

IDSA

Issue Brief

Emerging Flashpoints in the Himalayas

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S*ummary*

Abstract: Long-term stability on both sides of the Himalayas cannot be achieved without working together or seeking coordinated policies. It is time to bring together the interests of both the Indian and Chinese governments toward seeking the common goal of saving the Himalayas and the people living in the region.

Flashpoints in the Himalayan region are rising. The US Defence Department has expressed caution about China's increased troops build-up along the Indian border as well as the likelihood of China establishing "additional naval logistic hubs" in Pakistan.¹ From the Chinese perspective, the spectre of jihadi terrorism is spreading across Xinjiang province. The monks in Tibet continue to resist China's military suppression. Pakistan, for its part, continues to sponsor terrorism in Kashmir with China's tacit support. In Nepal, the vortex of the political crisis refuses to stop.

This trend of events unfolding on both sides of the Himalayas is forming an interconnected chain. The issues involved transcend rugged mountains and even well-drawn cartographic and military lines. Signs of instability on one side impacting on another are visible. One would have hardly imagined that China's dissenters, Uighurs and Tibetans could meet on this side of the Himalayas.²

Conventional wisdom had the Indian Himalayan belt being at least peaceful. Conviction also explained that freedom of religion (Buddhism) has ensured stability on this side of the mountain range. This sadly is no longer the case. The entire belt from Tawang to Ladakh has been subject to a string of incendiary events threatening to pitchfork the region into crisis.

At the root of most of the troubles on the Indian side is the Tibetan standoff. For years, the subtlety of Lamaism – the main powerhouse of Tibetan politics – has taken an intricate sectarian context. Tension that has been festering around it for decades is now getting murkier and complex by the day, and this is clearly happening not without Chinese prompting.

Beijing may have found it easy to play on the sectarian fault lines as the surest way of breaking Tibetan unity. From clergy to laity, the refugee community is riven by sectarian fissures that seem difficult to heal.³ Even the Dalai Lama seems to be finding it hard to keep his Lama flock together. The sectarian divide is ricocheting throughout the Indian Himalayan region, engulfing even Indian Buddhists from Tawang to Leh and pushing them deeper into the throes of anxiety. Trouble could erupt at any time, and perhaps in a big way.

Clearly, sectarian rife in the Himalayan region points to strategic calculations involved. It may well have been a part of China's well-thought-out game plan of passing the Tibetan puzzle across to the Indian side. China has viewed the Himalayas as a bridge and Tibetan Buddhism as a useful vehicle of influence. This

¹ US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016*, available at <http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2016%20China%20Military%20Power%20Report.pdf>

² The 11th Inter-ethnic/interfaith Leadership Conference organized by Initiatives of China/Citizen Power of China was held in Dharamshala between 27 April and 1 May 2016.

³ Younten Phuntsok, "We are losing our ground: Tibetan Struggle," 16 June 2014, available at <https://victimofred.wordpress.com/tag/karmapa/>.

policy had underpinnings in Chinese strategic thinking under the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911) that patronised Tibetan Buddhism as a means of imperial expansion.

Following the departure of Dalai Lama from Tibet in 1959, China not only eagerly let all major Tibetan sectarian heads flee but perhaps coordinated the exodus of their reincarnated ones as well. Over the years, these powerful masters have ably set up parallel religious institutions across the border – their network is spread across India. A clear trend in the source of funding for building such mega religious infrastructure along the Southern Himalayas is known to all. Clearly, Beijing controlled the trends of Lamaism not just in Tibet but in the rest of the Himalayan region as well.

India, by contrast, saw the Himalayas as a barrier. For most Indian mandarins, China's game was not fathomable. Instead, frequently emerging signposts of trouble were put under the wraps. Gullible Indian policy-makers, in fact, worked on various schemes for facilitating every move that the Chinese made. They rejoiced in harbouring numerous spiritual heads as key assets without realising that the policies they pursued perfectly suited Beijing. According to a former foreign secretary, Chairman Mao Zedong had once conveyed a message to Prime Minister Nehru through a visiting Indian Communist delegation to Beijing that "he should keep the Dalai Lama in India".⁴ 57 years down the line, India has gained little. Instead, it now finds itself worryingly and helplessly entangled in the Tibetan quagmire, with serious implications for the stability of its own frontier region.

Firstly, take the case of excessive Tibetanization of the Himalayan states, which has become a serious, even incendiary, social and political issue over the past few decades, although it has been repeatedly downplayed by the government. The process began with rising prosperity among Tibetan refugee communities, thanks to the generous support provided to them by the Indian government and foreign donors. The entire process also apparently involved corruption, scams, and misuse of government institutions on a fecund scale. This, at the same time, has cut into the interests of indigenous, mostly tribal, communities which have been complaining about administrative apathy and relative socio-economic deprivation. This is what has sparked-off a string of pent-up inter-ethnic tensions simmering across the region.⁵

Secondly, concerns have grown over the swift taking over of Indian monasteries by Lamas from outside. In fact, a mapping of India's key institutions that have fallen into the hands of non-Indians masters looks frightening.⁶ Ironically, the Tibetan issue is becoming less about 'freeing Tibet from China' and more about creating

⁴ Personal conversation with author.

⁵ Mila Rangzen, "Is Dharamshala Safe for Tibetans?," *Tibet Telegraph*, 12 June 2014, available at <http://www.tibettelegraph.com/2014/06/is-dharamshala-safe-for-tibetans.html>

⁶ "Dozen monasteries of Drukpa Buddhist lineage taken over by monks with strong financial backing," *Economic Times*, 3 December 2014, http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2014-12-03/news/56685022_1_monasteries-tibet-government-monks; also see, "Eye on border, China fanning intra-sect rivalry: Ladakh's Buddhist leader", *Hindustan Times*, 25 September 2014, available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/eye-on-border-china-fanning-intra-sect-rivalry-ladakh-s-buddhist-leader/story-IJsgAz4z9oQfl4gZnmy8xM.html>

Tibet in India. A major case in point is the struggle over the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim.⁷ The takeover of monasteries in Ladakh has been rather hassle-free despite Article 370. The entire process seems to be wrapped in a psychosomatic order; blackmailing of innocents into submission through religious means. By now, the entire region has seemingly acquiesced to this fact.

The third, and most dangerous, trend of all is growing sectarian rifts that are threatening to tear apart Himalayan stability. Suitors of all sorts with deep funding from Chinese-sponsored Buddhist networks are having a field day. They are building their respective sectarian networks while skilfully managing to manipulate Indian laws, buying off influential individuals and local institutions.

In Ladakh, people have been helplessly watching the sectarian game ignited by outsiders. The menace is creating havoc among a people hitherto devoid of any sectarian differences. It is consuming every walk of life, threatening to divide and cripple the society. The situation took a critical turn last summer when the Dalai Lama ordered the Buddhists of Ladakh not to entertain a rival Karmapa, Thaye Trinley Dorje (TTD), during his visit to the region in 2015. The Dalai Lama has not approved TTD and instead recognised Ugyen Trinley Dorje (UTD) as the 17th Karmapa, who also enjoys China's official recognition. While a majority of outfits in Ladakh followed Dharamshala's instruction, other sectarian groups barring the Geluk chose to defy the gag and went ahead to welcome TTD. Clearly, other sects including Druk-pa Kagyu, Drikung Kagyu, Ning-ma and even the Sakya sect do not question the spiritual authenticity of TTD altogether. The incident, however, led to a split in the All-Ladakh Gompa (Monastery) Association (LGA), which is equivalent to a *Sangha*. The LGA office has since been locked to avoid any direct conflict between sects.⁸

To be sure, sectarian rife and the growing sinister power struggle among various sects will become worse especially in the post-Dalai Lama scenario, for the issue also pertains to retaining the current supremacy of Geluk-pa sect in the Tibetan order. Interestingly, a media report recently highlighted a communication between the Dalai Lama's aide (from the Geluk Monastic Council) and Chinese authorities about a joint 'project' ostensibly to decide next the Dalai Lama.⁹

It is widely believed that the Dalai Lama would prefer to install his chosen Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje, as the next leader, at least in the interim. But there are other young Lamas such as Drukchen Rinpoche, head of Druk-pa Kagyu, who would wish to fill the post-Dalai vacuum. The latter claims Ladakh to be his bastion. He often challenges Dharamshala's diktats.

⁷ "Struggle for Rumtek worries home ministry," *Times of India*, 31 May 2002, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Struggle-for-Rumtek-worries-home-ministry/articleshow/11516997.cms>

⁸ Yatish Yadav, "Close aide of Dalai Lama Denies Chinese Whispers in Monastery Land," 1 May 2016, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/Close-Aide-of-Dalai-Lama-Denies-Chinese-Whispers-in-Monastery-Land/2016/05/01/article3409945.ece>

⁹ Yatish Yadav, "Hush! Tibet Government in Exile Plays Footsie with China," 1 May 2016, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/Hush-Tibet-Government-in-Exile-Plays-Footsie-With-China/2016/05/01/article3408894.ece>

Amidst all this turmoil, it is not unreasonable to wonder whether such discord among Tibetans would be happening without it being scripted by China. If so, China is clearly winning both the Tibetan and the Himalayan games. But the most galling aspect in all this is the absence of an alternative to stall the process.

Some observers have suspected China's hand in the recent unrest in Tawang on May 2, in which two monks were killed over a dispute about building dams for hydroelectric projects. But the issue appeared to be more about the abbot of Tawang Monastery, Guru Tulku Rinpoche, whose nationality was questioned by the local Monpa monks.

Sikkim has been on the boil for decades over contesting sectarian parties claiming rights to Rumtek's ownership. In Nepal, China is funding the KP Oli government with Buddhist projects and has sent a Tibetan monk, Drukhang Thubten Khedrup Rinpoche, Vice Chairman of the Buddhist Association of China, to oversee the Buddha Jayanti celebration this year in Lumbini on 21 May.¹⁰

The central government's inability to gauge this trend has been rather surprising. Does it show a lack of understanding or does it want to encourage the trend? It seems clueless in the face of its apparatus working hand in glove with the operators. Worse, regional leadership is also not clear about whether they are not in compliance or part of the caucus.

India is helplessly losing the game. The situation is deteriorating rapidly and getting perilous enough to begin to wonder whether Indian Buddhists in Mon-Tawang or in Ladakh can even retain their hold. A delay in resolving the crisis, whose ends are not in sight, will make the Himalayan belt more vulnerable. The government, therefore, needs to wake up and pull itself out of its current confusion. Peace in the Himalayan region must be preserved at all cost, before it slides irretrievably into the hole.

Developments require constant monitoring and comprehension. The government must curtail outsiders from freely impinging in sensitive areas. It should instead boost the indigenous Buddhist strength and resources; introduce new regulations to protect local religious institutions and practices; and provide the necessary stimulus for people to regain their confidence.

Ladakh, Sikkim and Tawang had their own rich historical profile. They need to be careful not to fall into a downward spiral and lose their identity. Ladakh needs to restore the authorities of Kushok Stag-sang Raspa, Kushok Bakula, Kushok Thiksy, Kushok Togdan and Kushok Stag-na and others who were pillars of the Buddhist tradition across generations. Their role in stabilising the border areas have been unparalleled. In their actions, they always kept in mind the core

¹⁰ Bharat Bhushan, "Buddha in a diplomatic jam: Nepal-China take on India over Buddhist heritage," 11 May 2016, <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/buddha-in-a-diplomatic-jam-nepal-china-take-on-india-over-buddhist-heritage-1462976283.html>; Craig Lewis, "Indian Officials to Boycott Buddhist Conference in Nepal in Diplomatic Spat," 16 May 2016, <http://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/indian-officials-to-boycott-buddhist-conference-in-nepal-in-diplomatic-spat>

interests of Ladakh and the nation. Rekindling their spirit is more than an imperative today.

Similarly, prolonged trouble in Nepal is neither in China's nor in India's interest. The current problem is part of a miscalculation that also gave birth to the ongoing predicament in Afghanistan. The experiment with new political models has failed to meet the hopes and aspirations of the Nepali population. Make no mistake of underestimating the strategic value of Nepal to Asian stability. Any durable stability can only be found by reviving the old and time-tested system of Monarchy, which alone will serve the interest of Nepal, India, China and the world.

Tibet is certainly a keystone to Himalayan stability. China will find it difficult to tackle the Tibetan problem once the Dalai Lama is gone. Therefore, it is time for Beijing to settle the issue. But it appears that world powers are going to get locked into a major contestation over the next Dalai Lama. As Beijing is preparing to select the 15th Dalai Lama, the US, India and others too seem to be gearing up to play the counter game. As for the Dalai Lama himself, the whole idea of searching for the next soul seems to be an absurd idea and he probably wants to put an end to the politics of reincarnation which is not feasible in 21st century politics, though he has spelled out several ideas for his successor.¹¹ Tibetans would, however, need a Dalai Lama. To be sure, Beijing too understands the need for finding the next Dalai Lama either of its own choice or otherwise.

Long-term stability on both sides of the Himalayas cannot be achieved without working together or seeking coordinated policies. It is time to bring together the interests of both the Indian and Chinese governments toward seeking the common goal of saving the Himalayas and the people living in the region.

¹¹ "The Last Dalai Lama?," *New York Times*, 1 December 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/the-last-dalai-lama.html>

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