neutrality and did not allow the use of its territory by the allied forces to assist China, though after the allied victory in the war, Tibet promptly sent envoys to the United States, the United Kingdom and China to felicitate them.

Accordingly, on the eve of independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru invited Tibet as an independent participant in the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947. The Chinese delegation protested against the flying of the Tibetan flag at the conference venue, and in the Prime Minister's first gesture of accommodation of the Chinese on Tibet, the Tibetan flag was removed. However, he continued to refer to Tibet as an independent country, equating it to Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Myanmar (then Burma).<sup>6</sup> On gaining independence, the Indian government wrote letters to all those governments with which it has had treaty relations. A similar letter was sent to Tibet as well, stating:

The Government of India would be glad to have as assurance that it is the intention of the Tibetan government to continue relations on the existing basis until new arrangements are reached that either party may wish to take up. This is the procedure adopted by all other countries with which India has inherited Treaty relations from His Majesty's Government.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese, however, took a strong exception to India's approach and extended arguments against Tibet's independence. The pressures from the Chinese slowly worked on India foreign office. In a position paper prepared in the Indian foreign office on its 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 for unqualified Tibetan independence." China's intervention in Tibet in 1949 was protested against "as deplorable and not being in the

---

<sup>4</sup> Mehrotra, L. L., "India's Tibet Policy: An Appraisal and Options", Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre, New Delhi, Third Edition 2000. p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 18-20.

<sup>6</sup> Proceedings of the Asian Relations Conference, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi, 1947.

<sup>7</sup> Mehrotra, op.cit.

interest of either China or peace.” Reacting to the Chinese assertion on Tibet through the use of force, Prime Minister Nehru said in India parliament on 7 December 1950:

It is not right for any country to talk about its sovereignty or suzerainty over an area outside its own immediate range. That is to say, since Tibet is not same as China, it should ultimately be the wishes of the people of Tibet that should prevail and not any legal or constitutional arguments – the last voice in regard to Tibet should be the voice of the people of Tibet and nobody else.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly Prime Minister Nehru was confronting China on Tibet not through legal arguments in favour of Tibet’s independence but on humanitarian basis. That is why India also did not endorse Tibet’s attempt to raise the question of Chinese military intervention at the United Nations. He ignored the strategic implication of Chinese control over Tibet for India which was presented by his colleagues in the Indian government. One such person, Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, who in his letter of 7 November 1950 to Prime Minister Nehru, cautioned him that the Chinese “onslaught on Tibet” was “little short of perfidy”, and that the “disappearance of Tibet” has resulted in the “expansion of China almost up to our (Indian) gates.” Another Indian leader, B. R. Ambedkar, said, “By letting China take control over Lhasa (the Tibetan capital), the Prime Minister has, in a way, helped the Chinese to bring their armies on the Indian borders.”<sup>9</sup> Prime Minister Nehru’s other political associates such as Jay Prakash Narayan also disagreed with him for his soft approach towards China on Tibet. India seemed to have decided in favour of the British formula of accepting “Tibetan autonomy under Chinese suzerainty.” This formed the basis of the Panchsheel Agreement between China and India in April 1954. As a part of this agreement, India withdrew its “military escorts stationed at Yatung and Gyantse in the Tibet region of China.” Other Indian facilities in Tibet such as the post, telegraph and public telephone services were also handed over to China. Indian trade agencies and facilities for the pilgrimage continued to operate in Tibet but they came under strict Chinese control.<sup>10</sup>

It would be unfair to assume that Prime Minister Nehru was ignorant of the strategic implications of the Chinese assertion and control over Tibet for India. However, a number of other factors weighed on him in his approach to the Tibetan issue. The British had accepted Chinese suzerainty and he could not ignore it. This had been reinforced by the 17-Point Agreement forced by the Chinese on the Tibetan delegation on 23 May 1951. Though this agreement was not endorsed by the Dalai Lama and the Lhasa authorities, it could not be challenged without a firm military action for which neither Tibet nor India were prepared or equipped to do so. Even politically, Prime Minister Nehru was not prepared to challenge the Chinese in Tibet as that would have vitiated his moves to build a cooperative relationship with China in the context of his overall vision of Asian solidarity. India was in a difficult situation in its relation with Pakistan at that time and the Kashmir question were becoming complicated and serious. Any confrontation with China would have forced India to depend on the West in the then defining Cold War and, consequently, make compromises with Pakistan on Kashmir.

These considerations continued to also impinge on India’s Tibet policy in 1959 when the Chinese violated all their assurances to India and Tibet on the latter’s autonomy and cultural

---

<sup>8</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *India's Foreign Policy (Selected Speeches; September 1946 to April 1961)*, The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> Mehrotra, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> “Notes Exchanged Between the delegations Of India and China”, Peking, 29 April 1954.

freedom. Tibet had been heating up with the Khampas revolt against China since 1956. This revolt was clandestinely backed by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. The Dalai Lama visited India to participate in the celebrations of 2,500 years of Buddha's birth in 1956 and apprised the Indian authorities about the Chinese excesses in Tibet. However, he was advised by Prime Minister Nehru to go back to Tibet and try for a workable relationship with Beijing. This was done to assure the Chinese that India was not supporting the Tibetan protests against China.

By 1958, there were growing Tibetan activists joining the Khampas revolt. However, India assured China that the Tibetan émigrés' anti-China activities would not be tolerated on the Indian territory.<sup>11</sup> As violence increased in Tibet, Prime Minister Nehru disallowed the entry of Tibetan refugees into India. However, on humanitarian grounds, India offered medical assistance to the sick and the wounded on the border.<sup>12</sup> India, however, treated the Dalai Lama differently and agreed to give him asylum when he crossed the India borders on 31 March 1959. Prime Minister Nehru met the Dalai Lama in April 1959 and explained to him the constraints of the situation on the ground by saying:

Let us face facts. One cannot bring heaven to people in India even if I wish it. The whole world cannot bring freedom to Tibet unless the whole fabric of the Chinese state is destroyed. Only a world war, an atomic war, could perhaps make that possible.<sup>13</sup>

Prime Minister Nehru disagreed with the President of India that China's "new colonialism" in Tibet be publicly denounced because that could lead to 'the rupture of diplomatic relations with China'. India only expressed concern on the violations of Tibetan autonomy and hoped that these violations would stop and Tibet would be able to enjoy autonomy. However, no direct demand was made on China to work in that direction. There was a strong feeling of helplessness along with a strong desire to maintain "good relations with China". India was "wary of playing into the hands of those who wished to exploit the rebellion in Tibet as a weapon in the Cold War."<sup>14</sup> The unfortunate aspect for India as well as Prime Minister Nehru, however, was that, in the Chinese perception, India was viewed as a part of western (particularly the United States) intrigues against China in Tibet. If this misperception could have been cleared, perhaps the 1962 conflict could have been avoided. Under such constraints, India even tolerated the harassment of Indian trade agencies in Tibet and did not push for the renewal of the 1954 agreement which allowed these agencies to function in Tibet. He sent an informal message through Burmese leader, U Nu, to China in January 1962 to negotiate the extension of this agreement but the lack of any response from the Chinese side eventually led this agreement to lapse.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese obviously preferred the removal of the last surviving Indian trade connection and presence in Tibet as they were planning their 1962 military moves against India.

Sino-Indian relations remained frozen from 1962 to 1976 as a consequence of the Chinese military action in 1962. The efforts to normalise these relations were initiated during the late 1970s but they started gathering momentum only after December 1988 when India's Prime

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarvepalli Gopal, "Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography", (Vol. Three: 1956-1964), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, p. 81.

<sup>12</sup> Prime Minister Nehru's Note to Foreign Secretary, as quoted in Gopal, *Ibid*, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Record of Prime Minister Nehru's meeting with the Dalai Lama, 24 April 1959. *Ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 210.

Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, visited China. This was the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to China in 34 years; the previous being by Prime Minister Nehru in 1954. During this visit, the two sides agreed to take up the resolution of the border issue through peaceful dialogue and start cooperation in economic and cultural areas even while the contentious issues remained unresolved.

India's reaction to the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests and the Chinese suppression of these protests was cautious and politically correct. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit opened the way for high level political exchanges between the two countries. Among the important visits that followed that by the Chinese Premier, Li Peng, in December 1991, India's Prime Minister Narsimha Rao in September 1993 and the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, in November 1996. During the 1993 visit, the two countries signed the "Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas" and, in 1996, another agreement was signed on similar lines, that is, the "Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas". Both these agreements dealt with political and military confidence-building on the common border between them. The two agreements greatly facilitated negotiations on the boundary issue and encouraged economic cooperation between the two countries.

The bilateral relations suffered another setback in 1998 following India's nuclear explosion which New Delhi sought to justify in the name of the "threat from China".<sup>16</sup> This was protested by China. The Chinese mood was softened by two consecutive visits from the Indian side, the first by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in June 1999 and then by President K. R. Narayanan in May 2000. This brought the relations back on track.

An important undercurrent in the normalisation in Sino-Indian relations since 1976 has been India's assurance that it fully accepts the "One-China" policy and would not allow the Tibetan factor to come in the way of their renewed efforts to strengthen bilateral political understanding and economic cooperation. This assurance was sought by the Chinese and reiterated by the Indian leadership during all these visits starting with that of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The Dalai Lama also softened his approach to China somewhat by formally abandoning the demand for independence in response to Premier Deng Xiaoping's expectations, and instead articulated and elaborated his five points of "full autonomy" to Tibet. This was done in an address to the United States Congressional Human Rights Caucus in September 1987 and in his address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in June 1988. In what is now known as the 'Strasbourg Proposal', the Dalai Lama asked for "the whole of Tibet", including U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo, to become a "self-governing democratic political entity". He agreed to China controlling its foreign policy but Tibet should have complete freedom in the "fields of religion, commerce, education, culture, tourism, science, sports and other non-political activities."<sup>17</sup> The Dalai Lama's reformulated position was aimed at being accommodated within China's "One Country, Two Systems" framework which was then being proposed for Hong Kong. China rejected this proposal as being a demand for "disguised independence", leading to tension in China on the Tibetan issue as protests and anti-Chinese demonstrations started in Tibet. What was offered to Hong Kong was not available to Tibet.

---

<sup>16</sup> 'Security threat from China' was mentioned in Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's letter to the United States' President Bill Clinton, who in turn discussed this with China, making the latter angry with India.

<sup>17</sup> 'Address to the European Parliament by the Dalai Lama on 15 June 1988', <http://www.dalailama.com/page.105.htm>.

To ensure the success of his visit which was then being planned, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's government soft peddled the question of the Tibetan protests against the Chinese and the Chinese strong arm methods to suppress these protests during 1987-88. This was the background context in which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit took place. The joint press statement issued at the end of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit on 23 December 1988 said, "The Chinese side expressed concern over anti-Chinese activities by some Tibetan elements in India. The Indian side reiterated the long-standing and consistent policy of the Government of India that Tibet is an autonomous region of China and that anti-China political activities by Tibetan elements are not permitted on Indian soil."

India's position on Tibet was further made comfortable to China during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to the country in June 2003. The Joint Declaration signed on the occasion said:

The Indian side recognises that the Tibet Autonomous Region *is part of the territory of the People's Republic of China* and reiterates that it does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. The Chinese side expressed its appreciation of the Indian position and reiterates that it is firmly opposed to any attempt and action aimed at splitting China and bringing about independence of Tibet. The Indian side recalls that India was among the first countries to recognise that there is one China and its one China policy remains unaltered.<sup>18</sup> (Italics added).

This was justified as a reciprocal gesture for Chinese recognition of Sikkim as an integral part of India that was being disputed since 1974 by China and China's promise to expedite work on the border negotiations. Scholars and commentators have disputed these assumptions of the Vajpayee's regime.<sup>19</sup> China did accept India's position on Sikkim but only subsequently. After Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit, the next India Prime Minister visiting China was Dr Manmohan Singh in January 2008. During this visit, Tibet was not even mentioned in the Joint Statement or speeches, except for the reiteration of India's "One-China" policy. The Joint Statement on "A Shared Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" stated, "The Indian side recalls that India was among the first countries to recognise that there is one China and its One-China policy has remained unaltered. The Indian side states that it would continue to abide by its one China policy and oppose any activity that is against one China principle. The Chinese side expresses its appreciation for the Indian position."<sup>20</sup>

Even during the preparations of Prime Minister Singh's China visit, the Indian government discouraged any explicit support for the Dalai Lama. In November 2007, the Indian government issued an advisory for its ministers and officials not to attend the Dalai Lama's felicitation ceremony for his Congressional award as that "would not be in conformity with the foreign policy of the government".<sup>21</sup> In December 2007, India and China had their first "joint anti-terrorism training between their armed forces." With fast growing economic engagement (trade touching the US\$50 billion mark in 2008), concern for the early resolution

---

<sup>18</sup> Text of the Joint Statement, The Times of India, (New Delhi), 24 June 2003.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, B. Raman, "Ominous Indian Shift on Tibet", 1 July 2003. <http://www.atimes.com>; and Brahma Chellaney, "Delhi's Tibet Glitch", in *Combat Law*, [http://www.combatlaw.org/print.php?article\\_id=1012&issue\\_id=36](http://www.combatlaw.org/print.php?article_id=1012&issue_id=36).

<sup>20</sup> Text of the Vision Statement signed on 14 January 2008. Ministry of External Affairs website.

<sup>21</sup> The Indian Express, (New Delhi), 4 November 2007.

of the boundary issue and the commitment to strengthen their “Strategic and Cooperative Partnership in a positive way”, India’s stance has been to keep China in good humour and avoid any irritation in their bilateral relations on the Tibet issue.

### **Tibetan Uprising 2008**

Tibet erupted into a revolt in March 2008. For three consecutive days on 10, 11 and 12 March 2008, the monks from the monasteries near Lhasa came out protesting peacefully to mark the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising and the Dalai Lama’s flight to India. A group of Tibetans had also started a march from New Delhi to Lhasa on 10 March 2008 but they were stopped by Indian police. They demanded freedom and independence for the Tibetans. On 13 and 14 March 2008, other Tibetan youths joined them. The protests then took a violent turn. The protesters attacked the Chinese police, the Han Chinese, and their shops and business establishments, resulting in the death of some Chinese and injuries to a number of them. This provoked a strong reaction from the Chinese army units stationed in Lhasa. The Lhasa police had then been dealing with these protests without using excessive force. The Chinese’s strong action against the Tibetans resulted in 99 deaths and several casualties, with about 1,000 protesters being put under detention.

Though the Tibetans protests appeared to be a sudden development, there was a strong feeling of frustration among the Tibetans for a long time. A Chinese academic, Liu Junning, felt that, “...it has something to do with the long-term policy failure of the central authorities. They failed to earn the respect of the people there.”<sup>22</sup> The situation had been deteriorating since 2006, when the Chinese-Tibetan dialogue broken down and Zhang Qingli, the Communist Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, revived a strong anti-Dalai Lama campaign and imposed tough restrictions on the Tibetans’ cultural and religious practices. The Tibetan railway was also inaugurated in 2006 but the Tibetans did not welcome it as it was built through forced labour by the Tibetans. The Tibetan nomads and farmers were also being forcefully moved and resettled by the Chinese authorities all these years to the great physical hardship of the Tibetans. A number of Tibetans lost their lives and livelihood during these years. Many of the Tibetans also fled to take refuge in India, Nepal and other countries.<sup>23</sup> There was a serious incident of nearly 30 Tibetans being gunned down by the Chinese border guards in September 2006. These Tibetan students were crossing into India from Tibet via Nepal. The Chinese authorities had sternly told the Nepal government not to allow Tibetans to cross over into Nepal’s territory.

Though the Lhasa protests were suppressed by the use of strong force, including rolling tanks on the streets of Lhasa by the Chinese authorities, the unrest soon spread to other parts of Tibet and beyond. The Chinese provinces surrounding Tibet such as Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan witnessed even more frequent and widespread protests than those evident in Lhasa. These provinces have sizeable Tibetan populations as some of their territories had been carved out of the larger Tibet, particularly the Kham and Amdo areas. Besides the monks (even those who had been subjected to Chinese ‘patriotic re-education’ programmes) and civilians, Tibetan students also joined the protests. The spread and scale of these protests

---

<sup>22</sup> As quoted in, Jim Yardley, “Simmering Resentments Led to Tibetan Backlash”, The New York Times, 18 March 2008. Also, Erich Follath, “Tibet has Caught China by Surprise”, Spiegel Online, 9 April 2008.

<sup>23</sup> For a Tibetan version of the excesses by the Chinese, see; Barry Zellen’s interview of Arijia Rimpoche, Director of Indiana based Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Centre on 4 April 2008, in Barry Zellen “Tibetans Rise Up, as Hope Overtakes Fear on China’s Western Front”, Strategic Insight, Centre For Contemporary Conflict, California.

were unprecedented and, in some ways, even stronger than the 1959 Tibetan uprising. The 1988 protests that were quickly put down by President Hu Jintao, then in charge of Tibetan affairs, were far milder than the 2008 protests.

In the 2008 uprising, the use of ruthless force, inflicting heavy casualties and resulting in a large number of arrests, eventually calmed the protests. China had to do that in the interest of the smooth holding of the proposed Olympic Games in August 2008 and to use these games to showcase China's status as a credible and rising Asian power. China was also concerned as these protests coincided with the similar protests by the Uighur Muslims in the unsettled Xinjiang province.<sup>24</sup> The Tibetans probably had their plans to obstruct the relay of the Olympic Torch in Lhasa as well as in many other countries, not only to mar the Chinese attempts to project its newly-acquired "greatness" but also to raise the violation of Tibet human rights and cultural identity. The Tibetans registered protests during the relaying of the Olympic Torch in a number of cities such as New York, Washington, London, Paris and Canberra. Nearly 300 Tibetans were arrested in New Delhi to ensure a trouble-free relay of the Torch on 17 April 2008.

Before we look at the Indian response to the Tibetan uprising, it may be useful to keep in mind the possible implications of this uprising from India's perspective.

### **Implications of the Tibetan Uprising For India**

India has been a host to the Dalai Lama and his Tibetan government in exile and more than 100,000 Tibetan refugees. India has also been internationally committed to the cause of Tibetan autonomy. The uprising that brought the Tibetan question to the front stage of international media and political attention had varied and worrisome aspects for India. They affected India's relations, not only with China (both the border issue and the overall 'constructive engagement') and the Tibetan people, but also with the wider international community. There were also implications of the Tibetan question for India's internal political dynamics and security concerns. Let us look into these implications one by one.

To begin with, the Tibetan uprising revived and reactivated, with considerable sharpness, the domestic political divide in India, which has, by now, long existed on the rights and wrongs of India's Tibetan policy initiated and pursued since Prime Minister Nehru's times. India's strategic community and the political class were sharply divided on how to respond to the Tibetan question, by treating it as China's internal matter or playing it as a strategic card to press on and bargain with China for an early and amicable resolution of the border issue. At the political level, the ruling United Progressive Alliance, led by the Congress Party, and the opposition National Democratic Alliance, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), were sharply divided on the Tibet question. In the ruling coalition, the Congress was the inheritor of the Nehru policy and one of its stronger allies, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wanted the Tibet issue to be treated as China's internal matter. Therefore, the government did not want to play up the Tibet issue and spoil relations with China.<sup>25</sup> On the opposition side,

---

<sup>24</sup> Howard W. French, "China Confirms Protests by Uighur Muslims", The New York Times, 3 April 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/world/asia/03china.html?> China also sought Pakistan President General Musharraf's help in dealing with the Uighur Muslim's protests, B. Raman, "Unrest in Xinjiang: China Seeks Musharraf's Good Offices", South Asia Analysis Group, paper No. 2660, 4 April 2008. <http://www.southasiaanalysisgroup.org/papers27/paper2660.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee's statement in the Upper House of Indian Parliament on 19 March 2008. <http://www.newindpress.com/Print.asp?ID=IEH20080319160135>.

the leader of opposition and the BJP leader, L. K. Advani, deplored the crushing of democratic protests by China and wanted India to raise the question in the United Nations and other international forums. His colleague and former Foreign Minister, Yeshwant Sinha, asserted that while seeking good relations with China, India should not surrender its own national interests and “India should not remain a mute spectator to what was going on there.”<sup>26</sup> It may be useful to keep in mind that the BJP, while in power, had followed largely the same policy of not irritating China on the question of Tibet and accepting it as an autonomous region of China. We have earlier noted India’s position on the Tibet issue during Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit to China in 2003.<sup>27</sup>

The strategic community of India also became sharply divided on the Tibet issue, though a majority of former diplomats, journalists and academics pleaded for the use and retention of the “Tibet Card” to deal with China.<sup>28</sup> There were, however, others who laid emphasis on maintaining good relations with China and avoid the use of the Tibetan people as strategic cards while being concerned about their plight and future.<sup>29</sup> The division went down from the strategic community to the civil society, involving people who were also asked to carry China’s Olympic Torch in the relay in India. India’s football captain, Baichung Bhutia, refused to carry the Torch saying, “My sympathies lay with the Tibetans”. Another long distance runner, P. T. Usha, registered her protest against “mixing politics with sports”. A famous Bollywood actor, Amir Khan, agreed to carry the Torch and said, “When I do run with the Olympic Torch...it is not in support of China. In fact, it will be with a prayer in my heart for the people of Tibet.” A non-government organisation (NGO) representative, Narayan Hegde, however, said, “China is so powerful, will it change if we protest in this minor firecracker manner.”<sup>30</sup> Such divisions went down to the mass level as well. In a public opinion survey, while the overwhelming majority (70 percent) did not blame the Dalai Lama for the violence in Tibet, they conceded that Tibet has affected India’s relations with China adversely (71 percent) though this was not a sufficient reason to abandon the Tibet issue and expel the Dalai Lama (78 percent). The survey also held that the Tibetans should not be stopped from protesting against the Chinese (64 percent) but there was no need for the Indian government to openly support the Dalai Lama, even at the cost of annoying China (47 percent).<sup>31</sup>

The difference of opinion at the political and the strategic community/civil society levels in India on the Tibet issue was mainly driven by two imperatives, both related to different aspects of relations with China. Firstly, the politicisation of the Tibet issue was bound to have adverse implications for India’s surging economic and cooperative relationship. Secondly, Tibet provided the substance to India’s case on the disputed boundary question with China. No one in India wanted to jeopardise the ‘constructive’ engagement with China which was not only yielding very positive momentum in the bilateral regional economic relations but also had the prospects of the two Asian giants together influencing the course of political and

---

<sup>26</sup> The Hindu, (New Delhi), 18 March 2008.

<sup>27</sup> “What is BJP harping about Tibet?”, <http://indiainteracts.com/utilities/printpage.php?sourcecolumniststory&id=1213>.

<sup>28</sup> Kanwal Sibal, “Tibet Is Our Best Card To Settle Borders With China”, Outlook, (New Delhi), Magazine, 7 April 2008. Also see G. Parthasarthy, “Avoid Past Mistakes”, Times of India, (New Delhi), 14 April 2008; and Brahma Chellaney, “China’s Tall Claim”, Times of India, (New Delhi), 2 May 2008.

<sup>29</sup> M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Engaging China as a friendly neighbour”, The Hindu, 10 April 2008, R. S. Kalha, “Fresh Look at Tibet; Nehru was not at fault”, The Tribune, (Chandigarh) 23 May 2008; and B. Raman, “The Tibet Card vs The Tibet Issue”, Outlook, (New Delhi), 12 April 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Rohit Mahajan, “Half an Indian Leg”, Outlook, (New Delhi), 14 April 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

strategic direction in Asia and the world. The vision document signed between the two countries during Prime Minister Singh's visit to China in January 2008 was a clear pointer in that direction. India also expected China to cooperate on the Indo-US nuclear deal when the question came up at the Nuclear Supplier's Group. India's encouragement to the politicisation of the Tibetan issue could also provoke China towards reviving its old policy of providing shelter, support and encouragement to India's numerous insurgent groups, particularly in the northeast region. As China had done in the past, it could also work to erode India's strategic presence and stakes in its sensitive South Asian neighbourhood, far more aggressively than what it was doing at the present time.

On the boundary issue, however, the Tibetan leadership's position sought to strengthen India's case, particularly at a time when China appeared to be slowing down on the process of negotiations and advancing its claims on the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>32</sup> The McMahon Line, the basis of India's claims on its border with China, was the result of the Shimla Agreement of 1914 between Tibet and the British India, which the Chinese refused to recognise. The Dalai Lama and his exiled government in Dharamshala continued to recognise this agreement and, accordingly, were of the view that Arunachal Pradesh, including its disputed area Tawang, belonged to India. The Prime Minister of the exiled Tibetan government said in an interview in the wake of the Tibetan uprising in March 2008:

We have continued the legitimate government of the Dalai Lama, which is now 367 years old. That government had 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 borne in Tawang, it belongs to Tibet then if one Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia, can I say Mongolia is a part of Tibet?<sup>33</sup>

Subsequently, the Dalai Lama also endorsed this position that Tawang belonged to India. Earlier, the exiled Tibetan position was that while Tibet recognised and accepted the McMahon Line, Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh were considered as being part of Tibet. In 2003, the Dalai Lama himself had said so.<sup>34</sup> The change in the Tibetan position on Tawang and Arunachal Pradesh was, therefore, interesting and strategically significant when the Tibetan revolt broke out and the Sino-Indian negotiations on the border entered a sensitive phase with the intensified controversy on these areas between India and China. This shift provided the legal and historical evidence for India to hold on to its position and, therefore, its strategic value cannot be undermined till the boundary is finally agreed to and demarcated on the ground.

Besides divisions within the Indian political establishments and the strategic community, the violent aspect of Tibetan revolt was a matter of long-term concern. The Dalai Lama had asserted that he did not approve of the violence in the Tibetan protests and even appealed to

---

<sup>32</sup> These claims were asserted during the Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to India in November 2006. To reassert India's claims, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Arunachal Pradesh in January 2008. See S. D. Muni, "Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Arunachal Pradesh: Butressing the Claims", ISAS Brief No. 52, 13 February 2008, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore.

<sup>33</sup> Interview of the Prime Minister S. Rinpoche, the Tibetan Government in Exile by Sheela Bhatt in Rediff News, 19 March 2008, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/mar/19enter!htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Times of India, (New Delhi), 4 June 2008.

his people that if violence was not stopped, he would resign as the Dalai Lama.<sup>35</sup> The violence in the Tibetan movement has long term implications for India as there are more than 100,000 Tibetan refugees living in India and a large number of them are young and frustrated. The militarisation of the movement can easily get the Tibetans in touch with various other militant movements and armed insurgencies in India and in the neighbourhood. In fact, the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), in its training programmes, was learning the methods of the Nepal Maoists and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.<sup>36</sup> The TYC is a 30,000-strong group. In January 2008, the TYC, the Tibetan Women's Association, the Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet, the National Democratic Party of Tibet and the Students for a Free Tibet decided to launch a "Tibetan People's Uprising Movement" together. These groups has a leadership that is well exposed to international politics and seems to have come to the conclusion that the Dalai Lama's 'peaceful' "middle-way" would not yield any results as it has failed to persuade the Chinese to be reasonable. The TYC's President, Tsewang Rigzin, asserts that there is "no guarantee that the Tibetans would only resort to non-violent actions." One of his predecessors in 1989 first hinted at the possibility of violent methods. According to him, after the death of the Dalai Lama, young Tibetans in exile "would take up arms and return to their homeland to fight for independence." Drawing comparison with Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya, the frustrated Tibetans are of the view that a bomb blast attracts greater attention than a hunger strike, even outside the United Nations office.<sup>37</sup> The Tibetans in Tibet are more frustrated and alienated from the Chinese as they face daily harassment and humiliation. They were in the forefront of the March 2008 uprising and were even violent, though they know that the Chinese state is too powerful and ruthless to yield against the Tibetan violence. The easy suppression of the Tibetan revolt and the Chinese refusal to engage in any meaningful dialogue with the Tibetans, even after promising this in the wake of the revolt, has raised questions on the relevance of the Dalai Lama's non-violent strategy in dealing with China. We shall get back to this question a little later again.

## India's Response

The two basic pillars of India's Tibet policy were set in 1954, namely, accepting Tibet as an autonomous part of China and committing itself to the preservation of Tibetan autonomy, especially its cultural and religious identity. China has also, in principle, accepted the notion of Tibetan autonomy and it is also so enshrined in the Chinese Constitution. However, in the context of the Tibetan traditional concept, there exists a deep gulf between the degree of autonomy acceptable to the Chinese authorities and the degree of autonomy desired and demanded by the Tibetan people and the Dalai Lama. The concept of autonomy has also been endorsed by the Dalai Lama, particularly since the 1980s, as defined in his Strasbourg Proposals (1988), mentioned earlier. The problem with the notion of cultural autonomy in Tibet, however, is that it also encompasses the political dimension since the cultural and religious head of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, is also the political head of the Tibetan community. While the Tibetans want to control all their affairs, save foreign, defence and currency, the Chinese are not willing to concede to them more than the right to worship. The Dalai Lama wants all the territories where the majority residents are Tibetans, even outside the officially designated 'Tibetan Autonomous Region', to come under his sway, that is, he is asking for autonomy for the greater Tibet that had the Kham and Amdo provinces, and the areas of some of the neighbouring provinces, as its parts. The Chinese do not accept this.

---

<sup>35</sup> Spiegel Online, 21 March 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Personal interviews with the Tibetan Youth Congress leaders in New Delhi in October 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Law Siu-lan, "Cracks Emerge in 'Dalai Lama clique'", Asia Times Online, 2 April 2008. Andreas Lorenz and Padma Rao, "A Nerve-Wracking Wait for Exiles in Dharamsala". Spiegel Online, 21 March 2008.

They are willing to restore the old religious status to the Dalai Lama but do not want to surrender to him the way the Tibetan people and regions should be governed.<sup>38</sup>

Since the flight of the Dalai Lama, even the display of his photos has been treated as a criminal activity by the Chinese authorities. India's two-pillar policy of Tibetan autonomy and Chinese sovereignty generally works during periods of peace between the Tibetans and the Chinese. However, any conflict between the two creates pressures on Indian policy, as has been evident since 1959. In such conflict situations, India has to evolve a delicate balance to avoid being misunderstood by either side.

The March 2008 Tibetan uprising created a serious dilemma for the Indian policy. It had to evolve a balance where it did not annoy China without appearing to be appeasing it, and where it did not abandon the Tibetan cause without appearing to be abating it. There was no room in Indian policy either for offence or endorsement of either side. It was a situation somewhat parallel to the one in 1959 except that the Indian position had shifted closer to the Chinese as it had much stake in protecting and sustaining its 'constructive engagement with China'. This was notwithstanding the significant reinforcement in India's military capabilities as compared to the 1959 situation.<sup>39</sup>

To address the Chinese sensitivities, India did not allow the Tibetan protests to be advanced in India right from 10 March 2008 when they started simultaneously in India and Tibet to mark the birthday of the Dalai Lama. About 100 protesters were arrested. Those protesters who led a march to go to Tibet were also stopped. The Tibetan refugees were asked to avoid indulging in politics. In the media briefings, the Ministry of External Affairs' spokesman said:

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 crossing 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.<sup>40</sup>

India's Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, also cautioned the Dalai Lama to refrain from any overt political activity. In a televised statement, he said, "India will continue to offer him (the Dalai Lama) all hospitality, but during his stay in India, they (the Tibetans) should not do any political activity, any action that can adversely affect relations between India and China."<sup>41</sup> He was also quietly advised to urge the Tibetan protesters to stop their march to China. Representatives of the five Tibetan organisations who were sponsoring such protest marches, including the TYC, the National Democratic Party of Tibet, the Tibetan Women's Association and the Students for Free Tibet, met the Dalai Lama on 19 March 2008 and

---

<sup>38</sup> Wu Zhong, "China Plays Tibet Card to the Full", Asia Timesonline, 10 December 2008.

<sup>39</sup> For some idea of the growing Sino-Indian engagement see, Claude Arpi, "Good timing for PM's visit to China", 9 January 2008. <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/jan/09guest.htm>; Gareth Price, "China and India: Cooperation and Competition", *Asia Programme Briefing Paper*, ASP BP 07/01, Chatham House, May 2007, UK; Pallavi Aiyar, "For a formidable economic engagement across the Himalayas", *The Hindu*, 10 January 2008; William van Kemenade, "Détente Between China and India: The Delicate Balance of Geopolitics in Asia", *Clingendale Diplomacy Papers No; 16*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendale, July 2008; and Robin Meredith, "The Elephant and the Dragon: The Rise of India and China and What It Means for All of US", WW Norton & Company, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Ministry of External Affairs website. The statement was issued in New Delhi on 15 March 2008.

<sup>41</sup> BBC News, Published on 1 April 2008. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south\\_asia/7324693.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7324693.stm).

subsequently called off the marches.<sup>42</sup> Only four days back, the Dalai Lama had expressed his “helplessness” in stopping the Tibetan protests. In a press conference in Dharamshala, he said, “I feel very sad, very serious, very anxious; Cannot do anything.”<sup>43</sup> This stand of India was appreciated by the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao when he said, “China appreciates the position taken by the Indian government to handle the ‘Tibet independence’ activities schemed by the Dalai clique.” For the future, he added, “I hope the Indian government can follow the agreements reached between the two countries and handle this issue in a correct way.”<sup>44</sup> The Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, Zhang Yang, was however, more demanding. He wanted India to see “clearly the nature of those instigating and conspiring activities of the Dalai clique” and maintain an “objective and correct stand, and avoid any irresponsible words and acts.” Explaining China’s position, he denied that there was any “crackdown”.<sup>45</sup> When some people described this Chinese tone as patronising, Foreign Minister Mukherjee denied it.

India attempts to curtail the Tibetan protests did not go down very well with the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama also expressed reservations, saying that regarding India’s policy towards China in general and Tibet in particular, “Sometimes my constructive criticism is that it is over-cautious.”<sup>46</sup> Months later, he reiterated that “in 1959-60, Pandit Nehru took personal interest in Tibet...Of late, Delhi’s view about the Tibetan issue has been over-cautious.”<sup>47</sup> Young Tibetans were more resentful, “India supports China too much. We are struggling, but they don’t let us. It is because India is afraid of China, That’s why there is no help.”<sup>48</sup> On the whole, the Tibetan leaders kept their resentment in low key. Samdhong Rinpoche, the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government in exile, was of the view that, “We are not dissatisfied with the Indian government’s policy on Tibet. There is no use of using strong words when the real help is effective action.”<sup>49</sup> The Dalai Lama also felt that India being “over-cautious” does not matter. He said, “Important is, the last almost 50 years since Pandit Nehru laid out a certain policies regarding the Tibetan refugee community...Now that’s still being carried out, no matter what government, no matter what political party, Janata Party or Congress Party.”<sup>50</sup>

China became very concerned about the safety of the Olympic Torch’s relay in various countries. The smooth relay of the Torch had been marred by Tibetan protests in some countries such as Greece. In India also, the security of the Chinese Embassy had been breached on 21 March 2008 when some protesters managed to enter its compound. Worried by these developments, the Chinese Embassy approached India’s Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, to ensure that the relay of the Torch, scheduled for 17 April 2008, went off unhindered. The Chinese authorities in Beijing had made it clear that “competent authorities in countries through which (the) Torch relay will pass have the obligation to ensure a smooth relay...any act of disruption of the Torch relay is shameful and unpopular.”<sup>51</sup> India assured the Chinese accordingly. India’s National Security Adviser, M. K. Narayanan, personally undertook to arrange for the smooth transit of the Olympic Flame and he also personally assured the

---

<sup>42</sup> The Telegraph, (Calcutta), 20 March 2008.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in The New York Times, 16 March 2008. (“Dalai Lama Won’t Stop Tibet Protests”).

<sup>44</sup> Xinhua News on 18 March 2008, www.xinhuanet.com.

<sup>45</sup> The Hindu, 18 March 2008.

<sup>46</sup> “Tibet: India walks a diplomatic tightrope”, NDTV, (<ndtv.com>), 20 March 2008.

<sup>47</sup> “India being over-cautious on Tibet: Dalai Lama” Press Trust of India, 23 November 2008.

<sup>48</sup> NDTV, (<ndtv.com.), 20 March 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Deccan Herald, (Bangalore), 12 April 2008.

<sup>50</sup> Thaindian, 27 March 2008, <http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorised>.

<sup>51</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s statement, Xinhua News, 26 March 2008.

Chinese that all possible arrangements for the safety of the flame had been made.<sup>52</sup> The Torch indeed passed through India safely. However, its route and relay was drastically curtailed. The display of the Torch took place only in one city, New Delhi, and there too, its route was reduced from the 21 kilometres originally planned to only three kilometres on the Rajpath. This was an implied acknowledgement of the strength of the Tibetan protests in India. These protests were, however, allowed to register in a different corner of the city. To keep the Chinese in good humour, the Dalai Lama's appointment with the Vice-President of India, Mohd Hamid Ansari, was also cancelled.

The concern for keeping good relations with China in India's approach was equally matched by concern for the Tibetan sensitivities. On the day that the statement on restraining the Tibetans from protests and marches was issued, India cautioned Beijing and asked it to open a dialogue with the Tibetan authorities. The spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs said:

We are distressed by reports of 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 cause of such trouble in Tibet, which is an autonomous region of China, through dialogue and non-violent means.<sup>53</sup>

There was, of course, no direct criticism of the force used by the Chinese to suppress the protests but then, there was also no direct reference to the violence unleashed by the Tibetan protesters on the ethnic Chinese on 14 March 2008. Attention may also be drawn here to the fact that, on 21 March 2008, the Tibetan protests in New Delhi managed to breach the security cordon around the Chinese Embassy and enter its premises. There were no signs of any official connivance at this breach. This seriously upset the Chinese in view of the scheduled relay of the Olympic Torch in New Delhi about a month later as we have already noted. The Chinese authorities in Beijing summoned the Indian Ambassador, Nirupama Rao, at odd hours to register their protest against the breach of the embassy security.

Though the Dalai Lama's request for a meeting with the Indian President was not granted and his appointment with the Vice-President was cancelled, he managed to come to Delhi to participate in a prayer meeting and a meditation workshop for the Tibetans organised by the Foundation for Universal Responsibility. This was an international event where many of the Dalai Lama's followers from all over the world came, including Hollywood stars such as Richard Gere.<sup>54</sup> While in Delhi, the Dalai Lama also met Prime Minister Singh, though this visit was not publicised. A day before coming to New Delhi, the Dalai Lama met Ms Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, in Dharamshala. Though the Chinese would have been happy if India discouraged this meeting but since it was scheduled much before the events in Lhasa, there was no reason for New Delhi to go out of the way to offend the Tibetans and the United States. Ms Pelosi is an admirer and supporter of the Dalai Lama for a long time. The third ranking United States official came with nine Democratic Congressmen and assured support to the Dalai Lama. She described the "situation in Tibet as a challenge to the conscience of the world" and said, "If freedom-loving people throughout the world do not speak out against Chinese oppression in China and Tibet,

---

<sup>52</sup> India Express, (New Delhi), 26 March 2008; and 9 April 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Official Spokesman's response to questions on developments in Lhasa, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, website, 15 March 2008.

<sup>54</sup> The Times of India, (New Delhi), 21 March 2008.

we have lost all moral authority to speak on behalf of human rights any where in the world”.<sup>55</sup> On her way back, Ms Pelosi also met the Indian Prime Minister where besides the issues related to Indo-US nuclear deal, Tibet must also have been discussed. This visit considerably added to the Tibetans’ morale. The Tibetan parliament, in its session subsequently, expressed its gratitude to Ms Pelosi, through a unanimous resolution, for her “overwhelming support for Tibet during its critical moment, with an indomitable spirit of humane integrity and truth.”<sup>56</sup> The Chinese authorities were naturally upset over this meeting. Reacting to the meeting, the Chinese Ambassador in New Delhi, almost within hours of Ms Pelosi’s meeting with Dalai Lama said:

We oppose any country, any organisation, any person to interfere in China’s internal affairs...On this issue, we have stated clearly. Tibet is China’s internal affairs. We do not allow anybody to meddle in China’s internal affairs. Any attempt to cause trouble to China is doomed to fail.<sup>57</sup>

India’s concern for the Tibetan sensitivities and interests was reflective of India’s interest in keeping the Tibetan issue alive. There has been no dilution in India’s support for the Tibetan government in exile and all its activities, the known emphasis on “refrain from political activities” for the Tibetan notwithstanding. After all, Ms Pelosi’s meeting with the Dalai Lama was also a political activity. The Indian government has continued to support the Tibetan government financially. In recent years, the amount of support has been enhanced to 100 million Indian rupees annually. Ignoring Chinese objections, India also allowed the meeting of Tibetan parliament in Dharamshala in November 2008, where the Dalai Lama’s proposal to review his peaceful and non-violent “Middle Way” was discussed.

## Prospects

Tibet remains a contentious issue in India’s relations with China and there are no likely prospects of this issue disappearing in the near future. Neither the Chinese side looks amenable to a radical shift in accommodating the Tibetan aspirations nor will the Tibetans ‘disappear into nothingness’. The talks initiated by China under international pressure and in order to ensure smooth conduct of the August Olympics yielded no positive results. The “Memorandum For all Tibetans to Enjoy Genuine Autonomy” was presented by the Tibetan side for consideration. This was termed, at the eighth round of talks in November (31 October to 5 November) 2008, as an agenda for “Tibet independence, half independence or covert independence” and summarily rejected by the Chinese side. The Tibetan representative at these talks, Lodi Gyari said, “China rejected our demand saying that two systems cannot work in one country.”<sup>58</sup> This stonewalling of the Tibetan demands by China has been disapproved even by Chinese analysts.<sup>59</sup>

The growing Tibetan frustration forced the Dalai Lama to review his “Middle Way”. He summoned a special meeting on 17-22 November 2008 in Dharamshala to discuss his “Middle Way” in the face of rising resistance to this approach by the young Tibetans and

---

<sup>55</sup> The New York Times, 21 March 2008; and The Times of India, 21 March 2008.

<sup>56</sup> <http://speaker.house.gov/newsroom/articles?id=0179>, 9 December 2008.

<sup>57</sup> The Times of India, 21 March 2008.

<sup>58</sup> Indian Express, 17 November 2008. Also, Claude Apri, “The end of the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way?” <http://www.rediff.com/cms/print.jsp?docpath=//news/2008/nov/12columns>.

<sup>59</sup> Frank Ching, “On Autonomy for the Tibetan People”, in China Post, 19 November 2008. <http://chinapost.com.tw/commentary/the-china-post/frank-ching/2008/11/19/183845/on-autonomy.htm>.

refusal on the part of China to show any accommodation. Article 59 of the Tibetan Charter was used to call for this meeting and it was attended by cabinet ministers, serving and former members of the Tibetan parliament in exile, government officials, Tibetan NGOs and intellectuals, totalling some six hundred people from all over the world. Among the options put on the table was to seek independence instead of autonomy. India allowed this meeting to be held, ignoring its political character despite China's request to stop it. The conclave heard the strong articulation of the demand for complete freedom and independence, largely from the younger participants. A young delegate, Tenzin Tsundue, after the conclave said, "I still stand for complete independence of Tibet. There should be no compromise on that. Only an independent Tibet can guarantee the survival of the Tibet nation. This is the belief of every Tibetan."<sup>60</sup>

The conclave's majority decision was in favour of continuing with the "Middle Way". The conclave also resolved that, "China should stop criticising His Holiness without valid reasons. The meeting unanimously decided that he remains our unequivocal leader and whatever course we decide, we will not resort to violence."<sup>61</sup> The continuation of the "Middle Path" was, however, for a short time. Dolma Gyari, the Deputy Speaker of the "Parliament-in-Exile", made it clear that, "If the middle path fails in the short term, we will be forced to opt for complete independence or self-determination as per the UN Charter".<sup>62</sup> There were several constraints against going for the "complete independence option". International opinion was resolutely against it. One of the last supporters of Chinese 'suzerainty' and not sovereignty, Britain, had also shifted its position on 29 October 2008, to accepting Tibet as a part of the People's Republic of China.<sup>63</sup> No state was willing to offend a rising power, China, for the sake of Tibet. The declaration of the 'independent' option would also create problems for the Tibetan government in exile in India. India's acceptance of the Tibetan refugees and the Dalai Lama was primarily based on the "autonomy" concept. It is extremely difficult for India to house an explicitly anti-Chinese separatist movement without completely reversing its policy of engagement with China. A great deal of the continuation of the Tibetan movement would depend upon its Indian hospitality. There were high expectations from India among a large number of Tibetan delegates. One of them was reported to have said after the conclave, "Ten years ago, when we warned them about the train to Tibet, Indian officials ignored us. And now, when the train is coming uptown Nepal, they are panicking. But it is too late. If India fails to act now, they will have to live with China as a permanent and hostile neighbour."<sup>64</sup> Even the Dalai Lama, while admitting that his "trust in the Chinese officials, not the people, has become thinner and thinner", he looked towards India as the "guru" of Tibet. This implied that India should guide Tibet at this difficult moment and must evolve a China policy that takes Tibet's interests also into account. "If the Tibet issue is resolved, both India and China shall gain enormously", added Dalai Lama.<sup>65</sup>

The Tibetan movement is passing through a critical phase. India will have to seriously review its Tibet policy and evolve viable options to suit the changing contours of the Tibetan movement, keeping in mind the diversity of its interests in relation to China, including the

---

<sup>60</sup> Indian Express, 23 November 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> B. K. Upmanyu, "Tibetan Conclave backs Dalai Lama's middle way", Merinews, 23 November 2008. <http://www.merineews.com/shareArticle.do?detail=Print&articleID=150525>.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Barnet, "Did Britain Just Sell Tibet?", The New York Times, 26 November 2008.

<sup>64</sup> B. K. Upmanyu, op.cit.

<sup>65</sup> The Hindu, 24 November 2008, Indian Express, 23 November 2008. Jyoti Thottam, "Dalai Lama Signals a Tougher Line on China", Time Magazine, (London), 23 November 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1861391,00.html>.

border issue. If Tibet changes its struggle in favour of “complete independence” or when it descends into chaos and anarchy through the rise of militancy in the absence of the Dalai Lama, India will have to deal with its consequences. China is waiting for the death of the Dalai Lama, assuming that that would be a solution for its worries. However, that may not really be so.

oooOOOooo