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## New Delhi plays the Tibet card

By Saransh Sehgal  
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DHARAMSALA, [India](#) - Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao's closed-door meeting with the Dalai Lama and talks with officials of the Tibetan government in exile, during her July 10-11 weekend visit here, has prompted speculation that New Delhi plans to play the Tibet card with China.

It was Rao's first visit to Dharamsala - home to the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader and his followers since 1959 - after she became foreign secretary last year. The visit came shortly after the Dalai Lama celebrated his 75th birthday on July 6.

Officially, the foreign office of the Tibetan government described Rao's visit "as a courtesy visit to the Dalai Lama". "Rao called on His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the two discussed issues of common interest," said Tenzin Taklha, a spokesman for the Dalai Lama. Taklha refused to give details of the meeting.

However, according to India's DNA (Daily News & Analysis), Rao conveyed the Indian government's concern to the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan officials that they should exercise restraint in their comments about China so that India-China relations do not suffer. Rao requested the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile not to go overboard while "making observations about China".

Rao, who met the Dalai Lama and Samdhong Rinpoche, prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile on Sunday, July 11, briefed them on recent [India](#)-China talks. India was worried that the Dalai Lama's remarks could spoil these talks.

India follows a one-China policy and recognizes Tibet as a part of China. China has often criticized India for allowing Tibetan refugees to engage in political activities on its soil. Last year, New Delhi allowed the Dalai Lama to visit Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state that China claims as its territory.

The Dalai Lama usually describes [India's](#) position on Tibet as "over-cautious". In this view, New Delhi seems wants to play the Tibet card to please Beijing in hope of warming up ties between the two countries.

Still, China slammed Rao's meeting with the Dalai Lama. At a regular press conference in Beijing on Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang said it hoped India would abide by its commitment not to allow exiled Tibetans to conduct anti-China activities.

"China has expressed its position clearly to the Indian side over this [the Tibet] issue," Qin said when asked about Rao's meetings with the Dalai Lama and Tibetan officials. "The Indian government has expressed on many occasions to China that it recognizes Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the People's Republic of China and it would not allow exiled Tibetans in [India](#) to conduct anti-China political activities. So we hope India could abide by its commitments on Tibet-related issues and properly handle all the issues," he said.

Other analysts believe New Delhi wants to play the Tibet card to kill two birds with one stone: a goodwill gesture to tone down the Dalai Lama's anti-Beijing rhetoric, and leverage in negotiations with China on sensitive issues.

Noticeably, Rao's weekend [trip](#) to Dharamsala came less than a week after [India's](#) National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon's July 3-6 visit to Beijing.

As Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's special envoy, Menon held talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and State Councilor Dai Bingguo, who is also China's chief negotiator with India on their border disputes. The state-run Xinhua News Agency reported that some sensitive issues were discussed during the meeting.

Moreover, Rao's meeting with the Dalai Lama also came soon after China announced a nuclear deal with [Pakistan](#) under which it will supply Islamabad with two reactors.

"Whenever there is a perception of China crossing the red lines of core, sovereignty related issues, we react by activating the Tibet card," Srikanth Kondapalli, a China expert at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, told IANS (Indo-Asian News Service).

"This is shadow boxing. It's a way of signaling to Beijing India's displeasure over some recent issues like [China's decision to issue] separate visas for Kashmiris," he added.

Officials from India's external affairs ministry in New Delhi refused to comment on the Rao-Dalai meeting. Even the Dalai Lama's office maintained strict confidentiality.

Rao's visit was kept away from the media, like earlier visits by her predecessors Syam Saran and Shiv Shankar Menon. Professor Samdhong Rinpoche, the prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile, also said was simply a routine courtesy call.

During her meeting with the Dalai Lama, Rao reportedly focused on issues related to Tibetans living in India, their frustrated movement to gain autonomy from China, and issues related to the security of the Dalai Lama.

Tibetans in exile are gearing up for parliamentary elections next year, with analysts suggesting that the next prime minister will bring in new policies and take a new tack in negotiations with Beijing. Currently more than 120,000 Tibetans refugees reside in India. Interestingly, Rao also met Tibet hardliners who uphold "Rangzen" - full independence for Tibet, which goes against the Dalai Lama's Middle Way policy that demands greater autonomy for Tibet under China.

New Delhi believes this hardline sentiment could grow much stronger, particularly after the Dalai Lama, who is 75, passes away.

Radical Tibetans greeted the Indian foreign secretary while asking the Indian government to review its policy towards Tibet. They wrote in a memorandum that they owed to Indian government the revival of Tibetan life in India and the "resurrection of international awareness and confidence within the struggle".

Tenzin Tsundue, a prominent young Tibetan independence activist, and other Tibetan signatories to the memorandum, believe that independence is the only goal. "Only an independent Tibet can guarantee the survival of the Tibetan people, our culture and the nation. The 2008 uprising in Tibet is a clear public mandate that the Tibetans in Tibet are willing to even die, but not live under Chinese colonial rule."

The memorandum said: "Whatever may be the policies being held by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the exile government; we believe very strongly that the goal of the struggle cannot be anything less than Independence."

The Tibetan government in exile seemed happy with the secretary's visit. "By and large the visit went very well and we are very happy with that," said Migyur Dorjee, cabinet secretary of the Tibetan government in exile.