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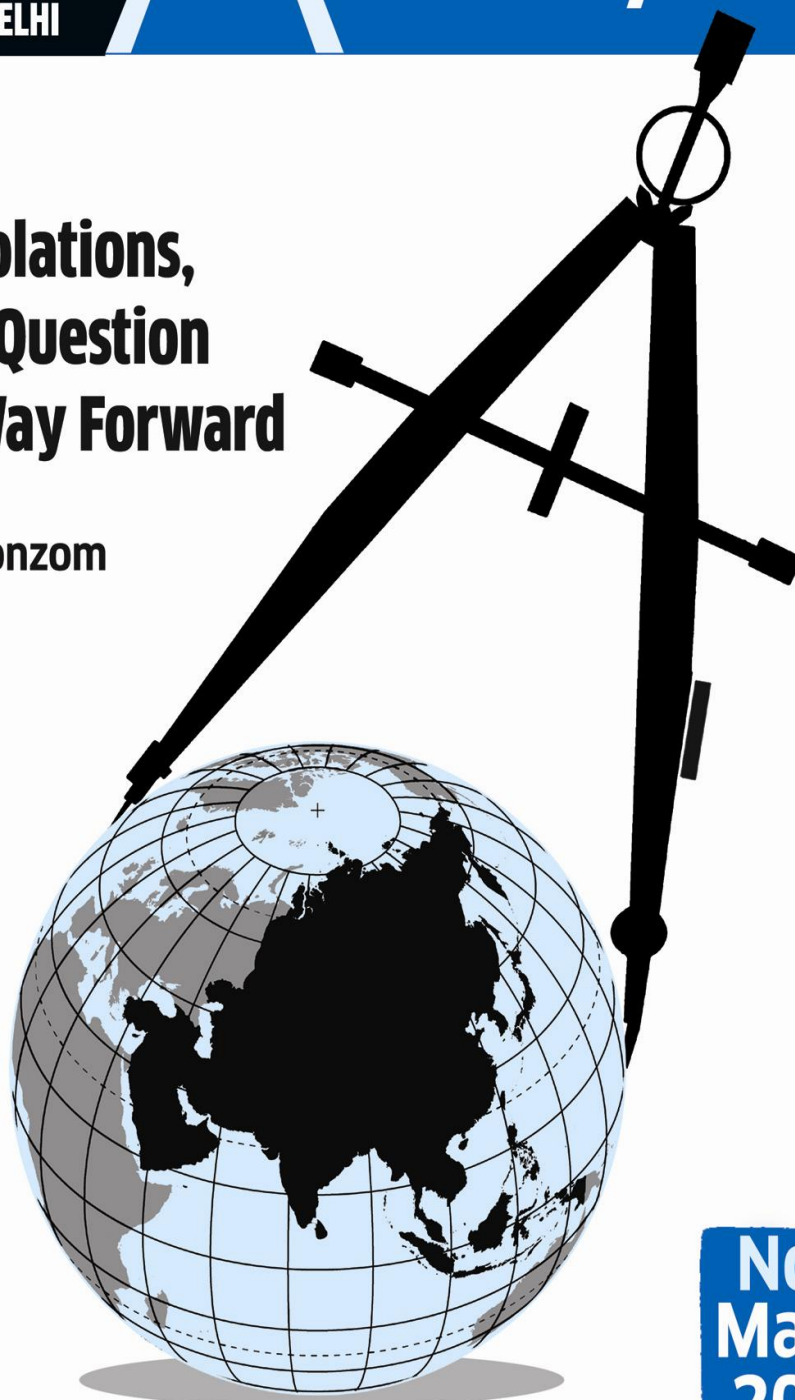
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Analysis

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Self-immolations, the Tibet Question and the Way Forward

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Dissent and opposition on the Tibetan plateau has surfaced prominently from time to time since the late 1950s – but has taken a serious turn in the form of the ‘self-immolations’ since 2009. The first took place in February 2009, increased to 12 in 2011 and totaled about 32 until 10 August 2012.¹ As of date, the number has more than tripled, exceeding the 100 mark in a period of less than half a year. Notably, most of the self-immolators have been young Tibetans, who had not experienced ‘old’ feudal Tibet, against which the Communist Party and the Chinese government has waged a relentless war.

Despite the change in leadership at the 18th Party Congress (8-14 November 2012), there has not been any visible change of policy towards handling dissent in Tibet. Given that Xi Jinping is just over 100 days into his new position as General Secretary of the CPC, it is too early to assess his policy approach towards Tibet or the Sino-Tibetan dialogue. In a positive development, however, Robert Barnett points out that ‘there are suggestions that Xi Jinping has set up an internal team to review Tibet policy.’ According to him ‘the possibility of a change in policy cannot be ruled out’ (as cited in Patience 2012). Nevertheless, the fact that three immolations took place on the eve of the 18th Party Congress and one on the day of the Congress, suggests that the Tibetan people want their voices to be heard by not just outsiders, but also the central Chinese leadership. More than 30 have immolated themselves since.

When Xi Jinping visited the TAR as Vice President in 2011 to celebrate 60 years of the signing of the 1951 Agreement, he highlighted Tibet’s importance as a ‘national security screen’, among other aspects. He underlined, that ‘speed[ing] up development holds the key to resolving all issues in Tibet.’ He called on the cadres and all ethnic groups of Tibet, therefore, to ‘thoroughly implement the spirit’ of the 5th Forum on Work in Tibet (18-20 January 2010)².

Inevitably, Xi Jinping, ended up emphasising the need to ‘fight against separatist activities by the Dalai group’ (*Xinhua*, 2011a). Chen Quanguo, the new Party Secretary of the TAR since August 2011, at a meeting in Lhasa on 25 August 2011, reiterated that, ‘[T]remendous efforts are needed to boost development in Tibet and the region’s long-term stability’ (*Xinhua*, 2011b). The key issue is that the focus on development would also mean re-emphasising past policies of prioritising security and stability. Appropriately, at the recent opening day of the National People’s Congress on 5 March 2013, Beijing announced an increase in its internal security budget for a second consecutive year taking the total to 769.1 billion yuan, (USD 122 billion). Though the increase in percentage terms (8.7 per cent) is lower than the percentage increase in national defense (11.5 percent), however, the total internal security budget still exceeds the 720.168 billion yuan (USD 115.7 billion) allocated for national defense (Varma, 2013).

While continued protests have cast their shadow on Beijing’s developmental policies for Tibet, the Chinese assumption that ‘the only way to develop the Tibetan economy is by integrating it with the Chinese economy’, has aggravated the problem (Dreyer 2008: 143). Beijing’s economic and developmental policies undertaken in the last six decades are intrinsically linked to the Tibet question faced by the PRC. Growing aid and subsidies, increasing dependency on the Centre, disproportionate emphasis on construction (Blondeau and Buffettrille 2008: 252-53), ‘indirect demographic disruption’ (Barnett, 2003: 232) and the large administrative structure (Dreyer 2008: 135) have aggravated the Tibet question further, as the Tibetan people perceive the lack of local stake-holding in the development process. Alternatively, ‘[T]he issue in ‘Tibet for Tibetans’ is not one of getting better Chinese policies,’ as Eliot Sperling has

¹ Since 2008, about six Tibetans have immolated themselves in India and Nepal as well.

² The fifth forum (2010) focused on plans for ‘leap

growth at par with other parts of the PRC. Further, Hu Jintao, at the forum re-emphasised the control of religion through ‘laws and regulations’ (Government of

put it, 'it is basically a nationalist issue' (As quoted in *Congressional Hearings 1997*).

The Tibet question remains unresolved even after more than three decades of Sino-Tibetan talks. Beijing's lack of reciprocity to the Dalai Lama's constant call for dialogue³ has in effect strengthened the resolve of many in his constituency seeking 'complete independence'. Most recently, Tibetans around the world commemorated the 100th anniversary of the 1913 declaration of Tibet's independence by the 13th Dalai Lama. To mark the occasion, a number of Tibetans came together to inaugurate what is called the 'Tibetan National Congress.' It declared 'restoring a sovereign and independent Tibetan nation state' as its 'ultimate goal.'⁴ The ongoing self-immolations and protests are intrinsically linked to these contending processes. Beijing's propensity to consistently blame external forces tends to situate the Tibetan people as passive agents, waiting to be manipulated by the so-called 'Dalai clique' and external forces.

In this context, one distinctive characteristic about the self-immolations and the protests in 2008 is that both have been concentrated in areas outside the TAR, i.e. in the adjoining provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan that have traditionally been populated by Tibetan people of Khampa and Amdowa origins. Only about 8 have taken place in the TAR. Such a concentration of protests outside the TAR demands attention for various reasons. In an important article on the Tibet question in 1991, in the context of the Sino-Tibetan negotiations, Dawa Norbu had presciently observed that, '...to augment the Dalai Lama's bargaining power *vis-à-vis* China's there has to be widespread popular resistance inside Tibet.' His prognosis has materialized – with wider ramifications.

Anthropologist Melvyn Goldstein in his book *Snow Lion and the Dragon*, invokes apocalyptic images about the impending doom: 'The crux of the matter is that Tibetans are unlikely to stand indefinitely on the sidelines watching Beijing transform their homeland with impunity... [t]here are Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet who are

intoxicated with the idea of beginning... a Tibetan-style *intifada*' (Goldstein, 1997: 116). He even goes so far as to suggest that the Dalai Lama might tacitly promote 'organised violence' if the negotiations fail to reach agreement.

Such an assessment, in terms of the implied potential for violence, is rather alarming. Not only would it impact (and in a worst case scenario, prejudice) present policies of governments hosting Tibetan refugees, it would also signal the onset of a long and protracted struggle. It is to be seen if such a discourse has any deterrent effect on Beijing; but the anticipation of a negative crackdown by host governments on refugees can itself have far-reaching consequences.⁵ In a recent article, Moyra Moynihan pointed out that approximately 150,000 Tibetans in exile in India 'want and need (Indian) citizenship' (Maura Moynihan, 2013).

A forward-looking approach has to be adopted by all stakeholders owing to the uncertainty as regards the future development of the Sino-Tibetan problem and its fallout on the dialogue process on the one hand, and the increasing complexity of the Tibetan dynamics on the other. It needs to be appreciated that despite pressure from different sections of his constituency, the Dalai Lama has managed to remain committed to his MWA. Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership in exile have to reassess their approach and seek to win confidence by fulfilling Beijing's preconditions that do not impinge on their core bottom line. But there is very little doubt that waiting for a post-Dalai Lama period is unhelpful and unadvisable.

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³ The last round of Sino-Tibetan talks that resumed almost after a decade in 2002, also reached an impasse following the 2008 protests. The ninth and last round of talks was held in January 2010.

⁴ See its website for further details, URL <http://www.tibetnc.org/tnc/background-information/?lang=en>

⁵ In that context, one must applaud constructive policies by the Indian government to actively promote education of Tibetans in exile. Its latest decision to transfer the management of schools under the Central Tibetan Schools Administration (CTSA) to the Department of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala (CTA) can be interpreted as a positive approach (Government of India, 2013).

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