

# Tibet as a Factor in India–China Border Dispute

Bibhuti Bhusan Biswas

## Abstract

*In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, China is one of the fastest growing economies and China poses intricate challenge to India's national security decision-making. Nevertheless, trade between India and China has grown in many folds, the border issue remains contentious. The Tibet issue is closely linked to the border issue, despite several sessions of talks it has remained intractable with tensions periodically coming up at various points on the long border. In fact, India's granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959 is an irritating point for China. On the other hand, Tibetans refugee populations in India around 130,000 and they are living in India around half a century. The community by and large remains loyal to the Dalai Lama headed government-in-exile in Dharamshala, and still nurtures the hope of returning to a free and autonomous, if not independent, Tibet. However, the Tibet issue figures only as a bargaining chip to regulate Beijing and New Delhi's bilateral relations, not as an issue that has an independent bearing on the intractability or resolution of the Sino–Indian border dispute. Under this backdrop, the present paper make an attempt to understand whether Tibet issue is just a bargaining point for both the countries or it may bring deficit in trade and commerce? This paper will also make an attempt to analyses what would be the possible way ahead for both the countries in near future.*

**Keywords:** Border Dispute, Dalai Lama, Government-in-exile. India-China, Tibet

## Introduction

In the context of international relations, border has played a vital role to evidence the outline of territorial sovereignty which was emerged from the Westphalia Treaty. It was true and historic that the all major war has been done for the accumulation of outside border and land.

As a result, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries imperial and colonial powers expanded their invasion policies in most Asian and African countries. In this sense, border security has been one of the important issues for all sovereign states to protect their land from outside states. India and China have shared total length of 3440 kilometers (Kms) spanning from Karakoram Range in the west to the border of Myanmar in the East, through connecting Tibet along with Himalayas range (Shrivastava, 2016, pp. 14). So, this long-distance border area played a significant role between the two countries and is highly dependent on each other. Hence, it will be seen that how India and China will manage to border in the near future? With this regard, Tibet has played a bargaining chip to regulate India and China border relations

Historically, Tibet represents an autonomous region where Manchu Dynasty gave military assistance to the religious head in Tibet which was referred to as Patron-Priest relationship. In this connection China claimed that Tibet is an integral part of Chinese territory but Tibetan people and Tibetan run temporary head refuse China claims. Subsequently, after the formation of People's Republic of China in 1949, they incorporated Tibet into their control. But this land expansion action wasn't recognized by various countries in the world. Even though, Tibetan people asserted that the Chinese military forcefully violated their human rights and endangered political participations and religious practices in the Tibet. Due to these reasons, the religious leader Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, where Indian government had allowed settling for Tibetan refugees with permission to run Government-in-exile in Dharmashala.

Generally, India and China border dispute is not only questions of two nations sovereignty, but it has also created tension in the entire South Asia region. In fact, Tibet is a key factor in India and China bilateral relations. When China invaded and captured Tibet in 1950, relations have been gone into ups and down. India and China share longest common border, along with economic trades, philosophy and knowledge. It means that each front has tremendous interests and attentions towards the border area. However, both countries have different approaches in the border area. In fact, if we look into the sequence of events then, it has been quite clear that the India and China border dispute deteriorate day by day. Since the decline of Manchu dynasty, British Empire tried to expand its colonizing motives in the Tibetan plateau which was thrusting China. As a result, in July 1947, British India signed secret agreement with United States to permit continuation of aerial activities in Tibet as backing of Chiang

Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) forces against the Mao's Red Army. Interestingly, this was for initial two year but later on it was made for indefinite in 1949 (Ali, 1999). From the Chinese perspectives, Tibet has a strategic importance for them .It has been backdoor in the border area and has huge deposit of resources. So, Chinese communist party wants to control over the Tibetan plateau because they believe if China lose their interest in Tibet then Anglo-American-Indian can gain control over the Tibet.

Since China invaded Tibet in 1950, India China relations has been gradually turned to be tense. New Delhi allows Dalai Lama in India to run Government-in-exile in Dharmashala, and it has created annoyance to Chinese leaders. But initially India did not acknowledge this. However, in 1954, India and China signed a historical agreement on achieving the confidence but Indian academician argued that the confidence did not last a long (Kumar, 2010, p. 189). After the 1962 war, India dramatically changed her policy towards Tibetan refugees. India constantly provided assistance to Tibetan communities including allocation of lands and allowing Dalai lama to visit western countries for getting political support from them (Sikri, 2011). But India does not allow Tibetan refugees to operate anti-Chinese activities in Indian soil. Subsequently, from 1962 to till the visit of Prime Minister of Rajiv Gandhi in China in 1988, India China relations goes into a freeze. In fact, exchange of ambassador had started before Rajiv Gandhi visit but that was not resulted in successful diplomacy. Later, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited China in 2003, where he tried to normalize India-China relations, with the recognition of Tibet as part of territory of the People's Republic of China (Sikri, 2011). And China recognized Sikkim as an integral part of India. Moreover, in 2005, India and China relations got high momentum to reduce tensions and disputes in the border area because Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visited India and agreed to establish India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity which was based on the Principles of Panchsheel and Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlements of the India-China Boundary Question (Sikri, 2011).

### **Tibet: Historical Background**

In the historical discourse the status of Tibet has remained significant. In fact, Chinese and Tibetan relationships have reflected ambiguous, because it had rooted that the Chinese and Tibetan were not share common idea, language and culture. But during the Mongols came to

rule China, Chinese empire seeking to Tibet leave their own cultural practices. As result, the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism travelled across the Himalayas where Tibetan people deeply devoted to transform Tibet as a Buddhist territory. In due course, the Dalai Lama become religious leader and temporary head in the Tibetan territory and he got the military protection from Manchu emperor which was a kind of Patron-Priest relationship (in the Tibetan language *Mchod Yon*). On the other hand, India and Tibet relations constantly endorse religious linkage and share common cultural practices between the both territory such as practices by the people of Ladakh, Sikkim and Tibet. Buddhist philosophy had also reflected important place in both territory which is somewhere recognize Tibet as unique status in the global level. From the perspectives of Chinese scholars, they claim Tibet had been integral part of China because it was been postulates that the imperial domination of China incorporates the position of Tibet within the jurisdiction of Mongol empire in 1206. In this notion of substantial Chinese narratives entitled that the Tibet had integral part of China in the period of Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) through until the present day. Even though, Chinese has structural narratives that the China and Tibet had long back relations even before Yuan dynasty, which was growing together from Tang period (618-907). It is constantly seemed that Chinese interest in Tibet tremendously increase and remains China and Tibet relations had moved into Ming dynasty (1368-1644) up to mark. But during the Qing dynasty-relations had been impacted on the multifaced way to provide substantial development in the Tibetan territory. For instance, the element of various outset of the development had been established in Tibetan territory- whether recruited Qing officials (known as *amban*) and Qing armies deputed to Tibet and *Amban* directed to authority control over the political, financial, defense, communications matters. It had been established China's sovereignty over Tibet by the Qianlong period (1792-1793). Meanwhile, one of the Chinese researches elaborated that the Gurkha invasion of Tibet, which resulted Tibet-Nepalese War in the year 1792-1794, where Qing dynasty supplies adequate military assistance to Tibet and Gurkha moved away from Tibetan territory (The Boundary Question Between Tibet and China , 1940). This incidence had confirmed china's sovereignty over Tibet. These has been well designed manifestation to undertake Chinese interest in the outer border and central Chinese administration predominantly revised its policies for the region of Tibet that had been showing own part of Chinese state for centuries. But the Tibetan thinker cited that the status of Tibet inseparable from Chinese sovereignty and it had been independent state from very long time.

The status of Tibet has one of the contentious and intricate matters for India and China till today. Because, India's relations with China was shrinking due to Tibet issue. British authority in India felt that Tibet is having strategic importance and need to deal proactively because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Qing dynasty had been declined rapidly. So, British didn't want to left easily in this plateau. In fact, it was clearly observed that the Younghusband expedition in the 1904-1905 (British India march on Lhasa) brought world attention toward the Tibetan plateau. Afterward, the revolution was spread in Tibet to overthrow Manchu empire by the Sun-Yat-Sen in 1911. Thus, post 1911 had tremendous changes and Tibet enjoyed independent state status till Mao sent Peoples Liberation Army into Tibet in 1950. India's leaders did not support Tibetan people during the Chinese communist march in Tibet . Once China controlled all over the Tibet then, the religious leader Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959 and Indian leaders permitted him to settle in Dharmashala. As a result, after that India and China relations has been gone to deteriorated and subsequently resulted in 1962 war.

### **India-China Border Dispute: Tibet as a Factor**

Since Dalai Lama fled to India, relationship has spoiled with China because it was not only created annoyance to Chinese policy but also major barricade for imperial Chinese expansion and control over the Tibet. In fact, when Dalai Lama was settled in Dharmashala with the help of Indian leaders then Chinese authority felt aggravation about Indian decisions. That resulted, in India -China border dispute . Tibet has become a core issue for both countries but intention has been different from each other on the basis of Tibetan territory. One side, China wants to establish its own sovereignty over Tibet but India addressed the issue of violation of human right, political equality, religious freedom of Tibetan people. The questions of Tibet issue have been more relevant and bargaining instrument to the India – China border conflicts. The scholars from both sides have represented own narratives on the issue of border dispute. In spite of academic discussions, the border issues has been unresolved even today, which is another trigger for India-China relations. Historically, India China border dispute aren't new incident, which was drawn from the colonial period. Even after the independence of India and subsequently establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, has been fail to demarcation of border whereas, the Tibet centrality remain as a factor for delimitation of border between two Asian countries. Various

scholars articulated that there are four important factors for India-China rivalry with connection to Tibet. These are: uncertainty of Tibetan status, activities of Tibetan refugees in India, Chinese military presence in Tibetan plateau and border dispute.

First of all, status of Tibet has remained key issue for both countries. India's position on the matter of existence of Tibet has been clear to endorse Tibet as a part of China in 1954 (Shakya, 1999), but before British India policy was recognized as a '*de facto* independence of Tibet' – which means 'completely autonomous state'. So, India relented referring Tibet as part of China. But this articulation has been broken after 1962 war and till to visit Indian Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi in 1988 merely used to Tibet as a discussion, while 'Sino-Indian Joint Press Communique' referring as an autonomous region and subsequently, India signed in the declaration that "Tibet as autonomous region is the part of PRC" in 2003 by the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It means that India accepted Tibet as autonomous region of PRC with the conditional authority. Secondly, China has actively focused on the Tibetan refugee activities in India because Chinese policy-makers reacted on the various activities run by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile in against of China and they claimed that India knowingly allow and given material assistance to Tibetan refugees. These incidences led to create obstacle and emerge tension between the India-China relations (Jain, 1981, pp. 473-474). Thirdly, China has been expanding its military presences entire the region of Tibet by build of roads and railways connectivity, deploying huge number of troops and infrastructure developments. One of the research articles estimates that the Chinese PLA deploying large number of troops in Tibet is around 150,000 in Eastern Tibet and 40,000 in the border between India and the Tibet Autonomous Region (Topgyal, 2011). Lastly, the border dispute has remain long-standing issue for both Asian countries. After the independence of India and formation of People's Republic of China have been signed several agreements to resolve border dispute and yet it has been come to productive result. However, after the signed of 'India-China Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Region of China and India' in 1954, the Indian leaders accepted that the Tibet as a part of China. Afterward, Indian Prime Minister J. Nehru observed that there is no any issue regarding border demarcation between India and China. But later on, China published a map where Indian area is drawn to be part of China. These soft corner expansions led to rethink by India's policy-makers to more advance way India and China border issue in the future actions. Although, Chinese expansion to western sectors of Aksai chin (disputed area) through control all

over Tibet and construction of road connection between Xinjiang and Tibet through Aksai chin, which challenges Indian sovereignty, that led to the 1962 war, it has not only an issue with India, but also China intentionally claimed that the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh) is a dispute area where Tibetan led government rule over the territory and British government incorporate into their empire through dodge manner. On the other hand, India refuse China's claimed that the Arunachal Pradesh isn't integral part of India and China's aggressive activities near border area has been challenges to Indian national security. In 1986, India and China border negotiation had breakdown and in the next year, India was allowed to Dalai Lama to visit western countries for political support of Tibetan cause. As result, in 1987, India and China nearly went to war situation in North-Eastern region of Sumdorong Chu, state of Arunachal Pradesh (Subrahmanyam, 2005, pp. 216–28). Subsequently, in the world parlimentsrians convension on Tibet held in 20 march, 1994 at the New Delhi, where 25 countries parliamentarians came together and made statement which is also known as New Delhi statement on Tibetan freedom and where they said that '*Tibet was a separate, independent and sovereign nation prior to its invasion and subsequent occupation by the People's Republic of China*' (Zayul, 2004, pp. 282). So, several aggrements and diplomatic talk has been happened in the last six decades by the India and China for delimitation of border issue whereas, Tibet place a central position between both countires. From the 1959 to till present day, India seem to Tibet as an issue of national security and China assume that their own sovergnity over Tibet.

### **India and China Border Dispute: Looking Forward**

The glory of past never be forgotten and with this context, India and China had shared largest economics in the world, including largest market and population which were able to work in agriculture field and other domestic activities. In this richness, both countries have also huge potential of sharing economic, knowledge, production capacity, leaderships etc. So, world has looking actively towards the India and China every step and their relations obviously impact on the global level. Thus, the 21<sup>st</sup> century's India and China border dispute can create obstacle to fulfill the opportunities of super power status. Besides, it was reported that the India and China border faceoff create tension due to deployment of military apparatus, strengthening troops and construction of roads etc. Moreover, recently Indian and Chinese army's faceoff has been reported in the Ladakh region. It is not correct that India and China never be tried to resolve border issues. There

have been several examples of settlement agreements made by two countries. For example, The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) signed in 2013 to prevent tailing of patrols by channels of communication in case of faceoff situations (Bhonsale, 2018, p. 20).

Both countries need to look forward and actively participate in the opportunities of rising globalisation. Even today, India and China have huge economic opportunities in terms of trading, commerce largest market and man powers along with largest population. The continuous efforts of bilateral relations between the two countries has greater extends of strategic relevances in the world. Obviously, there has been tremendous challenges in the border area such as cross border terrorism, human trafficking and uncertainty. Apart from that, Tibet is a factor for India and China border dispute but this not been only one factor. So, China should move away from narrow issue and should establish confidence among the neighbours, especially with India. On the other hand, Tibet claimed that the Chinese army forcefully violate human rights and religious freedom of Tibetan people. But Indian leaders shown their interest towards Tibet is more clear, — to recognised Tibet as a autonomous state is part of China and India precisely said that the Tibetan culture, history and religious practices has commonality with Indian subcontinent. So, Dalai Lama fled to India, along with largest refugees who were settled in Dharmashala nothing to be anti-China decision. Scholar has analysed that the “Tibet could conceivably ignite a future Sino-Indian conflict” (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). it has been time to strengthening bilateral relations in more advance level to ensure peaceful and stable border.

## **Conclusion**

The understanding of India and China border dispute are more about political issues. China wants to expand her territory and challenge neighbour's sovereignty and national security whether, it has been issues in the Tibet or in the South China Sea, Chinese aggressive policy challenges the world order. On the other hand, India continuously claimed that it has been question of national security where India has enough capability to ensure national security and sovereignty. Besides, it has also analyzed that Tibet as a factor for India and China border dispute but it has been not only one factor or variable to made instability and tension between two countries. There have been various factors to led India and China border dispute such as arms race, trade competition, searching for super power status, strengthening alliance system, etc. Tibet can play a key role to 'regulate' India and China border dispute.

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