
Bam-i-Duniah (Roof of the World): A Future Conflict Scenario

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In 1838, the British explorer John Wood described *Bam-i-Duniah* or “Roof of the World” as a native expression generally used for the Pamir Mountains. The expression perhaps took root because the Pamir Highlands were the nodal point of the mountain systems of Tien-Shan, Kun-Lun, Karakoram, the Himalayas and Hindu Kush. With the awakening of public interest in Tibet, the Pamirs, “since 1875 ... probably the best explored region in High Asia”,¹ went out of the limelight and the description “Roof of the World” began to be increasingly applied to Tibet and the Tibetan Plateau. It is here, on the “Roof of the World” that the key to Sino-Indian relations lies. Writing in the preface to his book *India's China Policy*,² PC Chakravarti stated, “... Any strong expansionist power, entrenched in Tibet, holds in its hands a loaded pistol pointed at the heart of India.” He was to be proved tragically right within a year.

Indian empathy to China, in the century prior to independence, was very strong. China was striving hard to maintain its political entity against a whole series of imperialist powers, Western and Eastern. India was fighting against British imperialism. And from this common struggle emerged new ties of friendship and understanding. Soon after independence, the common refrain in India's polity, when talking of its relationship with China was of an “*age-old and eternal friendship between the two countries.*” Such sentiments, besides being grossly exaggerated and misplaced, flew in the face of facts. While the history of India's relations with China does go back to the time Buddhism spread to China in the

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early years of the Christian era, the relationship was essentially a spiritual and cultural one and lasted only for a few centuries. During this period, while Indian thought deeply tinged Chinese civilisation, we have no evidence of Chinese civilisation impacting Indian lives. Essentially, it was a one-way traffic. India gave; China received³. From the time of the Muslim invasions in the 7th century, this interaction too faded and was followed by over a thousand years of very little contact between the two countries. Indian sympathy and interest towards China started rising only in the early part of the 20th century when both nations were pitted against imperialistic forces. For Indian leaders to believe in the myth of age-old and eternal friendship was an act of delusion and betrayed a lack of understanding of *real politik*. The Chinese suffered from no such delusions. While mouthing platitudes of “*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*”, they surreptitiously kept focussed on the larger goal of amalgamating Tibet within the Chinese Republic.

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The Indian leadership was not unaware of the consideration that continued exclusion of China's authority from Tibet was in India's interest. Accordingly, post-independence, India attempted to continue British policy in the area. However, India lacked the economic, diplomatic and military muscle of the British Empire, and as the Britain withdrew from the region, the way was paved for a reversal of the balance that had existed across the Himalayas. The establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 with a strong central authority confirmed the shift which was soon demonstrated by China's reassertion of its power in Tibet.⁴

Why was India so blind to Chinese machinations? Merely continuing British policy in the region without taking any military or diplomatic steps at maintaining the status quo was doomed to failure. While it is understandable that in the decades preceding independence, India's nationalist leadership was primarily focussed on the freedom movement, adequate evidence existed of Chinese intentions in Tibet which should have been factored in as a part of defensive planning post-independence. As early as 1910, the *Morning Post* of London had sounded a bleak warning...⁵ “*A great empire, the future military strength of which*

no man can foresee, has suddenly appeared on the North-East Frontier of India... China, in a word, had come to the gates of India, and the fact has to be reckoned with". Why did India not reckon with the fact?

In the first flush of building a nation after achieving independence, India perhaps did not comprehend Chinese sensitivity towards Tibet. An assertive Tibet has always been a source of concern for China. In 800 CE, while contact between India and China was at a low ebb, Tibet's influence extended westward up to Samarkhand and Ferghana in Central Asia, eastward up to Xian in China and northwards up to Xinjiang and Mongolia. The Tibetan King Trisong Detsen extended his empire north into Qinghai and Gansu and eastwards towards Mongolia at the expense of what is now modern China in the latter half of the 8th century⁶. In 1578, the Buddhist monk Sonam Gyatso visited the Mongol King Altan Khan who became a follower and patron of the great sage and Buddhism spread throughout Mongolia. While meeting the monk, Altan Khan addressed him in Mongol by the name of Dalai Lama, the Tibetan word *gyatso*, "ocean," being the equivalent of *dalai* in Mongol. Sonam Gyatso (1543–1588), thus, became the first officially recognised Dalai Lama, although the title was retrospectively given to his two predecessors. Altan Khan's grandson, Yonten Gyatso, was selected as the 4th Dalai Lama⁷. By 1720, however, the power equation had changed, with Tibet succumbing to the Qing Dynasty in Beijing. When the Qing Dynasty's "mandate of heaven" (*tianming*) started weakening, Tibet began reasserting itself. This obviously was unacceptable to China. Thus, when Mao came to power in 1949, the new government in Beijing moved its forces into Tibet in 1950 and forcefully 'liberated' it.

Three of China's largest provinces – Xinjiang, Qinghai and Tibet – constitute about 37 per cent of the total area but have only 2 per cent of the population. Tibet secures China's southern border and provides access to South Asia while Xinjiang does likewise in Central Asia and Russia. The rim, thus, provides protection to the Chinese heartland. This coupled with the fact that both Xinjiang and Tibet are resource rich provinces blessed with mineral deposits, gas and oil, further highlights the importance of the region. An assertive Tibet would threaten Beijing's access to Xinjiang just as any talk of Greater Tibet does today. In addition, this region provides China access to the Arabian Sea through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

China is also conscious of the fact that water is going to be the world's most political and precious resource in the decades ahead and Tibet's potential in this respect is tremendous. There has been periodic talk of harnessing the Yarlung

Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) at the Yarlung Gorge where it flows around the Namcha Barwa Mountain at Pe and drops nearly 2,700 metres before entering Arunachal Pradesh. The plan⁸, dubbed the Western Route Scheme, calls for building a massive *hydroelectric dam and water-diversion scheme on the great bend of the Tsang Po River. Of concern to India is that the plan calls for changing the direction in which the Tsang Po flows to make it feed into the south-to-north transfer project. By the time the river enters India as the Brahmaputra River, most of its water would have been diverted to China with disastrous consequences for the state of Assam and Bangladesh. Beijing has repeatedly denied any such intentions but rumours persist that a diversion project is in fact underway.* Work is currently scheduled to begin in 2010, but it would not be completed until 2050. The Yarlung Gorge scheme may appear to be an unattainable dream but control of Tibet gives China the power to control this water.

Today, China is in illegal possession of the Aksai Chin area in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and also claims large tracts of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Besides the boundary dispute, India's concerns are related to China's role in supporting insurgent groups in India's Northeast and in its active support to Pakistan, especially in the nuclear field. There is also a feeling amongst the well informed sections of India's strategic community that Maoism or Naxalism in India is indeed a proxy war being waged by China against India for the last five decades. Chinese concerns are related to the activities of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC). China also appears to be concerned over the reported presence in Indian territory of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a US non-government organisation (NGO) but funded by the US government. From, time to time the US Congress has provided special appropriations to the NED to carry out specific democratic initiatives in countries of special interest, and China blames the NED for part of the troubles in Xinjiang and Tibet. The positives in the relationship have been increasing trade flows, cooperation in the World Trade Organisation (WTO), commonality of interests over contentious world issues such as the recent UN Climate Change Conference 2009 held at Copenhagen and a relatively peaceful border since the Wang dung incident in 1986. However, a pragmatic assessment indicates that given China's sensitivities towards Tibet and the fact that we have an ongoing dispute with China over the boundary issue, which has been marked by venomous animosity over the years, the possibility of a conflict between India and China over the high Himalayas cannot be ruled out. Recent reports of Chinese incursions in parts of Indian territory led to public opinion being

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inflamed in India and a dangerous hysteria being created, with both countries accusing each other of intruding into their territory. While the two governments exercised restraint, such incidents have the potential of leading to conflict.

As of now, both India and China are focussing on economic development and the possibility of armed conflict erupting between the two countries has low probability. But we cannot make the same mistake of misreading Chinese intentions that we have done earlier. The Chinese concept of “*wu wei*” – a process of refraining from distorting the natural course of events by clumsy or premature intervention does not presage inaction. It merely signifies waiting for the right opportunity to present itself or creating the right framework before embarking on a particular course of action. The fact that China is

content to maintain the status quo on the border with India does not imply acceptance of the status quo. It merely means that China will deal with the problem on its own terms, at an opportune time. It would, thus, be prudent for India to maintain a high state of defence preparedness against any Chinese misadventure. Intentions are difficult to gauge and are subject to change. Capabilities provide a more reliable index of threat probability and need to be matched. An effective defensive set-up backed by political will and economic and diplomatic leverages is the most effective deterrent to war and this is what the Indian state must aim at. As Sun Tzu says in the ‘*Sun Zi Bing Far*’ (The Art of War), a 6th century BC Chinese military treatise, “*It is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle*”.

Militarily, China ranks among the most powerful nations in the world. In the past decade, China’s growing military capability has attracted a great deal of attention, but details about the current and likely near-future state of China’s military power have been in short supply. While it is true that China is modernising its forces and increasing defence spending, the prospective improvements in

overall military capability need to be set against the very low-technology starting point of China's armed forces.

China's security concerns are many and varied. In recent years, the development of China's domestic and foreign policies has increased the country's involvement in international affairs. The rapid expansion of international trade, along with its increased reliance on imported commodities and participation in multilateral policy-making institutions have exposed China to risks that may increasingly jeopardise its interests abroad and at home. Becoming a major world power also creates strategic and military imperatives that create a momentum of their own. China has every reason to see the US as both a major trading partner and a potential strategic rival. China has borders with 15 other countries in Asia, several of which pose serious security issues in Chinese eyes. Across Chinese shores, Taiwan and Japan remain major security concerns. In the above context, India does not assume primacy in the Chinese security paradigm as China does not envision a land-based threat from India in Tibet. For India, however, the possibility of a conflict erupting in the "Roof of the World," with the Chinese resorting to the use of force to resolve the boundary dispute, is very real and must be factored into the Indian security paradigm.

China does not make publicly available a unified, single doctrine for guiding military operations. The broadest guideline for war-fighting within China's military doctrine is the concept of "*active defence*" – an operational guideline for military strategy that applies to all branches of the armed forces. It means that China does not start wars to achieve strategic means and, thus, remains committed to only use its armed forces to defend against attacks on its national sovereignty. The doctrine also refers to "*local wars under conditions of informationisation*." This stands in contrast to the term "*local wars under high-tech conditions*" which was a previous guideline from 1993 and referred to short duration conflicts with limited political objectives and geographical scope but with decisive strategic outcomes. They are usually fought over territorial claims, economic disputes, or ethnic rivalries. These wars are not region-wide, much less global conflicts, but they can be very large in scale and intensity. The implications of the change of language from "*limited wars under high-tech conditions*" to "*local wars under the conditions of informationalisation*" remain unclear. It is undoubtedly clear, however, that China has made great efforts to introduce high-tech equipment into its armed forces in order to enable them to lead extensive joint Services campaigns with information technology capabilities⁹.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is moving toward an overall reduction and reorganisation of personnel and equipment with the goal of creating a more modern and mobile army. In 2006,¹⁰ the total estimated manpower of the PLA (PLA + paramilitary forces + reserves) had come down to approximately 6 million personnel from 9 million in 1985. The PLA ground forces were almost halved, from 3,160,000 to 1,600,000. These ground forces are divided into 7 Military Regions (MRs) within which lie 18 Group Armies. The Group Armies contain among them 9 armoured divisions, 12 armoured brigades, 15 infantry divisions, 3 mechanised infantry divisions, 1 mechanised infantry brigade, 24 motorised infantry divisions, 22 motorised infantry brigades, 2 amphibious assault divisions, 7 artillery divisions, 14 artillery brigades and 12 air defence artillery brigades.

While conventional Chinese military strength far outnumbers India's, only a part of this capability can be applied against India in Tibet. China's military capability, strategic traditions and domestic influences, therefore, need to be analysed and understood as this would have a bearing on their military thinking and policy towards India. The practical manifestation of that policy would devolve around the following:

- Avoid a protracted conflict.
- Use and manipulate information and retain information dominance to shape the battlefield.
- Constrain the adversary.
- Inflict surprise.
- Control and manage escalation.

In the event of a conflict, we could expect the Chinese to choose the time and place of initiating hostilities in accordance with the earlier mentioned concept of "*wu wei*". They would aim to limit, mislead and control India through both the military and political realms. As an element of surprise, a crucial pre-war element could be a highly capable cyber attack as part of the strategy to carry out psychological paralysis of the adversary and manage conflict. Some military districts have already established reserve and militia units specialising in information warfare, thereby drawing on the vast untapped potential of civilian software experts. As many as 20 city departments are believed to have information warfare regiments among its military reserve forces.¹¹ Chinese hackers are believed to have attacked computer networks of the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence and the American Institute in Taiwan on June 5, 2006, as also several military command networks located in the US in 2003.

In India, more than 200 computers belonging to top-ranking government officials, including the three Service chiefs and former National Security Adviser (NSA) MK Narayanan, were compromised in a hacking operation that originated in China on December 15, 2009. Security agencies now believe that the operation was bigger in scale than earlier believed¹². As per the 2006 US Department of Defence (DoD) report, under China's increasing use of information technology, computer hackers may support the PLA in protecting Chinese networks and, at the same time, attempting to disrupt those of the enemy. The report also mentions that the PLA undertook a military cyber warfare exercise in 2005, practising first-strike cyber attack operations. It is believed that PLA leaders have a somewhat coherent concept named "Integrated Network Electronic Warfare" to coordinate efforts in this regard¹³.

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The advantage of a cyber attack is the element of deniability inherent in the nature of the operation. A high level political strategy of prevention would likely be put in place to convince India of the futility and high risk of going to war. Should India not be deterred, China is likely to progress operations with a heavy ballistic and cruise missile attack as the next step in conflict management to destroy command and control centres and inflict damage on communication and logistic nodes prior to launching a ground offensive. The political commissars and the Central Military Commission (CMC) could be expected to play a vital role in the conflict as also in formulating the nature of operations.

To shape world opinion, China has already started conditioning the international political and military environment by its claims over the whole of Arunachal Pradesh. As a result, Google has now started showing both Indian and Chinese claim lines in its maps. The intent of the Chinese is clear. In case of an India-China conflict, Beijing would like to mould international opinion in its favour and minimise support for India, by convincing the world that China has acted in 'self-defence' and is only reclaiming territory which it claims.

Chinese attempts to constrain India are exemplified in their support for Pakistan. This forces India to also look westwards while engaging with China, and ties up valuable resources in anticipation of a two-front war. China's extensive development of multi-modal connectivity all along its borders and inside the

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neighbouring countries for facilitating trade flows, energy supplies and movement of arms and armada is another aspect of containment and psychological dislocation of the adversary. This attempt at creating a ring of anti-Indian influences could rightly be inferred as strategic encirclement and containment of India, to subserve its strategic global ambitions.

If this is how a future conflict scenario is envisaged, then the best strategy to avoid a conflict is in having the capability to inflict an unacceptable level of damage to Chinese forces in Tibet. A major component of Chinese

offensive forces has to be built up largely from the Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions in the mainland. The terrain in the Tibetan Plateau with its concomitant communication network will play an important role in this build-up. The time taken to induct such a large sized force robs the operation of any element of surprise. The lines of communication being limited are also extremely vulnerable to interdiction by air and missile attacks. Indian capability in ensuring a high degree of battlefield transparency over the Tibetan Plateau will make it impossible to hide large troop concentrations and logistic nodes; further adding to the attacker's vulnerability from aerial and missile attacks. To support its ground offensive, China would have to deploy a vast quantity of artillery within 15 to 30 km of the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The lie of the ground in the mountainous terrain as existing along the LAC is such that the artillery would have to deploy near existing roads and tracks, making use of reentrants and folds in the ground. It would be well nigh impossible to conceal these gun locations, making them viable targets for own aerial attacks. Destruction of a large part of the adversary's artillery would seriously jeopardise his ground offensive, which could then be defeated in detail. The key to an effective defence strategy against China is, hence, in ensuring local air superiority over the Tibetan Plateau. While overall Chinese air power may have an edge over India, what needs to be considered is how much of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) can be deployed in *Bam-i-Duniah*, taking into account both the existing infrastructure available in Tibet as also Chinese security concerns in the mainland, necessitating the deployment of the major component of the force there. The reduction in payloads of aircraft taking off from high altitude bases must also be factored as against Indian

aircraft taking off from bases at sea level. India has the requisite air capability as of now. It is essential that this edge is maintained.

There can be no two opinions on how deadly cyber warfare can be in terms of crippling or destroying an adversary's economic, communication and strategic networks and infrastructure. As part of their pre-war strategy, the Chinese have exceptional capabilities in this regard which they will put to good use in a conflict situation with India. We can expect an attack on India's financial institutions and information databases in conjunction with attacks

on military cyber systems. But Indian capacity too is not insignificant and the application of this capability over the Tibetan Plateau would degrade Chinese offensive capability to a considerable extent. It must be noted that the Indian Army is geared up for operating in a digitised battlefield and its information systems are quite secure from hostile strikes. However, steps need to be taken to ensure survival of our civilian networks in the event of a hostile attack. India needs to emulate the Chinese example and exploit its vast availability of trained manpower to enhance its information and cyber warfare capability.

Finally, mountains give tremendous strength to the defence and India has adequate holding troops to stave off the most determined Chinese attacks. With the addition of two extra mountain divisions in the region, this capability will only get enhanced. However, voids in defences need to be speedily plugged. Also, logistic infrastructure in many areas requires improvement and this aspect must be dealt with on priority to enable quick build-up of forces when required.

On the naval front, the previous Naval Chief, Admiral Sureesh Mehta had stated that China was shaping the maritime battlefield in the region and had cautioned that the Chinese are looking 20 years ahead. As per an official from the Indian Navy, China has increased its nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean. These reports, while a source of concern, are not something which cannot be dealt with, given the time-frames involved.

While India has the present capability to address its security concerns emanating from Tibet, much needs to be done to maintain a conventional military deterrent in pursuit of its genuine security concerns. A war in the high Himalayas will be a costly proposition for both India and China

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and should best be avoided. The Chinese are, however, further increasing the conventional gap between the two forces through a rapid process of modernisation and improving infrastructure in Tibet. The Chinese military modernisation programme is the biggest manifestation of this since it is the largest in the history of the world. While this issue needs to be addressed with the utmost concern, there appears to be no real movement towards this end. The defence budget has remained stagnant as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and available trends do not suggest a change in this aspect. From the army point of view, a much greater push is required in improving infrastructure, especially with respect to logistics and communications. Procurement of guns for the artillery needs to be expedited and thought needs to be given to match Chinese missile capability so as to achieve effective deterrence. The air force needs to ensure it has a combat edge over the PLAAF in Tibet for which appropriations in the defence budget may need to be readjusted. India should also focus on developing its naval capability with a power projectionist role, giving greater emphasis on the 'anti-access' strategy. While the biggest Chinese vulnerability in the political sphere is present in the form of Tibet, with a possibility of serious domestic fallout for the Chinese, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is also a serious Chinese concern as nearly 60 percent of their oil passes through the Indian Ocean. All of these activities will require extra budgetary allocations which must be made available if India is to be taken seriously as a regional player. In addition, the antiquated system of defence procurements needs reforms so that equipment required for the defence of the country is not kept hostage by the exercise of excessive bureaucratic and financial control. Reforms are also required in the state owned defence industries which need to be modernised to ensure quality in production. As of now, even the indigenously produced 5.56 mm INSAS rifle lacks the reliability of the Kalashnikov rifle, which does not augur well for the force.

Politically, India needs to work out a water treaty with China to obviate any move by China to divert the waters of the Yarlung Tsangpo. The political leadership also needs to carry forward the process of higher defence reforms to their logical conclusion and appoint a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to give single point advice to the government on all defence related issues. Keeping the armed forces secluded from policy-making decisions can only be counter-productive and will be detrimental to national security concerns.

Notes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed.(1911)
2. PC Chakravarti, *India's China Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, third edition (Natraj Publishers), pp. 69, 70.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
6. <http://soodvikram.blogspot.com/2007/07/importance-of-tibet.html>
7. Yonten Gyatso was a Mongolian, making him the only non-Tibetan to be recognised as the Dalai Lama other than the 6th Dalai Lama, who was a Monpa—but Monpas can be seen either as a Tibetan sub-group or a closely related people.
8. Kenneth Pomeranz: “The Great Himalayan Watershed: Agrarian Crisis, Mega-Dams and the Environment”, *New Left Review*, 58, July-August 2009.
9. “Chinese Military Modernisation and Force Development,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Arleigh A Burke Chair in Strategy, <http://www.comw.org/cmp/fulltext/060811cordesman.pdf>
10. *Ibid.*
11. Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment, *China and Northeast Asia, Armed Forces*, November 7, 2005, p. 19.
12. http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report_chinese-hackers-broke-into-nsa-service-chiefs-comps_1344788
13. Department of Defense, Annual Report to Congress, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China* (Washington, 2006), p. 36.