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US CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATION'S VISIT TO TIBET: BEIJING'S HOLLOW GESTURE?

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United States Congressional delegation of seven members led by Nancy Pelosi, Democratic Leader of the House of Representative, made a visit to Tibet on November 12, 2015 prior to visiting Beijing. The itinerary included a visit to Hong Kong, Tibet and Beijing. The essence of the delegation's visit was to boost trade ties along with talks on climate change, national and cyber security and human rights with China. The visit has aroused enthusiasm of the strategic community and political elites because, such a nature of visit by congressional delegation occurred for the first time since the 2008 uprising in Tibet. Besides, Nancy Pelosi who led the delegation is not only a prominent supporter of the Dalai Lama but has also been vocal and critical of China's human rights violation and religious freedom in Tibet. Though the visit was not formally announced ahead of time, the Chinese Foreign Ministry had described it as "normal exchange between the US and Chinese legislatures".

During the visit, the delegation met Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Chen Quanguo, Party Secretary of TAR Pema Choling and Party Secretary of Lhasa, Qi Zhala. They visited the Potala Palace, Jokhang temple and also observed monks at the Sera Monastery. According to the statement released by the delegation after the visit, it was mentioned that they had engaged in candid talks with officials who are at the helm of affairs in TAR over the importance of respecting Tibet's autonomy, its ecology, human rights and religious freedom of its diverse set of people. The delegation expressed its concerns over these issues in addition to preservation of Tibet's unique cultural, linguistic, religious heritage and diplomatic and public access to Tibet as well. Concerned by China's relentless vilification of the Dalai Lama, the delegation conveyed to the Chinese government officials the strong, bipartisan support the Dalai Lama enjoys in the US Congress and among the American people.¹ The visit occurred as a follow up to the invitation

extended by Xi Jinping to 'come and see for yourself' during his visit to Washington from September 22 to 28, 2015 when Congress raised concerns about human rights violations in China. The delegation also stated that they had intensive discussions with Chinese officials as they called for Beijing to renew dialogue with the Dalai Lama. On the whole, the trip had been marked as a constructive, bridge building and also lays hope for more visits in the future.²

However, there seems to be a contradiction between the statements made by the delegation after the visit and what was covered in the Chinese official newspaper namely, *Tibet Daily* and *China Daily*. *Tibet Daily* reported that "the delegation toured a Tibetan temple, school, residential home and had frank and thorough exchanges with leaders of the TAR, people from different ethnicities, monks, nuns thereby deepening the delegation's comprehensive understanding of Tibet." The same report was mentioned in *China Daily* with an addition that "Pelosi spoke highly of the great transformation in the new Tibet and the efforts by the Chinese government in guaranteeing freedom of religion, protecting ethnic tradition and culture and environment".³ These reports however, were in tune with the usual practice by official Chinese news organisations to highlight such prominent visits as a platform for Chinese propaganda. As per the delegation's statement, they underscored the importance of respecting Tibet's autonomy, ecology, religious freedom, human rights and

expressed their concern over these issues to the Chinese officials, on the contrary the Chinese official newspaper mentioned that the delegation praised Chinese government's efforts in ensuring freedom of religion, protection of culture and tradition of Tibetans, it clearly contradicts the delegation's statement.

Although it is not possible to pin point various factors that might have influenced Beijing's decision to allow the congressional delegation to visit Tibet, however, following two factors should definitely be taken into consideration. Firstly, the delegation's visit to Tibet could be hailed as a successful outcome of persistent efforts made by the US towards highlighting human rights, religious freedom, and preservation of Tibet's rich culture. For instance, President Obama urged China to engage with the Dalai Lama and to preserve religious and cultural identity of Tibetan people while addressing joint press conference with Xi Jinping on date? September 2015. Secondly, there has been a shift with respect to how China has been handling the Tibet issue. Since last year, China has started sending its Tibet delegation to various Western nations and has been engaging in cultural exchange programmes too. It appears to be taking measures to rebuild its image at the international platform.

Given the fact that Beijing has strictly restricted foreign delegates access to Tibet, visit of this nature is a rare phenomena. Moreover, it exhibited certain exception in the Beijing's long

held policy of categorically rejecting any foreign intervention in its internal matters. Taking into account the highly restricted nature of the visit where interaction with ordinary Tibetan has been curtailed, it completely negates the key purpose of these visits i.e, to gauge the ground realities. This has been clearly reflected in the statement given by one member of the delegation that “they saw what Beijing wanted them to see”. Although the visit marked a breakthrough in the Beijing’s policy of resisting any external intervention in its internal affairs, making Tibet more accessible for independent media and foreign diplomats would be a desirable.

Currently the situation inside Tibet remains bleak as seen from the statements released by Chen Quanguo recently where he vowed to crack down on officials who ‘profess no religious belief but secretly practice’,⁴ thus, clearly depicting intensification of anti-Dalai Lama campaign inside Tibet.

From the above mentioned facts and interpretation of the visit by the US delegates and China’s temporary drift from its traditional stand towards external intervention in Tibetan affairs can be only concluded as a calculative effort by the Chinese administration which only reflects Beijing’s hollow gesture. Beijing has sought to make use of the visit to create its image as a cooperative and receptive nation at the international platform and domestically it has capitalise from the visit to portray itself in the favourable light by allegedly claiming

delegation’s appreciation for its policies inside Tibet. Furthermore, due to restricted nature of the visit, the delegates couldn’t gauge the comprehensive picture of the prevailing situation inside Tibet hence it renders the visit futile.

(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])

Notes

¹Pelosi’s Tibet Visit Report Varies from China’s Official Media, November 16, 2015, <http://www.tibetanreview.net/pelosis-tibet-visit-report-varies-from-chinas-official-media/>, accessed on November 19, 2015.

²US Lawmakers Wary of Progress After Tibet Visit, November 17, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/us-lawmakers-wary-of-progress-after-tibet-visit/3062932.html>, accessed on November 20, 2015.

³Nancy Pelosi Makes Unannounced Visit to Tibet, November 12, 2015, <https://www.savetibet.org/nancy-pelosi-makes-unannounced-visit-to-tibet>, accessed on November 17, 2015.

⁴China’s Corruption Fight Targets Tibetans Who “Secret Believe”, November 10, 2015, <http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/3050271.html>, accessed on November 21, 2015.