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Fictions that Nation-States Sell- Tibet and the China-India Border Dispute

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Presentation

Dr. Dibyesh Anand started the presentation by stressing that there is a need to view the border dispute, or any political dispute, from the perspective of the people, and not only from the perspective of the state as if it was an abstract entity. Tibet is a specific aspect of the border issue, it is at the heart of it. But there is no Tibet, in the sense that it does not exist as a nation-state. The traditional Tibetan state has disappeared and it is the ghost of that traditional Tibetan state that haunts both India and China. Dr. Anand then laid out his central argument which was that there is a clash of both nationalist and strategic narratives between India and China when it comes to Tibet and the border dispute. There is a nationalist-security dissonance, there is a dissonance at the heart of how China and India approach Tibet and the border dispute. For China Tibet is a nationalist issue and the border dispute is a strategic issue, while for India Tibet is a strategic issue and the border dispute is a nationalist issue. The difference between a strategic issue and a nationalist issue is that strategic thinking is usually looked at in terms of rational calculability, and bargaining is a part of strategic thinking. But you cannot bargain over nationalism. There is different placing of Tibet and the border dispute for the Indians and the Chinese.

Dr. Anand then dwelt in some detail on the history of the Tibetan issue and the border dispute. He questioned the legitimacy of the 1914 Simla agreement because even though it was a tri-partite conference there was a secret agreement between British India and Tibet which was not shown to the third party. At the time the British were not really interested defining the boundary, they were simply drawing different cartographic lines and seeing which line would be most advantageous and be acceptable to the Tibetans at the same time. There was a vague frontier region but where the line was drawn on the ground was unknown. So most people did not know where the boundary lay. So long as Tibet remained practically independent, which it was from 1911 to 1951, the British did not feel any urge to define and put into practice what it claimed as part of India. When post-colonial India came along it could not play the same game that the British played being an imperialist power. For the British it was about 'buffers', they were mainly worried about Russia, Sikkim and Ladakh were buffers between India and Tibet, Tibet was a buffer between Russia and China, and China was a buffer between Russia and British India. That was how British thinking operated at the time. Post-colonial India had to clarify the boundary. Both India and China could not operate with the same level of flexibility as imperial Britain. In 1951 the major event was China taking-over Tibet. Before that there was a cartographical fluidity, various maps would show you different things, and there was a mismatch between the map-making and ground realities. The

terrain was very harsh so the map-making itself was not very effective, nor the ground reality very clear. The people inhabiting these areas were also moving around and were not very clear about whether they belonged to Tibet, India or China. That also contributed to the fluidity. But that situation started changing between 1951 and 1959. The 1950s is the period where both the states of India and China try to make real what they have been claiming, sometimes openly, and sometimes not openly. Much of the struggle was going on through diplomacy. War takes place only when diplomacy fails. So diplomacy fails by 1959/60 and war takes place in 1962.

Dr. Anand then set out his view of the contemporary state of affairs. In some sense the border dispute is no longer seen as a military issue or a territorial issue, things are open to political negotiation. One cannot deny that things have not improved, they have improved a lot. However one must remember that India-China relations were very cordial in the 1950s but because of Tibet and the border dispute everything deteriorated. Even now India and China are cooperating at many levels, economically they are important partners. Yet Tibet and the border dispute is something that can again take them back to a 1962 situation. Somehow economic cooperation and interdependence will by itself prevent a war from happening is highly unlikely. Economic cooperation and interdependence should not be seen as replacing political negotiation. Political negotiation is a must. Without that things will not improve considerably.

Following this Dr. Anand went on to critically examine what he argued were fictitious narratives sold by the nation-states of India and China to their respective peoples. When a nation-state sells a fiction someone has to buy it, who buys it is also important. Broadly speaking the fiction that the Chinese government sells to its people does not include the border dispute as such, its more about Tibet. The fiction that India tries to sell to its own public is something that resonates with most Indians. When one speaks to people in India who were children in 1962, for them much of it was about poor soldiers suffering and Chinese betrayal. They see it through a 'betrayal lens'. The way in which India sells the border story is through a 'betrayal narrative'. It's a very simple narrative about 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' and then India being stabbed in the back by the duplicitous Chinese, and that therefore India can no longer trust the Chinese. It also includes the notion that Nehru was naïve and idealistic, and China's close relations with Pakistan as another effort by China to stab India in the back. That narrative still remains very strong, not so much among scholars, or even policy-makers, but if you look at the Indian corporate media and its cacophony over China, much of it buys into the betrayal narrative. There are two strands to the betrayal narrative, one blames the Chinese, the other one blames the Chinese and Nehru. The first strand is prevalent within the Congress party and the second strand is prevalent among the right-wing parties and the more hawkish security experts.

There are three primary ideas associated with the Indian 'betrayal narrative' which can be questioned. The first is the legitimacy of Indian claims itself. The second is the idea of unexpected Chinese aggression. The third is the failure of Indian political leadership. With regard to the first, Indian nationalism operates by investing a sacrality to territory. Looking at the western sector if Aksai Chin was really a part of India how is it

that the Indian public did not find out about it till 1957/58. This raises the question of what was the government doing between 1947 and 1957, how does the Indian government explain to its public the government's activities between 1947 and 57 if Aksai Chin was really in India. The nationalist hysteria of 1958/59 was made possible by the Indian government's failure to keep the public informed about what was really happening with regard to the border with China. The idea of unexpected Chinese aggression also does not work because by the late 1950s both the Indians and the Chinese were militarily pushing towards the disputed area. The forthcoming release of the Henderson-Brooks Report should enable us to come to a definitive conclusion on this. The third notion of the failure of Indian political leadership is also untenable because there was failure of command and control at every level in the military, so the military leadership also failed.

The major narrative that the Chinese government has on the border dispute is that of 'Indian intransigence'. At the time the Chinese essentially saw the Indians as stooges of the imperialists. The Chinese saw the Indian position on the border and Tibet in 1961/62 as the result of manipulation by the Americans and other great powers. This fitted into the Chinese nationalist narrative that the Indians on their own will not do anything, they will only do something if they are manipulated by the great powers. The 'Indian intransigence' narrative of China is tied with two factors, stability or instability in Tibet and geopolitical challenges that China faces from time to time. The Chinese narrative blames India for being duplicitous and encouraging 'splitists' in Tibet in connivance with the imperialists, especially the Americans, while adopting a moralist tone of non-alignment. It claims that Indians are essentially 'insincere' and cannot really be trusted. One has to note however that it does not blame all Indians, only specific political leaders such as Nehru. They saw Nehru very much in the mould of British imperialism and as a bourgeois nationalist, and therefore as expansionist. There is a continuity of this narrative even at present with the Chinese claiming that the Indians are working together with the Americans, Vietnamese and others to contain China. But of course the idea that India and China can work together because they are great civilizations is also part of the Chinese narrative. This 'Indian intransigence' narrative is also problematic. First and foremost it absolves China of all responsibility. One does not come across any Chinese scholarship that looks critically at what the Chinese were doing in the 1950 and 60s, or ever for that matter. One has to seriously question scholarship that is not self-reflective about anything. That's how the 'Indian intransigence' narrative works. There is no scrutiny of how the Chinese Communist Party's decision-making worked in the 1950s and 60s, or even now, on to what extent the tension within the party's leadership could have contributed. This Chinese narrative also can be questioned on three grounds. First, the idea that India inherited the British imperial legacy has to be questioned because the Chinese themselves were more in line with western imperialism with regard to what they were doing in Tibet. If anyone was a victim of imperialism it was Tibet. In some sense China is the beneficiary of the failure of western imperialism in Tibet. Secondly, the notion that outside forces were motivating separatism in Tibet is also problematic. While the Americans did play a role in supporting Tibetan rebellions, there could not have been a major rebellion in Tibet without local impetus. So one has to be critical of the Chinese claim of foreign interference stirring-up trouble in Tibet. The

Tibetans themselves wish to exercise some sort of freedom. The third aspect that can be questioned is the notion of ‘Chinese sincerity’, because they have also been playing the game of ‘realpolitik’ over Tibet, especially over Tawang, that they accuse the powers of playing.

Dr. Anand then came back to his central argument of nationalist-strategic dissonance. In the case of India, the only way the government that lost the war with China could stay in power was by selling the nationalist ‘betrayal narrative’ to the people. Now the ‘betrayal narrative’ is enmeshed in the Indian psyche, which makes it difficult for the government to seriously negotiate a solution to the border dispute. Tibet on the other hand does not have a nationalist resonance with Indians. The Indian government does not want the Tibetan cause to become very popular in India because that would make it difficult for the government to play the strategic game over Tibet. In the case of China the Qing dynasty, the nationalists and the communists have always claimed Tibet as a part of China, making Tibet very much a part of the Chinese nationalist narrative. While Tibet has a strategic significance for China, the point to note is that the way in which the Tibetan issue was sold to the public in China had a very nationalist flavour to it. It is not so with the border dispute, most people in China don’t even know about the border dispute with India, and therefore it can be considered more of a strategic issue for China.

Dr. Anand concluded the presentation by briefly sketching the way forward. While he recognized that there are geopolitical and bureaucratic factors at play, in his view the most fundamental thing is there has to be a recognition in India about what makes Tibet so important for China, and there has to be a recognition in China about what makes the border so important for India.

Discussion

With regard to the notion of unexpected Chinese aggression Prof. Sreemati Chakravarti (Institute of Chinese Studies) pointed out that it was Nikita Khrushchev who had convinced Nehru that the Chinese were in no position to fight a war because of the failure of the Great Leap Forward and its consequences.

Colonel Virender Verma (Institute of Chinese Studies) revealed that at the time India had received intelligence with regard to Chinese forward deployments in Tibet, and that therefore the assessment in the Indian military was that the Chinese may retaliate if India pursued the Forward Policy. He further revealed that due to this intelligence a particular senior officer of the Indian Army had been reluctant to carry out the Forward Policy and had resigned his post. Due to the overall political control of the Indian Army as per British tradition, while the Indian Army had not opposed the Forward Policy, there assessment had been that the Chinese may retaliate. Dr. Anand pointed out that according to his research while the intelligence that the Chinese may retaliate could have been there, it did not influence the decision-making at the higher levels of the Indian military.

Brigadier Mandeep Singh (Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses) queried Dr. Anand on the Chinese withdrawal from Tawang and Zhou Enlai's offer to exchange Aksai Chin for Arunachal Pradesh. To the first query Dr. Anand responded by arguing that the Chinese withdrew from Tawang because they were not interested in controlling that region, and that such withdrawal was for the Chinese a moral victory because it enabled them to show to the world that they were withdrawing despite their claims to that piece of territory. With regard to the second query Dr. Anand argued that Zhou Enlai was sincere when he made that offer, that such an exchange is even today the only way forward, but the question was can any contemporary Indian government be confident and open enough to convince the Indian public about such a deal. He further stressed that the Indian government should take the public more into confidence when they make policy.

Prof. Manoranjan Mohanty (Institute of Chinese Studies) argued that there was some degree of artificiality to the nationalist-strategic dichotomy because the nationalist and the strategic often converge. He also thought that Dr. Anand's portrayal of how the Indians perceive the Chinese and vice versa was rather undifferentiated. He further argued that when you talk of the roles played by the Indian civilian leadership and the military leadership in 1962, it is important to look at the influence of the Cold War on the Indian ruling class as a whole. With regard to the artificiality of the distinction between nationalist and strategic Dr. Anand admitted that at times they do converge, but that one could still distinguish them based on the rational calculability of strategic thinking and the emotiveness of nationalist thinking. Taking into account Prof. Mohanty's point about the artificiality of the distinction Dr. Anand stated that he will endeavor to incorporate this notion into his work. Regarding the point about Indian perceptions of China and vice versa, Dr. Anand argued that that was not precisely what he was talking about, that he was focusing on particular narratives in India and China on the border dispute, and that these were not the only narratives that exist between India and China. With regard to the point about American lobbying in India during the Cold War, Dr. Anand stated that he was certainly interested in research on American funding of security think-tanks in India and generally on the political economy of encouraging warfare.

Dr. Alka Acharya (Institute of Chinese Studies) commended Dr. Anand on the clever craftsmanship of the nationalist-strategic dissonance construct. However she pointed out that territorial nationalism was a part of the narratives of both India and China, and that Tibet and the border are enmeshed for both countries. Dr. Anand responded by arguing that there was a need to distinguish between the 'border' and the 'border dispute', which would enable one to regard the 'border dispute' as a nationalist and emotive issue on the Indian side.

Mr. Anil Kumar (Delhi University) commented that once China settles the Taiwan issue it would be ready to settle the boundary dispute with India. Dr. Anand responded that while that could be possible, in his own view the boundary dispute with India is more related to how the Tibetan issue is settled.

Prof. Patricia Uberoi (Institute of Chinese Studies) argued that in her understanding the 'betrayal narrative' started after 1962 and that there was a different

kind of nationalism preceding that. She wondered whether Dr. Anand would like to consider some of the explorations in 'sacred geography' which could include such notions as the 'sacred himalyas', which are emotionally very powerful in India. Dr. Anand responded that while the 'betrayal narrative' becomes more powerful after 1962 it actually started in 1957/58. He also stated that he does take into consideration how Indian nationalism invests sacrality to territory.

Dr. Anand concluded the discussion by stressing that there was a need for more 'openness' in foreign policy making including on the border issue, that the public should play a larger role, and that it should not be confined to a small group of policy-makers and strategic specialists.

Report Compiled by Dr. Sithara Fernando, Visiting Research Fellow, ICS