

Setting the stage for dialogue

China's official news agency Xinhua announced on 25 April 2008 that a meeting would take place *"in the coming days"* between *"a private representative"* of the Dalai Lama and *"the relevant department of the central government"*. The announcement follows a series of statements by the Chinese authorities that portrayed themselves as *"patiently keeping contact with the Dalai Lama side"* while accusing the Tibetan leader of *"destroying the base for dialogue"*.

Although the announcement, issued while China held consultations with the EU, is a conspicuous attempt at appeasement, the ground for dialogue with the Dalai Lama appears to have been laid in March 2008, prior to the Olympic torch relay debacle, with the declared purpose of co-opting the Dalai Lama's participation into easing current pressures. While it is too early to predict whether forthcoming talks will bear results and what those results might be, it is clear that another inconclusive round of dialogue would be unlikely to serve any of the parties concerned.

The first statement hinting at a possible forthcoming meeting was made on 31 March 2008 by Wen Jiabao, Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and number two in the Party hierarchy, in the Laotian capital Vientiane, where he attended the third Greater Mekong Sub-Region Summit. In an unusually moderate tone, Wen assured that *"the channels for dialogue between the Chinese government and Dalai Lama are always open"*. He said that *"the Chinese government is to continue resuming [sic] dialogues with him"*, specifying with the usual truism that this pertained as long as the Dalai Lama *"abandons the claim for 'Tibet independence' (...) and recognizes both Tibet and Taiwan as inseparable parts of China"*. Wen added that readiness for dialogue prevails *"especially [if the Dalai lama] uses his influence to stop the violence in Tibet"*, thus implicitly acknowledging continuing confrontations inside Tibet, in contradiction of official reports claiming that normality had returned. The speech also acknowledged the capacity of the Dalai Lama to appease the Tibetan masses, in contradiction of official Chinese media reports that continue to portray him as the *"mastermind"* and *"orchestrator"* of anti-social activities perpetrated by *"a few splittists"* against the wishes of most Tibetans.

A second official statement, this time by the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu, coming two days after the disastrous Olympic torch relay in London and almost simultaneously with the torch relay in Paris, castigated the Dalai Lama as a *"liar"*, *"cheater"* and *"serf owner"*, and accused him anew in harsh words to have instigated and orchestrated violence in Lhasa. Jiang Yu's statement also claimed that the central government's policy towards the Dalai Lama is *"consistent"* and that they had been *"patiently keeping contact with the Dalai Lama side"*. It concluded: *"our door to conduct dialogue with the Dalai Lama was open in the past and is still open now"*. It reiterated that, should the Dalai Lama *"change his mind, stop separatist activities, violence and sabotaging the Beijing Olympic games (...) we are still willing to contact and consult with him"*.

A third official statement then reversed international criticism towards China for not entering into dialogue with the Dalai Lama, by accusing him of *"destroying the base for dialogue"*. It was delivered by Sitar, an ethnic Tibetan and deputy head of the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee (1) at a press briefing hosted by the State Council Information Office on 9 April 2008. Apart from reiterating the ubiquitous accusation of instigating violence, Sitar declared that the *"violence"* and the latest *"organized disruptions"* of the Olympic torch relay, not just *"greatly hurt the feelings of the Chinese people"*, but also *"damaged the basic conditions and atmosphere for dialogue"*, thereby implying that the Sino-Tibetan dialogue was an ongoing process. Sitar said that *"the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) always shows the utmost sincerity and patience in keeping contact with the Dalai Lama"*, adding that more than 20 of the exile leader's delegations had visited China since 1979, including six meetings since 2002. At least the latter, however, had been so far regularly played down by the Chinese authorities as 'private visits' by 'oversees compatriots' to 'see their relatives' and 'experience China's progress', a portrayal which some Tibet support groups starkly criticised and used to demonstrate the futility of the exercise. Sitar concluded his statement by assessing that *"the root cause for no progress after so many contacts is that the Dalai Lama is not sincere; he has proved this by not giving up the 'Tibet independence' stand"*. However, at the beginning of his statement, Sitar also clarified *"our door to conduct dialogue with the Dalai Lama is still open now"*.

The Xinhua report of 25 April 2008 announcing new talks appears to be fully in tune with these three statements. Although keen to clarify that the meeting comes up *"in view of the requests repeatedly made"* by the *"Dalai side"* for resuming talks, it specifies that *"the policy of the central government towards Dalai [sic] has been consistent and the door of dialogue has remained open"*. It also hints strongly that concrete outcomes are expected: *"It is hoped that through contact and consultation, the Dalai side will take credible moves to stop activities aimed at splitting China, stop plotting and inciting violence and stop disrupting and sabotaging the Beijing Olympic Games so as to create conditions for talks"*. The talks, it appears, will take place with the United Front Line Department, the organ of the CPC devoted to forming 'broad alliances' with non-Party and religious social groups and among the non-Chinese (Han) ethnic population within and outside the PRC. So far no exact date appears to have been set for the meeting and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala commented that so far no invitations have been received.

The announcement of the forthcoming talks did not refrain the PRC official media from continuing verbal attacks against the Dalai Lama. A commentary posted on 27 April 2008 in the People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, said that the Dalai Lama *"clique"* was *"playing with words to drum for the so-called Tibet issue"*. An article by a Chinese Tibetologist published by Xinhua on 28 April referred to the Tibetan Government in Exile as *"a theocratic power"*, pointing to the prominence of clerics in its ranks. The article concludes *"as a result of theocratic rule, internal faction, religious persecution and assassinations have been rife in the history of his exiled 'government'". Many monks were expelled from monasteries just for believing in different gods"*. The latter remark seems to hint at the Dorje Shugden cult which the Dalai Lama discouraged because of its sectarian nature, while the Chinese authorities effectively encourage it within Tibet. During the recent crisis, Tibetan and Western Shugden followers have stepped up their protest activities, particularly in India.

These ongoing Chinese or Chinese-supported attacks have raised suspicions amongst Tibetans and in the international press that Beijing's offer for talks is not genuine. However, the attacks might equally be a measure preparing the ground for talks, as Beijing has often been seen to intensify pressure before entering into tough discussions on a thorny issue with the aim of magnifying any possible future concession. For instance, the PRC refused for decades to acknowledge the State of Sikkim as a part of India, although it never appeared to have had any serious interest in the territory, and finally China quietly abandoned its position when the Indian government agreed to re-open the Nathu la, the pass that links Sikkim and Tibet. More recently, China has taken up a very similar issue about the neighbouring Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, likely with sight on future negotiations with India about the disputed common border. The Chinese nationalist demonstrations which flared up following state controlled media reports reprimanding the Tibet protests were, at least, effectively tolerated by the authorities. This appears to conform to the same pattern of creating bugbears to strengthen the Chinese position for discussions, in this case on Tibet, at a national and international level.

The Chinese authorities insist that the Dalai Lama's stance on claiming genuine autonomy rather than independence is *"insincere"* as it allegedly

does not match his actions. But in a similar way, the current abrasive rhetoric alone does not provide any clue about how far the Chinese authorities are willing to engage in a constructive dialogue with the Dalai Lama. A more reliable indicator will be the extent to which the forthcoming talks provide concrete measures for a betterment of policies in Tibetan regions.

Notes:

1: About Sitar and his nomination to the post, see TibetInfoNet's Update of 18 September 2006 (<https://www.tibetinfonet.net/content/update/31>)

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