



‘Give up “splittist activities”’ - Its Meaning and Significance: Review of recent Chinese responses to Internationalization of the Tibet issue

Speaker: Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

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Tshering Chonzom began by discussing the genesis of the phrase ‘give up splittist activities’. She mentioned that it is a common refrain in the Chinese leadership’s repertoire when referring to the Tibet issue. It basically is a reference to international campaigns by various Tibetan actors that peaked in the late 1980s and is more commonly referred to as ‘internationalisation of the Tibet issue’. These campaigns were accompanied by massive and unrelenting protests inside Tibet which resulted in the passing of many international resolutions condemning China. Result being that, China blamed the ‘Dalai clique’ for all the problems. ‘Dalai clique’ is a term often used to denote not just the DL but everybody who participated in ‘internationalisation of the Tibet issue’. The speaker informed that she would not go into the details of the context of the protests or the rationale behind Tibetan campaigns. Neither would she go into details about the context and rationale of Chinese responses.

The speaker cited a few quotes to present a sense about Chinese sensitivities pertaining to the issue. All the statements by various officials and agencies hark on foreign interference or pressure, and collusion between the Dalai Lama and anti-China or enemy forces directed at ‘splitting’ China.

The speaker next discussed Beijing’s policy of ‘external propaganda’ to counter the ‘internationalisation’ or ‘splittist activities’ by the exile Tibetans. This involved publication of

books, magazines, CDs, websites, outreach activities to universities, media visits, organising of strategy conferences, Tibet museum exhibitions within China for foreign diplomats and media persons as also outside, delegation diplomacy and white papers. And commemorative events like Serf emancipation day that was a point of publicity during delegation diplomacy.

She mentioned about leaked reports of two propaganda conferences held in 1993 and 2000 to give a sense about the ongoing debates and planning. The next part of the presentation discussed the two important instruments of propaganda – white papers and delegation diplomacy. She mentioned that China issued its first-ever white paper in 1991 following international criticism of its crackdown of the Tiananmen demonstrations. She saw some link between the inception of Chinese propaganda work and Tibet. For, not only China's second white paper in 1992 was on Tibet, but the head of Chinese propaganda machinery from 1989-2002 was Ding Guangen, who was one of the persons that the Dalai Lama's interlocutors met in Beijing during the talks. Out of 92, about 11 white papers dealt specifically with what Beijing considered were concerns related to its Tibet policy. The speaker argued that the various white papers are also a benchmark in many ways to gauge the status of the Tibet issue in Beijing's perspective. For example, the two white papers that were issued in the 1990s were on Tibet's human rights issues. In the 2000s the number and frequency of white papers increased to six and so did the subjects.

The last segment of the presentation discussed delegation diplomacy which the author informed commenced since 2009, which is following the 2008 protests. There were also simultaneous Tibetology/cultural delegations headed by Chinese delegates to the same destinations in some of the years. Like the white paper, the delegations tended to focus on contemporary issues and events - such as, self-immolations, international resolutions, including recent Chinese policies and achievements in Tibet. Target groups and activities during the visits involved: Press conferences, interviews, briefings to parliamentarians and politicians, discussions or symposiums with overseas Chinese, and interactions with bilateral parliamentary forums. Interestingly, an interaction was held this year with overseas Tibetans in Zurich. Another approach that seems inclusive on the surface is by bringing Tibetan delegates to narrate personal stories of success.

The speaker made use of charts to present a sense about the distribution of countries visited, frequency of visits, and composition of delegates. As far as the delegations led by government officials are concerned, in total, 11 delegations visited 11 countries in North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific and Latin America, 20 times. The delegation of 'Chinese Tibetologists' or 'Chinese Tibetan Cultural exchange delegations' conducted 11 visits to 12 countries, 17 times. In total, 22 official

and non-official delegations visited 16 countries, 36 times in the last 6 and half years. Many of these countries are frequently visited by the Dalai Lama and also host active Tibet support groups.

The speaker informed that for further research, it would be interesting to see how particular countries are included or excluded for different formats of visits. Whether it is a Chinese prerogative to choose these destinations or that of the countries receiving these delegations. And what might have been the imperatives?

The speaker made a few preliminary observations given that the study was still ongoing. While there has been one lone critical report on the delegation diplomacy in the Chinese media, the white papers have received full marks as an important outreach tool internally. It is clear that both actors are involved in a massive struggle over who can better represent the Tibet question at the international stage. At the organizational level, the speaker informed that it would be relevant to look into the Propaganda department, disposition of its heads and overall policy approaches.

In conclusion, the speaker pointed towards what she saw as a major problem. The continuation of – Tibetan campaigns versus Chinese propaganda work –framework may seem effective in the short term, but they also end up doing huge damage by increasing the gap between the two sides, given that no known effective channel of communication exist between the two sides. One main problem seems to be the inadequate Chinese understanding about the causes and the actors it considers as being responsible for ‘splittist activities’.

Report prepared by Tshering Chonzom Bhutia, Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies

Discussion

Much of the discussion revolved around the contentious issue of Sino-Tibetan relations historically. A question was posed as to why none of these Chinese delegations made their way to India. One audience member added that there have been delegations to ICS though they were un-official delegations. Another important issue raised was not only is it important to study the intensity and magnitude of these diplomacy efforts but also their effectiveness. The speaker informed that she has been looking at that aspect in her larger study. In itself, it is a difficult process, as both sides seem to be doing their best to outdo the other. Further, in isolation, both seem to be doing well in impacting their respective target constituencies. On this point, the speaker argued that that again brings one to the whole question about the efficacy and need of such efforts in the first place. Nonetheless, the speaker averred that she is trying to apply a quantitative method to understand the extent of Chinese success in outmanoeuvring the Tibetans in international propaganda campaigns and vice versa.

About the Speaker

Tshering Chonzom Bhutia is an Associate Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She has a PhD from the Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. Her thesis was an attempt at generating knowledge on the dynamics of the Sino-Tibetan conflict in engendering a sustained impasse by using negotiation theory as an analytical tool. She speaks and writes regularly on this and related themes. In January 2013, she was part of a three member delegation from India to Kathmandu to launch the initiative 'China-India-Nepal Trilateral Cooperation', hosted by the Nepal Institute of International and Strategic Studies in collaboration with the ICS and a number of institutions in China. Earlier, she undertook a one month study visit to Taiwan in 2007 where she attended lectures on Taiwanese culture, society, economy and polity. She is currently recipient of an ICSSR project grant to study Indian and Chinese ethnic minority policies.

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