

Conference on Tibet: The Third Pole and Its Global Significance

Ambassador Dalip Mehta's presentation on Tibet and the Security Environment (Transcript)

Organized by Tibet Policy Institute, 11th April, 2012

Please note that this is an unedited, rushed transcription of the conference

Your Excellency Dr. Lobsang Sangay, Kalon Tripa, Mr. Thubten Samphel, Director of the Tibet Policy Institute, ladies and gentlemen.

I thank the institute and the organizers of this conference on Tibet, the third pole and its global significance, for inviting me to speak here this morning. I propose to speak on the relevance of Tibet for regional security, in other words, the security environment. It is unexceptional to say that peace in Asia, to a large extent, depends on the state of relations between India and China. Until China invaded Tibet in 1949 Tibet throughout its independent existence had been a zone of peace, a source for regional stability, being an effective space between Asia's two largest and most populous nations, China and India, countries which till then had no common border and therefore no basic conflicting interests. After 1950, when Tibet no longer existed as a separate nation the geopolitical reality changed fundamentally, with India and China now sharing a long and dangerously militarized border of over 4500 kms, with claims and counter-claims, and which had lead in 1962 to a war between the two countries. Today India and China are both nuclear powers with regional and global aspirations and no longer have the benefit of Tibet as a buffer separating them. Herein lies the significance of Tibet in our relations with China.

I need hardly emphasize the implications of the Chinese having converted the Tibetan plateau into a vast military zone with huge stockpiles of conventional and nuclear weapons, and have also made Tibet the dumping ground of its nuclear waste. The 1100 kms rail link between Gormo and Lhasa enables the rapid transport of troops and military hardware into Tibet. At short notice China can deploy as many as twelve PLA divisions against India courtesy this rail link running through Tibet. Beijing maintains its strategic focus on the modernization of the transport infrastructure in Tibet. According to reliable sources this year, China will spend the equivalent of 1.5 billion US dollars on building new roads and repairing old ones in Tibet. Tibet already has 63,000 kms of roads and during the period 2011-2015 the Chinese government will invest a further 7.3 billion US dollars on the road system in Tibet. The Chinese government has also announced that its defense budget for the current year will grow by 11% and cross the 100 billion dollar mark for the first time. This indeed is a matter of concern for China's neighbors, especially India.

Further, China is busy connecting Tibet with Kathmandu by road and rail and intends eventually to link Pakistan to Nepal via the Karakoram Highway. It also plans to connect Nepal with Bangladesh via Myanmar. Clearly these steps are intended to dilute Nepal's ties with India. As far as sea power in the Indian Ocean is concerned, China has port facilities both in Pakistan and Myanmar and an ever increasing naval presence in the area.

The importance of Tibet for India's security interests cannot be over emphasized. A look at the map immediately highlights its strategic location, straddles as Tibet does the very heart of Asia. Tibet comprises a quarter of China's entire land mass and its vast mineral resources fuel the economy of China. Tibet's river systems affect the lives of millions of people in south and south-east Asia as well as the Chinese mainland. Damming and diverting these rivers will have a profound impact on the ecology and livelihood of the peoples of these countries. Let me refer to what Brahma Chellaney has to say in his recently published book "Water-Asia's new Battleground". Chellaney has said that "the Tibet issue is much larger and more fundamental than simply in political and cultural terms. It is about Asia's water and climate security and its ecological interests. It also is about access to vital resources. Fundamentally, it is about securing Asia's future."

The implications of Chinese activities in Tibet are irreversible quite apart from the horrendous human rights abuses and the demographic manipulation that is fast making the Tibetans a minority in their own homeland.

The border between Tibet and India remains disputed in several sectors. China is in occupation of 53,000 sq.kms. of Indian territory in Aksai Chin and continues to claim 83,000sq.kms of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh, which it considers as a part of Tibet and infact calls 'Little Tibet' and at other times South Tibet. While professing friendship with India the Chinese have simultaneously upped the ante with hostile acts and pronouncements. There have been innumerable intrusions and incursions along the line of control including in the Sikkim sector and more recently in Uttarkhand, quite apart from Arunachal Pradesh. There have been objections to Indian dignitaries visiting Tawang, there have been the cases of stapled visas, the questioning of Indian sovereignty of Jammu and Kashmir, the building of several infrastructural projects in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, in territory that is legitimately Indian. The list of provocative and hostile activities goes on, as does the pitch and stridency of Beijing's language. In my opinion the Chinese are signaling a message to which we should take serious cognizance, for ignoring it would be at our peril. If India aspires to a great power status it must not be intimidated by a fear of China. As Aung San Suu Kyi has said, India needs to do much more in support of democratic movements, the very principles the world's largest democracy should stand for. India's record has clearly been wanting. The manner in which the government handled by the peaceful and non-violent demonstrations by Tibetans, during the Chinese President's visit, speaks for itself.

Tibet can and must play a role in India's strategic thinking. Having once abdicated our historic role in Tibet we should not make the mistake again. As long as China questions India's sovereignty regarding Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir we should not mindlessly reiterate, like a mantra, Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. Government of India should take serious note of human rights violations and environmental degradation in Tibet in the right forums. I strongly believe that the Government of India should be seen to support the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach as it is the only workable way to bring about reconciliation between the Tibetans and the Chinese. This suggestion may be utopian and unrealistic but it is a pragmatic compromise as His Holiness has unequivocally renounced any demand for independence, which safeguards the sovereignty and territorial integrity of

the People's Republic while seeking genuine autonomy for Tibet as guaranteed by the Chinese themselves in the 1951 Seventeen Point Agreement. Beijing should respond positively to the Dalai Lama's hand of friendship else the unrest in Tibet, and these tragic and dreadful immolations, will continue further the more radical elements may resort to more militant methods. It is only the Dalai Lama who can convince his people to accept Chinese sovereignty over their land provided his reasonable conditions are met. There is no alternative as I see it.

While I have mentioned some of the issues bedeviling Sino-Indian relations there is also the flip side to show that Delhi and Beijing have made incremental progress in improving bilateral relations. Examples of this are the substantial increase in trade between the two countries, the 2005 declaration establishing the guiding principles and political parameters for resolving the highly complex boundary dispute, military exchanges between the two countries and generally greater maturity in handling sensitive issues in their bilateral relations. This year in fact is being celebrated as the friendship year between India and China whatever that may result in. These may be modest yet significant steps. It is in the light of this new spirit that I venture to suggest most emphatically that the Government of India should play an intermediary role in bringing the Tibetans and Chinese closer to a mutually acceptable understanding. The Chinese are unlikely to accept an India role but the possibility should be explored especially as the Central Tibetan Administration is based in India and India would wish for nothing more than reconciliation between the Chinese and Tibetan peoples, to bring peace and stability to Tibet and the region. Thank you very much.