



## The Dalai Lama Card-India's Options



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Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama celebrated his 82nd birthday this month at Leh in Jammu and Kashmir. On this occasion, the Indian Government allowed the Tibetan Flag to be hoisted at Pangong Tso by the Tibetan PM in exile, Lobsang Sangay.<sup>1</sup> No doubt it was in response to the ongoing Doka La standoff. However, has the Indian Government thought through the Dalai Lama angle to the very end or is it just using the card till it automatically expires. An introspection into the institution of Dalai Lama and his succession prospects reveals India needs to decide its future actions keeping in mind China's likely future actions before it loses all leverage.

### Background to Reincarnation

The Dalai Lama is the Highest Lama in the Gelug or "Yellow Hat" sect of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> In religious terms the Dalai Lama is believed by his devotees to be the rebirth of a long line of Tulkus who are

### Key Points

- The Dalai Lama is an important leverage card with India against the Chinese which needs to be kept alive lest it expires on the present Dalai Lama's death.
- As present Dalai Lama is 82 years old thus his succession needs to be immediately planned albeit carefully.
- Traditional methods of re-incarnation are well in control of China hence other options like emanation or selection by other methods are required.
- China has history of selecting its own Panchen Lama while "disappearing" the selected one by the Tibetans and is likely to follow same methods or shore up the Panchen Lama itself as the next Dalai Lama subsequently.
- Options exist with Tibetans in Exile to select and groom the next Dalai Lama well in time and announce to the world before death of the present Dalai Lama but may need India's help in the same.
- India's has only two options – extend the Dalai Lama card to continue its leverage options by supporting the succession process OR wash its hands now itself before situation deteriorates and curry favour with the Chinese for some quid pro quo gains.

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considered to be manifestations of the Bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokitesvara. Traditionally, the Dalai Lama is also thought of as the latest reincarnation of a series of spiritual leaders who have chosen to be reborn to enlighten others. Tenzin Gyatso is the 14<sup>th</sup> and present Dalai Lama.

Upon the death of the Dalai Lama and in consultation with the Nechung Oracle, a search for the Lama's reincarnation is conducted.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally it has been the responsibility of the High Lamas of the Gelugpa Sect and the Tibetan Government to find his reincarnation. The process can take around 2 or 3 years to identify the Dalai Lama and for the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama it took 4 years before he was found. The search for the Dalai Lama has usually been limited historically to Tibet, although the 4<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia.

The High Lamas used several ways in which they could increase the chances of finding the reincarnation. They visited the holy lake, called Lhama La-tso, in Central Tibet and looked for a sign from the lake itself. This was either a vision or some indication of the direction in which to search and this was how Tenzin Gyatso was found. High Lamas also could have a vision by a dream or if the Dalai Lama was cremated, by monitoring the direction of the smoke as an indication of the direction of the rebirth.

Once the High Lamas found the home and the boy they believed to be the reincarnation, the boy underwent a series of tests to affirm the rebirth. They presented a number of artefacts, only some of which belonged to the previous Dalai Lama, and if the boy chose the items which belonged to the previous Dalai Lama this was seen as a sign, in conjunction with all of the other indications, that the boy was the reincarnation.

If there was only one boy found, the High Lamas would invite living Buddhas of the three great monasteries together with secular clergy and monk officials to confirm their findings and would then report to the Central Government through the Minister of Tibet. However, if there were several possibilities of the reincarnation then Regents, eminent officials,

monks at the Jokhang in Lhasa and the Minister to Tibet would decide on the individual by putting the boys' names inside a Golden Urn and drawing a lot in public.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Succession Options for Tibetans**

In 2011, the Dalai Lama announced he would end the 369-year-old Gaden Phodrang system of governance, which had made him both political and spiritual leader and devolved political powers to an elected Prime Minister.<sup>5</sup> Chosen by exiled Tibetans in April 2011, Lobsang Sangay took office in August 2011 (was re-elected again in 2016 for a second term).<sup>6</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama also suggested at the end of September 2011 that for the first time in 600 years his successor might be an emanation and not a reincarnation. He also said, "When I am about 90, I will consult the High Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism and re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not<sup>7</sup>." He is 82 years old now.

The possibility of an emanation-successor is an innovation if it includes one selected by appointment. If an emanation system is used, then the successor will most likely be identified before the death of the present Dalai Lama, and will probably be an adult or young person rather than a child and the great drawback of a reincarnation system could be avoided; the 20 years or so that it takes to find and train a successor.

Options with the present Dalai Lama are for a group of high Tibetan Lamas to select the new Dalai Lama on the basis of seniority or he could choose his successor on his own as he is the 'ultimate authority' as the Dalai Lama.

### **Chinese Stand and Likely Interference**

China has said that it has never been up to the Dalai Lama to pick his own successor and that Beijing will identify who is the next incarnation of the Tibetan spiritual leader. China has said that religious law

requires that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama be born in a Tibetan area.<sup>8</sup> They have claimed the power to approve the naming of 'high' reincarnations in Tibet, based on a precedent set by the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, they also say it must be endorsed by the Central Government of China and the Panchen Lama.

In reply the Dalai Lama has said no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China.<sup>10</sup> He said that his successor will not be reborn in a country controlled by the People's Republic of China or any other country which is not free. A selected/elected Dalai Lama would however, need to be carefully announced and guarded, lest the Chinese Government plays politics as they did in the case of the Panchen Lama.

In 1995, The Dalai Lama chose a 6-year-old Tibetan boy, Gendun Choekyi Nyima, to take the title of Panchen Lama, effectively the second highest ranking monk in the complex Tibetan hierarchy. The boy and his family disappeared almost immediately and haven't been heard from since.<sup>11</sup> Beijing later appointed its own candidate Gyaincain Norbu for the position and is promoting him ever since. In fear that the Dalai Lama would pick up a successor to carry on his 'separatist' course for Tibet, Beijing has stepped up its actions in preparation for a battle over his reincarnation and is using Gyaincain Norbu as a pawn in the same. He holds top positions in the Communist regime and is being groomed perfectly to serve Beijing's command.

### India, Tibet and Dalai Lama

With respect to Tibet, India, which started out in the late 1940's with a policy of ambivalence shaped by the British Raj, has come a long way. In the Declaration on Principles and Comprehensive Cooperation between India and The Peoples Republic of China, issued at the end of the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in June 2003, India firmly reiterated its One China policy and recognised that the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was part of territory

of China. It added that it did not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India. The Manmohan Singh Government also reiterated this stand in the Joint Statement issued at the end of the then Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's State visit to India in April 2005.

China raised the question of the 'activities' of the Dalai Lama with the former President Pratibha Devi Singh Patil in 2010 and sought reiteration of India's stand that Tibet was a part of China. The President said that the Dalai Lama was a spiritual leader who stayed in India; India regards the TAR as a part of China and does not allow any anti-China activity by Tibetan exiles in India. Later, at her first public speech during her 6-day state visit, Patil sent a subtle but clear message to the Chinese leadership that 'mutual understanding of each other's sensitivities' holds the key to 'deeper and sturdier friendship' between the Asian giants.

On 11 December 2016 a meeting took place between former President Pranab Mukherjee and Dalai Lama,<sup>12</sup> the first time a serving Indian President had met him in decades. It followed Dalai Lama's visit to Mongolia in November which created problems for Mongolia with China.<sup>13</sup> Mongolia later said it would not allow the Dalai Lama to visit the country, even in the name of religion, thus settling a 1-month standoff between Mongolia and China. Subsequently an editorial in the *Global Times of China* mentioned as follows: "New Delhi has long held the Dalai Lama issue as leverage that it can use against China. Indian President Pranab Mukherjee met with the Tibetan separatist in exile in India this month, probably as moral support to Mongolia, which mired itself in diplomatic trouble after receiving the Dalai Lama in November. India's way of dealing with the issue shows, once again, the gap between its ambition and its strength. It is way beyond India's capability to acquire leverage against China by employing a proxy or challenging China's bottom line. India has used the Dalai Lama card from time to time in a retaliatory move against China." India of course dismissed Chinese objections, saying

he was a revered spiritual leader and the meeting was a non-political event.

Thereafter, India also allowed the Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh in April 2017 to anger the Chinese further. In response, the current Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said China would take necessary measures to defend its territorial sovereignty and interests.<sup>14</sup>

India's latest allowance to the Tibetan Prime Minister Lobsang Sangay to hoist the Tibetan flag on the shores of Pangong-Tso in Leh at the same time Dalai Lama was celebrating his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday there in first week of July 2017 was a slight departure from its previous actions as it involved the Tibetan political machinery to create ripples with the Chinese. It led to Chinese media giving statements like "India burning itself over its support to Tibet and the Dalai Lama" as well as "if Pakistan requests, a third country could send its army to Kashmir the same way India intervened in Bhutan."<sup>15</sup> Additionally, India is also fast emerging as the natural leader in the Buddhist World giving Dalai Lama pride of place in the same which likely hurts Chinese interest. Dalai Lama has been allowed to address gatherings and conferences in the past even after Chinese objections.

China's complete control on Tibet affects India's defence and military status and makes 'China that much larger in Asia and India that much smaller'. A Chinese selected Dalai Lama undermines India's decision of giving asylum to Dalai Lama. The Tibetan diaspora in India will not accept it and volatility will ensue putting India in a difficult spot within Asia as well as the world. Timely right nudges are required to ensure things fall in place as advantageous to India, Asia as well as the World.

India's stated position that it welcomes the Dalai Lama (a spiritual leader) but does not allow anti-China political activities has been eroded with Dalai Lama's devolution of political power and the division of political and religious institutions. Its locus standi has been further questioned with the elections to the Tibetan Parliament and functioning of the Tibetan Administration on the Indian soil. The same has the

potential to turn into a major flash point with China if the Dalai Lama dies before nomination of his successor. In such a scenario, China would be quick to announce the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, ratified by its Panchen Lama. This would render India with no justification for continued presence of 'Tibetan Administration' on the Indian soil.

Having two Dalai Lamas—one inside China and one in exile—will in a way play into the hands of Beijing, for it would only serve to denigrate the institution itself. It will also harm any prospect of future compromise between the Chinese Government and the exiles. So, on the surface, it seems the Chinese have all the cards and Tibetans are in a position of weakness.

Tibetans have a crisis of legitimacy too. Only the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has the stature and authority to unify most Tibetans. Once he is no longer there, inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian jealousies and animosities as well as competition may come back. So the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama living in exile may get some international attention and a lot of support from many Tibetans in exile, but he may not command similar popularity within Tibet.

### **The Likely Way Ahead of China**

- China is likely to continue reducing the present Dalai Lama's fame and influence, deny him access to large gatherings, reduce his stock in the World, and denude effect of Tibetans in exile by putting pressure on affected countries.
- It is also likely to continue denouncing Tibetan Government-in-Exile/Tibetan Administration thus making it ineffective.
- It is likely to portray 'Chinese Panchen Lama' extensively as the right one; increase his stock with the Tibetans in Tibet and use his influence to sway their minds.
- China most likely will not allow the next Dalai Lama to be selected till the present Dalai Lama dies; if done so, it will immediately select one of its own, creating a parallel situation as in case of the present Panchen Lama.

- From China's perspective, the best scenario unfolds like this: the Dalai Lama dies, the Tibetan movement is robbed of its charismatic leader, and Tibet becomes just another of the hundreds of obscure ethnic struggles that litters the globe. However, just to ensure China's control over Tibet, Beijing ensures its right to pick the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama based on historical precedent.

### The Preferred Way Ahead for Tibet and the Present Dalai Lama

- Increase favourable world opinion towards the Tibetans; simultaneously groom a future Dalai Lama secretly (most probably in Dharamshala).
- To ensure China has no say in selection—a difficult prospect but needs to be relentlessly followed.
- Increase political clout of 'Tibetan Administration' worldwide as well as in Tibet itself.
- Convince Tibetans in Tibet to accept Dalai Lama's 'new' thinking and accept possibility of selecting a Dalai Lama while he is still alive (Tibetans in Exile have already accepted the same).
- Ideally announce the next Dalai Lama in the next 4 to 8 years and appoint him as the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama while the present Dalai Lama is still living (the next 8 to 12 years)—a practical solution as the gestation period of a reincarnated Dalai Lama is the window which China may exploit to take matters beyond redemption.

### The Options for India

- **Option-I: Continue Patronage to the Dalai Lama**
  - (i) 'Tibetan Administration' and the next Dalai Lama extended safe refuge;
  - (ii) Continued mistrust with China;
  - (iii) Allows playing the 'Tibetan' card against Chinese claims in India.

- (iv) Retain capability to launch Sub Conventional Operations in TAR—diminishing as years progress.
- (v) Win support and goodwill from the Buddhist world.
- (vi) Leverage the Buddhist connection to expand Indian influence in ASEAN and East Asia in confirmation to the 'Look East Policy'.

- **Option-II: Bid Adieu to the Dalai Lama**

- (i) Timing to *bid adieu* needs to be selected as if the same is done when the present Dalai Lama is alive will have more leverage than after his death.
- (ii) Resolve certain border disputes as *quid pro quo*; may only be possible when the present Dalai Lama is alive.
- (iii) Limited leverage available against China, once Dalai Lama passes away.
- (iv) Toe the policy of 'Non Interference in Internal Affairs of Sovereign States'.
- (v) Hurt sentiments of Tibetans in India.
- (vi) Reduce credibility in Buddhist world.
- (vii) Reduce India's stock in ASEAN.

### Conclusion

- China
  - (a) China has set the stage for executing its plan on the Dalai Lama issue.
  - (b) It is likely to utilise the window of opportunity provided by the gap period in case traditional reincarnation methods are used.
  - (c) Most traditional selection methods are under Chinese control and thus would allow them to influence the selection of next Dalai Lama easily. They are constantly propagating their stand to use only traditional/historical methods for succession and selection.
  - (d) Simultaneously, China is increasing the stock of their Panchen Lama exponentially to either make him the next Dalai Lama or to ensure he selects the next one according to China's wishes.
- Tibet and Dalai Lama

- (a) Precedent of a Dalai Lama being born outside Tibet exists; however, only with the 4<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama who was born in Mongolia. The same can be used now to have one born in exile.
  - (b) If the next Dalai Lama is born in exile he may not get the same spiritual and religious education as those before him. His standing in the Buddhist world accordingly will also be that much lesser.
  - (c) The present Dalai Lama is worried that a parallel situation like that of the present Panchen Lama may be created or the gap period after his death will finish the institution hence he is propagating different methods of succession and may finally utilise the one most profitable to Tibetan cause when the timing is right.
  - (d) Lobsang Sangay (Prime Minister of Tibetan Administration) may take many years before his voice has a meaning and he is not likely to find support from India in the future also as it opposes all anti-China activities on its soil.
  - (j) Funding of Tibetan cause from across the world also is likely to reduce when the present Dalai Lama passes away.
- India
    - Dalai Lama is an important leverage card India has over the Chinese and India loses most of the leverage with passing away of the present Dalai Lama; hence, selected option needs to be chosen prior to his passing away.

## Endnotes

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