

Quiet Diplomacy on The ‘Roof of the World’

by Mary Burdman

Amidst many dramatic international developments, a quiet, but notable, process is going on “at the roof of the world”—Tibet. For three weeks, during Sept. 9-24, a delegation of high-level representatives of the Dalai Lama, the exiled former religious and temporal leader of Tibet, visited China and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the first such visit since 1985.

On his return, Special Envoy Lodi Gyari, head of the delegation, announced that the purpose of the visit was to “re-establish direct contact with the leadership in Beijing and to create a conducive atmosphere enabling direct face-to-face meetings on a regular basis in future.” The delegates strove to build “confidence by dispelling distrust and misconception.” Most notable, is that Lodi Gyari emphasized the impact of the economic progress in the region, and the development projects being undertaken in the Tibetan areas. “We have been impressed by the dedication and competency displayed by many of the Tibetan officials,” he wrote.

While “encouraging and admiring their efforts to develop Tibet economically, we drew their attention to the importance of paying equal attention to preserving Tibet’s distinct cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage,” the envoy added. The two sides also discussed the importance of protecting the “delicate” natural balance in Tibet—an important issue, considering that Tibet is the source of five of the greatest rivers in Asia.

This visit, downplayed while it was going on as a “private” affair—although at the invitation of Beijing—must be seen in the context of improving relations between China and India, Asia’s two giants.

The status of Tibet and the role of the Dalai Lama—supported by U.S. intelligence—were a key factor in setting off the nasty, but short, 1962 border conflict between China and India. Border questions remain still to be solved.

However, totally new elements could rapidly transform the situation. China is now building the first-ever railroad into Tibet. This incredible project has great potential for India as well. Before the 1950s, most trade routes to Tibet went through India, because access geographically—extremely challenging everywhere—was relatively easier from the Indian side. When the railroad reaches the Tibetan capital Lhasa in 2007, a great opportunity will exist for India to directly join the “Eurasian Land-Bridge”; at first, by road, eventually, by rail. There are still *no* rail connections between India and the rest of Eurasia.

‘Frank Exchanges’ in Beijing

The importance for the region’s stability is also great. Well into the 20th Century, Tibet was a key “geopolitical” factor, frequently played by, first, the British Empire, and then the United States, as a bone of contention between China, India, and even Russia, which also has a Buddhist population.

Until recently, Hollywood tried to exploit its crass “vision” of Tibet—until this came to grief over the problem of its similarity with the Nazi Party “vision” of Tibet some decades earlier. There have also been revelations about the nasty CIA-run “insurgency” operation in Tibet well into the 1960s—which led only to the many Tibetan deaths.

The Dalai Lama, who, Gyardi wrote, “welcomed the positive gesture of the leadership in Beijing . . . and was very pleased that a renewed contact had been established,” has lived in Dharamsala, India, and maintained his “government in exile” there for 40 years. A resolution of this situation would improve relations overall.

The Dalai Lama sent a four-person delegation led by Lodi Gyari, his “envoy” to the United States, and Kelsang Gyaltzen, his envoy to Europe. Other diplomacy has been going on, including the “unofficial” visit to China in July of Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama’s elder brother. The delegation visited the cities of Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, and Lhasa, as well as the regions of Nyingtri and Shigatse in Tibet. There, Lodi Gyari and Kelsang Gyaltzen met officials of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC); the Tibet Autonomous Region government; and regional Communist Party leaders. They visited Buddhist shrines in Lhasa, Shanghai, and other Chinese cities.

In Beijing, the delegates had “frank” exchanges “in a cordial atmosphere” with high-level CPPCC and government officials, and reported “keen interest” on the Chinese side. Lodi Gyari, who had been in Beijing in the early 1980s, was impressed by the “much greater flexibility” from Beijing at this time.

Some moves from the Dalai Lama’s side may have contributed to these openings. In a commemorative message on the first anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001, the Dalai Lama emphasized the “great importance” of responding “to an act of violence by employing the principles of *non-violence*. . . . The attacks on the United States were shocking, but retaliation that involves the use of further violence may not be the best solution in the long run.” “These issues,” he emphasized, “concern the whole of humanity, not just one country.” This is not a message to go down well with the George W. Bush Administration right now.

Then, on Sept. 30, Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, “prime minister” of the Tibetan government-in-exile, issued a circular to all Tibetans abroad, noting the recent “positive development in our effort to re-establish contact with the Chinese leadership.” He requested that during the October visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin to the United States and Mexico, Tibetans “refrain from public actions like rallies and demonstrations” against the Chinese President.

FIGURE 1

China and the Province of Tibet



Involvement of India

Problems remain great, and will take a long time to resolve. China is emphatic on three preconditions for a dialogue with the Dalai Lama—ending his activities to split China; recognizing Tibet and Taiwan as part of China; and accepting the present government in Beijing as the sole representative of all of China.

The Dalai Lama, in turn, calls for what he terms “genuine autonomy” for Tibet, and its “demilitarization”—as opposed to either direct rule from Beijing, or independence. Such autonomy would leave military and foreign affairs in Beijing’s hands. The Chinese side has frequently questioned the sincerity of this demand; now, it will be put to the test.

For example, as recently as Sept. 18, Gyaria Dolma, vice-chair of the “Tibetan Parliament,” called on New Delhi to actively support the Dalai Lama’s policies. She played up the allegation that China had deployed missiles in Tibet, with a range of 4,800-12,800 kilometers, and that these are a “matter of grave concern” for India, which lies within a 2,000 km range of Tibet.

The past 40 years have well established—as all reasonable forces in New Delhi know—that China has no national interest whatever in targetting India. The only threat India could pose to China were if India became too entangled in

approaches to the current U.S. “new Roman Empire”—something which reasonable forces in India would also oppose.

Something to watch is the upcoming visit of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to China, which could occur as early as this year. There have been some high-level military exchanges between the two sides, and there is potential for more. As the *Times of India* noted on Oct. 4, there are “growing expectations” in Beijing, that Vajpayee’s visit will lead to creation of a “comprehensive partnership of cooperation” between the two Asian giants.

Chinese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Wang Yi told the *Times of India* that China wants to “establish mutually beneficial and reciprocal economic relations” and to “create a stable and harmonious regional security environment.” This would enable India and China to address the “serious imbalance of powers in the world,” by which “issues of war and peace would be decided by one or two nations and not by a majority of them.”

As C. Raja Mohan wrote in the Indian newspaper *The Hindu* on Sept. 20, “What would be most important, would be a final settlement, the return of the Dalai Lama and the large community of exiles based in India, and the transformation of Tibet from a political barrier in bilateral relations into a land bridge with China.”