

The Way Forward on Tibet: The Status of Discussions Between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Government of the People's Republic of China

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I would like to thank the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) for providing this opportunity to share my thoughts on the status of our discussions with the Chinese government in finding a political solution to the issue of Tibet and the possible way forward.

Today, our talks with the Chinese leadership have reached a stage where, for the first time after decades of being in and out of contact, we have been able to convey to them in an unambiguous manner the position of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in seeking a solution within the framework of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the steps that need to be taken to resolve the Tibetan problem. Although we are yet to see any concrete outcome leading to a solution, our talks have certainly enabled the two sides to have a better understanding of each other's position and concerns.

In order to put our dialogue process with the Chinese leadership in context, I would like to explain its historical development. Broadly, we can categorize the dialogue process into three phases since the process began in 1979:

Initial Contact (1979 - 1985)

The first phase started with the establishment of contact in 1979, when the then Chinese leader, Mr. Deng Xiaoping, conveyed a message to His Holiness the Dalai Lama (through Mr. Gyalo Thondup, his elder brother) that except for the issue of Tibetan independence, all other issues could be discussed and resolved.

Subsequently, two high level Tibetan delegations were sent to Beijing for exploratory talks in 1982 and 1984 respectively. I was a member of both the delegations. We had wide-ranging discussions with the Chinese leadership. One of the issues that we had clarified then was the fact that the Tibetan problem is not about the future and personal wellbeing of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but that it is about the welfare of the six million Tibetans.

Simultaneously, four fact-finding delegations were sent by His Holiness to study the conditions in different parts of Tibet from 1979 to 1985.

During this phase of the dialogue process, the Tibetan delegations met with senior Chinese leaders, including Mr. Deng Xiaoping and other politburo members.

Tibetan Initiatives and Developments in Tibet (1985 - 1993)

The second phase of our dialogue process occurred between 1985 and 1993. There were infrequent visits by emissaries of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to China during this period.

As an effort to encourage the beginning of serious talks on the issue of Tibet, in September 1987 His Holiness presented his Five-Point Peace Plan, his vision for a way forward on Tibet, in an address to the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus in Washington D.C. Thereafter, in June 1988, His Holiness elaborated on the fifth point (calling for earnest negotiations on Tibet) of his Five-Point Peace Plan, in an address at the European Parliament in Strasbourg. The essential characteristics of this proposal were that Tibetans would enjoy self-governance in their internal affairs, with Beijing

maintaining overall responsibility in matters of foreign affairs and defense.

Thereafter, the Chinese government publicly agreed to meet His Holiness' representatives to discuss issues any time at a venue of his choice. His Holiness responded positively and immediately to this indicating his sincerity and determination to engage in dialogue. He appointed a negotiation team and proposed that the talks be held in Geneva. Unfortunately, Beijing responded negatively to this by raising procedural issues, despite clarifications from the Tibetan side. His Holiness' subsequent proposal for our two sides to meet in Hong Kong in April of that year was also rejected.

September 1987 saw the beginning of a series of massive demonstrations by Tibetans in Tibet expressing their grievances against Chinese policies. The PRC authorities resorted to brutal crackdown on the Tibetans, imprisoning hundreds and declaring martial law in Tibet in 1989. The Chinese Government's attitude spoiled the atmosphere for the dialogue process during this period.

Meanwhile, as an indication of the international community's recognition of his peaceful efforts, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. China responded negatively to this honoring of His Holiness.

Eventually, contacts between our two sides broke off in August 1993.

Re-establishment of the dialogue process (2002 onwards)

After several years of intense and active informal and behind the scene contacts, our two sides agreed to resume formal direct contact and the first round in this process took place in September 2002. This process can be categorized as the third phase. This phase has become more institutionalized with meetings being more business like. Since 2002, nine rounds of talks and one informal session have been held. The most recent round, the Ninth Round, took place in January 2010. I have been leading the Tibetan side in all these deliberations.

During these rounds we have been able to present and clarify His Holiness the Dalai Lama's position on the future of Tibet. Our talks eventually developed to a stage where we formally presented a Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People during the Eighth Round in November 2008.

Our Memorandum puts forth our position on genuine autonomy and how the specific needs of the Tibetan nationality for autonomy and self- government can be met through application of the principles on autonomy of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, as we understand them. It outlined 11 basic needs of the Tibetan people, which are provided for in the PRC's Constitution and Law on Regional National Autonomy.

Since the Chinese leadership had several concerns relating to the Memorandum, which they rejected as being unconstitutional, we presented a Note to the Memorandum during the Ninth Round in January this year. This Note addressed the concerns and offered some constructive suggestions for a way forward in our dialogue process. The Note was also intended to prevent misinterpretation and misconception by the general public about His Holiness' position.

We emphasized that His Holiness the Dalai Lama's sole concern is the wellbeing of the Tibetan people. His Holiness has never raised any issue relating to his personal wellbeing or the welfare of the people around him. Our position is that most of the Tibetan people are being severely marginalized and that they do not enjoy satisfactory religious, political, economic, language and cultural and social rights. The widespread peaceful demonstrations throughout Tibet, starting from March 10, 2008, once again clearly indicated the people's dissatisfaction with the Chinese policies. Majority of these peaceful demonstrations took place outside of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Just last month, from October 19, there were series of peaceful rallies against the proposed replacement of Tibetan language by Chinese as the medium of instruction in schools. This is but the

latest indication of Tibetan grievances.

The Chinese Government, however, contends that the Tibetan people are in a happy and satisfactory situation, and that there is no Tibetan issue.

In the light of these two differing perspectives, we suggested that there be a study by the two sides to determine the conditions of the Tibetan people. The Tibetan people should have the opportunity to participate in this study without fear or suspicion. If the outcome of this study is that most of the Tibetans feel there is no problem and their present situation is satisfactory, this is what His Holiness the Dalai Lama is calling for. But if the outcome confirms that most of the Tibetan people are not in a satisfactory situation, the Chinese government then needs to recognize that there is a problem and, in the spirit of seeking truth from facts, our two sides need to discuss and find a solution.

Also, during the informal session in Shenzhen in May 2008, we rejected the Chinese charge that His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership in exile have instigated the demonstrations throughout the Tibetan areas since March 10, 2008. Since we find that the same allegations are being repeated, we asked the Chinese Government to clarify and invited it to undertake a thorough scientific investigation, in Tibet as well as in the Tibetan community in exile, into the veracity of their charge. We stated our readiness to extend every support to such an investigation.

Some Important Issues Raised by the Chinese Side

During our most recent round, the Chinese side provided us with a detailed briefing on developments relating to Tibet, particularly on the Fifth Tibet Work Forum, held from January 18 to 20, 2010. They said the Forum decided to further improve the livelihood of Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region and all Tibetan areas, specifically in public services, such as education, medical services, and environmental protection. Based on the initial reports that we had of the Forum, we welcomed the decision to improve the lives of the Tibetan people, especially in rural areas.

We especially welcomed the fact that the Fifth Tibet Work Forum has looked into the issues of development in all Tibetan areas –The Tibet Autonomous Region as well as other Tibetan areas. It is our strong belief that all the Tibetan areas must be under a uniform policy and a single administration. If we take away the political slogans, many of the issues that have been prioritized by the Forum are similar to the basic needs of the Tibetan people outlined in our Memorandum. However, recent indications are that instead of having a positive uniform policy for all Tibetan areas, there is effort to extend the stringent measurements already in place in the Tibet Autonomous Region to all other Tibetan areas. This is a counterproductive measure and the Chinese authorities need to realize this.

The Essence of the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach

One of the fundamental points that the Chinese officials fail to acknowledge is the fact that His Holiness the Dalai Lama is sincere and serious in his efforts for a solution within the framework of the People's Republic of China through his Middle Way Approach.

His Holiness and the Tibetan leadership in exile took the courageous decision not to seek Tibetan independence but genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people that would ensure their basic needs of safeguarding their distinct culture, language, religion and identity and the delicate natural environment of the Tibetan plateau.

The Middle Way Approach is a way to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples, based on equality and mutual co- operation. Its origin goes back to the mid-1970s when His Holiness had internal discussions with his advisors. Over the years the Tibetan leadership in exile refined the concrete features of the Middle Way Approach to in the light of existing political realities in the PRC.

Official Chinese media continue to label His Holiness as being a separatist, who wants to regain Tibetan independence. They refer to contents of his statements of the past, including the Five Point Peace Plan and the Strasbourg Proposal, deliberately ignoring His Holiness' subsequent appreciation of Chinese concerns and clarification of his position.

Our Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People clearly outlined His Holiness's Middle Way Approach.

Our Memorandum and the Note to the Memorandum have been well received by many governments, parliaments, institutions, organizations and individuals as being very reasonable and legitimate. Many are surprised and deeply disappointed with the Chinese government's reactions. Finding the Chinese government's position inappropriate, they continue to emphatically urge them to engage in a substantive dialogue with us on the agenda of the Memorandum. For example, following a meeting between His Holiness and President Obama on February 18, 2010, the White House released a statement saying, "The President commended the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way" approach, his commitment to nonviolence and his pursuit of dialogue with the Chinese government."

Wider Implications of the Unresolved Tibetan Issue

Resolving the Tibetan issue concerns not merely the rights of the Tibetan people. Rather, it concerns the future of the Tibetan Buddhist culture, which impacts both the Tibetan people and the broader international community. Tibetan Buddhist culture, which, promotes a culture of compassion that, is much needed in Tibet, in China and the region as a whole. When we talk about Tibetan Buddhist culture we are not talking about the religious aspects of Tibetan Buddhism.

Specifically, China is aspiring to be a superpower but such a status cannot be achieved purely through military and economic strength. Rather, moral authority is a very important condition and this can be imparted by the Tibetan Buddhist culture.

From the geopolitical perspective, too, if the issue of Tibet is resolved, it will be a positive factor not only in the relationship between the two upcoming global powers, India and China, but also to the region as a whole. Here, I concur with Singapore's Foreign Minister, Mr. George Yeo, who wrote in an article that "Tibet is part of a much larger Asian drama that is changing the world". Certainly, on account of geo-political, strategic and environmental reasons, the situation in Tibet will have deep impact to the changing landscape in Asia.

Environmentally, the Tibetan plateau is of great importance with scientists virtually naming it as the Third Pole. Tibet is the source of many major Asian rivers. Thus, if the Tibetan environment is impacted, it affects the global environment.

There is another implication about the Tibetan issue that impacts the Chinese people themselves. Today, there is increasing awareness of the Tibetan situation among the Chinese people. This is even more evident among the intellectuals and with younger generation. Many of them have courageously called for pragmatic approach to the Tibetan issue and sees His Holiness the Dalai Lama as the key factor in helping resolve the Tibet issue. They have realized that the attitude of the Chinese Government to the issue of Tibet will have a direct bearing on China's own future, including its domestic stability and international standing.

Some Challenges

I have no reasons to doubt the Chinese authorities repeated assertion on the Tibetan issue that the "door is open for dialogue and the negotiations". At the same time, I cannot help but feel concerned about their sincerity and seriousness in pursuing the present process for a substantive and meaningful outcome.

It seems that a section of leadership in Beijing continues to entertain the illusion that the problems in

Tibet can be solved or confronted by economic means and that the China's global standing as an economic and political power provides them leverage both domestically and internationally to impose its arbitrary stand.

They also continue to deceive themselves with the belief that the Tibetan problem will cease to challenge them once His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is no more with us or the issue will lose its edge due to his advanced age.

The biggest concern of the Chinese leadership is the legitimacy of its rule in Tibet. The Chinese leadership knows that only one individual, the Dalai Lama, has the capability and authority to provide that. His Holiness is aware of the People's Republic of China's concerns and sensitivities. For this reason we have conveyed directly to the Chinese leadership, and His Holiness has also publicly stated, that he stands ready to lend his moral authority to endow an autonomy agreement, once reached, with the legitimacy it will need to gain the support of the Tibetan people and to be properly implemented.

The Chinese Government has also been making the case that it would like everyone to respect its core issues, most importantly, the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the PRC. As can be seen from the points I have made here, we respect these concerns. At the same time, we also have a core issue, namely the preservation and promotion of the distinct identity of the Tibetan people. The Chinese Government must acknowledge and respect this legitimate right of the Tibetan people and work with us accordingly.

Fundamentally, the Tibetan issue needs to be resolved between the Tibetans and the Chinese. Just as the Chinese Government does not want a third party involvement, we Tibetans, too, feel the right way is to resolve it through talks with the Chinese leadership. At the same time the issue of Tibet is of international concern with direct bearing on the peace and stability of Asia.

It is essential for students of the Tibetan-Chinese conflict to clearly understand and appreciate the differences between the fundamental positions of our two sides. Some experts do not seem to understand this.

The Way Forward

We do not see any reason why we cannot find a common ground on the Tibetan issue if the Chinese leadership has the sincerity and the political will to move forward.

We are convinced that this could be done without rewriting the history of Tibet. This is because if we go on the path of rewriting history of Tibet it will then not only lead to complicating further some of the existing conflicts in China's relationship with others, but even give birth to new ones. Furthermore, the Chinese leadership needs to ponder whether it should make claims on the basis of some past imperial actions and should understand the international ramification and repercussion if it continues to do so.

Today's Chinese leaders are also talking about establishing a harmonious society. We certainly support this endeavor as we believe it will directly impact China's policies on the Tibetan people. However, it is clear that there cannot be a harmonious society without equality among nationalities.

Tibetans, especially those who are inside Tibet, continue to face the stark reality of the absence of equality at every level. Prominent Tibetan leaders, including the Late Panchen Lama, have repeatedly voiced their concerns in this regard by saying that any talks about unity should be preceded by the presence of equality.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has a forward-looking approach and has shown his willingness to take any initiative necessary that is in the interest of the Tibetan people, that will encourage harmony

and stability in the People's Republic of China, and that will promote peace in the region. His Holiness is committed to work with the Chinese Government so that the Tibetan people can maintain their distinctive identity, regain their pride and dignity and the stability and unity of the People's Republic of China are ensured.

Once again, I am grateful for this opportunity to share my thoughts at this prestigious institution.

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