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Chinese Studies

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# Analysis

## Postponement of the 15th Special Representative-level Talks: Possible Causes and Implications



**No.1  
May  
2012**



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# Postponement of the 15th Special Representative-level Talks: Possible Causes and Implications

The 15th round of SR-level talks between India and China scheduled for 28-29 November 2011 in New Delhi were postponed just two days before they were to be held. This was a consequence of the Chinese side raising objections to the simultaneous scheduling of a Buddhist congress in New Delhi at which the Dalai Lama was a speaker. The Chinese were forced to call off the talks since the Indian side expressed its inability to agree to their demand to either force the Dalai Lama not to attend or to cancel what was a private religious endeavour taking place in the Indian capital.

The postponement of the SR talks raises a number of questions. What explains the postponement of the Special Representatives (SR) talks? Was the GoI showing assertiveness vis-à-vis China? What was to be gained by deliberately arranging the SR talks and the Buddhist congress at roughly the same time? What has India gained from the postponement of the SR talks? What has China gained from the postponement of the SR talks? What is the level of importance India gives the SR talks in the overall framework of Sino-Indian ties?

## POSSIBLE INDIAN MOTIVES

Viewing matters on the Indian side, the postponement smacks of a lack of coordination within the government and gives a very poor impression indeed of the state of the government's China policy. The Indian official response that the SR talks are political and that the Buddhist conference was a religious affair and that the two should be kept separate ring a little hollow against this background. If all of this was deliberately planned by government agencies, since clearly the dates of the private affair of the Buddhist congress had to have been settled much earlier and the SR talks were deliberately fixed around the same time, then, it must be understood as the government

being intent on pushing the Chinese to the wall.

However, this 'assertiveness' if that is what it sends confusing signals. One, that the government wanted to get back to the Chinese for any number of reasons publicly known – stapled visas, the South China Sea issue, Chinese troops in POK – or unknown. Two, the government is no longer serious about or interested in continuing SR level talks again for a variety of reasons. It was noted that the frequency of SR-level talks have come down from about two a year to just one last year and probably none at all this year.

Does this mean that the negotiations are stuck on some difficult issue or issues and not moving forward because one or the other side is unwilling to make any compromises at this stage? Or does it mean that India prefers a more comprehensive dialogue instead at the highest levels covering the gamut of issues between the two countries and not just the boundary dispute? Examples of such dialogue include the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue? Or does New Delhi perhaps a preference for the Special Envoy role of the NSA rather than the SR role?

Three, if this was 'assertiveness', why did New Delhi withdraw the participation of the President, the Prime Minister and other political dignitaries from the Buddhist congress? While India was right to have stuck to letting the Buddhist conference continue, if diplomacy and image projection was the intent then both objectives were lost because of the absence of high Indian political dignitaries.

Could the Indian stance on the Buddhist congress be meant to bolster the image of the Dalai Lama as a religious leader given that he has given up his temporal powers as

leader of the Tibetan movement in exile? The Indian intention might have also been to allow a return to official hosting of the Dalai Lama after having turned down his requests for meeting with high Indian dignitaries over the past few years.

However, if this was the intention, why could the dates not have been managed such that the 15th SR talks could have taken place smoothly first? India would then have had both achieved its ends smoothly without getting into an argument with the Chinese. This now makes it harder for the Indians to pull off any manoeuvre vis-à-vis the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan exile movement

### **POSSIBLE CHINESE MOTIVES**

China's insistence that the Global Buddhist Congregation be cancelled – the event was held in Delhi from 27-30 November 2011 – or that the Dalai Lama be prevented from attending it could well be interpreted as interfering in India's internal affairs. By being unwilling to accept the compromises India offered – withdrawal of high dignitaries and shifting of the venue of SR talks – the Chinese also seemed to indicate that the SR talks were not important enough to salvage from the contretemps. Surely, the Chinese were aware sooner than ten days ago (when they first broached the matter to the Indian side) that there was a Buddhist meeting on. If they waited until as late as 10 days before the SR talks, it suggests that they too could have been looking for a way out of the SR talks.

A counterargument to this is that had there been a moderately successful SR talks where a proposed new border mechanism would have been finalized, then it would have shown China in a good light given that it has had troubles with its neighbours in the Southeast Asia over territorial issues in the last year.

Alternatively, did the Indian action put the Chinese leadership in a spot given the upcoming leadership transition? China's reading that India had deliberately arranged the SR talks and the Buddhist conference at the same time should have been tempered by its understanding that the Indian

policymaking process is often a cumbersome process prone to lack of coordination and incompetence.

The Chinese have also gained by diluting the profile of the Buddhist conference in which prominent Indian dignitaries of state cancelled their appearances. Alternatively, by drawing attention to a conference that would have largely gone unnoticed in the Indian and international media, the Chinese probably only drew attention to their own poor record on religious issues.

### **CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS**

This mini controversy has been interpreted by some as part of a new pattern that is emerging in India-China relations as a result of an anti-China, pro-US tilt in Indian foreign policy.

An important consequence of the postponement of the talks is that Xi Jinping's proposed visit to India next year is also likely to be postponed.

This possible postponement is a serious issue. Apart from the perceived indignity to Dai Bingguo on what was possibly his last visit as SR, Xi Jinping if his visit does not take place as planned, might not find another opportunity to visit India before the Communist Party of China Congress in October next year. And once he is party chief, India might not immediately rank high on his priorities. In other words, India might miss the opportunity to get the measure of the man who is also believed to be the 'India hand' in the next generation of Chinese leaders, taking over this role from Wen Jiabao.

Another important conclusion drawn from the whole episode is that India is possibly engaging in soft power-based coalition building and this seems a policy drawn up vis-à-vis China if not actively targeted against it. But this does not appear yet to be a clearly thought out strategy.

The Dalai Lama might not necessarily be important in this endeavour. In fact, it is

possible that this could be the Indian way of preparing for a post-Dalai Lama scenario. Since it cannot be involved in the selection of the next Dalai Lama, such a process at least reduces the legitimacy and/or importance of the Dalai Lama chosen by the Chinese.

Against, this backdrop, the absence of the President and the Prime Minister – which was seen as an additional inducement to the Chinese to continue with the SRs meeting – does not materially affect Indian objectives