

The Dalai Lama at 90: A Pivotal Moment for India-China Relations

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As the Dalai Lama approaches his 90th birthday on July 6, 2025, the Dalai Lama's spiritual shadow still looms large over India-China relations—amplified by recent events, suggesting both cautious optimism and continued strains. I had the great privilege to meet His Holiness in Dharamsala last year, where I received his blessing, and to experience his peaceful determination to unite the world, even in the face of political rationalizations that define his legacy. His advanced years and imminent succession plan, which could name a successor outside China, perhaps from India's Tibetan exile community which he also refers to in his new book as well as in his last book 'voice for the voiceless.' With this as the general backdrop, the recent talk on the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, getting back direct flights, taking up transboundary river issues such as the Yarlung Tsangpo, coupled with China's high-octane renaming of places in Arunachal and Tibet and the tit-for-tat issue of Tibetan "refugees", India and China are at a crossroads in their joint destiny.



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The reinvigoration of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra in the summer of 2025, a five year five- year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic and 2020 Ladakh standoff, is an important step in the normalization of the relations. Considered a sacred trip by Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, it probably remains Tibet's most punishing treks to Mount Kailash and Mansarovar Lake. Facilitated by the Ministry of External Affairs, India; this revival of the Yatra through

Lipulekh Pass (Uttarakhand) and Nathu La (Sikkim) demonstrates India's and China's commitment to people is centric confidence- building measures.

For India, offering refuge to the Tibetan government-in-exile and allowing this pilgrimage is evidence of its devotion to religious freedom, and that plays well at the domestic level. However, China's stranglehold over access points to these sites in Tibet renders the Yatra a fragile diplomatic instrument that is vulnerable to Beijing's political signalling.

Parallel to this, the agreement to resume direct flights between India and China, suspended since 2020, is another gesture toward rebuilding ties. Before the [suspension](#), 539 monthly flights carried over 125,000 passengers, and their restoration is expected to boost economic and cultural exchanges. This move which was proposed during foreign secretary Vikram Misri's visit to Beijing in January 2025, comes in the backdrop of the larger initiative to mark the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two sides with a series of celebrations. However, hopes of these arrangements have been soured by even deeper irritants, particularly China's renaming of places in Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. Since 2017, China has renamed dozens of these locations unilaterally in Arunachal, which it claims as "SouthTibet," a move India says is provocative and rejects. These moves as well as a wider renaming exercise in Tibet, challenge India's sovereignty and sow mistrust, muddying goodwill earned from cultural ties.

The question of Tibetan migration only complicates the picture. More than 140,000 [Tibetans](#) have gone into exile in India, including some living in settlements like Dharamsala where the Dalai Lama resides. His succession plan, likely to circumvent a China-controlled process for identifying reincarnations, could embolden more Tibetans to flee to India, which could strain bilateral ties. China considers the Tibetan diaspora a challenge to its territorial integrity, especially when the Dalai Lama's influence outside his homeland continues to fuel demands for Tibetan autonomy. India's taking in Tibetans—and here I must add I find it a humanitarian stance—as a sanctuary risks escalation, especially if it is seen as interference by Beijing in its domestic affairs.

Another flashpoint is the Yarlung Tsangpo river, which transforms into the Brahmaputra in India. China's showcase infrastructure project to build the world's largest hydropower dam on this river have rung alarm bells in New Delhi over its potential to alter water flows and aggravate flooding hazards in India's Northeast, especially during the monsoon season which commenced in June 2025. The MoU on sharing hydrological data, which expired in 2023, is important to India's ability to control water resources and flood risks. Recent engagements, such as the India-China Expert Level Mechanism, have focused on re-concluding this MoU, and both parties have agreed to meet early to talk about sharing of data. Such cooperation matters — the fact that China has control of the Yarlung Tsangpo at its point of origin in Tibet gives Beijing a strong hand, and India has not always have had timely data to guide its disaster-risk preparation. The monsoon's onset makes this issue more pressing than ever, especially for millions in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh who are vulnerable to floods.

So, the 90th birthday of the Dalai Lama is an occasion to reflect and to take stock. His blessings, which I experienced so keenly last year, represent a call to compassion that both of our nations would do well to act upon. The restart of the Yatra, and the start of flights, are pleasant news but do not paper over the deeper issues of border disputes, Tibetan refugee inflow and water security. On the eve of His Holiness's 91st birthday, the legacy of these Shepherds of Peace teaches both nations to prefer dialogue over confrontation, making sure that the cultural bridges such as Yatra and shared rivers are the roads to peace and not the places of conflict.

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