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Securing Tibet: The Dragon Way

*To govern the nation, we must govern our borders;
to govern our borders, we must first stabilize Tibet.*

Xi Jinping¹

Annexing Tibet in 1951 and dictating the Seventeen Point Agreement was relatively easy for China, but despite six decades of Chinese control, the assimilation of Tibet into mainland China has been much harder. Tibetan identity questions the very root of China's One Country, One Language, One Religion philosophy. The initial annexation (or liberation as the Chinese like to call it) was to use the large Tibetan landmass as a buffer, but over the years it has not been the asset it was envisaged as. Taking a more aggressive stand on Tibet allows Xi Jinping, the current Chinese President to give the impression of a strong nation and be seen as a leader proactively fulfilling the 'Chinese dream' of 'great rejuvenation of the

Chinese nation'. There have been developments on various fronts to secure China's control over Tibet in recent times. This article explores the extent of their success.

Impact of Military Reforms on Tibet

China has raised the political rank of the Tibetan Military Command and put it under the direct jurisdiction of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) ground forces. After the 2016 military restructuring, most of the provincial military commands are under the control of the newly established National Defense Mobilization Department of the Central Military Commission. Their focus will be on the regional militia reserves and local conscription. 'The Tibet Military Command, on the other hand, is under the leadership of the Chinese ground forces, which suggests that the command may undertake some kind of military combat mission in the future.'² Tibetan Military Command falls under

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the Western Theatre Command, headquartered at Chengdu. During the military restructuring, the Lanzhou military region and the Chengdu military region were integrated to form the larger Western Command.³ This will allow greater coordination within China for potential disputes along the Sino-Indian border. China has also been militarizing the shared borders further, both on the Tibetan side and the Pakistan side.⁴ ‘We have noticed an increase in capability and force posture by the Chinese military in areas close to the border with India’, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for East Asia, Abraham M Denmark told reporters during a news conference after the Department of Defence submitted its Annual Report to the US Congress on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.⁵ China disputed this, relying on the old party line of being committed to safeguarding peace and tranquility in the region and peaceful settlement of disputes with India.⁶

China has also implemented a new border regulation for the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), expanding the scope of the earlier regulation which has been in force since 2000. The designated border areas under the new regulation now include land ports, trade zones, and scenic spots. Wang Chunhuan, the Deputy Director of the Theoretical Marxism Institute of the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) who participated in the amendment was quoted as saying the following:⁷

The update of border regulation provides a legal foundation to combat potential terrorist activities in the future brought by the further opening-up of Tibet as the Belt and Road initiative has positioned Tibet as a gateway to South Asia, even though the border areas do not face severe terrorist challenges at present in general.⁸

This can potentially be used against Tibetan separatists in the future.

China is the largest importer of energy worldwide, importing over 60 per cent of its demand and this number is only set to grow. It is dependent on the South China Sea route for around 83 per cent of its oil imports. The

One Belt One Road provides China with a shorter route for imports from Central Asia and West Asia. Investing in this land route will reduce Chinese dependence on the important sea lanes of navigation which pass through the busy Malacca Straits and South China. As a keystone in the Chinese vision for the next century, Tibet plays an unparalleled role. Tibet is strategically located to support China’s increasing foray into South Asia. It can act as a convenient entry point for both the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) corridor, linking them to its lesser developed hinterland. Tibet reported a total trade volume of more than 5.66 billion yuan (US\$ 815 million) in 2015, engaging in bilateral trade with 77 countries and regions.⁹ The increased militarization is the direct result of the Chinese desire to protect its heavy infrastructural investments. ‘Military capability in the region must be stiffened so as to “absolutely not allow any person, at any time, in any way, to separate out any part of Tibet”,’ Wu Yingjie, the region’s Communist Party Chief said, echoing the increasing party focus on Tibet.¹⁰

Increased Infrastructure Development for Better Connectivity to the Mainland

Enhanced connectivity has played a pivotal role in fulfilling Chinese ambitions of greater economic prosperity. The Chinese government has emphasized rapid development of the transport system ever since the modernization post-Cultural Revolution. After the rapid growth that accompanied development in central and southern region, the emphasis shifted to connecting the more far flung areas. China’s Tibetan policy seeks to modernize Tibet’s economy and people, increasing their income and reducing their isolation by inextricably linking Tibet’s economy with the rest of China.¹¹

China created large, urban centres like Lhasa and Shigatse in Tibet and developed the infrastructure considerably, increasing effective control over the region.¹² The 2012 National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) decided to accelerate

the development of a comprehensive modern transport system further. Tibet secured its first highway, the Motuo highway in 2013. The construction of the Qinghai-Tibet highway and the Qinghai-Tibet railway were subsequently completed, overcoming geological challenges like plateau permafrost and desert land.¹³ The Sichuan-Tibet railway project, which will reduce the journey time between Lhasa and Chengdu by over 17 hours, is also scheduled to be completed within the current Five Year Plan (2016-20) (Map 1).¹⁴

its plans to connect to both the OBOR in the West and BCIM in the South. Moreover, Tibet is geographically contiguous to Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan—key provinces for the Belt and Road initiative which is focusing on the lesser developed interior regions of China. Crucial strategic projects like the Chengdu-Lhasa highway have been sanctioned. China also wants to leverage Tibet's strategic geographical location to extend its influence in Nepal. The rail and road cargo link between Nepal and Tibet was operational by the end of December 2016 and the first batch of trucks



Map 1: Rail Lines in Western China

Source: 'Taming the West, The Communist Party Deepens Tibet's Integration with the Rest of the Country', *The Economist*, 21 June 2014, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21604594-communist-party-deepens-tibets-integration-rest-country-taming-west>; accessed on 8 January 2017.

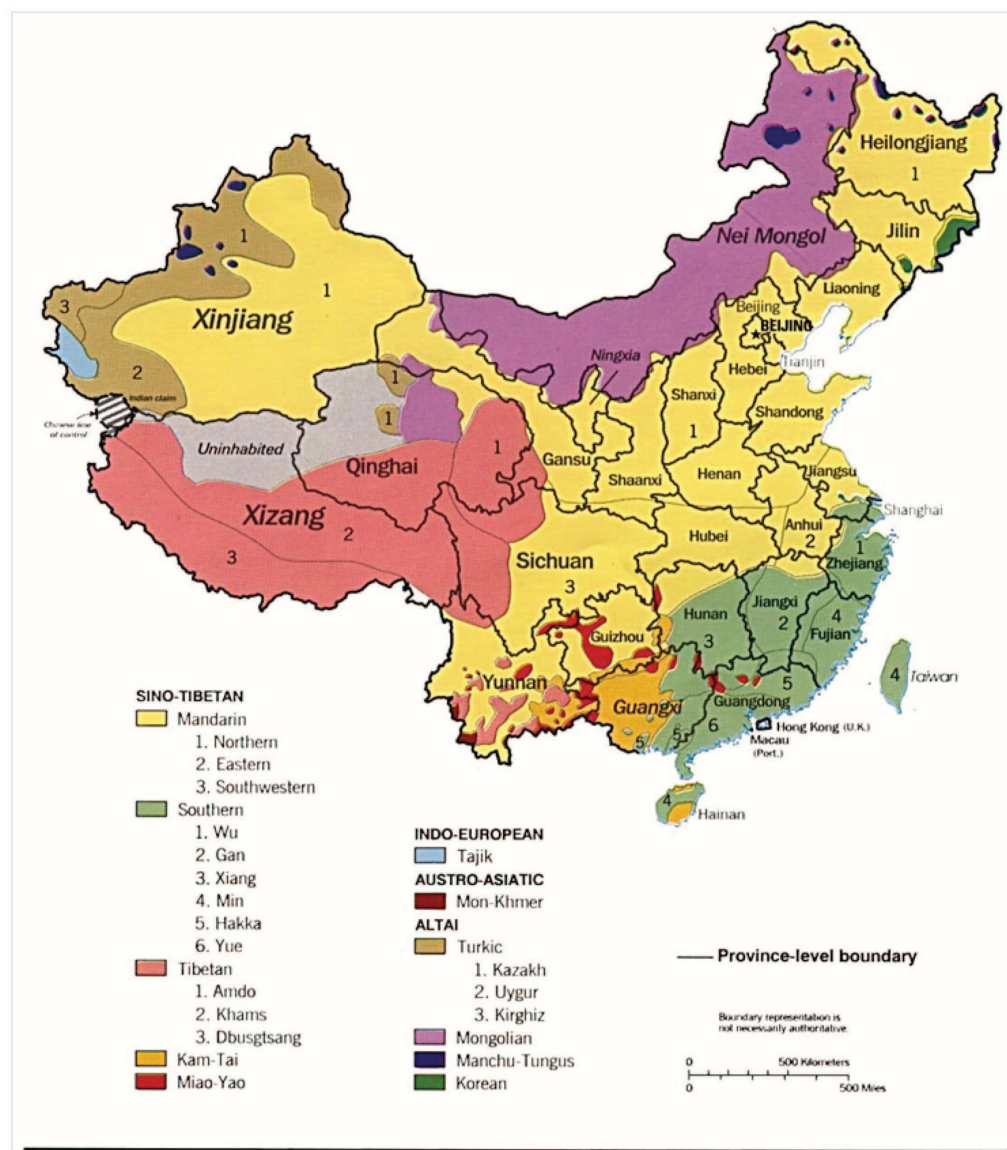
Despite gradual increase in Chinese development in Tibet over the years, announcement of the One Belt One Road initiative has led to an unprecedented increase in Chinese activity in the Tibetan plateau. Tibet is the starting point for the planned China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a major route envisaged under the Belt and Road initiative. It is a crucial gateway into Central Asia as well. The Tenth Tibet People's Congress announced

carried goods worth over US\$ 2.8 million.¹⁵ Further extensions from the strategic Tibetan border town, Gyirong into Nepal has also been agreed upon. An extension of the existing Qinghai-Lhasa highway is envisaged. Feasibility studies are being conducted to extend a rail link from Lhasa to Nepal.¹⁶

Greater Economic and Cultural Integration of Ethnic Tibetans

China's approach towards ethnic Tibetans has been twofold; first, greater integration economically by greater development in the region and second, culturally by increasing restrictions on personal liberty, especially religious freedoms. The promotion of Han migration into the TAR to change the demographic profile of the area is ancillary but has its own role to play in the Chinese scheme of things.¹⁷

The Tibetan population is divided across the TAR and three provinces in China.¹⁸ This 1965 administrative division failed to divide the Tibetan movement for autonomy. While Tibetans are a minority in all provinces except the TAR, many small, remote villages in these three provinces have retained some degree of local autonomy by virtue of their isolation and the lack of Han settlers.¹⁹ The movement for autonomy is strong across the entire Tibetan population (Map 2).



Map 2: Linguistic Groups in China

Source: Available at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china_ling_90.jpg, accessed on 7 January 2017.

The brutal suppression of Tibetans in 2008 marked a turning point in China's policy towards Tibet. The *taoguan yanghui* era has definitively ended now. President Xi Jinping has never used this phrase which roughly translates to hiding one's strength and biding one's time. Security restrictions which were tightened after the 2008 popular uprising in the TAR are still

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 (Map 3).

The 2016 border regulation also empowers the government against terrorists. There has been no



Map 3: Tibetan Self-immolations 2009-16

Source : 'International Campaign for Tibet, Map: Tibetan Self-immolations From 2009-2016', 2 March 2016, available at <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/map-tibetan-self-immolations-from-2009-2013/>, accessed on 7 January 2017.

in place.²⁰ They have even been extended to Tibetan populated regions outside TAR as well.²¹ There has been a crackdown on lawyers, human rights activists, and journalists. Internet access is severely restricted in Tibet, far greater than in other regions of China. Freedom House, a think tank working on democratic rights, has reported waves of self-immolation by Tibetans protesting CCP rule. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, there have been 144 known immolations since 2009.²² The Chinese

history of terrorist activity in the region, and the term is probably a euphemism for 'separatists'. The broader powers given to the border police under this regulation can potentially be misused in the future. This is keeping in line with the harsher stand being taken against Tibetan activists. Despite vowing to implement the rule of law, China continues to blatantly disregard it. Thousands of Tibetan monks were forcefully evicted from their homes at Larung Gar in eastern Tibet, in complete disregard for their right to religious freedom.²³ There are intrusive

state controls on monasteries including ‘management committees’ run by the local or Communist Party and constant surveillance, age restrictions to become a monk and even those who become monks are subject to patriotic ‘re-education.’²⁴ A senior Communist leader has even asked them to behave in a ‘patriotic and law abiding’ manner.²⁵ In the Qinghai Province’s Malho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture distributed a document in early 2015 (prior to the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday) outlining various activities that would be construed as support for Tibetan independence, outlining punitive punishments for these. This list included even benign activities like burning incense.²⁶ Despite such rigorous restrictions and efforts to brainwash, the popularity of the Dalai Lama has not dimmed. 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.’²⁷

The Chinese White Paper on Tibet published in 2015 went so far as to:

[H]ope that the Dalai Lama will put aside his illusions in his remaining years and face up to reality, adapt his position, choose the objective and rational path, and do something of benefit to overseas Tibetan compatriots in exile.²⁸

Brushing aside the Tibetan movement for genuine autonomy as a mere delusion, the Chinese narrative of history claims ‘that has been part of China since antiquity’ and any attempt for independence would be dividing the Chinese nation.

Recently, China has started taking an even more aggressive stand against the activities of the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration. While China has always protested against meetings of world leaders with the Dalai Lama, it has now started isolating the Tibetans by flexing its economic muscle. The Pope refused to meet the Dalai Lama in December 2014 due to pressure exerted by the Chinese.²⁹ China imposed unilateral sanctions on the land-locked Mongolia for inviting the Dalai Lama, increasing tariffs, and cancelling scheduled talks for developmental aid. The Chinese government strongly protested a meeting

in December 2016 between the Indian President and the Dalai Lama held on the sidelines of the Laureates and Leaders for Children Summit organized by the Kailash Satyarthi Foundation.³⁰ Protesting the meeting with an Indian head of state, China warned India about not interfering with its ‘core interests’, a nebulous concept that has expanded over the years.

The Chinese government has also coerced over 7,000 Tibetan pilgrims holding Chinese passports to prohibit them from attending the Kalachakra festival presided over by the Dalai Lama in Bodhgaya, India.³¹ There have been reports of confiscation of Tibetan passports. Members of the Tibetan-government-in-exile also claim that some people were threatened with arrest of family members back home and other severe consequences if they did not return immediately. In keeping with past behaviour, China vehemently denies this claim, citing examples of some Chinese citizens who are attending as evidence to support their stand. China has also branded this religious ceremony as a ‘political tool’.³² Despite the Kalachakra being conducted smoothly in the past, it is speculated that China took such harsh action in 2017 since it was organized by the Central Tibetan Administration.³³

This increased opposition to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama can be linked to the Chinese attempt to control the future leadership of Tibet after his death. The Dalai Lama has made public his desire to not reincarnate. The Chinese administration wants to ensure that he not only reincarnates but also picks someone more favourably disposed towards the Chinese government.³⁴ If the Dalai Lama chooses not to reincarnate, the already divided Tibetan movement will lose a common figure head that all factions acknowledge, complicating any future negotiations. A moderate leader willing to toe party line will be ideal from the Chinese point of view. Instances from the past Chinese behaviour can shed some light on potential future action. The Chinese imprisonment of the candidate chosen as the Eleventh Panchen Lama by the Dalai Lama since 1995; simultaneously choosing Gyaincain Norbu, their own candidate to fulfill the duties of the Panchen Lama could be one potential path.³⁵ Recognition of two candidates as the Dalai Lama

could also split support among the Tibetan population, and while there is speculation that China might use this as a means to split the Tibetan movement, it might actually make it harder for the Chinese to negotiate a single, widely accepted settlement. In such a scenario, another route China could take would be to engage Lobsang Sangay, the elected sikyong (Prime Minister) of the Tibetan government in exile who enjoys support across the political spectrum. His strategy, the 'five-fifty' is that the Tibetan political leadership will make efforts to gain autonomy within China within the current elected term but also prepare a long-term strategy for the next 50 years.³⁶ Autonomy within China is also the position taken by the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People which encapsulates the Dalai Lama's Middle Way Approach. Lobsang Sangay proposes something similar to the 'one country, two systems' but suspects that Chinese mistrust of the Tibetans due to ethnic differences is acting as a roadblock for negotiations.³⁷

Another facet of economic development in the region is that it will invariably lead to job opportunities, resulting in migration to Tibet from other regions. This 'irresistible historic tide of development' in Tibet is being packaged as one that brings Tibet into the twenty-first century but this narrative brushes over the potential influx of migrants who will mostly be the Han Chinese.³⁸ This can change the demographic profile of the region permanently. Freedom House Report 2016 has cited an official plan which aims to increase the 'permanent urban population' of Tibet by approximately 30 per cent by 2020, with many new settlers likely to be ethnic Chinese.³⁹ However, despite rapid Han-ization of urban areas, the rural areas continue to be largely Tibetan. The theory that China is trying to reduce the dominance of ethnic Tibetans in the TAR to weaken the Tibetan identity and movement should therefore be taken with a pinch of salt.⁴⁰ TAR is too large and sparsely populated for ethnic profile change to be successful as a stand-alone policy. The Chinese policy towards Tibet is instead geared towards modernizing the ethnic Tibetan population by modernizing the region, homogenizing it instead of preserving its unique heritage.⁴¹

Tibet : A Constant Irritant in the Sino-Indian Relationship

Tibet shares a long border with India and any developments directly affect national security in India. After the 1959 Tibetan uprising, India gave refuge to the Dalai Lama and a large Tibetan population. As home to the Tibetan diaspora of over a lakh people, and the seat of power for the Central Tibetan Administration, India holds a unique position in the China-Tibet relationship. Even though India has never tried to use Tibet as leverage, refuge to the Tibetan population has been a constant irritant in India-China relations. While there have been some positive cross-border developments like an understanding in 2015 between China and India to step up collaboration in fields such as drug control and illegal immigration, the illicit arms trade and other cross-border crimes, it has had a rather limited impact.⁴²

The invitation to Lobsang Sangay, the head of the Tibetan government-in-exile to Indian Prime Minister Modi's swearing in ceremony in 2014 irked China to such a degree that in private meetings, India had to reassure that it recognizes Tibet as an integral part of China and does not support any separatist activity within its borders.⁴³ China lodged a protest when the Dalai Lama chose to visit Arunachal Pradesh, parts of which China claims as South Tibet. China also strongly protested Richard Verma, the US Ambassador to India's visit to Arunachal Pradesh.⁴⁴ An invitation to Losang Sangay by Richard Verma was again protested vehemently.⁴⁵ When China protested the Dalai Lama meeting the Indian president at the sidelines of an event organized for Nobel laureates and children, India justified it by classifying the event as a 'non-political'.⁴⁶

China's biggest concern regarding Indian support to Tibet is that it provides a platform to keep the Tibetan cause alive. China is relying on bullying tactics but India must hold its own as a responsibility to the large Tibetan population residing within India and as a regional power which is directly affected by developments in Tibet. India should rely on its democratic credentials and inextricably link the recognition of Tibet as an integral

part of China to genuine autonomy in the region.

The 'Chinese dream' of securing its status as a great power and regional pre-eminence can only be achieved after internal control of the party over China is secure. CCP is losing influence over the Chinese people, especially away from the centre of power. The Tibetan demand for autonomy and the perpetuation of their religious and cultural beliefs threaten party rule. It is the potential revolution of ideas that China is most afraid of since it goes to the root of one-party rule in the country. China follows a strict policy of brutal suppression of political ideas or religious beliefs, which challenge the party's authority and over the years, Tibet has been subjected to one of the most restricted regimes in the world. The Chinese government has praised the rich cultural heritage of Tibet, acknowledging its role in attracting tourists in the White Paper on Tibet. Ironically, it is trying to wipe out this unique cultural heritage through its actions.

Conclusion

China has used both the carrot and the stick but the Tibetan movement to preserve their identity continues to stay alive. Despite using numerous tools in its arsenal ranging from military reform and stronger anti-terror laws to greater economic integration and cultural repression, the process of Tibetan integration with mainland China remains incomplete. It is the perpetuation of CCP rule which is threatened by the cultural ideas and separate history of Tibet. China's actions indicate that it has increased efforts to silence dissent in Tibet. It is attempting to integrate the existing population of Tibet with the rest of the mainland to an extent that it becomes completely dependent on it. While this is an interesting strategy, Tibetans are a deeply religious society and economic interdependence coupled with religious repression will not be enough to obscure their distinct identity. China has also invested heavily in the development of Tibet and another uprising like the one in 1959 could have ramifications on the economic integration planned by China under the

Belt and Road initiative. A more liberal approach towards individual practices and beliefs as long as they do not threaten Chinese sovereignty is a more sustainable long-term approach for China to adopt.

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