

China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage

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China Shaping Tibet for Strategic Leverage

Introduction

Ever since the annexation of Tibet in 1950, China has had greater designs for the Tibetan region. The newly established state had the same fears about colonisation of Tibet by western powers that the Qing dynasty had since the Treaty of 1904. Tibet was also symbolic of the rising nationalism in China. Sun Yat-sen, for instance, called for the “creation of a strong Chinese state that would expel the Japanese from Manchuria, the Russians from Mongolia and the British from Tibet.”¹ Mao’s Tibet policy relied on gradual military, economic and social reforms to “reintegrate” Tibet with the Motherland.² Despite six decades of the Chinese rule, the process of Tibetan assimilation remains incomplete.

In 2000, China officially launched the “Open Up the West” (*Xibu Da Kaifa*) policy, also known as the Western Development Program. The policy was launched to address the economic, regional, ecological and security concerns.³ With China’s ambition to be a regional power by 2025 and a global power by 2050, securing complete control within its own boundaries has gained heightened significance. The 2015 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) modernisation strategy outlines ‘maintaining domestic stability’ as one of its goals, a direct reference to Tibet, a historically restive region. The Chinese central government has a multipronged approach to integrate Tibet with mainstream China. This includes the development of infrastructure, economic development and the change of the demographic profile of the region.

China is developing its long neglected western land borders to reduce dependence on the seelines of commerce. Integral to the Belt and Road initiative, Xinjiang and Tibet are the key for projection of China’s hard and soft power to the Western and Central Asian region. This elaborate transport network with six distinct roadways moving westward from the Chinese hinterland, will promote greater integration with Central Asia and beyond. It is the centrepiece of Xi’s legacy, as illustrated by its inclusion in the PLA constitution after the 19th Party Congress and will remain the Party’s focus even after Xi.

An added advantage is that this infrastructure will considerably strengthen the PLA capacity to deal with any unrest in Tibet or war with India. Infrastructure, military forces with offensive capabilities and logistic bases to sustain military operations collectively form the crucial components of military deterrence. For instance, the Yadong-Shigatse railway line has ostensibly been planned to boost trade from the Nathu La Pass.⁴ Trade is almost negligible on this route, whereas the strategic significance is immense.⁵

This paper will analyze Chinese efforts to control Tibet by exploring aspects of “Opening up the West” policy (*Xibu Da Kaifa*)—Hanization of Tibet, marginalisation of Tibetans in Tibet, increasing infrastructure development and force structuring and deployment in Tibet.

Overcoming the Demographic Disadvantage

Demography

Tibet is a multiethnic society with people from the Se, Mu, Dong, Tong, Dru, Ra, Bai people, Blang, Bonan, Dongxiang, Han, Hui Chinese, Lhoba, Lisu people, Miao, Mongols, Monguor (Tu people), Menba (Monpa), Mosuo, Nakhi, Qiang, Nu people, Pumi, Salar and Yi communities residing there.⁶ The Tibetans who comprise of six major groups constitute over 90 percent of the population. However, the nature of Han migrants in the region gives rise to the fear of Sinicization.

Increasing Han Numbers

The Chinese population constitutes 56 different ethnicities. The Han Chinese form an overwhelming majority. According to the fifth national census conducted in 2000, the population of all the 56 ethnic minority groups totaled 104.49 million, accounting for 8.41 percent of the total population of China while the Han Chinese accounted for over 91.5 percent of the population.⁷ Interestingly, the minorities occupy more than half the land in China; with the five ethnic autonomous provinces occupying 64 percent of the landmass.⁸

China has been accused of Hanization of Tibet to increase control over the Tibetan region to exercise greater control over the Chinese periphery. This is similar to the Chinese policy of flooding other minority areas like Mongolia with the ethnic Han population. In Inner Mongolia, one of the earliest ethnic

provinces created by China, only 20 percent of the population consists of ethnic Mongolians today.⁹ As early as 1952, Mao shared the idea of a planned population increase in Tibet with a visiting Tibetan delegation. He stated, “Tibet covers a large area but is thinly populated. Its population should be increased from the present two to three million to five or six million and then to over ten million.”¹⁰ In 1964, there were just 39,500 Han Chinese in the remote region, just under three percent of the population. According to the 2010 census figures, this number has now swelled to 245,000.¹¹ The Chinese argument is that this number constitutes less than ten percent of the total population. Freedom House report 2016 has cited an official plan which aims to increase the “permanent urban population” of Tibet by approximately 30 percent by 2020, with many new settlers likely to be ethnic Chinese.¹²

Simple percentages do not paint a complete picture about the influx of Hans. Tibet is heavily militarised and policed but the military personnel posted in Tibet have never been included in the census. Further, the census does not account for the large number of temporary Han and Hui workers who move to Tibet for a short period of time, mostly to make money and eventually move back to their hometowns. The census is conducted in November, a time when nearly half the floating population which moves to Tibet for the summer, heads back home.¹³ Two-thirds of this floating population is Han. According to some Tibetan estimates, the summer numbers stand at double the winter numbers in Tibet. Tibetan sources put the tally of the floating population in Lhasa at two million, when the overall population of Lhasa is just half a million.¹⁴

Han Migration and Tibetan Relocation—Understanding Tibetan Society

It is crucial to understand that neither the Hans, nor the Tibetans are a homogenous community. The rural-urban divide, perpetuated by decades of living under the *hukou* system,¹⁵ plays a major role in shaping the identity in China. Tibet witnesses the interplay between the rural-urban identity and the majority-minority ethnic identity.

There have been three major waves of Han migration into Tibet. The first wave was after the Communist regime was established. Until this period, the entry of Han peasants into Tibet was negligible.¹⁶ The second wave of migration started in the 1980s with easing of the *hukou* system in

Tibet. Rapid industrialisation led to an influx of a large number of economic migrants, mostly rural Han, who came in to earn quick money.¹⁷ Observations show that these economic migrants are relatively more skilled than the rural Tibetans and get the lion's share of jobs. Completion of the Qinghai-Tibet rail link in 2006 led to the final wave of migration. Tibet's cities, which provide the bulk of economic opportunity attracted migrants, including a floating population that works for the summer and retires to their native province for winter. The migrants dominate the job market in the cities, leaving little opportunity for the local Tibetans.¹⁸ Therefore, despite their small percentage in Tibet, migrants have been cornering most of the new opportunities that have emerged with Tibetan growth.

Impact on rural population—Rapid development in Tibet has particularly unmoored the rural population. While the shift towards urbanisation is a natural corollary of progress, forceful resettlement into modern homes suggests a more sinister motive than mere Tibetan progress. According to a Chinese white paper on Tibet published in 2015,

As many as 2.3 million farmers and herdsmen had moved into safe modern houses, their per capita living space having reached 30.4 m², so marking a historic improvement in their living conditions. Constantly increasing input into the building of relocation housing, Tibet has built over 66,076 of such houses covering 4.0442 million m², with an input of 8.809 billion yuan.¹⁹

This constitutes an astounding 85 percent of the Tibetan population in Tibet. There is no denying the amenities these houses provide. The rural Tibetan population contains a large number of nomadic herdsmen and pastoralists. Reports by the Human Rights Watch observe that the rural Tibetans have no choice in the decision to relocate. They are not adequately compensated for the complete upheaval of their lifestyle either.²⁰ Used to open spaces and free movement, the new houses with constant surveillance are a suffocating change. Chinese figures show that the income of the rural Tibetan population has risen by 13.9 percent in 2016 alone.²¹ The pastoralists have lost their traditional means of livelihood. Ming Yue, director of the Yushu Prefecture, Three-River Source office stated, "*At least 60 percent of nomads were unable to find work after leaving their land*".²² The new houses make no

provisions for sheltering livestock, an important input for and supplement to incomes from farming.²³ An independent, self-sufficient community has been made dependent on government doles for its livelihood.²⁴ Additionally, for every yuan spent by the Chinese government, a rural Tibetan spends 4.5 yuan on the construction of these new houses. Without a source of income, they have entered a vicious debt-trap and been introduced to a new cash economy. In the past, their dependence on money itself was limited and the singular development narrative which counts only increased incomes, as the metric of development is reductive. Even though incomes and housing quality have risen, they have lost their individual identity and independence.

China boasts about its environmental protection in Tibet. As the spokesperson for the Chinese embassy in London stated, “By the end of 2016, 47 nature reserves had been established in Tibet, covering 35 percent of the autonomous region’s total land area.”²⁵ The official statements fail to mention that the nomadic Tibetans, who have lived in harmony with the environment for thousands of years, are being forcibly displaced to establish these nature reserve conditions.

Impact on the urban population—As direct beneficiaries of the Chinese policy of appeasement, the prosperity of the urban elite is interlinked with continued central government investment in the region. The elite urban Tibetans have definitely witnessed a marked improvement in their economic circumstances. The salaries and consumption rates for the state employees are comparable to cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the highest in the country.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, these are fully subsidised by the central government. This is despite the failure of state-run organisations to stay globally competitive. Even though some Tibetan elites are employed by the government, they occupy a small number in proportion to their population. In 2003, the Han Chinese who represented only six percent of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) population occupied more than half the permanent government posts.²⁷ In 2006, Tibet witnessed a rare protest by college educated Tibetans who cited discrimination in hiring practices for the TAR civil services.²⁸ Of the 100 posts, 98 had been allotted to Hans and only 2 to Tibetans, indicating the prevalent discriminatory pattern.

Further, instead of competing for higher salaried jobs, the property owners often end up simply renting out their properties. There is some resentment

about the unproductiveness and the perpetual substance abuse that this new lifestyle has unleashed. More importantly, as argued by Emily Yeh, even though these communities have benefitted economically, they have paid the heavy price of loss of culture. Even for jobs in Tibet, passing a Mandarin exam is mandatory and the bilingualism of the Tibetans offer them any extra opportunities.²⁹ Their children go to Chinese medium schools to provide them with better opportunities in the future. The younger generations are not only more comfortable in Mandarin than their mother tongue, Tibetan; they also aspire towards and ape the mainstream Han Chinese lifestyle. This is reflected by the malls and the Chinese style restaurants and clothes favoured by this class. A parallel can be drawn with the 'brown sahebs' in India under the colonial rule, the class of people brown in skin tone but English in tastes and mannerisms. This threat to the very existence of Tibetan culture and identity is the strongest fear of the Tibetans.

An additional cause of concern is the communist party agenda to promote mixed marriages. A report by the communist party's research office in Tibet has stated that mixed marriages have increased annually by double-digit percentages for the past five years, from 666 couples in 2008 to 4,795 couples in 2013. The reasons attributed for this change are favourable policies in areas such as social security, reproductive rights, vacations, prizes and special treatment for children born from such marriage, including education, employment and communist party membership.³⁰ When forced to make a choice about the ethnicity of the child early on, mixed couples often prefer identifying the child as Han because it results in better future prospects.³¹ While the harmonious existence of diverse ethnicities must be celebrated, the Chinese policies in Tibet are dangerous since they aim to homogenise Chinese identity by chipping away at the unique Tibetan identity.

The Dalai Lama has termed the Hanization of Tibet by China the biggest threat to Tibetan identity. Even though China denies these claims, there is truth to the accusations. The flooding of Tibetan cities with Hans and the consequent marginalisation of ethnic Tibetans is undeniable. The rural Han migrants who largely come in for economic gains might be unaware of the larger Hanization narrative but the state has definitely invested heavily to promote Han migration. Even though individuals do not have a larger aim, it must be noted that this immigration has not been organic in nature. The Chinese in

Tibet are provided with a high-altitude allowance, rice and wheat are imported by trucks, housing, healthcare, cultural and educational facilities are all provided to encourage migration into Tibet.³² Moreover, other inland provinces like Sichuan view out-migration to Tibet as a means of poverty alleviation in their own province, subsidizing it heavily. State funding of infrastructure and the high number of soldiers in the region support Hanization as well. Therefore, it is evident that state policies have considerably strengthened migration which would have taken place at a much slower rate by market forces alone. This deliberate policy to swamp out the Tibetans in their native land can be placed squarely at the doorstep of Chinese leaders.

Economics Development

The rapid economic development of Tibet is undisputed. In 2016, Tibet reported 11.5 percent gross domestic product (GDP) growth, realizing the 24th straight year of double-digit growth.³³

Even though the GDP numbers are fairly impressive, a large part of it is composed of subsidies and loans from the central government. Some of it is the state-funded construction boom and administrative expansion. This distortion can be contextualised by the fact that in Tibet, four times more is spent on construction than on education while nationally, more is spent on education than on construction.³⁴ The state administration to GDP ratio is disproportionately high and the state employees are some of the highest paid in the country.

China is aggressively working towards making the province self-sufficient economically. While implementing the Western Development Program, it has promoted tourism and industry. In 2014, Tibet received 15.53 million tourists and the revenue from tourism reached 20.4 billion yuan.³⁵ The functioning of the Qinghai-Tibet rail link saw a massive boost in tourism numbers. Even if these Chinese numbers are inflated, the impressive growth of tourism is undeniable.

Tibetan industry is at a nascent stage when compared to the other provinces of China but given the vast potential in the region, it will be harnessed further. It has vast resources of chromite, lithium, copper, gold, borax minerals which can fuel the next wave of Chinese industrial progress.³⁶ The combined mineral wealth is valued by the Communist party at 600 billion

yuan (\$96 billion).³⁷ Major rivers like the Mekong, Salween and Brahmaputra also originate here and China is eyeing the water surplus in the region greedily. Mining, bottled drinking water, hydropower, Tibetan culture-centred industries like traditional Tibetan medicine, Tibetan paintings, folk handicrafts are some of the industries gradually being developed in the TAR. A promising sign is raising private investment which indicates market confidence.

Exclusion from the Growth Story

The Chinese narrative is that the Tibetans have enjoyed the benefits of this growth, as reflected by their increased standard of living. The Tibetans dispute this by arguing that they have been excluded from the growth narrative and been relegated to second-class citizenship in their own land. A closer analysis is required to understand the impact of development on Tibetan society.

Apart from distorting the economy, heavy reliance in state subsidies and central payment of wages makes a small proportion of the locals highly dependent on the central government for jobs while excluding others from the job market completely. Moreover, the comparison with the figures of 1950 and the constant reference to the Chinese gift of development are fallacious. Countries with difficult terrains and similar communities like Nepal and Bhutan have also made progress in the same duration, without cultural annihilation.

Tibet's GDP has been one of the best performing in China over the past three years, escaping relatively unscathed from the overall slowdown in the Chinese economy. GDP growth for the first half of 2017 reached 10.8 percent, underpinned by strong investment in infrastructure and robust consumption, according to Tibet's statistics bureau.³⁸ Despite 24 straight years of double-digit growth, Tibet's GDP ranks the last in China, less than half of Qinghai province, which is second last and it has 590,000 rural residents living under the poverty line with an annual income of 2,300 yuan.³⁹ The per capita disposable income for urban households in Tibet for 2015 was 25456.6 yuan,⁴⁰ while the per capita disposable income for rural households was 8243.7 yuan.⁴¹ In 2014, the per capita disposable income of urban residents in the region was 22,016 yuan, a 38-fold increase compared with 565 yuan in 1978, and that of farmers and herdsmen was 7,359 yuan, representing an average annual increase of 10.9 percent according to a government white paper published in September. This needs to be contextualised. The national average for urban households

was 31194.8 yuan and for rural households was 11421.7 yuan⁴² for the same duration. The disposable incomes in Shanghai, the leading province were over double the income in Tibet. The Tibetan incomes are still considerably behind the national average. Factoring the vast inequality in the region, these numbers portray an even more dismal picture. Another important structural feature of the Tibetan economy is the significant gap between urban and rural incomes, the largest disparity in China.⁴³

Little effort has been made to integrate this population in the opportunities created by new businesses. As already discussed, most of the lower-end jobs are performed by the rural Han migrants, who are paid one and a half to two times more than the local Tibetans to perform the same jobs.⁴⁴ Industries tend to employ the better educated Han migrants because the managerial staff is motivated by kinship and linguistic bonds. For instance, 65 percent of the employees at the *Jama* mine in Gyama, TAR are Han, one of the lowest proportions in the region.⁴⁵ This shows that the benefits of development are yet to reach most ordinary Tibetans. Their cost of living has increased without a proportionate rise in job opportunities or incomes. Growth has been uneven and even destabilizing. In conjunction with the Hanization of Tibet, this has led to resentment against the ruling Chinese government. The fringe elements are likely to continue rising if the Tibetans continue being marginalised in their homeland. A notable feature of the 2008 riots in Tibet was that a majority of the arsonists were rural Tibetans, while the people targeted were mostly small shop owners.⁴⁶ More than a thousand Han and Hui-owned small shops were destroyed during the 2008 riots.⁴⁷ This indicates that one of the causes of unrest was the Chinese economic policy in Tibet.

Population Control Measures

The 2008 Tibetan riots were a watershed moment for invasive monitoring and intensification of religious suppression in Tibet. The Chinese government further clamped down on the population in Tibet to prevent the existing unrest from destabilizing the region. Instead of addressing the religious grievances, which gave rise to such large-scale violence, the response was even more distrust of the Tibetan community. Followed by Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping has strengthened the policy of religious censorship. Travel restrictions for monks and Buddhist citizens, bans on religious festivals, control over

monasteries through 'management committees' run by the communist party and patriotic re-education of monks have intensified.⁴⁸ Patriotic re-education and denunciation of the Dalai Lama has been extended from the larger monasteries to all the monasteries in populated Tibetan areas. Despite efforts to reduce the centrality of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people by means such as restrictions on prayer and religious festivals, he continues to be highly revered. The Tibetan response to the Chinese white paper on Tibet expressed their sentiment by stating that "His Holiness, the Dalai Lama remains the irreplaceable jewel in the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people."⁴⁹ Another development has been the promotion of state approved interpretations of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, at the Sixth forum on Tibet held in August 2015, Xi declared that, "efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle...encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society."⁵⁰ The lack of faith in Tibetans is also reflected by paramilitary forces patrolling religious institutions. For example, Lhasa's Jokhang temple is policed exclusively by Han paramilitary forces.⁵¹ Traditional centres of learning like the Larung Gar are being reduced in size. Large parts have been demolished and the number of residents there reduced to 5,000 from the earlier 40,000.⁵² The government is promoting its own institutes such as the Tibetan Buddhist Institute in Lhasa, creating a parallel axis of religious authority. Dissidents and activists are detained for long periods. Their families and even villages are held responsible for their actions, creating a stifling atmosphere.

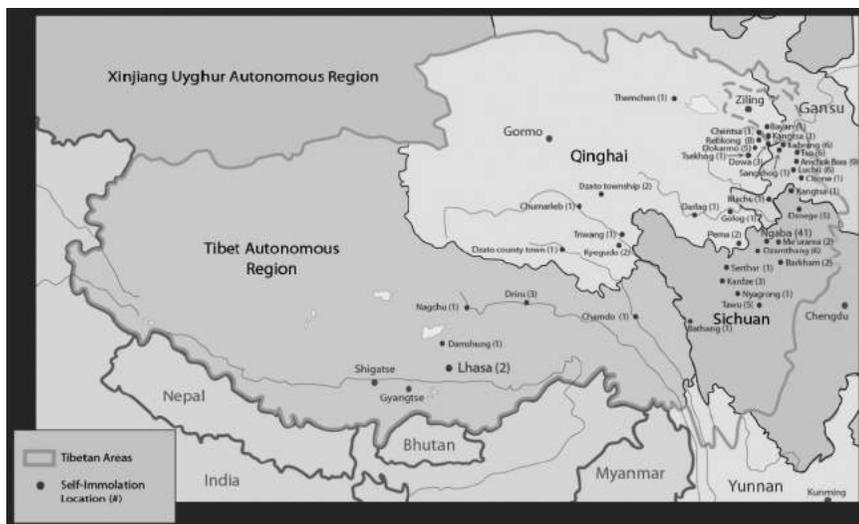
First introduced in 2011 as a response to the 2008 riots, the surveillance system was continued indefinitely in 2014. Tibetans have been relocated in large numbers to planned cities and towns. All of Tibet is subject to a grid-like management system, introduced as the key to "social stability maintenance". It is aimed at "fighting against the 14th Dalai Lama, other overseas Tibetans and hostile foreign forces" in Tibetan areas.⁵³ The Chinese central government gave up all pretence of human rights protection or even Tibetan progress when a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) described the grid management system as "nets in the sky and traps on the ground."⁵⁴ Ostensibly introduced to streamline the delivery of social services, the system involves surveillance till the household level. In a 1984-esque dystopian twist, a network of

community workers overseeing sections of cities, divided into “grids”, provide real time data on their territory and on the movement of people in the region to be analyzed for potential signs of unrest.⁵⁵ In late 2016, 22,000 Chinese ‘village-based’ cadres constituted the sixth batch to enter Tibet to provide intelligence and undertake religious and patriotic education. There is also a programme of double-linked households where party cadres are required to befriend and guide poor families in adopting the correct attitude. Apart from cadres in villages, Chinese cadres have also been placed in every Tibetan monastery. Tibet also has routine police check posts to monitor movement; a foreperson for every five to ten households responsible for political activities of the group.⁵⁶

According to official statistics, the number of party members in the TAR grew three times as much between 2006 and 2012 in China as a whole, increasing by 46.5 percent in the TAR compared with 14.6 percent nationwide. In the same period, the number of these party members who were working as officials at township or village level in the TAR increased by 59 percent.⁵⁷ Eighty percent of the 230,000 party members in Tibet are made up by ethnic Tibetans, with nearly half coming from rural areas.⁵⁸ China has promoted a culture of political assent and rewarded these loyalists. This is also reflected by barring these posts to anyone who has relatives with prison records, has travelled to India to get religious teachings from the Dalai Lama, or have allowed their children to study in exile schools in India.

This extreme control ensures that no large-scale protest occurs in Tibet but it has also led to the rise of the lone heroes, the self-immolators who can act on an individual basis with little prior preparation.⁵⁹ Freedom House, a think tank working on democratic rights has reported waves of self-immolation by Tibetans protesting against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. There have been 151 known immolations since 2009 in the TAR and China.⁶⁰ The Chinese government has responded by arresting the family members of the “activists”. It is interesting to note that the majority of these self-immolations took place in the Tibetan populated regions outside the officially demarcated TAR. This indicates that social discontent is simmering under the surface.

Tibetan Self-Immolations 2009-2016



Source: International Campaign for Tibet, Map: Tibetan self-immolations from 2009/2016, March 2, 2016, <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/map-tibetan-self-immolations-from-2009/2013/>

Chinese Concerns

The party leaders are acutely aware of their precarious control over Tibet and the threat a large-scale social unrest would pose to the global credibility of the Chinese socialist system. While the Hans are flooding major cities of Tibet, the majority comprises of short-term economic migrants disinterested in the larger regional dynamics. They are unlikely to act as Chinese foot soldiers in case of ethnic conflict. China is relying on a top down approach to build the economy of the region. However, the dissatisfaction over the change in lifestyle and lack of job opportunities is a constant source of frustration for Tibetans. Despite large subsidies into the TAR, China has not succeeded in integrating the Tibetan population. The heavy monitoring and intensive surveillance has failed to shake religious beliefs or personal identities. Tibetan Buddhism continues to be practised by Tibetans and even by Hans, including the President Xi Jinping's wife, Peng Liyuan,⁶¹ despite extensive restriction of freedom of religion. The Dalai Lama continues to hold moral authority over the people. The rural Tibetans who form a majority of the population are particularly dissatisfied with the Chinese administration. In a repetition of the 2008 riots, they could play a key role in future unrest.

The continuous string of self-immolations in such a restricted environment and China's own interest in the issue of Dalai Lama's succession indicate that despite economic growth in the TAR, it is concerned that the Hanization programme has only had limited impact in stamping out the Tibetan cause.

The physical infrastructure and the military means China is building to control ethnic strife will be discussed in the second and third parts of the paper.

Bridging the Geographical Fault Line

Geography

Tibet has been isolated for over a thousand years due to its stark geography. The Tibetan plateau, known as the 'roof of the world', comprises overwhelmingly of mountains and plateaus. It lies at an average elevation of over 4,000 m above sea level.⁶² The northern part, occupying nearly two thirds of the province has an average elevation of over 4,500 m above sea level while the southern basin is 1,200 km long and 300 km wide, sloping roughly from 4,000 m in the west to 2,800 m in the east.⁶³ The western side or the lake region of the basin is comprised of innumerable lakes such as Lake Paiku, Lake Puma Yumco, Lake Manasarovar and Lake Rakshastal. The south Tibetan valley comprises of the basin of Tsangpo river and its tributaries, Mekong, Salween et al. It is characterised by fault topography and high valleys.

Tibet remains the sparsest populated province of China. The difficult climatic conditions and the lack of connectivity to the mainland have meant that its fate has not been linked to the Chinese growth story. Over the past decade and a half, the Chinese central government has actively tried to bridge the gap by constructing an extensive network of connectivity.

Infrastructure Development

China is bridging the historical fault line created by geography by creating a vast network of infrastructure. This includes roads, railways, airfields, fibre optics network. The combined infrastructure network is China's biggest asset in the TAR. Greater control over the region will allow China to pursue both domestic and foreign policy aims. The Chinese Minister of Transport has acknowledged that the development of transport in Tibet was "crucial to China's national security... and the lasting prosperity in the autonomous region."⁶⁴

Roads

China has constructed an elaborate network of roads in Tibet which includes both national highways and provincial roads. By the end of 2016, the total distance of highways constructed in Tibet reached the staggering figure of 82,096 km.⁶⁵ It has witnessed a growth rate of nearly 30 percent annually since 2011.⁶⁶ It is expected that this will increase to over 90,000 km by the end of 2017 and over 110,000 km by 2020—connecting all counties and towns by asphalt roads and all administrative villages with roads.⁶⁷

Tibet has four major highways and a series of arterial roads crisscrossing these highways.

- **Western Highway**—National Highway G219 runs parallel to the eastern border of India. It starts from Yecheng in Xinjiang province and ends at Lhatse, a small town 151 km from Shigatse. In the northern region, it violates Indian sovereignty by passing through the Aksai Chin region in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), which is an Indian area illegally occupied by Pakistan. G219 runs almost parallel to the length of our eastern border, from Jammu and Kashmir to Sikkim. This road was constructed in 1957 and was relied upon by China in the 1962 Sino-Indian war.⁶⁸ In 2013, the entire stretch was repaved with asphalt.⁶⁹ It is a Class 18 to Class 50 black top highway with a capacity of 3,200 tonnes per day.⁷⁰ There is a further upgrade on the cards under the 13th Plan (2016/2020).⁷¹ There are multiple provincial roads which radiate out from G219 on either side. Provincial roads, S206 and S205 meet S301, often referred to as the Central Highway. The S207 branches off from G219, passing between Lake Rakshastal and Lake Manasarovar before reaching Burang, close to the point where Tibet and Nepal meet the Indian state of Uttarakhand. This road will be upgraded to National Highway G564 under the 13th Plan. Further, China plans to construct a second highway, the G365, which will connect the G219 to Tholing and Tsaparang.⁷²
- **Central Highway**—The G109, popularly known as the Central or the Qinghai-Lhasa highway has vastly increased the access to Tibet for the rest of China. The longest asphalt road in the world, it connects Lhasa to Xining in the Qinghai province which is further connected to Beijing.⁷³ It is the most significant route for Chinese trade, having considerably improved the connectivity of Tibet to mainland China. It carries almost 80 percent of the goods coming by road into Tibet.⁷⁴ It is a Class 50 road.⁷⁵

- **Eastern Highway**—National Highway G318 starts from Shanghai and crosses through crucial Tibetan cities like Qamdo, Nyingchi, Lhasa and Shigatse and ends at Zhangmu, just off the Sino-Nepalese border. It extends up to Kathmandu as the Araniko Highway. The road between Lhasa and Nyingchi has been upgraded to an expressway, cutting down the travel time from 8 hours to 4 hours at a speed of 80 km/hour.⁷⁶ S202, a provincial road starts close to the border opposite the Tawang region in Arunachal Pradesh, is connected to Shigatse through other provincial roads—S101, S 307 and S204 and to Nyingchi through S101. Further, S204 extends from Shigatse down to Chumbi Valley in the Yadong County, a mere 31 km off the Sikkim border.⁷⁷ This area has witnessed military conflict in the past, both in 1904 under the British and in 1962.
- **Northern Highway**—The Northern Highway runs almost perpendicular to G109. The western half of this highway is S301, which connects Ngari and Nagqu. The eastern half is National Highway G317. It connects Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province and Nagqu, meeting G318 which passes through Lhasa. National Highway G214 joins Xining, Qinghai province in the north to Jinghong in Yunnan province, passing through the eastern region of the TAR.

Apart from the highways, there are multiple crisscrossing provincial roads. Every county in the remote TAR is now connected by road.⁷⁸

Connectivity between western and eastern China is also being built through Xinjiang. G314 and G315 are major highways crossing the length of Xinjiang, connecting it to Beijing. Inaugurated in 2017, G7, a 2,768 km long major expressway between Xinjiang and Beijing has cut down the distance travelled between the two cities by 1,300 km.⁷⁹

However, roads are subject to the vagaries of weather. Despite China's best attempts, none of these roads are all weather roads. Extreme climatic conditions and frequent landslides triggered by earthquakes mean that they are not motorable for around 2–3 months a year.⁸⁰ The number of meteorological stations in TAR are being increased and upgraded to make up for the serious deficiencies and provide service for traffic, tourism as well as areas prone to weather disasters, improving the early warning as well as disasters prevention and reduction capabilities.⁸¹ Even with increased prediction through satellites and meteorological sites, road transport is likely to stay unpredictable due to the terrain. Therefore, the fast developing rail network running almost parallel to the major highways of the road network becomes critical.

Railways

The first railway line constructed in Tibet, the Qinghai Lhasa rail link has been operational since 2006.⁸² This 1,142 km long line is the primary means for people to reach the region.⁸³ It has made Lhasa accessible to the Chinese in mainland China and has given a considerable boost to tourism. Being an engineering marvel, it passes through 632 km of permafrost, apart from the crossing through Tanggula Pass, the highest point in the world on a railway.⁸⁴ It connects Lhasa to Xining. The other major towns it crosses through include Golmud and Nagqu. It has cut down the travel time between Golmud to Lhasa from 72 hours to just 16 hours.⁸⁵ In the decade after its inauguration, the Qinghai-Tibet railway sustained 75 percent of the total freight capacity of Tibet.⁸⁶ Its capacity is more than 40 times the capacity of all trucks in Tibet.⁸⁷

The 248 km Lhasa-Shigatse line became operational in 2014.⁸⁸ It is an extension of the Qinghai Lhasa rail link. The single-track alignment is designed for a maximum speed of 120 km/h, indicative of the harsh terrain which has necessitated 29 tunnels and 116 bridges on this stretch. The rail line passes through the 60 km Yarlung Zangbo Grand Canyon where the geological conditions made the construction challenging.⁸⁹ It has the capacity to carry 8.3 million tonnes of freight a year.⁹⁰

China has also invested in multiple dedicated freight trains along with coverage throughout the major regions of Xining, Delingha, Golmud, Lhasa, and Shigatse. The new trains have built a low-carbon and ecological logistical corridor for all nearby industries and businesses.⁹¹

China is not resting on its laurels. It has already signed a contract for increasing the capacity on the Lhasa-Xining line, along with modernisation of railway stations and the addition of 17 new stations on this line by August 2018.⁹² Interestingly, in 2015, China ordered the production of locomotives which will be used to haul heavy freight trains on the Lanzhou-Xining line.⁹³ The specifications are 25 kV and 50 Hz locomotives rated at 7.2 MW, intended to haul trains of 3,000–5,000 tonnes at speeds up to 120 km/h.⁹⁴ They will also be modified from the standard designs to adapt to high altitudes and harsh weather, including adapted ventilation and cooling systems and changes to accommodate strong solar radiation, wind and sand. It is only a matter of time before the capacity upgradation on the Lhasa-Xining line allows the extension of these locomotives to Tibet.

Under the 13th Plan, China has unveiled plans to construct the Chinese Rail Network. A major project planned is the Sky Road or the Sichuan Tibet rail link from Chengdu to Lhasa. This has been divided into three stretches for the purpose of construction, and work has already started on the Western stretch between Lhasa and Nyingchi and the Eastern stretch from Chengdu and Ya'an.⁹⁵ The Xierong (station after Lhasa on the Shigatse line) Lhasa-Nyingchi line will be 402 km in length, and be electrified.⁹⁶ There is also an extension planned to Dali, Yunnan province.⁹⁷ Dali is well integrated into the Western Region Railway Network and linking it to Tibet will further Tibetan integration with the rest of China. The strategic significance of this rail link will be a rapid mobilisation of military formations into and out of Tibet.

A more long-term goal identified is a rail line between Lhasa and Hotan. Three extensions are planned—one to Burang, close to the Nepal-Uttarakhand border; one coming down to Kathmandu, probably from Shigatse and Gyirong and a third route down to Chumbi Valley in Yadong county, 31 km from the Indian border at Sikkim.⁹⁸

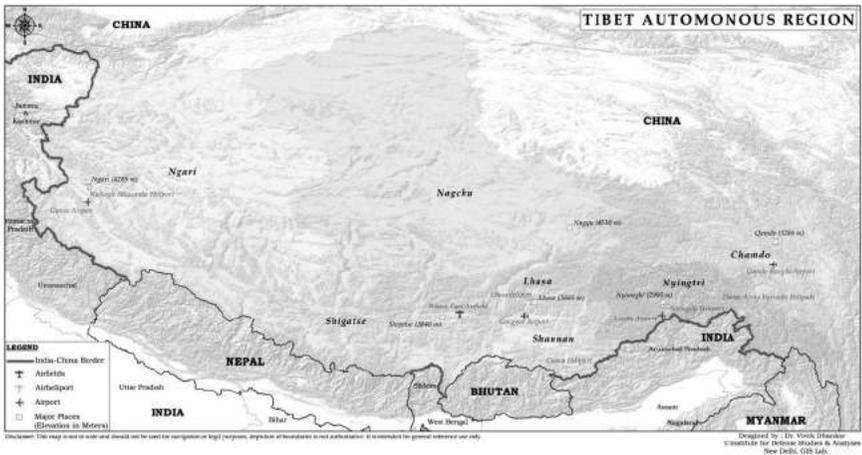
China wants to build three extensions to the Qinghai-Tibet Railway by 2030.



Source: Cui Jia, HouLiqliang, China Daily, Himalayan rail route endorsed, August 5, 2016.

Airports

There are five functional airports in Tibet—Ngarl Gungsa, Shigatse, Lhasa Gonggar, Nyingchi and Qamdo Bangda.⁹⁹ All of these are open to civil aviation. However, they have been planned and equipped for dual civil and military usage. The Chinese government has announced the integration of civil-military airports to ‘strengthen aviation safety and combat support capabilities’.¹⁰⁰ A joint statement from the People Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and General Administration of Civil Aviation (CAAC) said that the integration will include joint maintenance of airport support facilities, joint flight safety support and joint airport management.¹⁰¹ Another airport at Nagqu Daging is under construction. China is also planning to build a second airport at Lhasa.¹⁰² Tibet will step up reconstruction and expansion of Gonggar, Mainling and Bangda Airports during the 13th Five-Year Plan period as well.¹⁰³ By 2020, the second largest airport in China, the Nyingchi Airport’s annual passenger volume is projected to reach 750,000 persons and the annual freight volume to reach 3,000 tons.¹⁰⁴



China has also constructed 14 airbases and around 20 airstrips in the TAR.¹⁰⁵ Some of the airbases are Hoping, Donshoon, Kongka, Pangta, Nagchuka, Shiquanhe, Bayixincun and Dangxiong.¹⁰⁶ The Gongga and Pangta airfields are being upgraded to 1.1 million and 1.0 million transients, respectively.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, there are around 9 airstrips outside the TAR which can be used against India in case of conflict.¹⁰⁸ The newly constructed airfields

and the upgradation of advanced landing grounds (ALGs) and helipads in and around the TAR are likely to enhance China's strategic airlift capability.¹⁰⁹ They also have camouflaged airbases although the exact capacity is unknown.

Airfield	Elevation	Distance to IAF bases
Hoping	3,900 m	300 km
GongaDz	3,375 m	360 km
Pangta	4,200 m	360 km
Donshoon	4,300 m	450 km
Khotan	1,380 m	600 km
Kashgar	1,200 m	800 km
Shiqanhe	4,240 m	300 km
Golmu	4,500 m	1,000 + km
Bangda	4,240 m	200 km
Dequen	3,300 m	1,000 km
Kunming	1,900 m	800 km
Nachu	3,200 m	600 km
JeyKundo	1,600 m	1,000 km
Chengdu	600 m	800 km

Source: Air Vice Marshal A K Tiwary (retd), "China/India—PLAAF Against India—Attrition Through Tibet?" *Global Defence*, June 13, 2012, <https://www.globaldefence.net/portals/security/china-india-plaaf-against-india-attrition-through-tibet/2/>, accessed on July 3, 2017.

As observed from the above table, most of the airfields are located at considerable altitudes. Due to the low density at such heights, the load carrying capacity of aircrafts is compromised. This has been a major limitation in the past. However, it now seems that the Chinese are moving towards overcoming this operational limitation 'with extended runways (10,000–14,000 feet) and through aerial refuelling, with strike aircraft taking off from lower-altitude airfields farther away and refuelling over Tibet for strikes at airfields or other targets in northern India'.¹¹⁰ The induction of high performance aircrafts like Su-27, Su-30, J-11 and J-10 has enabled year round operability and will offset the altitude disadvantage further.¹¹¹

Fibre Optics Network

The ambitious 'China's Advanced Info-Optical Network (CAINONET) project' aimed to connect the entire region with optic fibre communications (OFC). As of 2016, the total length of long distance optical cable in Tibet had reached 51,900 sheet km, connecting 66 counties.¹¹² There is 100 percent broadband network coverage for the border towns and ports along the entire length of the Line of Actual Control.¹¹³ Secure OFC to all the forward defended localities along the Indo-China give the PLA a distinct advantage. In Tibet, 4,440 administrative villages have access to mobile Internet, with the coverage rate of 84 percent. 693 towns and more than 4,000 administrative villages have access to the optical fibre cable. The increased connectivity is reflected by the fact that there are 82 mobile phones and 11 fixed phones for every 100 people in China's Tibet.¹¹⁴ In addition, 58 very small aperture terminal (VSAT) satellite stations are part of the command and control structure in Tibet.¹¹⁵ Broadband connectivity and secure means of communications between successive higher headquarters, including the Western Theater Command at Chengdu have been developed.¹¹⁶ All military supply depots are connected to Lhasa by radio and optical fibre.¹¹⁷ This quick, secure communication system which provides real-time connectivity poses the biggest challenge to India in the future.

Logistic Centre

Another big step in the industrialisation (and militarisation) of Tibet has the construction of logistics centres. The construction of the Nagqu Logistics Centre was completed in 2009 with an investment of US\$ 230 million.¹¹⁸ The thorough-put capacity of the Nagqu Logistics Centre is 2.2 million tonnes. The centre not only provides essential logistic functions such as transportation and storage, along with product processing and other services; but it probably also has the facilities for a military command and control centre along with surveillance. This infrastructure has also given a fillip to the existing highway freight industry instead of shifting business away from it. In 2015, the highway freight volume in Nagqu reached 680,000 tonnes, with an annual growth of nearly 10 percent since the railway started.¹¹⁹ More logistics centres are being built in Golmud, Western Lhasa and Shigatse.¹²⁰ Hetian, Garr, Chayu and Nyingchi regions have logistics facilities as well.¹²¹ These

are well-connected by the rail route and dedicated freight trains. The dual use capabilities of civilian logistic centres make them crucial assets in case of sustained conflict.

Strategic Significance

The geographically difficult terrain on China's western border has been impenetrable by land in recent centuries, almost isolating China on land. This led to surrounding countries like India to rely on Tibet as a natural buffer between the two nations for military purposes. While China did dispute the buffer theory, it continued viewing the Western region as a vulnerable backdoor which could be used to attack the more developed regions of China.¹²² This imbalance between the interior and the coastal regions was also reflected by the uneven development of the southern and coastal regions of China while the more isolated areas remained backward.

Heavy infrastructure development has promoted the growth of industries and tourism in the TAR, resulting in a booming economy despite the global slowdown. TAR and Xinjiang are crucial for the success of the Belt and Road Initiative. Due to Chinese differences with India, the only means for expansion lie further West, through Afghanistan, Pakistan and the countries in Central Asia such as Kyrgyzstan. This important stretch of the roads in Western China will allow them the access by land to Western and Central Asia. Access to the Indian Ocean through ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan will also allow China to reduce the imbalance within its nation and reduce its dependence on the sea route which passes through chokepoints like the Malacca Straits.

Force Structuring and Force Deployment

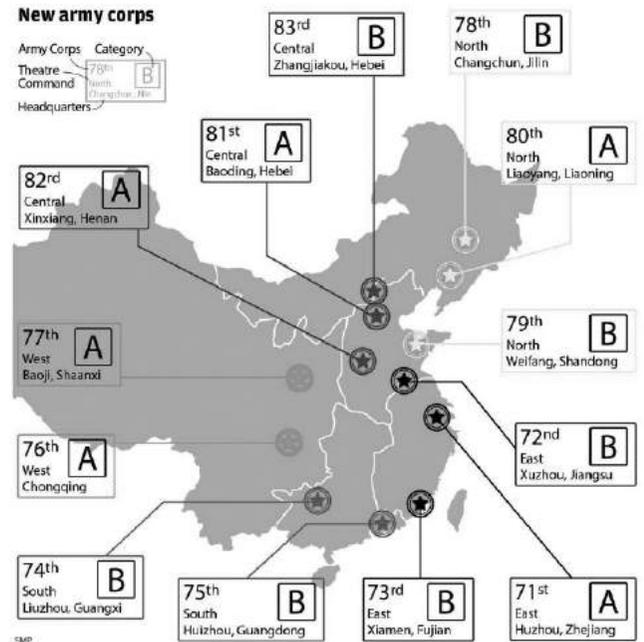
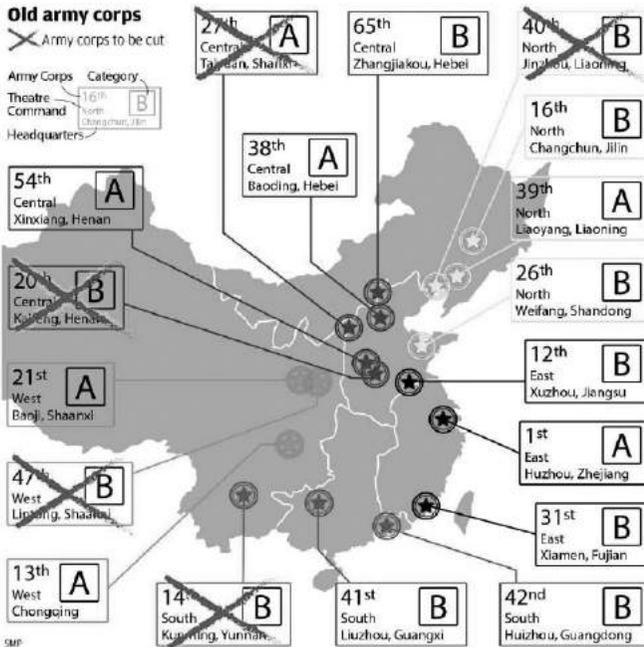
The limitations of Chinese central government control over the TAR were exposed during the 2008 ethnic riots. The military response took over three days and the troops stationed within the region were ill-equipped to handle the unrest in TAR. This jeopardises Chinese investments in the region, critical for the promotion of Chinese economic and territorial interests in the future. The 2015 modernisation of the PLA has had a significant impact on Chinese control over Tibet.

The entire Sino-Indian border now falls under the operational command of the Western Theatre Command. This is composed of the regions which

earlier fell under the Chengdu Military Region (MR) and the Lanzhou MR. Western Theatre command consists of geographical regions of the provinces of Sichuan, Gansu, Guizhou, Yunnan, Qinghai, Chongqing municipality, Xinjiang and Tibet.

On the personnel front, the PLA Army is cutting down its troops by 300,000 men.¹²³ Until 2015, the combined Lanzhou and Chengdu MRs had four Group Armies—the 13th and 14th Corps in Chengdu MR and 21st and 47th in Lanzhou MR. Under the restructuring, the 14th and 47th Corps are most likely to be disbanded.¹²⁴

The entire PLA is being restructured into Combined Corps.¹²⁵ The Western Theater Command will be served by enlarged versions of the existing 13th Corps based in West Chongqing and the 21st Corps based in West Baoji, Shaanxi. These will be renamed as 76th and 77th Corps.¹²⁶ They will also reflect the Chinese initiative of integrating the various services by including members from the PLA Air Force and PLA Rocket Force.¹²⁷ According to the report submitted by the US-China Economic and Security Review to Congress, the 76th and 77th GAs have up to six combined armoured brigades, an artillery brigade, an air defence brigade, a special operations brigade and an army aviation brigade each.¹²⁸ China has been conducting exercises like Stride, Joint Action and Firepower in Tibet to move troops across long distances and to reinforce the troops in another region. This interoperability is being practiced along with offensive and defensive cold weather mountain warfare. For instance, during Firepower-2016 in Qingtongxia, five theatres trained against a 47th GA brigade acting as an enemy.¹²⁹ The existing corps will function as modular units which can quickly be deployed across the Western Theater Command. This enhanced trans-regional mobility along with better, more mobile armaments balances the reduced boots on ground. It must be noted that the new Group Army headquarters will be directly linked to Tibet by the planned rail lines.



Source: Why Xi Jinping is planning a historic move to rename China's army corps, South China Morning Post, April 24, 2017, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2089218/xi-jinping-plans-first-shake-chinese-army-corps-names>.

It can be seen that the Western Theater Command has only two enlarged Group Armies after the restructuring. Further, the Central Theater Command has been conceptualised as a strategic reserve force for the east coast and even the Western Theater Command. Its three Group Armies will function in such a manner that its forces will supplement the ones already involved. The importance of this distribution is that the Central Military Commission will control the assets and based on their strategic decision, they will release the GAs. Such an arrangement gives more flexibility and CMC will be able to maintain balance. Preposition has certain advantages but that leads to committing resource prematurely as well.

The average load capacity of one Chinese train car is normally 60 tons, with about 20 cars in each cargo train. This would mean that each train could transport 1,200 tonnes and roughly 12 trains come in every day.¹³⁰ In times of war, the Qinghai Tibet rail link can run at its full capacity of roughly 20 trains. Based on the heavy equipment that needs to be transported, a mechanised division can move into Tibet within 48 hours by train alone. Based on these calculations, China can transport approximately 10 light mechanised divisions and some heavy mechanised divisions to Tibet through the Qinghai Tibet rail link within 30 days.¹³¹ Further, considering that the total weight of the equipment and combat material needed for one rapid reaction division of the Chinese army is around 15,000 tons, the Qinghai Tibet Rail can transport a whole rapid reaction division in a day. For instance, the 61st Plateau Rapid Reaction Motorised Division located at Baoji can move into Tibet within a day by travelling via Chengdu. Further, the divisions of the new Group Armies are likely to be spread out to some of the pre restructuring locations like Dali, Kaiyuan and Kunming; all well-connected by rail. Further, the new trains, discussed earlier, will increase the carrying capacity of every train to somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 tonnes (a huge jump from the existing 1,200 tonnes) will be game-changers; reducing these already impressive deployment timings considerably.

Apart from the Group Armies, the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Divisions also fall under the Western Theater Command. According to the report submitted by the US-China Economic and Security Review to Congress, the Tibet Military District has a mechanised infantry brigade, 2 mountain infantry brigades, an artillery brigade, an air defence brigade, a special operations

brigade and 2 army aviation detachments from the 77th GA.¹³² These are stationed in Tibet itself and will be the first responders in case of internal unrest and first initiators in case of war. For instance, the 52nd and 53rd Mountain Infantry Brigades are both positioned in Nyingchi, facing the Indian border in the north east.¹³³ The 54th Mechanized Infantry Brigade is headquartered at Lhasa and there is another Mechanized Infantry Division at Hotan which could be deployed.¹³⁴ Motorised divisions can also be moved down from Chengdu, headquarter of the Western Theater Command, where the rapid deployment forces are stationed for emergencies.¹³⁵

The front-line PLA troop concentrations in Tibet are stationed in Ruthok, Gyamuk (Chinese: *Siqenho*), Drongpa (*Zhongpa*), Saga, Drangso (*Tingri*), Gampa-la, Dromo, Tsona (*Cona*), Lhuntse Dzong, Zayul, etc. These are strategically connected by the major highways and roads. For instance, Ruthok and Gyamuk are both counties of Ngari Prefecture of the TAR, bordering Xinjiang in the north and Ladakh in the west. They both lie on G219 or the western highway. Drangso lies close to the Indian border on the extension of G318 coming down to Nepal. Tsona in Shannan Prefecture lies on S202, and is one of the last settlements on the Chinese side opposite Tawang. Similarly, Zayul lies at the end of S201, which extends to the eastern most point in Arunachal, down from G318.

The second line of defence stations are concentrated at Shigatse, Lhasa, Nagchukha, Tsethang, Nangartse district, Gyamdha, Nyingtri, Miling, Powo Tramo, Tsawa Pomdha, Chamdo, etc.¹³⁶ These are relatively bigger towns, with most of them equipped with logistics storage capability as well. Some of these are likely to be division or unit headquarters of the forces under the Western Theater Command Group Armies as well. China will be well-equipped to handle border skirmishes relying on the forces within Tibet itself. It is also likely that these are positioned to avoid any flare ups among the Tibetans in the region.

Established in 1994, the Special Operations battalions receive extensive parachute training to enhance their ability to fight behind enemy lines, engage in sabotage, reconnaissance and other unconventional operations.¹³⁷ One of these is the 15th Airborne Corps set up by the PLA Air Force which specialises in independent strategic missions like attacking the enemy supply chain. Functioning directly under the Central Military Commission and based

in the Henan province, it will be a valuable asset when dealing with tough terrain and limited deep strike capability in Tibet. Presently, with a capability to reach a division worth of troops anywhere on China's peripheries within 10 hours of mobilisation, the airborne corps aims at dropping up to 50,000 personnel at any given time.¹³⁸ It has also consistently building its airdrop capabilities. In June 2015, the first successful airdrop of heavy equipment at 6,000 m was carried out.¹³⁹ This helped China to break free of the limitations that high terrain imposed on their forces in the past. They have also participated in at least ten major exercises including Mission Operation and Airborne Sword to gain combat experience.¹⁴⁰ However, it must be noted that air operations are likely to be limited to summer months due to seasonal limitations.

Moreover, these do not include the local militia which has been considerably strengthened in recent decades. Though the numbers remain unverified, there is a large presence of the paramilitary force, People's Armed Police Force in Tibet.

The PLA Rocket Force is primarily tasked with Strategic Deterrence Power and changes are slowly being made to enhance their compatibility for joint operations.¹⁴¹ Northwestern China falls under the purview of Base 64 of the PLA Rocket Forces with its headquarters at Xining in Qinghai province in north central China.¹⁴² This is the primary base facing India and covering all of Tibet. According to the report submitted by the US-China Economic and Security Review to Congress, there are four Missile Brigades under Base 64.¹⁴³ There are other brigade locations under the Northern and Central Theater Command which have additional coverage over the western region. The peace time locations of some relevant bases are 809 Missile Brigade at Datong (equipped with DF-21), 812 Missile Brigade at Beidao (equipped with DF-31A), 823 Missile Brigade at Korla (equipped with DF-21), U/I Brigade at Da Qaidam (equipped with DF-11 and DF-15), U/I Brigade at Delingha (equipped with DF-4, DF-11, DF-15, DF-21 and DF-31), U/I Brigade at Liuqingkou (equipped with DF-21); U/I Brigade at Mahai (equipped with DF-11 and DF-15) and U/I Brigade at Xining (equipped with DF-21 and DF-31).¹⁴⁴ Satellite imagery has confirmed the extensive nuclear bases at Delingha and Da Qaidam in Central China, the more significant of the locations.¹⁴⁵ Nuclear Tibet has also reported the possibility of nuclear manufacturing centres at

Dhashu (Chinese: *Haiyan*) in the Haibei Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Tongkhor (Chinese: Huangyuan) in Amdo.¹⁴⁶

Over the years, liquid fuel missiles such as the Dong Feng (DF)-4 that required longer preparation time for launch and were immobile have been replaced by sophisticated solid fuel medium-range ballistic missile DF-21 (single warhead of 200–300 kilo tonnes yield), which can hit targets at a distance of 2,150 km.¹⁴⁷ These missiles have significantly increased Chinese strike capability. The DF-21 can strike as far as the western Pacific Ocean. Even though its primarily targets are the South China Sea, Taiwan and the US bases of Guam and Hawaii, it does cover the strategically important northeastern India and can be useful to add redundancies during a conflict. The DF-31A is an intercontinental ballistic missile with the range to cover all of the United States. The DF-21, DF-31 and DF-31A are all portable and can be launched from the back of a train or canister. This road and submarine capable missiles have significantly changed the security landscape of the TAR.

Satellite imagery analysis by Col Vinayak Bhat has shown several suitable launch pads with clear post-launch markings in the TAR. Some of the surface to air missile launch locations identified is in the east of Shigatse (Xigaze) airfield, Xaidulla and Gonggar, all possibly storing medium-range DF-series missiles that could reach India. The Xaidulla facility, 250 km from Leh also targets India.¹⁴⁸ The Shigatse location is hybrid site prepared for S-300P but had HQ-2 deployed in between August 2010 and March 2011. It has remained empty since then.¹⁴⁹ Some DF-21 missiles, MRBMs capable of mobility are also placed in Qinghai.¹⁵⁰

China has built a large network of underground tunnels as well. According to CCTV China, there were as many as 300 miles of such tunnels in 2009 itself.¹⁵¹ There has also been some proof of a ‘missile train’ and a disguised passenger train to transport China’s long range missiles.¹⁵² These silos-based missiles coupled with the infrastructure development in Tibet allow greater mobility of missiles, allowing a wider range of coverage.

Strategic Significance

Restructuring of troops in the region coupled with the technological advances made by China in terms of equipment, especially missiles has considerably strengthened Chinese position in the TAR. Infrastructure development has

also given a fillip to its military deployment timings, allowing China to fortify its control over the region despite cutting down two group armies from the Western Theater Command.

This enhanced control allows projection of power in the region, necessary for protecting the economic investment in the Belt and Road Initiative. The area is particularly vulnerable to unrest, both from internal minority communities like Uighurs and Tibetans and external threats such as terrorism emanating from further west. It also allows China to take a more aggressive stand in long-term territorial disputes with India. China claims territories in the Indian states, Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Military adventurism could be used by China to project itself as a regional power, tying in with the Chinese leadership's vision for China's future.

Conclusion

Even after decades of Chinese annexation of Tibet, it remained isolated from the rest of China due to difficult geographic conditions and cultural uniqueness. The Tibetan people were never fully assimilated with the other ethnic groups. Despite severe cultural and religious suppression by China, they maintained their own identity. Lack of Tibetan integration also meant that it did not prosper economically while other parts of China, especially the coastal regions made rapid progress. Growth of industry was not successful despite abundant natural reserves, and Tibet continued to lag behind the rest of the nation on economic and social indicators. Limited infrastructure and connectivity also meant that the Chinese armed forces were slow to mobilise in case of war or unrest. Mao's policy of Chinese assimilation of Tibet—militarily, economically and socially was intended to reduce the vulnerability created by the lack of military mobility and a brewing ethnic separatist movement on China's borders. The aim to control western China was given further strategic impetus by the Western Development Program, which focused on the same areas as well.

Chinese expansion in Tibet has not only been consistent, but it has also been strategically planned along social, geographical, economic and military lines to achieve long-term goals for the nation. The biggest Chinese weakness is the social assimilation of the Tibetan population with the rest of China. Integration is limited to a small section of Tibetan urban elite, while a vast

majority of the others remain outside the development boom. Forcible curtailment of the freedom of movement, freedom of speech or freedom of religion has not won hearts in Tibet. Despite consistent economic growth, there remain significant disparities among the Tibetan and the Han beneficiaries of Tibetan growth. The geographical barrier has been largely bridged by the heavy investments in roads, railways, airports, logistic centres and fibre optic connectivity in Tibet, enhancing both economic and military capability. Many of these routes are already operational, and have served to promote tourism and the growth of industries like mining and handicrafts. The economy is still largely powered by central government subsidies but there is potential for significant enhancement of trade, industries and tourism which will allow gradual phasing out of the economic dependence of TAR on subsidies. The development of infrastructure has also allowed China to create a web of military areas, enhancing coverage of the region. Improved military capability through the development of interoperability among theatres, increased mobility of forces and advanced technology has made the Chinese armed forces more efficient and better responsive towards threats.

These developments will collectively affect the manner in which China views Tibet. The historic perception of a vulnerable backdoor has been put to rest by aggressive development and force building in Tibet. Chinese military has seen significant changes in the last decade and can comfortably consider itself in a position of strength in Tibet, capable of addressing both external and internal threats rapidly. This strengthened position could give China the confidence to adopt a more aggressive stance with its western neighbours. The development of infrastructure in Tibet and Xinjiang will also advance the fructification of land routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, of which the China Pakistan Economic Corridor is a key route. The growth of trade will result in higher economic development in Western China. China has already started successfully commercializing Tibet's assets—its vast mineral reserves, its rich heritage for the purpose of promoting commodities like Tibetan paintings and Tibetan culture—to promote tourism. The increase in private investment highlights that the regional economy is slowly becoming independently viable even without state subsidies. However, the top-down development of industry which relied on the trickledown effect to benefit the ordinary Tibetan has not quite succeeded in spreading prosperity to the Tibetans.

This economic marginalisation coupled with targeting of cultural practices has led to understandable dissatisfaction with the ruling government. Despite extensive efforts to curtail all manner of dissent, the underlying tensions remain a powder keg waiting to blow up China's best laid plans.

Notes

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12. Freedom House, "Country Report: Tibet" (2016), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/tibet>, accessed on November 3, 2017.
13. Emily Yeh, *Taming of Tibet* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 23.
14. *Ibid.*
15. A hukou is a record in a government system of household registration required by law in mainland China and Taiwan. The system is more appropriately called "hujū", and has origins in ancient China. This system, introduced to prevent overcrowding of cities, relied on tools like limiting social security benefits and schooling options for rural migrants to urban areas.
16. At this point, the Han who entered Tibet came for limited tenures and were mostly teachers, aid cadres, aid workers, police personnel etc. These workers invariably returned to their hometowns after earning hefty commissions. By the 1980s, the long-term assignments were reduced to short three- to five-year assignments. See, Emily Yeh, *Supra* note 14.
17. A policy push was given by the Second Work Forum of 1984, which called for the freeing of restrictions on Chinese opening businesses in Tibet, and established a pattern for future development with funding for large infrastructure projects including hotels, gymnasiums,

- and hospitals coming in. In the past, migration to coastal areas and major towns like Shanghai and Beijing attracted these migrants but given the hukou restrictions they faced there, Tibet became an attractive option for small entrepreneurs and low-end workers.
18. In Lhasa, a majority of the people employed in the hospitality industry, from hotel staff to taxi drivers and small shop owners are all non-Tibetan. Construction crews, often headed by Han contractors from outside Tibet comprised entirely non-Tibetan workers as well. The disproportionately large state administration has already been discussed. Not only do the migrants dominate private business due to their superior skills and experience, they also dominate the government jobs in Tibet. Of the Chinese immigrants officially counted, approximately ninety five percent are employed in state-owned enterprises.
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