

## **Exploring New Paths: India's Strategic Reassessment of the Tibet Question**

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India and Tibet have shared an enduring civilisational relationship that predates modern geopolitical frameworks. Rooted in centuries of religious, cultural, and philosophical interaction, this relationship was defined by the transmission of Buddhist thought, particularly the Nalanda tradition, from India to the Tibetan plateau. Tibet, in turn, became a vital custodian and disseminator of Indian philosophical and spiritual heritage. Additionally, Tibet holds significance in Hindu traditions, as the site of sacred Mount Kailash, revered as the abode of Lord Shiva.

This civilisational affinity was complemented by robust political and economic engagement. Well into the 19th century, Tibet functioned as a self-governing polity that conducted trade and diplomacy independently, including with India. This autonomy persisted even under British colonial rule in India, reflecting Tibet's de facto sovereign status. However, the Communist invasion of Tibet in 1950 marked a watershed moment. It led to the exile of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of Tibetans to India, fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape of the Himalayas.

Although India viewed the invasion not as an internal matter of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but as an act of external aggression, despite historical clarity, the Indian government initially maintained a cautious diplomatic posture. It recognised the PRC's sovereignty over the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) twice, first under Prime Minister Nehru and again in 2003 under Prime Minister Vajpayee. However, the 2003 proclamation is noteworthy because India formally accepted the TAR, not the entirety of historical Tibet, which includes the culturally and politically distinct regions of Amdo and Kham, as part of the PRC. It is possible that India made this statement intending to allow for some flexibility. Considering that the TAR was established in 1965 and the PRC was established in 1949, one could interpret India's statement as an indication that Tibet was a sovereign before 1949.

Further, the humanitarian dimension of Tibet issue demands sustained attention. The PRC's forcible occupation of Tibet resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Tibetans, approximately one lakh of whom now reside in India. These Tibetan refugees have embraced India as their *Karmabhoomi*, while preserving the memory of their homeland, Tibet, as their *Matrbhoomi*.

Additionally, India's limited endorsement of the One China Policy, particularly through the 1954 Trade Agreement, has not yielded reciprocal recognition from Beijing. PRC's persistent refusal to recognise the legitimacy of India's sovereignty. While refusing to acknowledge Arunachal Pradesh as part of India, opposing the reorganisation of Ladakh as a Union Territory, and continuing its illegal occupation of Aksai Chin since 1962, and simultaneously expecting India to adhere to its 'One China' principle, reveals a significant imbalance in diplomatic expectations. Additionally, it has maintained control over the Shaksgam Valley since 1963, when Pakistan ceded the occupied territory that India claims to China. Such asymmetry is inconsistent with the principles of mutual respect and non-interference outlined in the Panchsheel Agreement principles, which the PRC often cites but rarely upholds. Given this posture of non-reciprocity and strategic hostility, there exists neither a legal nor moral obligation for India to continue recognising the TAR as a legitimate part of the PRC.

The PRC claim that Tibet has always been an integral part of China does not stand up to legal or historical scrutiny. India's position on the McMahon Line, for instance, is rooted in the 1914 Simla Convention, where Tibet and the Republic of China participated as separate sovereign entities. Tibet's historical exercise of sovereignty is further evidenced by its participation in the 1948 Afro-Asian Summit hosted in India, as well as by its treaty relations with other sovereign states such as Mongolia and Nepal. These precedents affirm Tibet's status as an independent political actor prior to its annexation.

In reassessing its Tibet policy, India, therefore, must fundamentally question the legitimacy of the PRC's continued presence in Tibet. It is imperative that India no longer treat

the issue of Tibet as an internal matter of the PRC. Rather, Tibet must be recognised as a vital component of India's national security architecture.

Strategically, Tibet had long served as a natural buffer between the Indian subcontinent and the Chinese heartland, a geopolitical fact that cannot be overlooked when assessing the long-term cost of its occupation. The loss of this strategic buffer has imposed considerable operational and logistical burdens on Indian defence forces, especially in areas such as Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and the Siachen Glacier. China's ongoing military infrastructure development in the Tibetan plateau and its aggressive posture along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have led to frequent stand-offs, underscoring the pressing need for India to adopt a more assertive and forward-looking Tibet strategy.

Therefore, moving forward, India's future discourse must actively interrogate the legitimacy of the PRC continued presence in Tibet. It is imperative that the Indian government articulates a clear and principled position on the Tibet issue, guided by a structured and phased Strategic Doctrine for Tibet. This doctrine should align India's long-term national security interests with its historical responsibilities and moral obligations, offering a coherent roadmap for proactive engagement—diplomatically, strategically, and culturally.

At the core of this doctrine must be a dual-track approach: narrative rebuilding and diplomatic repositioning with legal and political backing. India must transition from a stance of passive accommodation to one of calibrated, semi-diplomatic support for the Tibetan cause. This could involve enhancing the stature and visibility of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) by enabling structured engagement with Indian think tanks, academic institutions, and parliamentary committees, mirroring India's informal yet substantive relationship with Taiwan. New Delhi can also facilitate visits by foreign diplomats and parliamentarians to meet Tibetan leaders and participate in cultural-political events in Dharamshala under the framework of Track 1.5 diplomacy, thereby creating global visibility for the Tibetan issue without breaching diplomatic protocols.

To further support narrative rebuilding, India should also actively host Global Buddhist Summits and thematic conferences that bring together prominent Buddhist leaders, scholars, and monastic institutions from across the world. Given that religion forms both the political, spiritual and cultural core of the Tibetan movement, these platforms can serve as powerful instruments for both cultural diplomacy and strategic narrative-setting. By reaffirming India's historical role as the birthplace and original seat of Buddhism, such initiatives would not only reinforce its civilisational ties with Tibet but also counter the PRC's efforts to position itself as the global patron of Buddhism.

India also has the opportunity to adopt a bottom-up approach in shaping national and international perceptions of the Tibetan cause. This includes institutionalising scholarly and policy-level discourse on Tibet within universities, academia, bureaucratic leadership, and civil society, to the strategic, cultural and humanitarian dimensions of the Tibet question, ensuring the emergence of a coherent and informed narrative. Such an environment will enable political leadership to act decisively when the geopolitical context permits.

To operationalise this strategic vision, India must institutionalise Tibet within its national security architecture. A dedicated Tibet Policy and Security Desk should be created (if one does not exist already) within the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) or the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) to ensure coherence and continuity in its engagement with Tibet. This unit would serve as a central coordination mechanism across ministries, intelligence agencies, and policy circles, tasked with monitoring developments in Tibet and providing input into India's China Policy based on Tibet-linked intelligence and analysis. By embedding Tibet into the national security matrix, India would move from rhetorical support to a consistent and strategic Tibet policy.

Simultaneously, India must develop a counter-narrative to the PRC's long-standing 'One China' policy by developing and advocating a 'One Tibet' framework. The first element of this framework should be that India should put out clearly through official or semi-official channels that it will only recognise the reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama after his *Parinirvana*,

which is solely chosen by Tibetans in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist traditions, via the Gaden Phodrang Trust, the sole authority to recognise His Holiness' future reincarnation.

Additionally, India should also firmly assert that Tibet is not confined to the TAR but includes the larger historical-cultural regions of Amdo and Kham, currently fragmented across the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. This narrative must assert that Tibet has a distinct identity, history of sovereignty, and cultural independence that predates the formation of the PRC.

This 'One Tibet' framework must be grounded in historical fact and legal precedent, emphasising Tibet's distinct cultural identity, centuries of de facto sovereignty, and autonomous religious governance that predate the founding of the PRC. While India may maintain diplomatic ambiguity in formal international settings, this framework should be vigorously articulated in public discourse, strategic forums, parliamentary discussions, and think tank publications. By doing so, India signals a decisive shift from strategic silence to strategic assertion, holding the PRC accountable for its own inconsistencies, particularly its refusal to respect India's territorial integrity, while simultaneously demanding India's acceptance of its territorial claims. Just as Beijing leverages Taiwan as a diplomatic pressure point, India must elevate Tibet as a legitimate counter-leverage, not only as a moral and humanitarian cause, but as a calibrated strategic instrument in times of diplomatic standoff or military tension.

To support and strengthen this narrative, India must invest in rigorous legal-historical research that maps Tibet's sovereign status prior to annexation, its treaties with India and other nations, participation in international conventions, and independent diplomatic actions. This form of archival diplomacy, grounded in credible historical evidence and rights-based legal documentation, offers India a vital non-kinetic instrument within its national security framework. By comprehensively mapping Tibet's historical independence, through treaties with India and other sovereign states, participation in international conventions, and autonomous diplomatic conduct, India can establish a fact-based counter-narrative to China's claims. This body of evidence, consolidated into white papers and strategic memoranda, can serve as a diplomatic force multiplier in times of crisis, enabling India to develop a robust narrative and expose the

fragility and illegitimacy of the PRC's territorial claims, particularly during periods of diplomatic standoff or military escalation.

India must possess the intellectual and diplomatic means to respond with calibrated counter- pressure. Tibet, when reframed not just as a humanitarian concern but as a contested zone of illegal occupation, allows India to bring symmetrical pressure in multilateral forums, during bilateral stand-offs, or within global opinion-making platforms. Additionally, incorporating this archival evidence into national discourse also strengthens domestic strategic clarity. It shifts the Tibet issue from rhetorical symbolism to an integral component of India's long-term China strategy, creating a foundation for assertive policymaking.

Therefore, by aligning its strategic interests, India can adopt a principled yet pragmatic Tibet policy, one that is informed by history, grounded in legality, and prepared for the geopolitical realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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