
China, India, and Tibet Since 1959: Border Challenges, Politics, and History

Monika Chansoria

The 14th (present) Dalai Lama arrived in India on a yak by crossing the border at Khenzimane on March 31, 1959, travelling for a fortnight, after leaving Lhasa perhaps during the darkest phase of the last night he spent in his homeland. Upon arrival in India, the first Indian post was at Chuthangmu, north of Tawang (then part of Kameng Frontier Division). Once past the Indo-Tibetan border, the Assam Rifles accorded the Dalai Lama a guard of honour in Tawang and escorted him. Following a stay in Bomdila, the Dalai Lama travelled to the hills of northern India and set up the Tibetan government-in-exile on April 29, 1959.¹ It is 60 years since this passage, and the relationship that India shares with Tibet, and the Dalai Lama, remains rooted in history for over a century. Since 1959, or even earlier, the issue of Tibet has been on a perpetual simmer between India and China – constituting the core of tensions seething at the political and military levels.²

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The Tibet That Was in 1912

Tibet's tempestuous past is well recorded and archived. The present Dalai Lama's predecessor, the 13th Dalai Lama (1876-1933) fled first to Mongolia in 1904 and thereafter to China. Upon his arrival in Peking, the Chinese did not accord him the same honour that his ancestors had received from the previous Mongol Emperors. From the earliest times, the political relations existing between Tibet and China were based primarily on the

special personal equation shared by the Dalai Lamas with the Mongol Emperors. With the collapse of the Manchu Dynasty in 1912 following the Chinese rebellion, the relationship ceased to exist.³

Sensing that its position inside Tibet was getting stronger, China planned to conquer and control the region. To deflect attention, Peking conveyed to the Tibetans that the approaching Chinese troops intended to protect them against the British. By 1909, the new Chinese military administrator, Chao Erh-feng, was actively pushing troops towards Lhasa, launching attacks in three Tibetan provinces. Upon the 13th Dalai Lama's return to Tibet from China, Chao, the appointed, 'Resident of Tibet,' was known to be committing excesses through his troops, including destroying monasteries, looting monastic properties and tearing up sacred books. It was during this stint that the 13th Dalai Lama met Charles Bell whose work *Portrait of The Dalai Lama*, published in 1946, is amongst the finest accounts on Tibet and its chequered history.⁴ Bell chronicles personal conversations with the 13th Dalai Lama in which the latter described how the Chinese military converted leaves from holy Tibetan scriptures as soles for soldiers' boots. In the wake of the growing Chinese aggression and atrocities, which he later described as a breach of

the peaceful arrangement between him and the Chinese in Peking, the 13th Dalai Lama was compelled to flee to Darjeeling.⁵

The Chinese Revolution of 1912 overthrew the Qing (Manchu) dynasty and created a republic with a provisional Constitution promulgated by the Nanjing Parliament, and the government was transferred to Peking. This was also the time when the 13th Dalai Lama returned from India to Tibet. The Chinese Revolution directly impacted the Chinese authority in Tibet. The strains started becoming visible when, in 1913-14, during a conference held in Delhi, the Chinese, Tibetan, and British envoys (Henry McMahon, assisted by Charles Bell) discussed three major points.⁶ These included that the frontier between China and Tibet should be drawn approximately along the upper waters of the Yangtse; that a frontier should be defined between India and Tibet, running along the main range of the Himalayas; and that the Tibetans were to have greater self-determination. Although the agreement was initialled, the Chinese refused to proceed with the full signature. Nonetheless, it was agreed to maintain three Trade Agencies in Tibet – at Gyantse, which lay between the Himalayas and Lhasa; at Yatung, north of the Himalayas; and also at Gartok in western Tibet.⁷

The August 12, 1912, agreement between the Chinese and Tibetans representatives, in the presence of Gorkha witnesses, discussed a ‘three-point’ proposal which stated that all arms and equipment including field guns and Maxim guns in the possession of the Chinese at Dabshi and Tseling in Lhasa shall be sealed; bullets and gunpowder shall be collected and deposited in the Doring House; and the Chinese officials and soldiers shall leave Tibet within 15 days. As he drew closer to Lhasa in 1912, the 13th Dalai Lama discovered that the Government of China had broken its pledge of not interfering in Tibet or his position. Describing the life and times of Tibet, Basil Gould, a British trade agent in Gyantse from 1912-13 narrates, in his notes published in November 1949, that the problem of Tibet’s future was whether China would continue

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to seek to dominate and destroy the Tibetan national identity, religion, and its distinct culture.⁸ Suffice to state that it is, indeed, a fateful paradox that the notes on Tibet's history have become its present-day destiny, with Chinese President Xi Jinping firmly in control of the Communist People's Republic of China (PRC), and Tibet.

China That Is under Xi Jinping

Contrary to being “surprising,” as many have termed it, the removal of term limits on the office of the Chinese Presidency was bound to happen. The systemic overhauling of China's governance system, intense military reforms, anti-corruption campaign and increasingly gripping control over nearly every aspect of China's socio-political life were lucid indicators that Xi Jinping is here to stay. The announcement of clearing the way for President Xi Jinping to rule beyond 2023 appears to be an extension in sync with his goals, objectives and vision for China stretching till 2035.⁹ In the run-up to the 19th Party Congress, one question that loomed particularly large in the minds of both domestic and international observers was: will Xi consolidate power and seek to retain control for yet another term post-2022 or will he pave the way for an anointed successor during the 2022 Party Congress? What emerged following the event was Xi receiving official recognition equivalent to the Communist Party's founders. I have argued in many of my writings ever since that the possibility of Xi serving a third term from 2022 to 2027 could well be conceivable, with loyalists and fence-sitters hedging their bets.¹⁰ Xi's close aide and current Chief of Staff, Li Zhanshu's promotion to the Standing Committee of the Central Political Bureau and taking over the National People's Congress (NPC) was a key

move. In so far as making legislative and constitutional changes required to ratify the move was concerned, Li Zhanshu played a pivotal role, favouring Xi.

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become associated singularly with the face of the political heavyweight Xi Jinping, much like it was during the era of Chairman Mao. By getting enshrined in the Party's Constitution, President Xi Jinping has emerged as the most powerful leader in the world's largest one-party, totalitarian, Communist state. This further quells the remotest hope of continuation of collective leadership in the Party, the prime objective of which was to shun "one-man" rule.¹¹ The dawn of Xi Jinping's era in China led to the demise of China's three-decade-old collective leadership system. Rather, it has paved the way for absolute centralisation of despotic power and control in the hands of Xi. The collective model of leadership traditionally saw the General Secretary of the Party as first among equals in the Standing Committee. In a clear departure from the past emphasis on such principles, including "collective leadership" and "democratic centralism," the Politburo pronounced that "centralised and unified leadership of the Party Central" was the highest principle of the Party's leadership.¹²

China and the world from outside are witnessing perhaps the greatest of its political journeys. Mao's 27-year reign began in 1949, followed by Deng's 18 years in power. Xi Jinping will be 82 years when China reaches the stated objective of becoming a topmost innovative nation in 2035, and further beyond, a nation with global influence by 2050.¹³

Infrastructure Reality on the Sino-Indian Border Involving Tibet

The situation along India's border in the eastern sector with China involving Tibet, continues to be indeterminate yet serious, militarily. Recent reportage of the Indian Army beefing up its troop presence in the Arunachal sector adjoining the Tibetan region, including at the tri-junction among India, China and Myanmar signals that Sino-Indian tensions have not eased much. While India appears to be undertaking short-term reactive steps, China, since 1999, has been working on its long-term "Great Western Development" initiative and strategy, *Xibu Da Kaifa*. The rationale and implementation of this project launched by the Chinese government nearly two decades ago have been the foundation of the blizzard-like infrastructure stack-up in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) adjoining India.¹⁴

The most recent illustration comes in the form of a declaration by the Chinese local authorities, stating that from 2012-17, the total length of ongoing sealed-road construction in Tibet was extended by 24,300 km. As a result, the total length of sealed-roads constructed across Tibet now is 89,504 km, with an average increase of the highway and subsidiary roads network in the Tibetan region of 4,861 km, according to China's regional transportation department.¹⁵ The expected target of the sealed-roads network inside the entire Tibet, to be completed by the end of 2018, is 96,000 km. It needs to be highlighted that the rural interior areas of Tibet have over 60,000 km of road network. The Chinese government, as per state-run and controlled media, has spent more than Yuan 146.3 billion (\$23 billion) in fixed-asset investment in transportation infrastructure since 2012. In the current year alone, it plans to invest Yuan 68 billion in the transportation sector.

In my book *China's Military Modernisation and Strategy* published in 2011, research demonstrated that China had developed 58,000 km of road network in Tibet.¹⁶ As for Tibet, seven major high-level roads have

been opened to traffic in the past five years, including those linking Lhasa to Nyingchi, the airport to downtown of Xigaze, and the Gonggar airport in Lhasa to the Tsetang township. By ramping up Tibet's modern infrastructure comprising railroads, airports, and highways, China apparently is preparing to position itself to rapidly move in large numbers of additional forces to the border

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areas with India during the build-up of a conflict. The rapid build-up of China's national road and rail transport system has greatly enhanced the Chinese Army's land-based transport capabilities. Many key civilian highway and railway projects in Tibet, especially trunk rail lines and inter-provincial highways linking the interior and outer areas, have been constructed to military specifications, which can be turned over to the PLA in the event of a war. Chinese strategic analyst Zhao Gancheng reinforced this argument when he stated, "Highways in Tibet...can be used by armoured vehicles and as a runway for planes to take off when it has to serve a military purpose." Besides, what aids China naturally is the fact that its forces control the heights along the frontier, while the Indian Army remains stationed largely at the lower levels. China's strategic highways have extended not just within and across Tibet, but also to the Nepal border. Termed a first-tier highway, the 25-metre-wide National Highway 318 (G318) runs from Shanghai to Zhangmu on the China-Nepal border. A section of this four double-lane highway links to the Nepalese border. Running very close to the border with India, the G318 connects the border town of Zhangmu with Lhasa and could link the future cross-border Sino-Nepalese railway.¹⁷

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given to the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) for several critical high-altitude border links is 2020-21. India still seems to be struggling to put in place and execute a vast plan to develop, on a war-footing, its own connectivity along and across the long frontier with Tibet in order to close the ever-widening “infrastructure gap” with Beijing. The jaded and laid-back approach adopted by India’s BRO—a quasi-military set-up established in 1960, tasked with developing and maintaining strategically vital infrastructure in the border areas,

is not helping India’s case either. As I argued in my book *China’s Military Modernisation and Strategy*, India cannot afford to discount the exigency of China’s massive *blitzkrieg* in the name of the air, road, and rail-networked infrastructure all along its adjoining border areas.¹⁸ The extent of logistics infrastructure development in Tibet is an indicator of the impetus being made available to the Chinese Army’s logistics capability, in turn, enhancing its operational capability for future mobile wars. After all, the infrastructure stack-up pumped inside Tibet by China is well beyond the genuine needs of either Tibet or the Tibetan people.

China’s Frontier Border Defence Construction with Fabricated Fortification

In what could be deciphered as a vital indicative pointer for China’s neighbours, State Councillor and Defence Minister Chang Wanquan called for strengthening “frontier defence construction” during a border defence inspection visit to northwest China’s restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Although the exact date of the assessment visit was

not disclosed, the statement carried weight, coming from none other than the State Councillor of the State Council—the chief executive organ. Chang went up where the border troop units and posts are located, simultaneously visiting frontier checkpoints, duty points, and border ports. Besides, he held crucial meetings with the armed personnel and local government machinery that gave inputs on border management,

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control, and building a consolidated border defence.¹⁹ Chang admitted that the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, with Xi Jinping as its “core,” recognised the complexity and severity of the security situation in the region. The statement only reinforces the centrality of maintaining control and stability in Xinjiang from China’s overall strategic perspective.²⁰ Building an “iron wall to enhance frontier border defence” appears to be the policy pronouncement by Xi’s administration, to be carried out by means including that of increased police patrols in Xinjiang.²¹

Towards the end of December 2017, Korla—a city in central Xinjiang—announced plans to recruit 1,500 police personnel from Hebei, Shaanxi, and Sichuan provinces. The administration in Xinjiang is infamous for draconian security measures and hardline policies such as asking residents to hand over their passports to the local police, opening up an extensive network of “convenience police stations” equipped with surveillance cameras and guards on round-the-clock patrols. In the periphery, Xinjiang’s border defence corps holds regular combat training drills, including on the Pamir plateau that once was considered a strategic trade route between Kashgar and Kokand on the ancient Northern Silk Road. The presence of Chinese military vehicles, the Dongfeng EQ 2050—a Chinese equivalent of the American mine resistant ambush

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protected vehicle, Humvee—has often been reported from inside the region called Little Pamir, a barren plateau near the border.²² Defence Minister Chang, who has earlier been the PLA's Chief-of-Staff for the Beijing and Lanzhou Military Regions (MRs), and Commander of the Shenyang MR, has a well-established penchant for making war-pitch statements

in China's landlocked or coastal border regions. On an earlier occasion, while visiting the strategically significant Zhejiang province, he exhorted the "military, police, and public" to increasingly prepare for a "people's war at sea". An eastern coastal province of China, Zhejiang is bordered by Jiangsu and Shanghai to the north, Jiangxi to the west, Fujian to the south, and the East China Sea in its east.²³

Chang's pitch for strengthening frontier border defence construction in Xinjiang resonates and reflects far away in China's southwest—on the Doklam plateau region. Satellite imagery, of late, increasingly indicates that the Chinese PLA is well set up in northern Doklam, with posts, trenches, armoured vehicles, heavy road building machinery, and permanent troop deployment. More importantly, more than half a dozen helipads, one full mechanised regiment (with the probability of another) and a tall observation tower have been constructed by the PLA Construction Corps. Chinese border roads today cover a major share of the North Doklam plateau, coupled with widening of the existing road network.²⁴ On December 18, 2017, a few days prior to Defence Minister Chang's call for frontier border defence construction, the Chinese Defence Ministry announced that the Defence Engineering Research Institute under the Academy of Military Science of the PLA had developed a new type of fabricated fortification and distributed the same to the frontier defence troops.²⁵ These fabricated fortification units can be divided into

13 sets in four major categories, namely, observation, and shooting, commanding centre, personnel and equipment sheltering, and are composed of electromagnetic shielding systems.²⁶

Fabricated fortification units are light components, small in size, capable of mobile transportation and flexible construction, rendering them well suited for remote, high altitude, mountainous areas where they can be assembled or disassembled with prefabricated parts multiple times. The Defence Ministry acknowledged that with the new fortifications, the troops could swiftly build battlefield-engineering support structures.²⁷ Using these fabricated fortifications, a PLA platoon now can effectively construct an advance commanding post for a division or a brigade within a span of a few hours. Not surprisingly, this advancement will, in effect, boost the PLA's engineering support capability in war-time and frontier management and control ability in peace-time, all along China's borderlines. The summer of 2018 will be a testing time for China's neighbours amidst a *blitzkrieg* of frontier defence infrastructure and readiness that Beijing seeks to confront its adversaries with.²⁸

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Xi Jinping's Emerging Narrative on Tibet

Soon after assuming his second term, Xi Jinping began spinning the narrative on Tibet yet again by urging Tibetans living in settlement areas bordering the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh to "set down roots" and help "safeguard Chinese territory". The state-run and controlled Chinese media is proving instrumental in spinning this narrative by highlighting a "letter" apparently written by Xi Jinping to a family of traditional herdsman living in the Yumai township of southeastern Tibet's Lhünzê county.²⁹ Lhünzê is a county in the prefecture-level Shannan city

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and is bounded by Lhasa to the north, Nyingchi to the east, Shigatse on the west and the border with India and Bhutan on the south. In the letter, Xi acknowledged the family's efforts to "safeguard the territory" and thanked them for their loyalty and contribution made in the border area. The *Xinhua* agency's dispatch quoted Xi as saying, "Without peace in the territory, there will be no peaceful lives for the millions of families."³⁰ Moreover, China's President hoped that the family would "motivate herders in greater numbers

to settle down in the border areas" and become guardians of the Chinese territory. Earlier, Xi's address at the CCP Congress underscored the sanctity of maintaining Chinese integrity and sovereignty. In this reference, the letter being played up in the Chinese media is significant, given the criticality and proximity of Lhünzê to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Conclusion

India and its policy-makers appear to be exploring options to repair the Sino-Indian relationship, which experienced perhaps its roughest phase over the Doklam standoff last summer, since the 1962 War. While this process is on currently, the question is: what are the areas that New Delhi seems to have identified, wherein it expects China to hand it a *quid pro quo* treatment for the 'Tibet relief' that China would expect to be provided with? Any outlandish hope of India expecting to be paid back in terms of diplomatic dividends for appeasing China might just be heading for a crash.³¹ Be it at the

Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), wherein it is all too well known and acknowledged that the chances of India's NSG membership getting through remain bleak given China's tenacious obstruction and antagonism to Delhi's candidature; be it India's fight against terrorism, wherein Beijing is officially stonewalling Indian attempts to brand Masood Azhar as a global terrorist; or, be it China's Belt

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and Road Initiative (BRI), where, given the amount of economic and political capital invested by the Xi administration in the BRI project, there is no way that China would relent to Delhi's objections on the BRI corridor running through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). Placing New Delhi's sovereignty and territorial integrity under strain suits Beijing's South Asia strategy, politico-diplomatically, and adds pressure on the Indian armed forces in the conventional deterrence equation vis-à-vis a two-front scenario.

China's dealings with the outside world hinge upon three discernible policy strands that essentially constitute the basis of Beijing's claim to legitimacy, namely, the so-called unequal treaties; nationalism; and sovereignty. Xi's current political standing pronounces him as China's most powerful ruler since Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Mao recommended "keeping the enemy in the dark about where and when [Chinese] forces will attack" and remained in favour of launching a "just war" if it contributed to the end of ensuring the predominance of the Party and enthusing national morale. China has successfully employed its traditional concept and strategy of *shi* that exploits the strategic configuration of power to its advantage, while maximising its ability to preserve its own strength. The strategy of *shi* also advocates engaging the

adversary in *qi* (extraordinary) ways and developing a win-win situation to achieve political and strategic objectives.³²

As Chinese influence and presence inside, and around South Asia increases, the hard realities outlined above need to be dealt with pragmatically. The policy of handing over olive branches to Beijing without any terms and conditions would not constitute prudence. Over the past decade and more, China has managed to gradually create a situation where India finds itself gripped, politico-diplomatically, and militarily. It is time for New Delhi to revisit the theoretical roots of its strategic thinking and orientation that lie in the *Arthashastra* as it delineates the theories of statecraft, diplomacy, strategy, and the prerequisites of politics and power, in the realist paradigm.³³ Tibet, its history, and association with India, ideally, should remain a vital facet of that larger strategy.

Notes

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