



## China's Rail March in Tibet Nears Indian Borders

■ Dr. Monika Chansoria

### Lhasa-Shigatse Railway Line Operational

Inauguration of the second railway line in Tibet, extending from the provincial capital Lhasa further up to Shigatse (Xigazê), the second-largest city in Tibet, located southwest of Lhasa, is the latest Chinese announcement on the infrastructure development front, posing a cause of grave concern for India's border regions in the eastern sector. The reportage and discussion in state-controlled Chinese media on this rail line hailed the move with captions such as "Sky Rail to Run from Lhasa to South Tibet". The Lhasa-Shigatse rail link is by far the largest infrastructure project in China's present 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2011-15), costing Yuan 13.28 billion (\$2.16 billion). Coming after more than a decade of planning and construction, this 258-km rail stretch, now operational following a series of trial runs, will reduce a five-hour road journey to an almost two-hour trip by train.

The completion of the Golmud-Lhasa-Shigatse rail link (now totalling 1,400 km) is central to China's Great Western Development Policy, aimed at promoting the cause of Chinese nationalism and "great power status" by virtue of greater economic development of the country's underdeveloped western region that is primarily populated by ethnic minorities. The western development strategy is a derivative of the overall

regional development strategy, the most significant aspects of which are infrastructure construction, especially expansion of the railway networks. China's western development strategy takes into account optimising utilisation of resources, implementing a market-oriented resource-transmission strategy, and arranging for resource development and processing in the resource-rich regions.

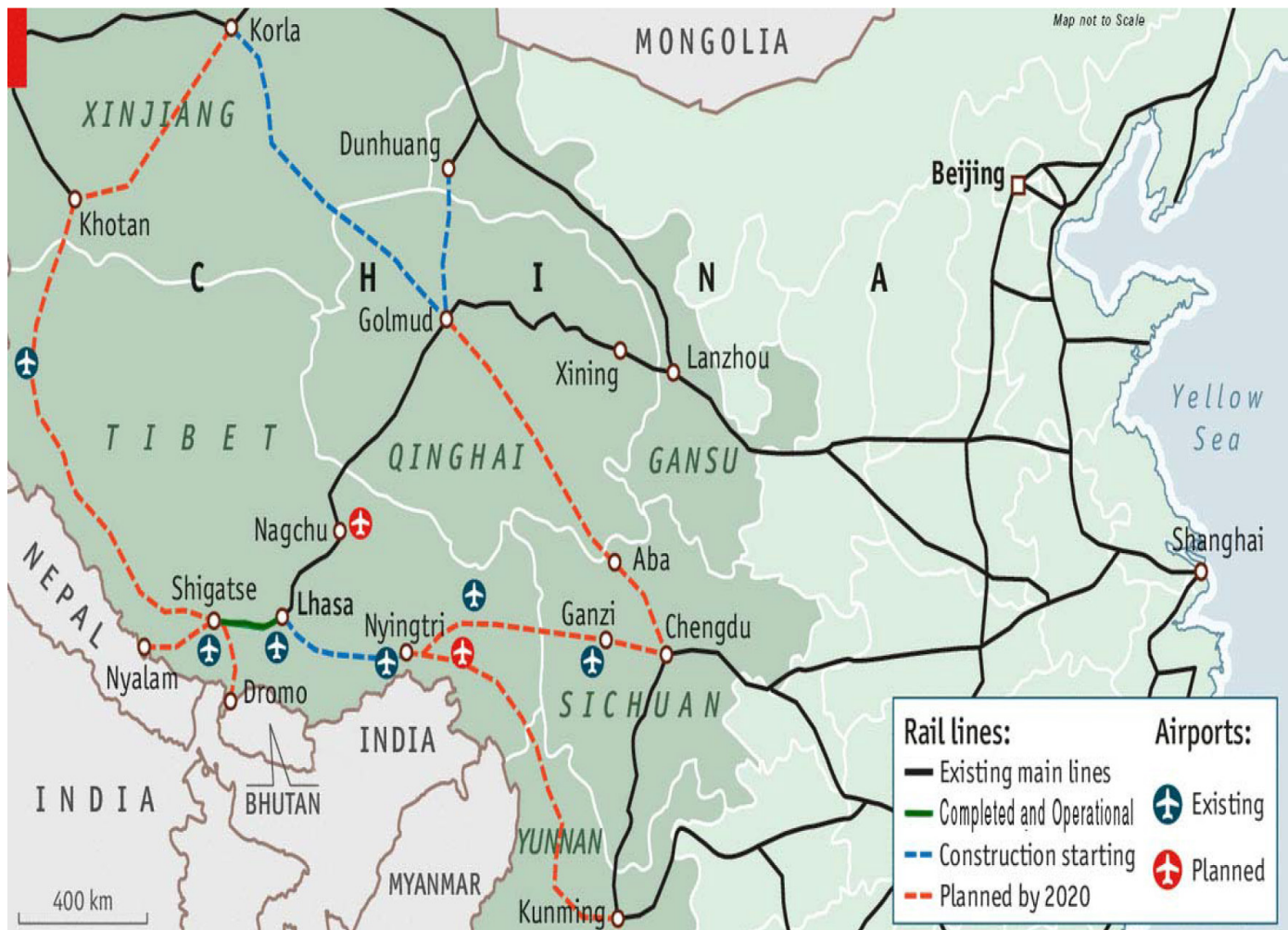
It is believed that by 2015-16, there will be almost 20 million Han Chinese in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), subsequently shifting the cultural boundaries between the Tibetan people and the Han Chinese. The "Go West" campaign includes giving fiscal incentives and sending Chinese graduates to Tibet. China's government has instructed all conscripts posted in the TAR to apply for change of residential registration, which will facilitate the demobilised cadres to find employment in the region. This practice, in the long run, will change the demographic pattern of the TAR, as a large majority of the 50,000 cadres demobilised every year is encouraged to settle in the TAR. Interestingly, the Chinese language being the medium of instruction in schools, necessitates more Chinese tutors coming in from the mainland.

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By means of this railway line, China has inched much closer to the Indian borders in Sikkim, along with Nepal and Bhutan, thereby enhancing its military mobility which inevitably shall leverage Beijing's alleged assertions over territory that is an integral part of India. The Lhasa-Shigatse line is an extension of the Qinghai-Tibet railway—a rail line situated at the highest altitude in the world, connecting Tibet with mainland China. According to a senior Chinese official at Tibet's railway office, the Shigatse line would further be stretched hereafter towards the Nepalese and Indian

borders, thus opening up “the south of Tibet”. It is being speculated that China's 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2016-20) includes construction of a railway line that will connect Shigatse with Gyirong county (close to Nepal), with a checkpoint that would connect Nepal and Yatung county (near Sikkim). The line to Dromo/Yatung will be an extension of the new Lhasa-Shigatse line. In the event of all these Chinese rail links reaching the Indian and Nepalese borders, China's troop deployment in the event of both, i.e., managing any form of uprising in Tibet, or deployment of the military in view of a border

Fig 1



conflict with India will be enhanced in a manifold and unprecedented manner.

An alarming rail link strategically is the upcoming one heading east from Lhasa along the Yarlung Tsangpo river (Brahmaputra) to Nyingchi (Kongpo). Having wrapped up a feasibility study, China reportedly is all set to begin construction on the 435-km Lhasa-Nyingchi railway line. Being located right above Arunachal Pradesh and the closest point to the Indian border, Nyingchi is of immense strategic significance from an Indian standpoint. Besides, connectivity in the form of fibre optic communication is already in place with almost 1,100 km of Optical Fibre Cable (OFC) having been laid out, connecting Lhasa with Nyingchi and Qamdo counties in east TAR.

## 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and Policy Direction on Rail Networks

The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plans have been the result of the implementation of theories and policies of the Chinese Communist Party's macroeconomic regulation, combining the socialist mechanism to the market in terms of resource allocation. More specifically, the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan has been formulated as per Deng Xiaoping's theory of "*reforms and opening up*". The 12<sup>th</sup> Plan mandates significant investments in what are being termed as "new strategic industries". Public transportation is one among these and includes construction of 35,000 km of high-speed rail, and connecting every city with more than 500,000 residents. While optimisation of the investment structure is being sought, the development of steel for express railways and urban rail traffic equipment is a key focus areas. The directive of the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan vis-à-vis the transportation system seeks completion of the national express railway and expressway networks, to create an integrated traffic and transport system featuring connected network facilities, and advanced and applicable technologies

and equipment. This would directly impact upon building urban rail traffic network systems in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In addition, it would entail completion of the main urban rail traffic frameworks in Tianjin, Chongqing, Shenyang, Changchun, Wuhan, Xi'an, Hangzhou, Fuzhou, Nanchang and Kunming, and planning rail traffic backbone lines in Hefei, Guiyang, Shijiazhuang, Taiyuan, Jinan and Urumqi.

Gaining prominence is improvement in the inter-regional traffic networks. The 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan is working towards accelerating construction of special passenger railway lines, inter-regional trunk lines and coal transport channels. The railways have been accorded priority in traffic construction. This includes construction of four longitudinal as well as four transverse passenger transport special lines, inter-city rail traffic trunk lines in city groups, the second double line of the Lan-Xin Railway and inter-regional trunk lines such as the Zhengzhou-Chongqing line. The 12<sup>th</sup> Plan seeks to complete an expressway railway network with an operating mileage of 45,000 km, and construct coal transport lines from central and south Shanxi, and western Mongolia to central China. Moreover, a feasibility study of constructing the Qiongzhou Strait sea-crossing project and the Sichuan-Tibet Railway is also being undertaken.

The Chinese Ministry of Railways states that the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan will witness accelerated railway construction with nearly 30,000 km of lines being put in production, while the overall nationwide railway operational mileage is expected to touch 120,000 km. Railway investments are likely to total Yuan 2.8 trillion and in comparison to the previous 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, the new lines put into operation have increased by 87.5 percent, while investments grew by 41.1 percent. By 2015, as the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan draws to a close, the length of track on the high-speed railway network will reach 45,000 km, and total

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track of railway lines in western China alone will reach 50,000 km. Presently, China has 91,000 km of railway network, according former Chinese Railway Minister to Sheng Guangzu.

Besides, in 2010, China announced plans for the construction of two new railway lines in western China. The first is a 401-km passenger expressway route linking Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province, and Baoji, a major city in Shaanxi province. The second is a 463 km line linking Lanzhou with Chengdu, the capital city of southwestern China's Sichuan province.

This line, according to China's National Development and Reform Commission, shall pass through Jiuzhaigou, a high-altitude valley comprising lakes and waterfalls near the Sichuan-Gansu border. While the Lanzhou-Baoji route would take 1.5 hours compared to the current 7 hours, the Lanzhou to Chengdu train ride will be covered in 4 hours, compared to 21 hours that it takes at present. Slated for completion by 2016-17, these lines will be instrumental in connecting northwest China with the much more developed

eastern China by means of an existing railway between Lanzhou and Xuzhou, which is an industrial city in Jiangsu province.

Given that the TAR constitutes nearly one-fourth of China's landmass, its security implies securing China's western frontier. By ensuring that extensive logistical demands and capabilities in the region are met, the Chinese military is guaranteeing that military operations at and above the campaign level can be undertaken while rapid induction of integrated forces takes place simultaneously. Given the phenomenal investments in railway construction and connectivity, the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan could well go down in history as a watershed phase as far as modernising China, more specifically, western China is concerned. It is an extensive statement of the Chinese government's strategic policy priorities. More importantly, the western China rail lines expectedly shall project Tibet as a major strategic and trade hub between China and South Asia, which tends to serve China's overall calibration in South Asia, the most vital objective of which is to keep India's geo-strategic rise in check. It will provide China the strategic space wherein Beijing could manoeuvre the Himalayan region to suit the design of its overall South Asian strategy.



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