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'CHINA'S 19th PARTY CONGRESS INDICATES NO CHANGE IN CHINA'S POLICY TOWARDS TIBET'

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The week long (October 18-24, 2017) 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which was held in Beijing, concluded as anticipated with Xi Jinping emerging considerably stronger. For those watching the Congress for clues as to Xi Jinping's policies towards China's ethnic minorities and especially Tibet and Xinjiang, however, there appears little prospect of any relaxation of controls. An indication was the sharp drop in the number of ethnic minority cadres elected to the new 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC).

In fact, the emphatic assertions during the Congress that China will safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity were reinforced by a letter publicised a couple of days ago and ostensibly written by two Tibetan village girls to Chinese President Xi Jinping during the Congress. The girls, Zhoigar and Yangzom, had written describing life in Yumai, Lhunze County, China's smallest town. China's official news agency Xinhua reported that Xi Jinping replied asking them "to set down roots in the border area, safeguard the Chinese territory and develop their hometown". Saying "Without the peace in the territory, there will be no peaceful lives for the millions of families", he expressed the hope "that the family would motivate more herders to set down roots in the border area ... and become guardians of the Chinese territory and constructors of a happy hometown". Xi Jinping's reply, which contained the assurance that the Party will look after ethnic minorities, endorsed ongoing efforts by authorities of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to co-opt villagers in guarding the border.

To prevent any protests or incidents like self-immolation that could cause embarrassment during the Party Congress, the already stringent security measures in force in the Tibet and Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Regions had been further heightened. In the months leading up to the 19th Party Congress, China's borders with Nepal and the Central Asian Republics were sealed, foreigners and journalists prohibited from visiting these regions, and Tibetans and Uyghurs especially singled out for searches across China and denied admission in hotels.

While neither Tibet nor the Dalai Lama were specifically mentioned in Xi Jinping's lengthy 32,000-character Work Report presented to the 19th Party Congress on October 18, there were repeated references to "splittism" and "separatism". China's new and potentially tougher policy on the Tibet issue was spelt out in the course of the Congress. China's authoritative official news agency Xinhua reported on October 21, 2017, that at a press conference on the sidelines of the 19th Party Congress on October 21, the Vice Minister of the CCP CC's United Front Work Department and its Executive

Deputy Head Zhang Yijiong, who was promoted at the 19th Congress to become a full member of the CCP CC, had reaffirmed China's opposition to the Dalai Lama's visits to foreign countries.

Asserting that "The 14th Dalai Lama is not only a religious figure, but also a political one," Zhang Yijiong made a remark with implications for India. He stated that "After fleeing China in 1959, he established a so-called government-in-exile, whose goal and core agenda is the independence of Tibet and to separate (from) China. For decades, the group headed by the 14th Dalai Lama has never stopped such attempts. As head of the group, the 14th Dalai Lama has never stopped his activities in this regard over the past decades." The statement suggests potentially increasing pressure on India with regard to activities of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala.

In an apparent toughening of the current policy, Zhang Yijiong warned foreign officials against meeting the Dalai Lama saying they "can't get away by saying they were meeting the exiled Tibetan leader in a personal capacity as they still represent their governments". Announcing that "Any country, or any organisation of anyone, accepting to meet with the Dalai Lama, in our view, is a major offence to the sentiment of the Chinese people," he expressed the Chinese government's "firm opposition" to such meetings adding "We consider such visit as a severe insult to the feelings of the Chinese people...".

Interestingly, amidst reports of restrictions imposed by authorities on the movement and teachings especially by Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns inside China, Zhang Yijiong observed that Tibetan Buddhism was a special religion "born in our ancient China". "It's a Chinese religion. It didn't come in from the outside." With this Zhang Yijiong, who worked in TAR from 2006-2010 as a Deputy Party Secretary, hinted that China's policy towards Tibetan Buddhists would endure. His remark additionally implicitly pointed to the authority of China's 'patriotic associations' that supervise all religions in China and authority of the Chinese government in religious matters concerning Tibetan Buddhism.

Meanwhile, Xi Jinping has strengthened the CCP CC's United Front Work Department (UFWD), which has expanded its activities. The UFWD with its increased personnel strength and larger budget, has enlarged the Seventh Bureau which looks after matters relating to Tibet and Tibetans. Available information is that since at least 2016, China's 'united front' activities have increased in India, some European countries, Australia, the US and countries along the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). In addition to targeting Tibetan groups and supporters, the UFWD is reaching out to opinion makers and 'influencers' by offering cash incentives, scholarships through its 'front' organisations and trips to China.

Cadres in the new 19th CCP CC Secretariat and Politburo with a background of Tibet affairs will have substantive inputs on China's policy on Tibet. In the Secretariat are Wang Huning, who has in the past been a member of TAR delegations to the National People's Congress (NPC) and is now a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) and heads the CC's Secretariat. Others are Yang Xiaodu, a 'sent down youth in the Cultural Revolution' and till recently Minister of Supervision who served in the TAR from 1976-2001, and Guo Shengkun who as Minister of Public Security (MPS) is familiar with the Tibet issue and attended meetings of the Leading Small Work Group on Tibet. Three of the Secretariat's members are persons with a background in security or the military namely, Yang Xiaodu, Guo Shengkun and Huang Kunming indicating a potential bias favouring progressively tougher Party controls.

Among others who will influence Tibet policy are Politburo member Chen Quanguo, handpicked by Xi Jinping in August 2011 to be TAR Party Secretary and now Party Secretary of the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region; 67-year old Sun Chunlan (f), who continues as Politburo member and heads the CCP CC United Front Work Department dealing with ethnic minorities and Tibetan affairs; and Zhang Qingli, born in 1951, who is a member of the 19th CC and made the infamous remark describing the Dalai Lama as “a sheep in wolf’s clothing and with the heart of a beast”.

Interestingly, while there has been a drastic drop in the number of ethnic minorities cadres in the CC with only 15 ethnic minorities cadres in the 19th CC as compared to 39 in the 18th CC, the TAR has at the same time been given increased representation in the CCP CC. TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie is a full member of the 19th CC. The number of ethnic Tibetans has also increased by one, with Qi Zhala (Chedak) and Luosang Jiangcun (Lobsang Gyaltsen) both being made full members of the 19th CC. Chedak or Qi Zhala who earlier this year replaced Lobsang Gyaltsen as Chairman of the TAR Government and prior to that was Party Secretary of Lhasa Municipality, a position usually occupied by a Han cadre, is a first time member of the CC. Lobsang Gyaltsen or Luosang Jiangcun is perhaps the senior most Tibetan in the CCP and currently Chairman of the Standing Committee of the TAR Congress. He was an alternate member of the 18th CC.

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