

# INDIA MUST STAND UP FOR TIBET

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

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The Dalai Lama marked his 85th birthday on Monday. He has now lived for 61 of those 85 years as a treasured guest of India, and has added value, in both tangible and intangible ways, to Indian public life, its soft power and its global reputation. The Dalai Lama is a symbol of an oppressed community which had to flee its homeland because of China's territorial aggression; he is representative of the great Gandhian tradition of non-violence; he is a religious and spiritual icon who has inspired hundreds of thousands of people, outside his own community, to seek the true meaning of life; and he is a living reflection of the shared Buddhist heritage of India and its independent neighbour for centuries, Tibet.

But it is equally true that India's hospitality has been often tempered with geopolitics. The fear of antagonising China has often meant that Indian governments — including the current dispensation — have been inconsistent in their approach to Tibet. From recognising Chinese suzerainty over Tibet to giving the Dalai Lama a home and collaborating with the United States in encouraging a rebellion, from deploying the "Tibet card" sporadically to refusing to even engage with the Tibetan leader, India's approach, to Tibet, has, for too long, been subject to its dynamic with China at any particular point.

It is now time to evolve a consistent approach. China, of course, sees Tibet as a "core interest" — an ever expanding circle to make its redlines clear. India has sought to respect this. But clearly, China has no hesitation in attacking India's core interest, of which territorial integrity is at the top. Delhi now needs to shed its hesitation, not just because Tibet is a "card", but is intertwined with the values of freedom and peace central to the vision to resist China. Delhi must take the following steps. One, honour the Dalai Lama with the Bharat Ratna. Two, speak up for Tibetan rights at international platforms. Three, deepen linkages with the new generation of Tibetan activists who are at the forefront of the new resistance. Four, rebuild links with all Tibetan sects, some of which have got caught in the web of bureaucratic battles in India. And most important, declare that India will respect the wishes of the Dalai Lama on his succession — making it clear that China will not have its way in installing a puppet Dalai Lama. Taking on "an expansionist" China must begin from a commitment to Tibet where it first displayed imperial ambitions.

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