



Dalai Lama's Entry into India and the Centrality of Tibet

Speaker: Ms. Sonia Shukla, Adjunct Fellow, ICS

Chair: Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, ICS

23 September

Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

The presentation by Sonia Shukla delved into the implications of the Dalai Lama's domicile in India on stability inside Tibet, Chinese (mis)perceptions about India's interest in Tibet and the centrality of the Dalai Lama/Tibet in India-China relations. She referred to the recently published book *The Noodlemaker of Kalimpong* authored by Gyalo Thondup and Anne F. Thurston. The book is significant because it is the story of Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of the Dalai Lama and a key figure in the Tibetan struggle, particularly with respect to the negotiations between the Tibetan and Chinese leaders.

The speaker's opening argument was that the Dalai Lama's entry into India changed the dynamics of the relationship between 'India, China and Tibet'. She explained that Tibet emerges as a significant factor in the India-China border negotiations, especially with respect to the eastern sector, as Tibet and Tawang have close historical links. The entry and asylum of the Dalai Lama has been a major irritant for Beijing and is often regarded as an indication of New Delhi's hegemonic designs over Tibet. The speaker did not disagree with the proposition that the Dalai Lama's presence in India is fueling 'insurgency' in Tibet, however, she pointed to the role of internal actors in keeping the insurgency alive. In addition, the speaker dismissed the view prevalent in Beijing that India has aspirations to control Tibet as an 'over-imagination'.

Delving deeper, the speaker discussed the ways in which she saw these perceptions and insecurities were playing out in Beijing and the counter-responses thereupon. She discussed Chinese responses to the 2005 India-China agreement as indicative of their misperceptions about India. In her view, the Chinese tended to see a direct linkage between the border issue and India's foreign policy behavior. They feel that any conciliatory gesture on the border front leads to an emboldened India. She further argued that for China, the stability of Tibet was hence linked to how it kept India in check, vis a vis the border issue. China seems to think that any sort of settlement of the border issue emboldens India to create trouble in Tibet. This, she argued, has emerged as a new concern for India in dealing with China. The instability witnessed in Tibet in 2008 has further complicated matters. Against this background, the speaker opined that it was important to understand the psyche of the Chinese who seem to imagine that India has a huge interest in Tibet.

The speaker once again reverted to discussing Gyalo Thondup's book to show how his views tended to confirm Chinese suspicions; however, she sought to argue otherwise by questioning some of the details in Thondup's account. She referred to the instance where Thondup claims that in 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru had asked him to transmit his messages to Tibet. These messages urged the Tibetan government to undertake military mobilization against an imminent communist attack without waiting for an overt signal and that India was willing to help with the supply of arms and ammunitions and the training of the soldiers. She found his account implausible owing to a few reasons. Firstly, the Tibetan government did not respond to these messages. Secondly, in mid-December 1950, by Thondup's account, the Dalai Lama was refused asylum by India. Even though she discussed Thondup's rationalization of Nehru's reasons for the refusal – that the latter had been disappointed with the indifference of the Tibetan government to his messages – she was not quite convinced about the turn of events as narrated by Thondup.. Thirdly, she referred to the fact that in September 1954, Thondup had led a delegation to Nehru seeking India's intervention on behalf of Tibet, which too did not receive any Indian enthusiasm. While Thondup argued that this may be owing to Nehru's loss of faith in the Tibetans, the speaker felt that his version of the sequence of event was not adding up. Further, the Dalai Lama was refused political asylum again in 1956 by India. She questioned, how is it possible that India is so keen to support Tibetan resistance against China in 1949 and is no longer interested in doing so in a matter of few months? The speaker then moved on to talk about the CIA operations in Tibet. She rejected Thondup's attempt to portray it as an Indian supported operation. She argued that India had nothing to do with it. The speaker also discussed the series of events that led to the Dalai Lama's entry and asylum in India in 1959 and the kind of overwhelming reception he was accorded on arrival based on her field interviews in Tawang.

Moving on, the speaker discussed India's concerns beyond the Tibet factor. She argued that the 1962 war was the turning point in India-China relations, which in effect, completely changed Nehru's view of Tibet. Having said that, she did not support Chinese views that India harbors any interest in Tibet, except as some sort of a buffer state between India and China. Alternately, she argued that the insecurity regarding Tibet is being used by China to frame India in a bad light. The speaker concluded that Tibet is thus central in India-China relations and by not confronting the Tibet issue, policymakers in India are not doing justice to the real cause of trouble in its relations with China

Discussion

The ensuing discussion was quite engaging and involved a number of interesting questions and back and forth comments and discussion. A relevant suggestion pertained to the need to contextualise the details provided in the whole story with verified sources in order to arrive at an objective conclusion of what actually might have transpired. A few members in the audience questioned/rejected Thondup's account pertaining to Nehru's interest in supporting Tibetan resistance in Tibet as Nehru had always been confident of China's friendship. The speaker acknowledged that parts of the book seem to be mere speculations and rather contradictory in relation to reality. The speaker's thesis that the Tibet issue is central to India-China relations generated a lot of interest and queries. Another dimension of the discussion involved arguing that India's ability to use the 'Tibet card' in strengthening the Indian case in the negotiations with China is limited. A more realistic policy for India is to promote dialogue between the Tibetans and China, and urging the latter to respect human rights and mobilize world opinion around it.

The speaker responded by saying that her main concern is to put the Tibet issue at the forefront of negotiations between India and China. India should firmly posit that the resolution of the Tibet issue should precede any settlement of the border issue.

Report prepared by Ms. Vaishali Singh, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Sonia Shukla is an Adjunct Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She is currently co-authoring a book on the India-China border policy, and working as a consultant on Indian foreign and security policy issues. While specialising in international security issues, Sonia launched and edited a high-end strategic affairs magazine called, Defence and Security of India. Sonia has been an editor at The Indian Express, contributing regular articles on India's fight against terrorism and the rise of fundamentalist forces in the region, India-Pakistan relations, Missile Defence, India's relations with its other neighbours and the United States. Her writings and papers have also appeared in China Report, The Business Standard and Hard News. Apart from journalism, Sonia edited a book on Peace Processes in Asia and Africa in 2006. As part of her book research, Sonia lived in Arunachal Pradesh, close to the China border in the West Kameng and Tawang districts. As part of her work, Sonia travelled in China, Vietnam and Indonesia to study the impact of economic reforms in 2001. Sonia also worked at The Independent newspaper in London in May 2000 as a Chevening Scholar at the University of Westminster, London. Her interests are travelling, reading, and trekking.

Disclaimer

The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.