



Impasse Yet Again: Beijing's Failure to Acknowledge the Dalai Lama's Increasing Moderation

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There has, of late, been growing interest in media across the world about a possible thawing of relations between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese authorities.¹ While Beijing maintained a quiet distance from the speculations for more than a month, the Tibetan leadership initially responded by denying these speculations (*Radio Free Asia* 2014; *The China Post* 2014; Jha 2014).

About a month later, *Agence France Presse* (AFP), in a report on its interview of the Dalai Lama on 2 October, mentioned that the 'Tibetan spiritual leader had "made clear", to contacts in China, including retired Communist Party officials', his desire to undertake a pilgrimage to a sacred mountain in his homeland (AFP 2014). It quoted the Dalai Lama as saying that he had been expressing such a wish '[n]ot formally or seriously, but informally' and that '[i]t's not finalised, not yet, but the idea is there'. In itself, these statements did not reveal much. However, the report concluded that the 'Dalai Lama

indicated...he was in informal talks with China to make a historic pilgrimage to Tibet (sic)'.² The report once again unleashed a plethora of media reports internationally.

On 8 October, Beijing decided to break its silence at a regular news briefing. In response to a question on reports about informal talks, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei reiterated Beijing's 'consistent and clear' position. He added '[w]hat the Dalai needs to do is not noisily advocate a so-called "return to Tibet," but give up his stance and activities on dividing the motherland ... Only this will help to resolve the problem regarding his future' (*China Tibet Online* 2014).

Hong's statement is silent as to whether 'informal talks' had taken place earlier or if the talks might still be going on currently. It is standard practice for Beijing to issue statements about its preconditions on the Tibet issue, even during times when formal talks were going on. Hong also did not allude to a statement in Lhasa made at the end of August by Wu Yingjie, Deputy Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to a visiting media delegation from India, Nepal and Bhutan. Wu had reportedly told them that talks with the Dalai Lama were 'ongoing and

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¹ In chronological order *The Hindu* on 25 August (Haidar 2014), *Times of India* on 30 August (Dasgupta 2014), *Sina.com* on 17 September, *Boxun News* on 17 September, *The China Post* on 18 September, *Wall Street Journal* on 19 September (Chin and Agarwal 2014), the *Forbes* on 23 September (Meyer 2014), and *The Diplomat* on 29 September (Richards 2014).

² To clarify, the pilgrimage site in question – the Wutai Shan mountain – is not in Tibet nor 'in his homeland (sic)', but in Shanxi province in northern China.

always smooth but we are discussing only his future, not Tibet's' (Haidar 2014).

There are a number of questions that come up in the backdrop of the aforementioned developments. If 'informal talks' are taking place, what might the contours of the discussion be? If these are mere rumours, how have they been sustained for such a long period of over a month? How does one explain Beijing's silence on the matter, and how does one relate it to its recent statement reiterating preconditions? This piece is an attempt to ascertain the implications for Sino-Tibetan talks which came to a standstill in 2010.

Beijing's Stand on the Talks

Both Wu's and Hong's statements are important reference points for understanding Beijing's current position on the talks. The standard position has been to ask the Dalai Lama to "give up independence", "give up splittist activities" and "declare Tibet and Taiwan as inalienable parts of China" for talks to begin. And these talks would only be on the "personal future" of the Dalai Lama (Yiduo 2008).

Even while Wu reiterated the aforementioned preconditions (Haidar 2014), he eschewed the standard official description of Tibet as having *always* been an *inalienable* part of China. He also did not use vitriolic terms to attack the Dalai Lama as has been the norm since the 1990s. Interestingly also, Wu did not mention the demand for 'genuine autonomy'.

Hong too, called on the Dalai Lama to 'give up his stance and activities on dividing the motherland' (*China Tibet Online* 2014) but refrained from making any personal attacks.

However, Wu rejected the Tibetan demand for 'single administration'³, which Beijing usually refers to as 'Greater Tibet'. Surprisingly, he attributed the demand to 'Prime Minister of the self-styled "Tibetan government in exile", Lobsang Sangay'. This demand, along with the demand for 'genuine autonomy' forms the core of the middle way approach (MWA) initiated by the Dalai Lama and also espoused by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).

³ This is the term that the Tibetans have used since 2008 in the 'Memorandum' instead of the more contentious 'unification' of three 'traditional' Tibetan regions known as 'Cholka sum' (comprising *U-Tsang*, *Kham* and *Amdo*).

Tibetan Position on Talks

The MWA forms the basis of the Dalai Lama's and the CTA's approach to dialogue with China.⁴ Current Tibetan demands are encapsulated in the 'Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy' that was submitted to the Chinese officials in 2008 (CTA 2009). It made many detailed proposals pertaining to the 'basic needs of the Tibetans...for self-government' and discussed procedures for 'application of a single administration for the Tibetan nationality in the PRC' and 'the nature and structure of autonomy'. It was prepared at the invitation of Chinese authorities following widespread protests in the Tibetan plateau in 2008.

Notably, the Memorandum is a much watered-down version of the Dalai Lama's earlier proposals – the 'five point peace plan' (1987) and the 'Strasbourg proposal' (1988). For instance, contrary to Chinese allegations, the current MWA does not envisage Tibet as a 'zone of peace' or a demilitarized region. It also does not call for turning Tibet into a 'self-governing democratic political entity' as had been proposed in 1988.

The Dalai Lama and the CTA have been making many efforts towards building confidence and adhering to Beijing's preconditions since the Sino-Tibetan talks restarted in 2002. For instance, since early 2000s, the Dalai Lama and the CTA have been calling for a moratorium on protests by the Tibetan people and Tibet supporters (*Tibet.net* 2002 and 2005). Also, the English name of the Dharamsala-based Tibetan government in exile (TGIE) was changed to Central Tibetan Administration (CTA).⁵ In 2011, even the Tibetan name for the CTA was changed from *Ganden Phodrang* (Government of Tibet) to *Bodmei Drigtsug*, which literally translated implies 'Organisation of the Tibetan People' (Wangyal 2012). In the 'Memorandum' (CTA 2009), the Tibetans contextualised their demand for 'single administration' for all Tibetan-speaking territories in China within the framework of the Chinese Constitution instead of

⁴ On 5 June 2014, the CTA under the leadership of Lobsang Sangay ceremoniously 'relaunched' the MWA under the theme 'peaceful conflict resolution for the 21st century' with a new website (*Tibet.net* 2014; CTA 2014).

⁵ It is not exactly clear when the name change was effected, but it seems to have begun around the time when Sino-Tibetan talks restarted in 2002.

historical right or precedence, among others (CTA 2010).⁶

On the question of history and independence, a CTA publication in 2010, perhaps for the first time, articulated in unambiguous terms that ‘even if independence is restored based on Tibet’s recent history, there is no way we could get more than the TAR area’ because, ‘most of the areas in eastern and north-eastern Tibet have gradually been sliced off from under the Ganden Phodrang [Lhasa] government’ (CTA 2010: 5).

The Dalai Lama’s moderated rhetoric on democracy in China in a 2 September 2014 interview (*SBS.au* 2014) seems to be another attempt to placate Beijing. Citing the gradual approach to political reform adopted by previous Chinese leaders, he suggested Xi Jinping should introduce reforms gradually – as a sudden collapse of the ‘communist system’ would not be helpful and would lead to ‘chaos’ in a country of 1.3 billion people. This is in keeping with Xi’s recent statements/speeches about China’s ‘consultative democracy’ (*Xinhua* 2014a).⁷

All these moves have encountered enormous challenges from within the Tibetan Diaspora.⁸ The criticisms range from objecting to the moderation/dilution of the MWA, to seeing it as a contrived process from the outset, and to opposing it altogether (see Norbu 2014 and Sperling 2014).

In such a scenario, Beijing’s policy of sticking to bottom lines – in this case, rejection of the MWA’s core demand of ‘single administration’ and also stating that any talks would be limited to discussion on the Dalai Lama’s future – constrains the scope of the dialogue process. On the one hand, it inhibits creative and alternative conflict transformation mechanisms, and on the other, constrains and questions the efficacy of the

MWA, thus limiting the policy options of the Tibetan leadership.

Poor Understanding of Each Other’s Positions/Interests

According to Wu, the nine rounds of talks that ended in 2010 had broken down because Tibetan demands were ‘unacceptable’ to the Chinese government. While the Chinese side is well within its rights to have reservations about Tibetan demands, the problem is that some of the objections are based on the Dalai Lama’s 1987 and 1988 proposals.⁹ And as mentioned earlier, the latest Tibetan demands/position is encapsulated in the ‘Memorandum for Genuine Autonomy’ (CTA 2009).

Contrary to what Wu states, the Memorandum only asks that security personnel responsible for maintaining internal public order consist of ‘local nationality’ (CTA 2009:16).¹⁰ Even Zhu Weiqun, the Executive Vice-minister of the United Front Work Department in 2008, and in charge of Tibet affairs, had, among other things, made the same point as Wu while rejecting the Tibetan Memorandum (CTA 2009).

While there is a problem in Beijing’s understanding of the Tibetan position, the Tibetans are also culpable, to some extent, in contributing to such a misunderstanding. The websites of the CTA and the Dalai Lama do not seem to have kept pace with the changing Tibetan positions (Dalai Lama n.d. and CTA n.d.). A new website on the MWA launched in June 2014, however, clearly projects the Memorandum as its *sine qua non* (CTA 2014).

While the CTA and the Dalai Lama’s websites need updating along the lines of its official website enunciating the MWA, Beijing must also update itself on the latest Tibetan demands and proposals. Their understanding of these shifts in the Dalai Lama’s stand (if not also the CTA’s position) needs to be reflected in their response, to make the dialogue – or even their refutations – more credible.

⁶ Currently, the Tibetan areas in China are divided into the TAR and various prefectures and counties within the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu.

⁷ In this context, one must refer to a statement issued by Lodi Gyari on 3 October 2014 as it makes many important points indicating a sense of anxiousness to fulfil Chinese preconditions and to be able to ‘rationally argue with Chinese government when meeting with them face to face’ (Gyari 2014).

⁸ For a recent criticism of the CTA’s abandonment of the goal of democratic political system in Tibet, as envisaged in the Dalai Lama’s Strasbourg Proposal in 1988, see *Tibetan Political Review* (2013). On the issue of questioning the efficacy of the MWA, see Tsering (2013).

⁹ The Dalai Lama unveiled two proposals for resolution of the Tibet question – the Five-point peace plan before the US Congressional Caucus on Human Rights in 1987 and the Strasbourg Proposal before the European Parliament in 1988.

¹⁰ A recent ‘comment’ on the MWA by *Xinhua* too, refers to the 1987 proposal (*Xinhua* 2014b).

Conclusion

The last time informal communications opened between the two sides was in 1997/98. Even that process was fraught with uncertainties as both sides sparred on various issues. More than four years were to pass before formal talks resumed in September 2002 (these lasted till 2010). Will it take this long again?

Time is an important factor in the Sino-Tibetan problem. The Dalai Lama, who turned 79 this year, is a potential deal-breaker in the Sino-Tibetan conundrum. Some leaders in Beijing who seem to believe that 'time is on China's side'¹¹ (Li 2014) need to acknowledge that the passing away of the Dalai Lama will give rise to a whole new set of uncertainties. For one, the current Dalai Lama has made it clear that he would be born outside China if the Tibet issue remains unresolved (Dalai Lama 2011). Analysts have consistently warned about the implications of 'duelling Dalai Lamas' – one within and one outside China (Wong 2009; Chonzom 2013).

Among other things, the prospect of Tibetans resorting to violence cannot be negated completely. Remember for instance that a series of bombings occurred in Lhasa in 1996 subsequent to Beijing's rejection of the Dalai Lama's Panchen Lama candidate (*Tibet Information Network* 1996a, 1996b).

Given the protracted nature of Sino-Tibetan problem, focusing on Wutai Shan, a Buddhist pilgrimage site in mainland China with Tibetan Buddhist linkages, creates a point of convergence for the two sides. It is a good beginning for approaching the problem from a non-contentious vantage point. As and when formal talks begin, Beijing has to not only update itself about the content of the MWA, but also acknowledge the efforts being made by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership in moderating their stance.

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¹¹ The statement was made by Zhu Weiqun, current Chairman of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of the CPPCC, and previously Vice-minister of the UFWD responsible for Tibet-related affairs, including the Sino-Tibetan talks.

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