

# India's Tibet Policy

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi has caused quite a ripple by announcing for the first time in years that he had spoken to Tibetan spiritual leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, to wish him for his birthday. Given China's continuing aggression at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), this hints that the government may actually be considering a shift in India's Tibet policy.

**In news:** India's Tibet policy

**Placing it in syllabus:** Foreign Affairs

**Dimensions**

- India's Historical relations with Tibet
- Background of India's Tibet Policy
- Indian stance towards Tibet post integration into china
- Challenges of Tibet Policy
- Way forward

## **Content:**

### **India's Historical relations with Tibet:**

- Tibet-India relations are said to have **begun during the spread of Buddhism** to Tibet from India during the **7th and 8th centuries AD.**
- The spread of Buddhism to Tibet from India through the efforts of **Tibetan kings, Songtsen Gampo and Trisong-Detsen as the first significant contact**
- The chief political authority was exercised by the Dalai Lama, who claimed to be the living incarnation of the power of the Buddha.
- The Lamas wanted to isolate Tibet from the rest of the world; however, since the beginning of the 17th century, Tibet had recognized the nominal suzerainty of the Chinese Empire.

- The Chinese Government also discouraged contacts with India though a limited trade and some pilgrim traffic between India and Tibet existed.
- The Chinese Empire under the Manchu monarchy entered a period of decline during the 19th century. Gradually, Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Japan, and the United States of America penetrated China commercially and politically and established indirect political control over the Manchus.
- For centuries, Tibet was India's actual neighbour, as most of India's boundaries and the 3500km LAC is with the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and not the rest of China.

## **Background of India's Tibet Policy:**

- In **1914**, it was Tibetan representatives, along with the Chinese that signed the **Simla convention** with British India that delineated boundaries.
- **McMahon line** was drawn by British negotiator Henry McMahon in 1913, the line was a consequence of the **Shimla Conference** between British, Tibetan, and Chinese envoys.
- Following China's disagreement with the proposed line, Henry **McMahon signed the agreement with Tibet privately** and **kept it a secret from the Chinese delegation**.

## **Indian stance towards Tibet post integration into china**

- However, after China's full accession of Tibet in 1950, that China repudiated the convention and the McMahon line that divided the two countries.
- **1954: India signed an agreement with China**, agreeing to **recognize Tibet as "Tibet region of China"**.
- **1959:** following the **Tibetan uprising**, the Dalai Lama (spiritual leader of Tibetan people) and many of his followers fled to India.

- Former Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru gave him and Tibetan refugees shelter, and helped in setting up the Tibetan government in exile.
- Since 1959, more than a lakh Tibetan refugees have been sheltered in India and they have even set up the Tibetan government in exile, which continues to hold elections.
- But the **official Indian policy is that the Dalai Lama is a spiritual leader, and the Tibetan community in India is not allowed to undertake any political activity.**
- Despite frequent protests from China, especially when the Dalai Lama is invited to an official event or travels to Arunachal Pradesh, most governments have held the line on what is seen as a contradictory stand.

### ***Recent Shift in Policy:***

- In the **event of increasing tensions between India and China**, there has been a shift in India's Tibet Policy.
- This shift in the policy, earmarks the **Indian government actively managing with the Dalai Lama in public forums.**
- For Example, in 2014, Prime Minister of India (PM) had invited the head of the Tibetan government in exile in India, Lobsang Sangay, to his swearing in ceremony.
- However, he did not invite him in 2019 after being re-elected for a second five-year term, to ensure a smooth passage for a second informal summit between him and Chinese president Xi Jinping.
- Recently, the Prime Minister of India (PM) wished the Dalai Lama in the first such public acknowledgement since 2013, the first time as PM.
- The **shift in India's Tibet policy is majorly focused on symbolic aspects.**

## **Challenges of Tibet Policy:**

### ***Changes in Tibetan Demography:***

- Over the past few decades, China is promoting people

from mainland China to migrate into Tibet.

- China is increasing suppression of the Tibetan populations' links to the Dalai Lama and pouring in investment, infrastructure projects in the region.
- In addition, there's Chinese dams on the upper riparian areas of the Brahmaputra, and construction of Tibetan villages along the LAC, particularly along Arunachal Pradesh boundary, which can prove to be a future flashpoint aimed at bolstering Chinese claims of territory.

### ***Tibetans Against Each Other:***

- As India-China tensions grow and turn violent after the Galwan valley clash, China has begun to raise Tibetan Militia groups.
- Further, the Indian Army trains the Tibetan Special Frontier Force, which could lead to Tibetans fighting each other in the future.

### ***Question of Tibetan Citizenship:***

- The Indian government doesn't give citizenship to Tibetans born in India after the cut-off year of 1987.
- This has created a sense of dissatisfaction amongst the youth of the Tibetan community.
- Further, in the past few years, the US has also increased its role, by accepting more Tibetan refugees. This will impact India's role as a sole entity arguing about the future of Tibetan refugee.

### ***Issue of Dalai Lama's Succession:***

- The 86 years old Dalai Lama is not only the spiritual leader, but the political leader of the community worldwide.
- The Dalai Lama asserts that his successor could be a living incarnation, in a specific area in India or even in another country like Taiwan.

## Way forward:

- The idea that India holds the “Tibet card” is crumbling and the government **needs a proactive policy** that takes into account these new realities.
- There is an **urgent need for community outreach, surveys and a referendum**, if necessary, to map what the Tibetan community in India wants in its future.
- To **improve the conditions of Tibetans in refugee settlements**, the Government of India needs to redouble efforts to implement the **Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy of 2014** which it adopted in consultation with the Tibetan government-in-exile.
- For those who want to make India a permanent home, especially those in the new generation, **India must reconsider its citizenship laws**.
- The Indian foreign policy establishment needs to **stop seeing the Tibetan population in India as a strategic tool**.
- India must **avoid a situation where it has a young and restive Tibetan population that resides here, but looks outside of India for its leadership and command structure** after the Dalai Lama has passed.

**Mould your thought:** In light of historical relations of Tibet with India, analyse India’s Tibet policy. Do you think that India’s Tibet policy needs to be reworked?

### ***Approach to the answer:***

- Introduction
- Write about the historical relations of Tibet with India
- Discuss India’s official Tibet Policy
- Discuss the signs of recent shift briefly
- Mention the challenges to the Policy
- Suggest measures to overcome them
- Conclusion