



### **BRITAIN-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT: TIBET ISSUE SIDELINED**

*Tseyang Lhamo*  
*Research Associate, CAPS*

David Cameron's paid three days visit to China in early December accompanied by around hundred business delegates eyeing to boost trade between China and Britain as well as to push for free trade between Beijing and the European Union.<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that China has a huge business potential that every nation is willing to engage with, Britain is no exception. However Britain and China political ties remained frozen for a year following David Cameron and Nick Clegg audience with the Dalai Lama on May 2012 irrespective of China's objection towards such meeting. A year earlier in June 2011, when David Cameron met then premier Wen Jiabao in UK, he spoke forcibly about human rights. It is evident that David Cameron has taken a tough stand on Tibet while dealing with China devoid of appeasing China in order to extract economic dividends. China has always been critical of any act which could be interpreted as extending support for Tibet, these include meeting the Dalai Lama, commenting on Tibetan protest or human rights abuses in Tibet.

To trace the history it is evident that every British Prime Minister since John Major in 1991 till David Cameron has met the Dalai Lama appearing like requirement of the office except Margaret Thatcher. However consequences of such act between 1991 to 2012 has not been same as far as retaliation from antagonized China is concerned, due to the fact that China's economic power has reached a stage (world's second largest economy) where it wields considerable influence or power to revenge mostly taking form of straining trade relations from China's side. Additionally Britain was forced to revise its position on Tibet from recognizing China's suzerainty over the region to admitting Tibet as integral part of

China. With that precedent set and also factoring China's growing assertiveness in every aspect, Mr. Cameron might have well anticipated bold responses from China's side.

On the other side, heeding to China's objection with regard to meeting the Dalai Lama could vividly give the impression that Britain Prime Minister is surrendering to China, putting stain on independent conduct of foreign relations not to mention massive domestic criticism. However some sources pointed out that economic ties between UK and China have not suffered in the wake of the Dalai Lama meeting. British exports to China have doubled to £15.9 billion the past five years and last year, even after the May meeting, the UK ranked fourth as a destination for outbound Chinese investment, behind only Hong Kong, the US and Kazakhstan.<sup>ii</sup>

Given Cameron's tough stand on human rights and Tibet issue in the past as mentioned above, added by Cameron's stiff stand on human right during his visit to Sri Lanka just last month has given the impression that he would raise aggravating situation in Tibet during his visit to China.<sup>iii</sup> However Downing Street made clear the PM will not mention the Chinese repression of Tibetans during his visit to Beijing and Shanghai amid fears it will damage Britain's business interests. A No.10 source said they had "turned a page" on Tibet and it would not form part of the talks with the Chinese leadership.<sup>iv</sup> Cameron's act of ignoring China's repression in Tibet was in sharp contrast to his recent criticism during a visit to Sri Lanka, in which he went out of his way to meet people who claimed they had been tortured by the State thus inviting much criticism. For instance human right groups questioned why Mr. Cameron was willing to stand up to the Sri Lanka premier when he visited Colombo last month but is running scared of the Chinese. Others have said he looks like a salesman, not a statesman.<sup>v</sup>

**ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR**

**RIPPLES OF UNRESOLVED BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN INDIA-CHINA: VISA ROWS**

Cameron said in an interview with CCTV that Britain and China have "come to an understanding" over the areas that had clouded their relationship. "It's clear to me China is an opportunity, not a threat," he said. Cameron also mentioned that Britain's policy on

Tibet is unchanged. He doesn't have plans to meet the Dalai Lama again but my diary is for me to decide. There by Cameron seemed to have strike a balance between values that Britain holds and their economic interest.

Though Cameron seemed to be doing his part to strengthen UK-China relations but there were certain indications from China's side that exposed China lukewarm response. "UK is not a big power in the eyes of the Chinese," snubbed the UK calling it just an old European country, the Communist Party-controlled *Global Times* said in an editorial appeared at a time when Cameron was on three days visit to China. The paper made it clear that the Chinese were still bristling over Cameron's meeting with the Dalai Lama in May 2012. *Global Times* said Cameron is driven by his "own political interest and the UK's national interest". "China's strategic initiatives in its relations with Europe have been increasing. The UK, France and Germany dare not make joint provocations toward China over the Dalai Lama issue," it added. <sup>vi</sup> The British press was critical too with pieces in the *Financial Times* and *The Guardian* criticizing the Prime Minister for muddling issues of human rights and trade. Equally critical of China's decision to ban *Bloomberg News* journalist Robert Hutton from a press conference with Li Keqiang the Chinese premier due to his investigation into the finances of the President.

**ARTICLES BY SAME AUTHOR**

**RIPPLES OF UNRESOLVED BORDER DISPUTE BETWEEN INDIA-CHINA: VISA ROWS**

Irrespective of all these, Britain and China signed some vital business agreements like business deal between Jaguar Land Rover and National Sales Company in China, agreement between English Premier League and Chinese Super League. Moreover two sides have agreed to push for breakthroughs and progress in the co-operation between their enterprises on nuclear power and high-speed rail. Cameron announced that deals worth £5.6 billion had been signed during his trip and that 1,500 jobs would be created as a direct result.<sup>vii</sup> Another successful result of Cameron's visit to China was UK and China

agreed to restart human rights dialogue in next year. David Cameron had emerged as trade pragmatist from human rights champion.

When Cameron was in China, a Tibetan Kunckok Tseten from Ngaba county immolated himself calling for the return of the Dalai Lama and union of Tibetans inside and in exile, thus revealing China's failure to address the root cause of series of self-immolations taking place in Tibet. On above that situation in Driru County in Tibet Autonomous Region's Nagchu Prefecture is tense with continued China's crackdown and strict surveillance due to their refusal to cooperate with the Chinese government orders to hoist the Chinese national flag. Hence it is evident that conditions in Tibet have not improved with Chinese repressive measures intact. As China is becoming assertive and powerful in every aspect in the international platform, other world leaders prefer to keep China's appalling human rights record in Tibet untouched so that their economic interests are not hindered.

Though the question arises whether a statesman enjoy luxury to uphold values, ethics, principles while realpolitik of international relation plays out pragmatically, but author would like to conclude by saying that real test for statesmanship lies at securing one's national interest without compromising with long followed values and principle and to act as responsible nation-state in the international platform. David Cameron pragmatically engaged with China to secure trade deals but then agreement to restart human rights dialogue between UK and China next year leaves enough room for possible bold policies from Britain towards rights violations in Tibet under the Chinese authoritarian regime.

### Endnotes:

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)*

<sup>i</sup> British premier Cameron flies to Beijing, says will push EU-China trade deal, December 02, 2013 <http://www.ndtv.com/article/world/british-premier-cameron-flies-to-beijing-says-will-push-eu-china-trade-deal-45>

<sup>ii</sup>Jamil Anderlini, Britain wins little reward from China in retreat on Tibet, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/2f8a4ac2-5a6d-11e3-942a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2mPQRXqaM>

<sup>iii</sup> David Cameron urges Sri Lanka to do more on human rights, 16 November 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-24970142>

<sup>iv</sup> David Cameron accused of selective human rights principles as he WON'T raise Tibet during China visit next week , 30 Nov 2013, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/tibet-david-cameron-accused-selective-2866600>

<sup>v</sup> Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren, David Cameron in China: Statesman or Salesman? [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/eleanor-byrne-rosengren/david-cameron-china\\_b\\_4389341.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/eleanor-byrne-rosengren/david-cameron-china_b_4389341.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Saibal Dasgupta, Chinese media criticizes UK during Cameron visit, Dec 4, 2013, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-12-04/china/44756205\\_1\\_uk-leader-li-keqiang-cameron-visit](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-12-04/china/44756205_1_uk-leader-li-keqiang-cameron-visit)

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

