

If Kosovo, why not Tibet?

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by Claude Arpi

Backed by the US and the EU, Kosovo has declared 'independence' from Serbia, although its claim to 'sovereignty' is extremely dubious. But the independence of another nation, Tibet, continues to be denied by China. The US and EU are least interested

We are living in a strange world in which truth and justice are often not the main moving forces. Take the example of Kosovo. Backed by the US and the European Union, though strongly contested by Serbia and Russia, Kosovo declared itself an independent nation. When Parliament Speaker Jakup Krasniqi solemnly stated that "Kosovo is an independent, democratic and sovereign state", members of the House burst into applause.

Reuters reported: "Across the capital, Pristina, revellers fired guns into the air, waved red-and-black Albanian flags and honked car horns in jubilation at the birth of the world's newest country."

Later, Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi and President Fatmir Sejdiu signed the declaration, sure of the support of the US and the European Union. Mr Thaçi, the former leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army, said: "We never lost faith in the dream that one day we would stand among the free nations of the world, and today we do." Though his troops battled the Serbians in a war that claimed 10,000 lives, today he stated: "Dreams are infinite... nothing can deter us from moving forward to the greatness that history has reserved for us."

We are living in a strange world because other people had also dreamt of independence, but is there any hope for them? This is the case of the Tibetans. The Kosovo nation is less than 11,000 sq km, but before the Chinese invasion of 1950 Tibet was spread over 2,5 million sq km, representing 25 per cent of China's landmass. Though sparsely populated due to the high altitude and difficult climate, the Dalai Lama's country, with six million Tibetans, has thrice the population of Kosovo.

The Tibetan nation was independent for two millennia, even if some Chinese or Mongol incursions occurred a few times over the last centuries. One such invasion happened in 1910, but the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was quick to recover his land. What Mr Thaçi did on February 17, the previous Dalai Lama did in 1913. He declared the formal independence of Tibet. The proclamation was distributed all over the Land of Snows. It is dated the eighth day of the first month of the Water-Ox year (February, 1913).

The Tibetan leader not only declared his nation independent, but reminded his people of their responsibilities: "Having once again achieved for ourselves a period of happiness and peace, I have now allotted to all of you the following duties to be carried out without negligence". He told them about the importance to follow the Buddhist precepts: "Peace and happiness in this world can only be maintained by preserving the faith of Buddhism." He asked the civil servants to be honest and serve the people.

Less well known, he wanted to raise an Army to defend his nation's borders: "Tibet is a country with rich natural resources; but it is not scientifically advanced like other lands... To keep up with the rest of the world, we must defend our country." He even promulgated land reforms: "From now on, no one is allowed to obstruct anyone else from cultivating whatever vacant lands are available."

The Land of Snows was to remain independent for the next 37 years, till the day the People's Liberation Army ruthlessly entered Tibet to 'liberate' it. "Liberate from what?" asked Jawaharlal Nehru in Parliament.

But soon the Government of India as well as the British who had signed a Convention with the Lhasa Government in 1914 in Simla, fell silent. The other European countries and the United States kept quiet. The same nations are today, for their own interests, supporting the independence of Kosovo. Tibet was then a separate nation with its own Government, its own Foreign Office, with treaty relations with other countries, with a distinct culture, history, language and religion.

Why did everyone stay mum? It is an inconvenient truth today. If one looks at the legal parameters which define a nation, Tibet fulfilled them all. Unfortunately, the world was not ready to follow its own rules.

In Delhi, many saw a danger for India if it betrayed an 'independent' Tibet. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister, masterfully summed up the strategic implications for India's foreign policy. In a letter, considered as his testament (he was to pass away six weeks later), he wrote to Nehru: "I have carefully gone through the correspondence between the External Affairs Ministry and the Chinese Government. I have tried to peruse this correspondence as favourably to our Ambassador (KM Panikkar) and the Chinese Government as possible, but I regret to say that neither of them comes out well as the result of this study." He then continued: "The Chinese Government has tried to delude us by professions of peaceful intentions... There can be no doubt that, during the period covered by this correspondence, the Chinese must have been concentrating for an onslaught on Tibet. The final action of the Chinese, in my judgement, is little short of perfidy."

The letter goes to detail the implications for India of having a new neighbour. Fifty-eight years later, Patel's words are today prophetic; the Chinese can freely enter Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh and nobody in India dares to say anything to avoid "jeopardising the progress of the border negotiations". In 1950, there was no border dispute; Tibet was, in the Dalai Lama's words, a true chela of India.

In November 1950, after sending his letter to the Prime Minister, Patel told an audience in Delhi: "In the Kali Yuga, we shall return ahimsa for ahimsa. But if anybody resorts to force against us we shall meet it with force." Due to his illness, Patel could not put his words into practice and Nehru did not even answer his letter.

However, 10 days later, he wrote an internal note on the subject on November 18, 1950. Hardly four weeks after the invasion, he had already accepted the fait accompli: "China is going to be our close neighbour for a long time to come. We are going to have a tremendously long common frontier."

Though at that time the Chinese troops were still a few months march from Lhasa, Nehru added: "I think it may be taken for granted that China will take possession, in a political sense at least, of the whole of Tibet." A few months later, Mao took over not only politically, but militarily the 'Roof of the World'.

Nehru admitted that the Tibetan people can nevertheless not expect too much: "Autonomy can obviously not be anything like the autonomy, verging on independence, which Tibet has enjoyed during the last forty years or so." It is beyond comprehension how Nehru, who considered himself to be the hero of the oppressed nations, could allow a nation 'verging on independence' simply lose its freedom.

Today, the Dalai Lama is asking for autonomy, But the world refuses to listen to his voice even as it gives in to Kosovo's clamour.

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