

ESD: AIR: ALL UNITS
19.08.2021: THURSDAY

TIBET: THE PAST HAUNTS THE FUTURE

Script: Amb. SUJAN R. CHINYO,

Director-General, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

The Chinese military entered Tibet in 1950. The Tibetans approached the UN following the entry of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) into their homeland. Apart from El Salvador, no other country showed much support in 1950. The UK, in keeping with the muddled policy of the British Empire in the previous half-century, favoured deferring the matter till Tibet's legal position was clearer, and, giving peaceful settlement a chance.

The US had historically outsourced Tibet policy to the British. It showed little interest in the blighted land. It has never questioned the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China. India waffled, with expression of hope for a peaceful settlement and continuation of traditional autonomy.

The 17-Point "Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" was concluded under duress by Lhasa with Beijing on 23 May 1951. It provided for local autonomy and respect for Tibetan culture, and, more importantly, a commitment not to alter the established status, functions and powers of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The reality was different. A disillusioned Dalai Lama, as early as 1950, had thought of seeking refuge in India, but was discouraged by India. In the years that followed, matters got worse. The Khampa rebellion in eastern Tibet snowballed to a point of no return. In March 1959, the Dalai Lama was obliged to flee Lhasa, entering India through the Bumla Pass in Arunachal Pradesh.

The decision to seek refuge in India was only natural, given Tibet's history, geography and close cultural and spiritual links with India, the land of Buddha and Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rimpoche. The latter had founded Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century.

Tibet's physical connectivity to India was far greater at that time than was the case with China. Even Chinese officials preferred to journey to Lhasa via Calcutta and the less arduous route along the Chumbi valley. India has acted as a powerful lodestar for Tibet throughout its history.

Seeking refuge in India had precedents. In November 1956, when the Dalai Lama attended the 2500th Anniversary of the Buddha's attainment of salvation, he had to be encouraged to return to Tibet. Earlier, the 13th Dalai Lama had fled to India in 1910 when Manchu troops entered Lhasa.

The Tibetan issue was again half-heartedly considered by the UN in 1959. A resolution was jointly tabled by Malaya and Ireland, expressing grave concern at reports of violation of human rights and denial of freedom. Forty-five nations voted for the resolution and nine

opposed it. What is interesting is that India was among the twenty-six nations that abstained. India got nothing in return from the Chinese, except further blame for alleged interference in Tibet.

Beginning 1979, there was some hope for a settlement of the Tibet issue. Confidential talks between Beijing and the Dalai Lama's representatives in the 1980s failed. Thereafter, the international campaign for Tibet, the Dalai Lama's address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1988, riots in Lhasa and the award of the Noble Prize to the Dalai Lama in 1989 widened the gulf.

US policy is key to the future of Tibet. It appointed a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in 1997. The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 laid the foundation for renewed activism for further legislative measures to preserve the distinct heritage of the Tibetan people. The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 have helped put further pressure on China. The Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 of the US categorically rejects any interference by China in the selection of the Dalai Lama.

An emboldened China no longer fears US sanctions. China has systematically eroded Tibetan culture and language. It has successfully absorbed Tibet by means of road, rail and air connectivity and weakened Tibetan Buddhism through a systematic proselytization of communist ideology.

The Dalai Lama has stated that he is not seeking independence for Tibet, only genuine autonomy. While there is great sympathy for the Tibetan people around the world, there appears to be scant appetite anywhere for Tibetan independence.
