



CHINA'S FRESH OVERTURE TO TIBETANS

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There have recently been more indications that China's new leadership, which is to be installed at the 18th Party Congress that is scheduled to convene in Beijing on November 8, is preparing to take some new initiatives with regard to the Tibetan issue. This could include recommencement of talks—suspended since January 2010—with the Dalai Lama and Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala. Thinly cloaked as the venture of APECF, a Chinese government-sponsored so-called NGO manned by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres, the initiative simultaneously seeks to revive plans to consolidate and expand China's presence in Nepal and ingress India and its border regions, including by ostensibly centering on Buddhist tourism in Lumbini in Nepal. Discernible contours of this new overture suggest it has the potential to undermine the Indian initiative taken at the Global Buddhist Congregation in New Delhi in November 2011.

The timing of this overture by Beijing additionally confirms that Xi Jinping's position as successor to Hu Jintao had been secured by late July. It confirms too that the problem of China's ethnic minorities, especially that relating to Tibet, would be a high priority on the agenda of the new CCP leadership led by Xi Jinping and that he has possibly commenced focusing on the Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD). The appointments of 65-year old Guo Jinlong as Beijing Party Secretary, while still only a Central Committee member and Ling Jihua, as Director of the UFWD, are pointers. Interestingly, Guo Jinlong also worked in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) from 1993-2004, where he advocated faster economic development simultaneous with a relentless 'struggle' against the Dalai

Lama and his followers. Xi Jinping's aim would primarily be to defuse the escalating tensions in China's ethnic Tibetan minority and eliminate a potential source of national security concern.

Beijing is aware that the level of resentment among Tibetans inside China is rising steadily. The authorities have failed to respond meaningfully to the series of successive self-immolations by Tibetans, usually by monks and nuns under 30 years of age. By October 22, 2012, the number who had immolated themselves since February 2009 totalled 56. A new feature indicative of heightened resentment in the past few months has been that, in disregard of the heavy armed police presence, thousands of Tibetans now assemble at the sites of the self-immolations to pray for the deceased and mark the spot. China's leadership is apprehensive that this resentment could boil over and manifest itself in damaging public violent actions elsewhere in China which would be very difficult to control. The upcoming Party Congress, which commences in Beijing on November 8, is a cause for immediate concern. More instances of self immolation by Tibetans could occur during this period.

Particularly disturbing for the authorities would be the incident that occurred on October 15, which underlined the fragile nature of the relationship between Tibetans and the Chinese communist regime. For the first time the grandfather of a high ranking reincarnate monk whose official recognition by Beijing had been announced by China's official news agency, Xinhua, in 2006, committed an act of self-immolation. Tamdin Dorje, who was in his early fifties, was the grandfather of 10-year old Lobsang Geleg Tenpe Khenchen, recognised as the 7th Gungthang Rinpoche

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and reincarnate of the 6th Gungthang Rinpoche Jigme Tenpe Wangchug (1926-2000), a highly influential lama and reputed scholar in Amdo.

A key figure involved in China's new overtures including as an apparent emissary of China's emerging leadership, is Xiao Wunan. Xiao Wunan, who is associated with Xi Jinping and appears to have regained influence since April this year, is a senior CCP cadre who is Deputy Director of an office of China's National Development and Reform Commission in Western China. He is Executive Vice President of the 'Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation' (APECF), the so-called NGO sponsored by the Chinese government. In 2011, the APECF established a Hong Kong-registered company called 'Link-wise', initially to handle all communications and funds for World Buddhist Forums. As a Vice President of the World Buddhist Peace Foundation, which originally proposed and later helped organize the Beijing-sponsored World Buddhist Forums, Xiao Wunan has close links with Buddhist leaders around the world and especially in South Korea and South East Asia. He was formerly Vice President of the editorial board of the journal 'Study on Maoism'. At least one Executive Director of APECF has links to China's military establishment.

Xiao Wunan's connection to the UN is curious, though there are indications that at some stage he worked with the UN. These links surfaced when it was claimed that the UN had signed an agreement with the APECF for a US \$ 3 billion project for the redevelopment of Lumbini with the Nepal government's approval. The UN official with whom the Lumbini Memorandum was signed was Hu Yuandong, who till July 2011 had worked for 20 years in China for the Investment & Technology Promotion Office (ITPO) under the UNIDO (UN Industrial Development Organization). Interestingly, within two weeks of UNIDO voiding the Lumbini Memorandum, Hu Yuandong seemed to be untraceable. Hu Yuandong was, incidentally, a PRC diplomat serving outside China from 1983 to 1989.

Initiating the latest overture, Xiao Wunan visited India for a week in mid-August 2012, when he seemed to have unrestricted access to government offices. Most interesting was his day-long visit to Dharamsala. According to reliable reports, Xiao Wunan was received in Dharamsala on August 16 by the Dalai Lama, Lobsang Sangay, then the 'Kalon Tripa' (Prime Minister) of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and Ugyen Thinley

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Dorjee, who has been formally approved by both, the Dalai Lama and Beijing, as the XVII Gyalwa Karmapa, or head of the Karma Kargyu (Black Hat) sect. Xiao Wunan was accompanied by Ms Gong Tingyu, identified as a Deputy Secretary General of APECF and Simon Kei Shek Ming, who represented himself as a journalist of the Hong Kong news magazine 'Yazhou Zhoukan', which is a subsidiary of the Ming Pao group. Xiao Wunan, who was a member of a Chinese delegation visiting Nepal since August 14, broke away from that group for his meetings in India and rejoined them on August 20.

It is interesting that Xiao Wunan met the Dalai Lama despite the latter having discarded all formal temporal functions last year. He probably carried a personal message from a senior Chinese leader, possibly including Xi Jinping, and recalled the links between Xi Jinping's father and the former Panchen Lama. Curiously, last month a 'liberal' Chinese magazine had reprinted a letter written by Xi Jinping's father, Xi Zhongxun, eulogising the late 10th Panchen Lama. The letter was first published by the People's Daily in early 1989. It is likely that Xiao Wunan would have again impressed on the Dalai Lama that the Chinese Communist authorities would welcome him to spend his last days

in Beijing provided he gave up 'anti-China' activities and expressed support for the CCP regime.

Xiao Wunan's meeting with Lobsang Sangay is significant as it was with the elected Head of the Central Tibetan Administration and indicates that Beijing might not be averse to talks with its representatives. Lobsang Sangay is also 'known' to the UFWD, since he had earlier facilitated contacts between Chinese academics and the Dalai Lama. The meeting was followed within a month, perhaps coincidentally, with the change in designation of the Head of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) from that of 'Kalon Tripa' (or Prime Minister) to the less controversial—from Beijing's perspective—'Sikyong' (or Political Leader).

Reports claim that Xiao Wunan's meeting with Ugyen Thinley Dorjee, who is formally recognised by both the Dalai Lama and Beijing as the XVII Gyalwa Karmapa, ended abruptly. Ugyen Thinley Dorjee is reported to have taken offence at the tenor of questioning by Xiao Wunan and walked out. Simon Kei Shek Ming, the journalist representing Yazhou Zhoukan who also attempted to ask the high-ranking reincarnate monk some questions, was similarly rebuffed. Xiao Wunan's photograph with Ugyen Thinley Dorjee is, however, posted on the APECF's

website, in compliance with the official stance regarding the Dalai Lama and CTA.

During almost a week's stay in India, Xiao Wunan exploited the seeming absence of coordination within the Government with apparently unrestricted access to government offices. After his visit to Dharamsala, he visited Gaya, Nalanda and Delhi. In Nalanda he is understood to have met officials connected with the proposed university and promised financial assistance through APECF. He met some office-bearers of FICCI in Delhi. He also met officials in the Union Ministries of Culture and Tourism. On return to Kathmandu and later Beijing, Xiao Wunan disingenuously announced that APECF now has the support of the Government of India and would be organizing 3 and 4-day package tours for Buddhist pilgrims traveling from Lumbini to Gaya, Nalanda etc.

Nepal continues to be the focus of Beijing's policy towards Tibetans. The official Chinese delegation that visited Kathmandu and of which Xiao Wunan was a member included **Zou Lanming, Vice General Manager of the Lanzhou-based China Railway 21st Bureau, which is a large corporation specialising in railway construction, bridges and tunnels.** Xiao Wunan's presence in the delegations could be suggestive of China contemplating plans to extend the railway from Shigatse to Nepal and possibly even Lumbini, which is the Buddha's birthplace and on the border with India. Within a month of his visit to Kathmandu, Xiao Wunan led an APECF delegation to Britain in early September 2012, when he had an in-depth exchange with the Vertical Theme Park (VTP) Group regarding the Lumbini Cloud Tower project and signed a MOU with the company. He also met Eric Kuhne, designer of the Lumbini Cloud Tower. APECF publicised that this had the Nepal Government's approval and that a copy of the proposal had been despatched to Delhi.

Reminiscent of the confusion generated last year by APECF's announcement that it had signed an MoU with UNIDO for a US\$ 3 billion redevelopment project for Lumbini, this time too there was a swift official denial. The Nepali newspaper 'My Republica' on October 11, reported that Nepal's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation had denied it was aware of any deal between the APECF and the UK-based VTP group on developing Lumbini

as an 'international peace city'. The statement added that the deal "said to have been reached between APECF and VTP would not hold any meaning" as the government of Nepal was not represented. Prachanda, leader of the Unified Communist Party-Marxist Leninist (UCP-ML), incidentally, continues to be on the rolls of APECF as a Vice President.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party's policy governing Tibetans and the Dalai Lama's establishment remains unchanged. This combines economic incentives with intense political persuasion. Since Chen Quanguo took over in April last year, he is known to have initiated policies that financially benefit residents in urban centres in Tibet. The CCP's surveillance over Tibet has simultaneously been heightened by ensuring the Party's presence in each village and increasing controls over monasteries and monastic orders. Confirmation of this became available in the unusually candid interview given by Chen Quanguo, Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), to the Party mouthpiece 'People's Daily' on September 21, 2012.

In the interview, published just weeks before the 18th Party Congress convenes in Beijing on November 8, Chen Quanguo asserted that advantage had been taken of the centre's preferential policies for Tibet and its GDP had increased by 11.3 per cent in the first six months of this year. Per capita disposable incomes of urban residents had increased by 6.9 per cent and per capita cash incomes of farmers and herdsman had increased by 12.3 per cent. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) had been kept below the national average and social security and health insurance schemes had been expanded. Education subsidies had been increased. More than 21,500 new jobs had been created and 800,000 'surplus' workers in agricultural and pastoral areas were transferred to non-agriculture sectors. Chen Quanguo elaborated the measures taken to protect the ecological environment.

He outlined in fair detail the steps taken to safeguard 'social stability'. Disclosing that 21,804 cadres had been sent to work in 5,451 administrative villages, he said 'friends' had been made with at least one person in a village, family visits were conducted and the Party had

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compiled sets of files. 698 police stations had been established with each covering an area of 300-500 metres to ensure police presence within 3-5 minutes at the affected site. At least 3-5 new members had been recruited annually from each administrative village. He emphasised that it had been ensured

that all monasteries and temples have photographs of the 'four leaders' (Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao), the national flag and a copy each of the People's Daily and Tibet Daily. In addition, management of monasteries and temples had been improved by deploying cadres on a 'routine and permanent basis' to them. Monks and nuns are now eligible for medical services and pensions. A programme is in force to select 'harmonious' models of monasteries and 'advanced models of patriotic and law abiding' monks and nuns. A project has been started to 'cultivate' 100 senior monks and 'guide' Tibetan Buddhism to 'adapt itself to socialist society'. Chen Quanguo stressed that political and ideological education

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of Party cadres and members has been intensified so that they take a 'firm position on the anti-separatism struggle'. As an example of the success achieved, he said that the TAR had successfully convened its 8th Party Congress and that it had 'smoothly' selected 28 delegates to the 18th Party Congress.

These developments, and especially Xiao Wunan's visit to Nepal and Dharamsala, indicate that among the serious domestic issues China's new leadership will accord priority to that of the Tibetan ethnic minority. Nepal will be important also because of Beijing's suspicions of US designs. Beijing's overture to the Dalai Lama and Central Tibetan Administration would be intended to defuse the tensions with Tibetans inside China and 'soften' opposition to the CCP and Xi Jinping. At the same time, TAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo's interview confirms that Beijing will not alter its policies followed in TAR and Tibetan areas inside China, which it feels are making rapid headway.



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