

The Middle-Way Approach: A Framework for Resolving the Issue of Tibet

Introduction

The Middle-Way Approach is proposed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples based on equality and mutual co-operation. It is also a policy adopted democratically by the Central Tibetan Administration and the Tibetan people through a series of discussions held over a long time. This brief introduction to the Middle-Way policy and its history is intended for the Tibetan people inside and outside Tibet-and all those interested-to have a better understanding of the issues involved.

A. Meaning of the Middle-Way Approach

The Tibetan people do not accept the present status of Tibet under the People's Republic of China. At the same time, they do not seek independence for Tibet, which is a historical fact. Treading a middle path in between these two lies the policy and means to achieve a genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People's Republic of China. This is called the Middle-Way Approach, a non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties-for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbours and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations.

B. History of the Middle-Way Approach

Although the 17-Point Agreement between the Tibetan government and the People's Republic of China was not reached on an equal footing or through mutual consent, His Holiness the Dalai Lama-for the sake of the mutual benefit of the Tibetan and Chinese peoples-made all possible efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement with the Chinese government for eight years since 1951. Even after His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Kashag arrived in the Lokha region from Lhasa in 1959, he continued his efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement with the Chinese military officials. His attempts to abide by the terms of the 17-Point Agreement are analogous to the Middle-Way Approach. Unfortunately, the Chinese army unleashed a harsh military crackdown in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and this convinced His Holiness the Dalai Lama that his hope for co-existence with the Chinese government was no longer possible. Under the circumstances, he had no other option but to seek refuge in India and work in exile for the freedom and happiness of all the Tibetan people.

Soon after his arrival in Tezpur, India, His Holiness the Dalai Lama issued a statement on 18 April 1959, explaining that the 17-Point Agreement was signed under duress and that the Chinese government had deliberately violated the terms of the Agreement. Thus from that day onwards, he declared that the agreement would be considered null and void, and he would strive for the restoration of Tibet's independence. Since then until 1979, the Central Tibetan Administration and the Tibetan people adopted a policy of seeking independence for Tibet. However, the world in general has become increasingly interdependent politically, militarily and economically. Consequently, great changes have been taking place in the independent status of countries and nationalities. In China also, changes will certainly take place and a time will come for both sides to engage in actual negotiations. Therefore, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has believed for a long time that in order to resolve the Tibetan issue through negotiations, it is more beneficial to change the policy of restoring Tibetan independence to an approach that offers mutual benefits to China as well as to Tibet.

C. The Middle-Way Approach was not Formulated Suddenly

Although this approach occurred to His Holiness the Dalai Lama a long time ago, he did not decide it arbitrarily or thrust it upon others. Since the early 1970s, he held a series of discussions on this issue with, and solicited suggestions from, the Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the Assembly of Tibetan

People's Deputies, the Kashag and many scholarly and experienced people. Particularly in 1979, the late Chinese paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping's proposal to His Holiness the Dalai Lama that "except independence, all other issues can be resolved through negotiations", was very much in agreement with His Holiness the Dalai Lama's long-held belief of finding a mutually-beneficial solution. Immediately, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave a favourable response by agreeing to undertake negotiations and decided to change the policy of restoring Tibet's independence to that of the Middle-Way Approach. This decision was again taken after a due process of consultations with the then Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, the Kashag and many scholarly and experienced people. Therefore, this Approach is not something that has emerged all of a sudden; it has a definite history of evolution.

D. The Middle-Way Approach was Adopted Democratically

Since the decision to pursue the Middle-Way Approach, and before His Holiness the Dalai Lama issued a statement in the European parliament in Strasbourg on 15 June 1988-which formed the basis of our negotiations as to what kind of autonomy was needed by the Tibetan people-a four-day special conference was organised in Dharamsala from 6 June 1988. This conference was attended by the members of the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies and the Kashag, public servants, all the Tibetan settlement officers and the members of the local Tibetan Assemblies, representatives from the Tibetan NGOs, newly-arrived Tibetans and special invitees. They held extensive discussions on the text of the proposal and finally endorsed it unanimously.

Since the Chinese government did not respond positively to the proposal, His Holiness the Dalai Lama again proposed in 1996 and 1997 that the Tibetan people should decide on the best possible way of realizing the cause of Tibet through a referendum. Accordingly, a preliminary opinion poll was conducted in which more than 64% of the total opinion letters received expressed that there was no need to hold a referendum, and that they would support the Middle-Way Approach, or whatever decisions His Holiness the Dalai Lama takes from time to time, in accordance with the changing political situation in China and the world at large. To this effect, the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies adopted a unanimous resolution ([see Appendix 1](#)) on 18 September 1997 and informed His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Responding to this, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said in his 10 March statement of 1998: "...Last year, we conducted an opinion poll of the Tibetans in exile and collected suggestions from Tibet wherever possible on the proposed referendum, by which the Tibetan people were to determine the future course of our freedom struggle to their full satisfaction. Based on the outcome of this poll and suggestions from Tibet, the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, our parliament in exile, passed a resolution empowering me to continue to use my discretion on the matter without seeking recourse to a referendum. I wish to thank the people of Tibet for the tremendous trust, confidence and hope they place in me. I continue to believe that my 'Middle-Way Approach' is the most realistic and pragmatic course to resolve the issue of Tibet peacefully. This approach meets the vital needs of the Tibetan people while ensuring the unity and stability of the People's Republic of China. I will, therefore, continue to pursue this course of approach with full commitment and make earnest efforts to reach out to the Chinese leadership..." This policy was, hence, adopted taking into account the opinion of the Tibetan people and a unanimous resolution passed by the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies.

E. Important Components of the Middle-Way Approach

1. Without seeking independence for Tibet, the Central Tibetan Administration strives for the creation of a political entity comprising the three traditional provinces of Tibet;
2. Such an entity should enjoy a status of genuine national regional autonomy;
3. This autonomy should be governed by the popularly-elected legislature and executive through a democratic process and should have an independent judicial system;
4. As soon as the above status is agreed upon by the Chinese government, Tibet would not seek

- separation from, and remain within, the People's Republic of China;
5. Until the time Tibet is transformed into a zone of peace and non-violence, the Chinese government can keep a limited number of armed forces in Tibet for its protection;
 6. The Central Government of the People's Republic of China has the responsibility for the political aspects of Tibet's international relations and defence, whereas the Tibetan people should manage all other affairs pertaining to Tibet, such as religion and culture, education, economy, health, ecological and environmental protection;
 7. The Chinese government should stop its policy of human rights violations in Tibet and the transfer of Chinese population into Tibetan areas;
 8. To resolve the issue of Tibet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama shall take the main responsibility of sincerely pursuing negotiations and reconciliation with the Chinese government.

F. Special Characteristics of the Middle-Way Approach

Considering the fact that the unity and co-existence between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples is more important than the political requirements of the Tibetan people, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has pursued a mutually-beneficial Middle-Way policy, which is a great political step forward. Irrespective of population size, economy or military strength, the equality of nationalities means that all nationalities can co-exist on an equal footing, without any discrimination based on one nationality being superior or better than the other. As such, it is an indispensable criterion for ensuring unity among the nationalities. If the Tibetan and Chinese peoples can co-exist on an equal footing, this will serve as the basis for guaranteeing the unity of nationalities, social stability and territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China, which are of paramount importance to China. Therefore, the special characteristic of the Middle-Way Approach is that it can achieve peace through non-violence, mutual benefit, unity of nationalities and social stability.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this brief introduction to the Middle-Way policy and its history, adopted by the Central Tibetan Administration and the Tibetan people, will receive due attention from all quarters and will help in better understanding this approach. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all the peoples of the world in general-and in particular the Tibetan leaders, officials and scholars in Tibet-who support and endorse the Middle-Way Approach.

-Issued by the Department of Information and
International Relations (DIIR), updated August 2006

Appendix 1:

An Excerpt from the Official Resolution No. 12/4/97/46 Passed by the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies

Be it unanimously Resolved that-

1. Following the announcement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his 10 March statement of 1995 that a referendum be conducted to decide on the policy with regard to the future cause of Tibet and the means to achieve that, suggestions were solicited from all the Tibetan people, within and without Tibet, on the procedure and options of the referendum from 2 September 1995 to 31 July 1997. Based on the overwhelming majority of the suggestions received, the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies implores His Holiness the Dalai Lama to withdraw his call for a referendum, and use his wisdom to decide from time to time the future cause of Tibet and the means to achieve that;

2. Whatever decisions His Holiness the Dalai Lama takes, from time to time by using his wisdom, will be regarded by all the Tibetan people as no different from having the force of a decision made through referendum.

The above resolution is adopted unanimously by the 4th session of the 12th Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies on 18 September 1997.