



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

RECENT FLURRY OF ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE TIBET ISSUE: MAJOR TAKEAWAYS

Ms Tseyang Lhamo
Research Associate, CAPS

For the past two months Chinese central government's deliberations over the Tibet issue have peaked with convening the Tibet Work Forum, issuance of the White Paper on Tibet, and the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The release of a new document by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) is another addition to this flurry of activities pertaining to the Tibet issue.

The Tibet Work Forum is a major platform where crucial policy decisions were taken pertaining not only to TAR but also other adjoining provinces namely Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan and Gansu. This kind of forum has been held six times so far in 1980, 1984, 1994, 2001, 2010 and the latest in 2015. The sixth Tibet Work Forum was held on August 25-26 in Beijing and it was the first Forum convened since the accession of Chinese new leadership in 2012. Such fora were attended by all the seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, around three hundred officials representing the

party, the central government, the People's Liberation Army, the People's Armed Police, the Tibet Autonomous Region and other province-level areas. The Forum prioritised security, stability and struggle against separatism over economic development in Tibet. Issues concerning entire Tibet region beyond TAR came under the purview of the Forum. At the Forum Xi Jinping presented his Tibet policy consisting the following points: to rule Tibet by law; to make the Tibetan people and economy prosper; to undertake long-term development of Tibet; to consolidate the hearts and minds of Tibetan people and to build a solid foundation for China's rule over Tibet.¹

The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) based in Dharamsala issued a new document titled 'Tibet was not part of China but Middle Way remains a viable solution' on September 1, 2015 as a response to China's White Paper. In this new document, CTA catered to Tibet's historical status, middle way policy, self-

immolations in Tibet, critical assessment of China's developmental activities and most importantly, the document suggested benefits of resolving Tibet issue, like possibility of Tibet acting as a bridge between China and India; emergence of Tibet as model for Hong Kong and enhancement of China's soft power.

Another pertinent event is the issuance of yet another [White Paper](#) (previous White Paper on Tibet was issued on April 15, 2015) titled 'Successful practice of regional ethnic autonomy in Tibet' by China on September 6, 2015, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the TAR. The White Paper talks of old Tibet as backward; developmental progress since China's so called peaceful liberation of Tibet; people as the masters of the country, improvement of people's welfare; protection of traditional culture of Tibet; respect to Tibetans' religious beliefs and promotion of ecological progress. While China's White Paper presented a rosy picture of Tibet, however, the ground realities depicting a contrary picture have been well brought out in various media like radio, blogs, news, free message services, reports etc. It is an irony that around the same time there have been reports of solo protests in Ngaba County in the Sichuan province.²

These activities were followed on September 9, 2015 by yet another event - China's grand celebration of fiftieth anniversary of founding TAR in Lhasa. Chinese central government delegation of 65 members for the

anniversary celebration was led by Yu Zhengsheng, a member of Politburo Standing Committee. As per the Xinhua report, a day before the grand parade marking the fiftieth anniversary of TAR, Yu had called on the Chinese army, police and judicial staff in the TAR to fight a protracted battle against the 14th Dalai clique (a term used by China to refer to all those who oppose the Chinese rule in Tibet including Central Tibetan Administration). In sync with Xi Jinping, he also emphasised that Tibet plays a significant role in consolidating national unity, ethnic solidarity and the CPC's governing status, particularly underscoring on ethnic unity.³ During the visit he met with representatives of PLA, the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) posted in Tibet; visited Shigatse and Tashilhunpo monastery, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama; also, presided over opening ceremony of the new four-lane highway linking Lhasa and Nyingchi and visited Ngari prefecture in Western Tibet.

Some conclusions which can be drawn from these events are as follow:

- First, the fact that Xi Jinping mentioned about the need to consolidate hearts and minds of Tibetan people at the Tibet Work Forum indicated the need on the part of Beijing to gain confidence of the Tibetan people.
- Second, to establish a solid foundation in Tibet as mentioned in Xi's statement depicted precarious position of Chinese

government in Tibet. Although the President's statement did not contain rejection of Middle Way approach but Beijing's severe criticism of Middle Way policy in the previous White Paper failed to portray any optimism over it.

- Third, pertaining to China's Tibet policy, one interesting development, after the conclusion of CCP Politburo meeting on July 30, 2015, was the formation of Leading Group for United Front Work Department which deals with Tibetan affairs.⁴ This initiative can be seen as an upgradation of United Front Work Department. The details about this group are not known yet.
- Fourth, Beijing has rightfully brought out important issues in Tibet raised by Tibetans in exile like religious freedom, preservation of culture and conservation of Tibet's ecology.
- Fifth, of late, the phrase 'ethnic unity' has gained prominence in various official statements emanating from Beijing which is indeed intriguing. This could be due to Beijing's renewed efforts at strengthening its assimilationist policy towards Tibet.

Hence the task that lies ahead for Beijing is to bridge the gap between the stated official policy and the ground realities in Tibet. Doing so would help Beijing in achieving what it mentioned as consolidating the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people. The updated guidelines of

Beijing's policy towards Tibet have been set, what remains to be seen is how these would unfold practically in the years to come. As far as solution to the Tibet issue is concerned, it remains elusive as of now, much would depend on what measures both sides embark on to shrink the differences between them.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Jayadeva Ranade, China Sticks to Its Guns on Tibet, September 3, 2015, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/columns/China-Sticks-to-Its-Guns-on-Tibet/2015/09/03/article>, accessed on September 7, 2015.

² For these solo protests, refer ww.phayul.com

³ China says autonomous Tibet possible only with communist party leadership, September 9, 2015, <http://www.tibetanreview.net/china-says-autonomous-tibet-possible-only-with-communist-party>, accessed on September 11, 2015.

⁴ Beijing sets up a leading group for united front work, July 31, 2015, <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20150731000142>, accessed on September 15, 2015.