



## A Review of the 2016 Forum on the Development of Tibet

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**Tshering Chonzom Bhutia**

Associate Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

[tsheringjnu@gmail.com](mailto:tsheringjnu@gmail.com)

China organised yet another ‘Forum on the Development of Tibet’ that lasted for two days from 7 to 8 July 2016 and was jointly organised by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) local government and the central State Council Information Office (SCIO). While Yu Zhengsheng, No. 4 on the CPC Politburo Standing Committee and Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) merely sent a congratulatory letter to the previous Forum, that is the Fourth Forum in 2014 and the first to be organised inside China, the opening speech in the latest Forum was made by Liu Qibao, a Politburo member and also head of the Propaganda/Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee.

While there were 100 participants from over 30 countries in the 2014 Forum, this Forum had about 130 participants from 30 countries and the ratio of the number of participants

from outside and inside China in the previous Forum was 4:6, this time it was 6:7 (China Tibet Online 2016). Before the Forum, the participants who were in Lhasa from 4-8 July 2016, were taken for field visits and exchanges in Lhasa and Lhoka (Ch: Shannan) cities of the TAR about which there is little information except for a few pictures.

The Forum wholeheartedly embraced and propagated the ‘new development concepts’ of ‘innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared growth’ that was announced in China’s 13th Five Year Plan for 2016-2020. Accordingly, the theme of the 2016 Forum was ‘New Stage in Tibet’s Development: Innovation, Coordination, Ecology, Openness, and Sharing’. The 2016 LC, as also the opening speech by Liu Qibao, touted them as the ‘new’ ‘norms of development’. While his speech is not available online, reports mention that he

conducted an ‘inspection tour’ (People’s Daily 2016) from 4-8 July, the same time as the foreign visitors, which may convey a sense about his priorities vis-à-vis Tibet. He visited ‘cultural and entertainment center (sic) and several media outlets’ such as a Tibetan TV station and office of the China Tibet News (SCIO 2016), as well as, ‘rural areas, communities and temples’ in Lhasa, Nyingchi, and Shigatse (Ch: Xigaze) (Xinhua 2016e).

*‘If we want to rule the country, we must start with the border, if we want to deal with the border, we start with Tibet’*

As far as his speech is concerned, Liu is reported to have said that, ‘the region (TAR) is on the cusp of a new round of development’. Following the forum, on 28 July, Liu attended a symposium on new development concepts in Beijing (Xinhua 2016c), therefore, indicating a renewed and consistent engagement on the subject on his part. However, during his tour of the previously mentioned locations in and around Lhasa, he focused on safeguarding ‘national unity’ and building a ‘great wall against separatism’. Liu called for the implementation of ‘the party’s strategy to rule Tibet’ though he did not elaborate on it. Referring to Xi Jinping’s ‘important strategic thought’ that ‘[I]f we want to rule the country, we must start with the border, if we want to deal with the border, we start with Tibet’, he repeatedly emphasised the need for education of the people on ‘national unity’. He reminded the local government about the role of schools in achieving this end.

Going further, the people were also to be educated in ‘thanksgiving’ to the ‘party’, the

‘country’, ‘the motherland and the people’ for the development of Tibet. All of this, according to him, was necessary ‘to build a new, beautiful, happy, (and) harmonious Tibet’ (Xinhua 2016e).

## Organisational and programmatic issues

Technically, this is the fifth such forum to be held, with the first three held outside China – in Vienna (2007), Rome (2009) and Greece (2011) – and the last two inside China, in Lhasa, the capital city of the TAR. However, the conference banner and reports do not attach a number to the latest forum and prefer to mention ‘2016 Forum on the Development of Tibet’ as its title.<sup>1</sup>

To recollect, details about the 2014 Forum, its programme, list of participants, leave alone presentations, were barely available and as a result, one had to rely on media reports. This time, by contrast, the news and information about the event, including the programme schedule (Tibet Online 2016b) and conference speeches were made available in one single web portal<sup>2</sup> shortly after the conclusion of the event; the portal also carries some information about the older forums. Nevertheless, after going through the website and the author’s personal discussion with a participant, one gathers that the Forum suffered from many organisational issues. The website has classified the conference presentations under three different heads. 1) A section titled ‘Speeches of opening ceremony’ has links to two news reports that carry summaries of some of the speeches. 2) Another section

<sup>1</sup> The conference declaration mentions that it is ‘the second of its kind to be held in China since 2014’ (Tibet Online 2016a).

<sup>2</sup> The website is available online at <http://en.tibetol.cn/01/04/2016/02/>

titled 'Conference speeches' carries seven presentations, whereas the programme lists eight speakers.<sup>3</sup> 3) A third set of presentations is listed under five topics.<sup>4</sup> Each topic has links to 10 presentations, which amounts to a total of about 50 presentations excluding the ones earlier mentioned.

While the first and second set of conference speeches were made on the morning of the first day, it is not clear when and how much time was slotted for the other 50 speakers. They might have been accommodated in the second half of the first day and/or the first half of the second day in the sessions titled 'Group discussion'. It would have been quite a feat to fit in so many presentations, some of them running into many pages (on the website), given that only three hours (spread out over two days) were dedicated to group discussion as per the programme. One of the participants confided to the author that initially he/she was asked to prepare a 45-minute long presentation.

Later, during the event, however, the time slot was repeatedly shortened in order to accommodate all speakers; in the end, the speaker was allotted only five minutes for the presentation. This may or may not be representative of the whole picture, but indicates problems with organisation. It is also possible that the organisers were not sure about how many would actually accept

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<sup>3</sup> Seems that the speaker was shifted to the next session as his presentation is available under the heading 'Topic 1' of the website.

<sup>4</sup> The five topics are 'Innovative Development: Opportunities and Alternatives', 'Coordinated Development: Integration of Traditions and Modernity', 'Green Development: Potentials and Advantages', 'Open Development: New Vision of the Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative' and 'Shared Development: Targeted Poverty Alleviation and Livelihood Improvements'.

the invitation and how many might finally turn up at the actual event given the controversial nature of the event.

The problem related to obtaining the list of attendees at the Forum is somewhat resolved as one can now go through the conference speeches and obtain the name of most of the presenters.

## The 'Lhasa Consensus'

Interestingly, despite all the controversy garnered by the conference declaration titled 'Lhasa Consensus' that was issued on the conclusion of the Fourth Forum in 2014 (Xinhua 2014), the organisers yet again issued another 'Lhasa Consensus' (Tibet Online 2016a). The 2016 Lhasa Consensus (LC), as it is being referred to in the document, circumvents controversy by avoiding the mistakes of the previous LC which made eight points, all of which began with the sentence 'participants notice/unanimously agree', as if the main purpose of the event was to gain participant (mainly international) endorsement of China's achievements in Tibet.

*There were three sets of conference presentations with the last one featuring a total of 50 presentations*

A major problem with the last LC was that it was projected as being unanimously passed by the conference participants. This one too has similar overtones when it states 'The participants conducted vigorous discussions. They have reached the following consensus'. One of the participants in the 2014 Forum, Sir Robert (Bob) Parker, a former mayor of Christchurch, New Zealand dissociated himself from the 2014 LC stating that 'I certainly haven't signed up to it'. He further

informed that ‘a number of people who were there were a little surprised to hear about that statement’, referring to the LC (Sudworth 2014). While, there has not been a disavowal of the 2016 Forum or the LC by any of the foreign participants so far, what may be considered an improvement this time is that the organisers have desisted from politicising the LC by refraining from making accusatory references to the Dalai Lama or the Western media as was done in 2014.

*The conference declaration, the 2016 Lhasa Consensus, has similar overtones as its predecessor in projecting unanimity in views of the participants*

Nonetheless, the Forum again attracted immediate criticism from international Tibet support groups, Free Tibet and the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) that had criticised the previous forum too. Free Tibet director Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren saw it as a ‘PR strategy’ to ‘herd delegates around a cherry-picked selection of photo opportunities and show-villages’ and likened it to a ‘wafer-thin veneer’ seeking to ‘hide the rot underneath’ (Free Tibet 2016). International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) President, Matteo Meccaci saw the Forum as an attempt to ‘gain legitimacy abroad’ and likened it to ‘Potemkin tours’ (International Campaign for Tibet 2016). Therefore, the Forum continues to be viewed negatively even though the organisers this time chose not to target the Dalai Lama or international media ‘bias’.

It goes to show that such a China-organised programme with a Tibet theme and strong elements of publicity, will continue to meet

with scepticism; even the foreign delegates are being held to account for choosing to attend such an event. While affirming that ‘intelligent people don’t like being herded, overseen and treated like idiots’, Byrne-Rosengren of Free Tibet, condemned those ‘delegates who are unable ... or unwilling to challenge it’ (Free Tibet 2016). The ICT article on the Forum found it noteworthy that participants chose to participate in a conference ‘even despite the language last year of the Lhasa Consensus’ with reference to the Dalai Lama and the international media.

The LC singled out Tibet’s high altitude, culture and environment as important imperatives and focus of continued construction and development work – that all the unique characteristics of Tibet have to adapt themselves on the path to development, and are to be guided by the concepts of opening and sharing.

## **Continued emphasis on publicity**

One of the primary questions this author had asked in a previous article reviewing the 2014 Forum was – what was the ‘Forum’s objective or even ... what was really discussed or achieved from the meeting’ (Chonzom 2015). Also, what sets it apart from the similar government hosted Tibet meetings that do not invite international participants and are attended by almost all the CCP Politburo Standing Committee members; the latest of which was held just last year in 2015. While the questions remain unanswered, it was clear that the 4th Forum was an exercise at propaganda/publicity given the fact that the State Council Information Office (SCIO) was and continues as one of the organisers.

Briefly, the SCIO was established in 1991 in the aftermath of international condemnation of China's handling of the 1989 Tiananmen incident 'to assist news media in presenting aspects of China to the world' (China.org. 2014). Nowhere in the SCIO's responsibilities is there a mention about its role as a policy planner or implementer of policies related to a region's or province's development. The Propaganda/Publicity Department of the CCP seems to be the shadow joint organiser given the fact that both the Head and Vice Minister of the Propaganda department, Liu Qibao and Cui Yuying (also Deputy Director of the SCIO) respectively, were present at the Forum. Xinhua carried an article titled 'Senior CPC official calls for better publicity of Tibet', in which Liu is said to have emphasised 'more publicity for the central authority's policies in Tibet' (Xinhua 2016d).

Further, the organisers commended themselves in the final point of the LC, which affirms the analysis that the purpose of the event primarily was to carry out publicity work. The LC states, 'the forum ... is a positive action to show China's confidence and openness to the world. The event will help the world better understand Tibet and build consensus on it, which is beneficial to Tibet's development'.

## **Praised be Thy Name**

A noted feature of these forums has been the Chinese media's overwhelming focus on the words of praise by international participants about China's achievements in Tibet. Christine Davies, Vice President, Global Partnerships, Asia Society and one of the star participants in the Forum, who gave a speech in the opening ceremony is quoted by Xinhua as hoping that 'many outside groups ... are invited to follow in our path this week and see firsthand both the progress

and opportunities that exist for further development of this strategic region' (KangbaTV.com 2016).

The same report cited Nikhil Agarwal, Senior Correspondent, Kolkata Bureau of Press Trust of India as seeing the Forum as an alternative to the 'bias' existing outside about the situation inside Tibet. French writer, Sonia Jeanne Bressler, is cited as calling upon the Western world to 'put down our ignorance' and the tendency to 'always approach the subject of Tibet through the prism of the English language and the Anglo-American culture' (KangbaTV.com 2016).

*Free Tibet condemned those  
'delegates who are unable or  
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Another Xinhua report titled 'Foreign experts marvel at rapid development of Tibet' cited praise by Mewati Sitaram Bholaram, a senior correspondent with India's Mumbai Messenger, Russian editor Maksim Belov of the Beijing-based China Pictorial magazine, Stefano Vernole, a researcher with Italy's Eurasia-Mediterranean Study Center and Farhana Paruk, a researcher at the University of South Africa (Xinhua 2016a). Bonaventure Haruna with the University of Jos in Nigeria was quoted on China Radio International as expressing happiness at Tibet's development (China Tibet News 2016). An article titled 'Tibet through the eyes of a western scholar' dwelled on the admiration of one particular scholar Albert Ettinger from Germany who has reportedly written two books on Tibet (Xinhua 2016b).

The China Tibet News carried an article that quoted Aided from Latvia saying Tibet ‘is completely different from what I imaged (sic)’. A ‘Mr Jim’ from the European and Asia Issue Research Institute is said to have been impressed by Tibet’s development and is quoted as commending the fact that ‘Tibet not only pays attention to central city’s development, but also emphasizes balanced development between rural and urban areas’.

*Propaganda Department of the CCP seems to be the shadow joint organiser as both its Head and Vice Minister were present at the Forum*

Another delegate from India, Anil is shown as praising China’s efforts in protecting Tibetan culture after a visit to the Tibet University. The article itself is self-laudatory while mentioning ‘guests ... can feel that people live a happy life under the leadership of the party and the government, and Tibet’s reform and development achieve (sic) great progress’ (Xzxw.com 2016). It is important to mention here that the participants’ statements may not always represent the totality of their respective views given the tendency of the Chinese media to quote selectively.

## **Tibet and the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’**

Most interestingly, discussion on Tibet’s importance to Xi Jinping’s pet project, ‘One Belt, One Road’ or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) came up at the Forum with one of the five topics (with 10 presentations) solely devoted to the subject. David Monyae, co-director of the University of Johannesburg Confucius Institute in South

Africa argues that ‘the success of the initiative largely depends on how China manages its underdeveloped western regions such as Tibet’ (China Tibet News 2016). Liu Yongfeng, Deputy Director General of the Department of External Security Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), mentions that ‘Tibet was once the gateway to the (sic) South Asia, and so it is now’ (Liu 2016).

Notwithstanding the TAR’s eagerness to integrate itself with the BRI, it is worth noting that while the Nepalese government has welcomed the BRI, the Indian government has been wary from the outset. While the concerns have not been articulated as such, some of them may pertain to the nature of cross-border trade that is going to take place through all the infrastructure connectivity underway in the TAR. Will the road and rail network inside the TAR merely facilitate the transportation of commodities from coastal China through India’s northern border states, thereby accentuating the trade imbalance?

In this context, we may also ask what is the capacity of the TAR to utilise BRI funds and does it have industries that can carry out large-scale production for export? Is it going to result in the migration of more Chinese (non-Tibetan) population to the TAR owing to increased development in the region leading to enhanced economic opportunities? Would the non-Tibetan migrants prefer to settle in the TAR or plausibly on the Indo-Tibetan borders, thus, aggravating India’s security concerns? How would the bordering provinces/states in both countries benefit, apart from the single-minded focus on tourism or pilgrimage travel?

As long as India remains sceptical of the BRI, in the face of continued instability inside Tibet, the latter’s role in connecting

China to South Asia would remain limited; China is also not likely to allow the free passage of Tibetan people in and out of Tibet into South Asia, primarily India. Of what use are the rails and roads then is a question that is likely to be raised by people on both sides of the Himalayan border. These are questions that did not come up in the Forum's eagerness to project TAR as a natural bridge to South Asia.

## The Point of It All

In essence, the dogged focus on 'foreign' participants and their praises tends to overshadow the substantive points that might have been discussed at the conference vis-à-vis Tibet's development. In fact, if one goes through the web portal that carries the presentations of the speakers there are many important points made by some of the participants, international, as well as, Chinese. The Chinese media too dwelled on some of them. For example, Markus Rudolph, Member of Executive Committee for Foreign Affairs, Security, European and Development Policy, CDU Hamburg, Germany, argued for 'good education at school for all, up-to-date and well-qualified professional education and higher education' as important for Tibet's modernisation (KangbaTV.com 2016). Thanong Khanthong, Executive director, Nation TV Station, Bangkok, Thailand, called for 'sustainable tourism' in Tibet and 'preserving its wonder and traditional way of life' (KangbaTV.com 2016).

Further, many important points related to poverty relief, environmental protection, cultural preservation alongside development and so on were also mentioned in the various presentations, albeit in an uncritical and prescriptive framework. Of course, at the end of the day, the most important question is how many of such

recommendations made at the Forum, especially by foreigners, are going to percolate into government decisions. It will be interesting to observe the next Forum in 2018 with regards further improvements likely to be made in terms of organisation, publicity, programme, participation, and so on. ■

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