

The Continuing Salience of Tibet for Sino-Indian Relations

Written by Manjeet Singh Pardesi

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MANJEET SINGH PARDESI, SEP 24 2012

Next month will mark the 50th anniversary of the 1962 Sino-Indian War that had profound implications for Indian foreign policy. The legacy of this war in which ill-equipped and ill-trained Indian forces suffered a humiliating defeat against China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) continues to bedevil Sino-Indian relations even today.

While Indian (and western) media refer to the 1962 Sino-Indian War as a "border" war, there was much more at stake when seen from China's perspective. One of the most important reasons behind China's decision to attack India in 1962 was the Chinese fear that India wanted to re-establish Tibet as a "buffer state" between India and China.[1] The Chinese leadership led by Mao Zedong was convinced that India had inherited this policy from its erstwhile British rulers. Notably, China justified its attack in 1962 by observing that "the Indian ruling circles" had taken over from "British imperialism," and had begun to "regard China's Tibet region as an Indian sphere of influence." [2]

There were two main reasons behind these Chinese fears. Firstly, Mao and other Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai believed that India was behind the 1959 Lhasa Rebellion and that Kalimpong – in the Indian state of West Bengal which was home to a number of Tibetan exiles since the Chinese invasion and annexation of Tibet in 1950-1 – was its commanding center. This rebellion against Communist rule in Tibet was the most serious uprising against the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the creation of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese leadership was certain that Indian power was lurking behind the activities in Tibet even as there is no evidence of Indian involvement. Secondly, the Dalai Lama escaped into exile to India on 30 March 1959 and announced "a government-in-exile" in June 1959 from India. China now faced the prospect of two governments-in-exile – a Tibetan government in India and the government of the Republic of China in Taiwan. While India did not recognize the Tibetan government-in-exile, Sino-Indian relations had significantly deteriorated along with Chinese perceptions of India's intentions vis-à-vis Tibet.

While China attacked India in-part to settle the Tibet issue in 1962, the Tibet issue remains unresolved for China even today and continues to cast a shadow on Sino-Indian relations.

In 2008, a series of violent protests against Chinese rule began in Tibet and unrest continues today. According to the India-based Tibetan government-in-exile, more than 51 Tibetans have set themselves on fire as a protest against Chinese rule over the past three years. On the other hand, China blames the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community in India for planning and instigating all the violence and acts of protest. The Chinese leadership is of the opinion that the Dalai Lama is behind the "secessionist activities" in Tibet and that he hopes to ultimately drive out all non-Tibetans from that region.[3] In particular, China has blamed the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), an organization of Tibetan exiles from around the world that was founded in India in 1970 for the activities that began in Tibet in 2008. The Chinese leadership believes that the TYC is a reserve force of sorts for Tibetan independence. China has also equated the TYC with terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda.[4]

The authorities in Beijing believe that the Dalai Lama and his supporters want to remove all non-Tibetans and Chinese troops from Tibet, and that they have (re-)adopted the 1987 "five-point peace plan" and the 1988

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Strasbourg proposals as their political guidelines since 2005.[5] In September 1987, while addressing the U.S. Congress, the Dalai Lama made several proposals to resolve the Tibetan issue by suggesting that Tibet should be transformed into a “zone of peace”. A modified version of these proposals was made by the Dalai Lama while addressing the European Parliament in June 1988 when he said that the maintenance of this “zone of peace” would give China the “right to maintain a restricted number of military installations in Tibet.” For China, these proposals are tantamount to Tibetan independence or the re-establishment of Tibet as a “buffer state” between China and India. Furthermore, these proposals “were seen as extension of Indian foreign policy”[6] by China because the only country to benefit from the removal of the PLA from Tibet would be India as Tibet is essentially landlocked between the two Asian giants.

More importantly, China remains unconvinced that the activities of Tibetan exiles in India are limited to culture and religion only and is likely to see an Indian hand in what it believes is its neighbor’s aim to drive the PLA out of Tibet using the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan-government-in-exile. In 1959, India’s official stand was that the Dalai Lama was a cultural and religious leader and that the Indian government did not permit Tibetan refugees to carry out political activities in India. This remains India’s position regarding the Dalai Lama and the nearly one hundred thousand Tibetan exiles who reside in India even today. But it remains unclear if the Chinese share this view.

After all, China took note of the fact that India (along with several other countries around the world) allowed the Tibetan exiles to vote for a new Prime Minister for the Tibetan government-in-exile based in India in 2011 after the Dalai Lama gave up his political role. This was a glaring example of Tibetan political activity on Indian soil. Notably, because of Lobsang Sangay’s – the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile’s – past association with the TYC, the PRC not only thinks that the Tibetan exiles will now demand full independence for Tibet, but is also of the opinion that a “terrorist” is now leading the Tibetan movement from his India-based government-in-exile.[7]

In other words, the current unrest in Tibet is not just an internal Chinese issue or merely a human rights issue. Unrest in Tibet has huge implications for Sino-Indian relations not least because India has a stake in the future of Tibet. As nearly 400 Tibetan representatives from around the world meet in India this coming week to rethink their struggle against Chinese rule,[8] India too needs to rethink its Tibet and China policies.

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[1] John W. Garver, “China’s Decision for War with India in 1962,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *New Directions in the Study of China’s Foreign Relations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 86-130.

[2] “More on Nehru’s Philosophy in the Light of the Sino-Indian Boundary Question,” published by the Editorial Department of *Renmin Ribao* (or People’s Daily), 27 October 1962. The full-text of this document is available in *The Sino-Indian Boundary Question*, enlarged edition, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1962), 93-134 (96-100).

[3] “PRC: Evidence Shows Link Between ‘Pro-Tibet Independence’ Activists, Dalai Lama,” *Xinhua*, 3 July 2008. Xinhua is China’s official news service. This and all subsequent Chinese-language articles were accessed in translation in English through World News Connection, a foreign news service of the US government.

[4] “TYC ‘Hand in Glove’ With Dalai Lama Group,” *Beijing Review*, 5 May 2008. Available: http://www.bjreview.com.cn/special/2008-05/05/content_114522.htm (Accessed on 23 September 2012).

[5] “Xinhua: Signed Article Says Dalai Lama Still Wants to Drive Chinese Troops Away from Tibet,” *Xinhua*, 14 March 2009.

[6] Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 412.

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[7] "People's Daily Online: Terrorist Poised to Rule 'Tibetan Government-in-Exile'?", *Renmin Ribao*, 22 March 2011.

[8] "Tibetan exiles rethink struggle against Chinese rule," *AsiaOne News*, 23 September 2012. Available online at <http://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Asia/Story/A1Story20120923-373219.html> (Accessed on 23 September 2012).

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Manjeet S. Pardesi is a Lecturer in International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from Indiana University, Bloomington, where he studied the initiation of strategic rivalries and their escalation to war. His research interests include causes of war, theories of foreign policymaking, the rise and fall of great powers, international relations in world history, Asian security, and Indian foreign/security policy. He was an Editorial Assistant for 'International Studies Quarterly' from 2009-2012, and is the co-editor of 'India's Military Modernization: Challenges and Prospects' (forthcoming, Oxford UP). His articles have appeared in numerous publications, including the 'Air & Space Power Journal', 'The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs', 'World Policy Journal', 'India Review', and 'The Straits Times' (Singapore).