



Institute for Security &  
Development Policy

# Mapping China's Himalayan Hustle

Revisionism Resistance  
Must be the Order of the Region

Edited by **Jagannath Panda**

Stockholm Paper  
November 2024



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# Abbreviations

AAGC	Asia Africa Growth Corridor
AD	Air Defense
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
AEF	Act East Forum
AEP	Act East Policy
AFET	Foreign Affairs Committee
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BAC	Buddhist Association of China
BBIN	Bhutan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal
BCIM	Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar
BLA	Balochistan Liberation Army
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
C4ISR	Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CPN-UML	Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist Leninist
CTA	Central Tibetan Administration
DF	Dongfeng
ECM	Electronic Counter-Measures
ECS	East China Sea
EP	European Parliament
ETIM	East Turkestan Islamic Movement

FOB	Forward Operating Base
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPS	Global Positioning System
GSI	Global Security Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
HAS	Hub-and-spokes alliance system
H-I-P	Himalayan-Indo-Pacific
ICWA	Indian Council of World Affairs
IMTRAT	Indian Military Training Team
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LAC	Line of Actual Control
LDC	Least Developed Country
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NC	Nepali Congress
NCP	Nepal Communist Party
NER	North-East region
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSS	National Security Strategy
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
PIS	Pacific Island States
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PLAGF	People's Liberation Army Ground Force
PoK	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir
PRC	People's Republic of China
QSD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RBA	Royal Bhutan Army
RBG	Royal Bodyguard of Bhutan

RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAARC	South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SCS	South China Sea
SFF	Special Frontier Force
SIGINT	Signal-based Intelligence
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SSF	Strategic Support Force
TAP	Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
TAR	Tibet Autonomous Region
TCHRD	Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy
TGiE	Tibetan government-in-exile
THMCN	Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network
TIV	Trend-Indicator Value
TMD	Tibet Military District
UAS	Unmanned Autonomous Systems
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UPI	United Payments Interface
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
US	United States
USCIRF	US Commission on International Religious Freedom
XMD	Xinjiang Military District



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# Executive Summary

## Himalaya in Today's Strategic Space

- The Himalayas have a critical role in regional stability and security. A liberal rules-based order in this region is essential for the overall stability of the Indo-Pacific, as tensions and militarization in the Himalayas can have far-reaching implications for maritime and territorial disputes across the region.
- China's militarization and exploitation of the Himalayan region started way back in the 2000s via its "Western Development Strategy." Policies like the "Go west" utilized the Chinese government's own funds, as well as foreign investment and development assistance. China aimed to develop both coastal and inland areas to offset the lack of economic reforms-led growth in the western provinces, including Tibet and Xinjiang, compared to the high-quality development in the eastern zones and the southern coast.
- However, the main purpose has been to control resources and solidify the Chinese ruling regime's influence through infrastructure development, territorial claims, and a securitization approach that undermines human rights and ecological integrity.
- The Himalayas serve as a crucial buffer zone for China, offering control over vital water sources like the Brahmaputra and Mekong rivers. This makes the region strategically important for China's national security and resource management, particularly as it navigates tensions with neighboring countries.
- China's annexation of East Turkistan (rebranded as Xinjiang) in 1949 and Tibet in 1950 were key to securing control over vital resources, including Tibet's water reserves, and establishing a strategic buffer zone against India. Notably, China's western regions—Xinjiang and Tibet—are culturally, linguistically, and religiously distinct from the rest of China.
- Through infrastructure projects like the China National Highway 219 in Aksai Chin and the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Agreement over the Shaksgam Valley, China solidified control over disputed territories, strengthening its military and geopolitical foothold in the region.
- Moreover, diplomatically, politically, and economically, China has already exponentially leapfrogged ahead of other regional and global giants. Yet, thus far, China has been lagging in building an effective Asian security order. China's recent launch of the three world order-building projects, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) have raised questions about their potential as a solution for a Sinocentric Asian security order.
- China's growing influence in the Himalayas through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has strategic implications for India. China's infrastructure and military presence complicate regional dynamics, and addressing these tensions requires increased diplomatic engagement and cooperative resource management.
- The deepening rivalry between China and India, highlighted by the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, has escalated military buildup and infrastructure development on both sides. This intensification has raised fears of potential miscalculations and conflicts, adding to regional instability.
- The India-China border conflict stems from colonial-era borders and differing national visions post India's independence. Despite early diplomatic cooperation, tensions escalated after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama in 1959. This triggered border clashes after a few failed diplomatic talks to settle a mutually agreed international border, with the 1962 Sino-Indian war marking a critical point in their deteriorating relationship. In October 1962, China launched

a calculated assault against India's border positions by surprise and they were overwhelmed by the PLA, though after a month's campaign and being in a strong position to push further into India, Chinese troops were withdrawn. But the military adventurism by China not only broke trust but also severely set back the India-China relationship, which has never fully recovered.

- China uses border tensions to destabilize India, keeping it militarily preoccupied in the Himalayas while leveraging its superior infrastructure and military advancements. This strategy allows China to limit India's regional influence and prevent it from challenging China's dominance in the Indo-Pacific region.
- India should continue its strategic partnerships, particularly with the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia, and India), to enhance its military capabilities and counterbalance China. With better economic growth prospects and support from allies, India may gain leverage to neutralize border tensions and secure a more stable regional power balance.
- In this context, Japan is working toward the realization of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Japan has engaged with allies and like-minded countries in the region on bilateral basis as well as multilateral formats such as the Quad. While these engagements are not explicitly targeted to any specific country, how to grapple with China is certainly part of Japan's strategic calculations. China's rapid and robust military buildup and more assertive attitude beyond its borders are of serious concerns for Japan as their eastern neighbor's activities directly affects its security. Yet maritime challenges are Japan's immediate concerns. But over time, Japan is becoming equally more alert about China military activities in the Himalayan region, too, including in Tibet. Japan and India are also expected to widen and deepen their discussion and include the security of the Himalayas in the future.
- The U.S. should counter China's Himalayan strategy by exposing human rights abuses, deepening alliances in the Indo-Pacific, applying targeted sanctions, enhancing its military presence to deter further Chinese expansionism, and leading diplomatic efforts to recognize the historical and cultural significance of Tibet and East Turkistan, and wage a vigorous campaign of information warfare to counter Chinese disinformation.
- Increased global awareness and action is required regarding China's policies in the Himalayas, encouraging democratic nations to recognize the broader implications of Chinese expansionism and to foster a comprehensive response that includes addressing human rights violations and geopolitical strategies.
- At the same time, the Himalayas ("Roof of the World") will likely remain a flashpoint for geopolitical competition. The strategic rivalry between China and India, coupled with the broader geopolitical contestations involving other significant powers, underscores the complexity of the Himalayan region's geopolitics and the challenges it poses for policymakers in the years to come. Unless China puts in more effort to discuss and seek solutions that foster an order that is less based on infrastructural and military prowess and more on understanding, resolving, compromise, and cooperation, including through cooperative mechanisms or bilateral agreements that better develop the management of water resources and lessen the concerns of both itself and its neighbors, China's rhetoric of shared future for mankind will not carry much significance.

### **Himalaya in China's Communist Vision**

- China's focus on the Himalayas is primarily security-driven, especially concerning Tibet and Xinjiang. Xi Jinping's policy prioritizes military control and infrastructure development to prevent separatism and strengthen influence, with the use of economic leverage and repressive measures.
- China uses the BRI to expand its influence in the region, particularly through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, success is mixed, as countries like

Nepal remain hesitant due to concerns over debt and sovereignty, even as China seeks to secure resources and military advantage.

- To counter China's influence, the European Union (EU), the U.S., and India must offer neutral, credible alternatives to the BRI, focusing on infrastructure projects without political strings. The U.S. Congress and Indian think tanks could raise awareness and build partnerships to highlight China's activities in the Himalayas and promote regional cooperation.
- The evolving dynamics of China's relationships with South Asian nations reveal complex challenges, including internal frictions within the China-Pakistan alliance, India's expanding influence in the region, and the strategic triangle between China, India, and the United States. China's South Asia policy is secondary to its broader global strategy, but Beijing remains committed to advancing its geopolitical, economic, and security interests, using a mix of soft and hard power tools.
- China's governance over Tibet, framed as "liberation" by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), reflects a strategic necessity to maintain regional dominance over its Himalayan borders. This control is maintained through extensive propaganda promoting national unity and ethnic harmony, alongside repressive measures that suppress Tibetan culture and religious practices. The narrative constructed by Beijing aims to foster loyalty among Tibetans while preventing any resurgence of separatist sentiments, thus reinforcing China's geopolitical standing against its regional rival, India.
- One of Beijing's key propaganda strategies involves discrediting the Dalai Lama and undermining his role as a spiritual and political leader for Tibetans. The CCP portrays him as a symbol of feudalism and unrest while positioning itself as a force for Tibet's progress and stability. China has also attempted to control the narrative of the Dalai Lama's succession, asserting its authority to appoint the next spiritual leader, which is seen as a way to solidify its control over

Tibet and counter international support for the Tibetan cause.

- China's assertive policies in Tibet may compel India to leverage its relationship with Tibetan dissenters to counterbalance Beijing's influence. As regional rivalries intensify, Tibet remains a flashpoint that could exacerbate tensions between the two powers, with broader implications for security and stability across the Himalayan region.
- Beijing's use of propaganda and control over Tibet's water resources also have implications for India, as it shares borders with the Tibet Autonomous Region.

### Sinicization of Tibet

- Tibet holds immense value for Beijing in terms of national security, natural resources, and food security. The region's water resources, critical to billions in Asia, and its proximity to rival India intensify China's control. Challenges from climate change, resource dependency, and regional instability compound these security concerns, making Tibet a high-stakes geopolitical issue.
- China's longstanding repression in Tibet since its occupation in 1950 has been documented and includes severe human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and enforced disappearances. This repression has extended globally through transnational tactics aimed at silencing Tibetan diaspora and leveraging international mechanisms to shield Beijing's actions.
- The CCP has ramped up its efforts to assimilate Tibet into the broader narrative of Chinese identity, especially under Xi Jinping. This includes imposing Mandarin curricula in Tibetan boarding schools and increasing policies to erase Tibetan culture. Simultaneously, Beijing has escalated its propaganda campaign to shape the global discourse on Tibet, focusing on highlighting the socio-economic progress in the region while downplaying controversial policies such as the forced assimilation of Tibetan children and cultural suppression.
- China has actively sought to legitimize its

policies in Tibet by leveraging foreign voices through carefully curated forums, inviting diplomats, journalists, and influencers to visit Tibet and endorse its narrative. These efforts aim to demonstrate global acceptance of China's policies and neutralize criticism of its human rights record. Beijing has also employed strategies like the adoption of the term "Xizang" over "Tibet" to diminish the region's distinct cultural and political identity in the international arena.

- China's manipulation of international human rights norms, especially through UN mechanisms and bilateral relations, enables it to evade accountability. By cultivating alliances, particularly in Africa and Central Asia, Beijing diffuses international pressure, erodes human rights norms, and promotes an alternative global governance model. The West must counter this through more equitable international partnerships to preserve the integrity of human rights standards.
- Further, China's use of mechanisms and institutions like the GSI not only shore up anxieties over separatism and political instability in Tibet and farther to its western frontier, but they provide aid and cover to states with similar internal security problems.

### **Between PLA's Muscle and China's Hustle**

- The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is actively employed in an assertive Chinese strategy aimed at consolidating territorial claims in the Himalayan region. This involves maintaining ongoing military tensions, countering Indian actions, and ensuring that Chinese claims remain alive, while framing China as a stabilizing force in the region.
- The PLA has significantly invested in building dual-use infrastructure, such as roads, airports, and other facilities, in the Tibetan region. This development enhances the PLA's military capabilities and logistical support, providing a strategic advantage over Indian forces while also contributing to economic and social development in Tibet.
- As China enhances its military presence and infrastructure in the region, concerns arise regarding the potential for instability and escalating tensions along the Sino-Indian border. The PLA's rapid development and strategic positioning indicate a growing advantage over India, with implications for regional security dynamics and a shift in the balance of power in the Himalayas. China is seeking to influence the region through both military and civil-military tactics, such as constructing "dual-use" villages.
- China's military and technological capabilities, particularly in the Himalayan region, significantly outmatch India's. The PLA has invested in modern military infrastructure, advanced air and cyber capabilities, and strategic support forces, posing a formidable challenge to India, whose forces rely on older, largely imported equipment.
- The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) also plays a crucial role in China's strategy in the Himalayas. As China seeks to secure its borders and assert its influence in South Asia, PLAAF's contributions have become increasingly significant. PLAAF supports China's broader objectives in the Himalayas through its airpower, infrastructure development, missile defense, and surveillance capabilities.
- The PLA is also rapidly advancing toward "intelligence of war," integrating artificial intelligence (AI), autonomous systems, and advanced technologies for operations in harsh environments like the Himalayas, aiming to gain a tactical advantage over India.
- India's ability to counter China's growing military-technological edge is under threat. Without significant investment in counter-autonomous systems and AI, India risks losing strategic influence and facing more aggressive provocations from Beijing in the region.
- The Chinese strategy is to keep India occupied with countless problems in the Himalayas while it consolidates its military power to the point where India would be left with no choice but to stay on the defensive even if a necessity to join other nations in an offensive against China in the future

arises. Moreover, the traditional Western way of looking at strategy will not help in understanding China's Himalayan gambit.

### Nations and Neighbors in the Himalayas

- China has continued to betray India's trust by seemingly reaching out for "win-win" cooperation and the spirit of neighborliness to create a "community of shared future," without intending to resolve the border question – the root cause of such mistrust. The Himalayan incursions (or transgressions); repeated clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC); massive border infrastructure build-up; establishment of military-civil village settlements along the border; and lawfare such as redrawing of maps or enacting controversial laws, among other such actions, convey the true story of China's empty "neighborhood diplomacy" rhetoric, including China's so-called adherence to the principles of "Panchsheel."
- The relationship between Pakistan and China, often referred to as an "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership," is pivotal to China's Himalayan strategy. This partnership has endured significant geopolitical changes over 73 years, with both nations emphasizing mutual trust and support, particularly in counterbalancing India's influence in the region.
- China significantly enhances Pakistan's military capabilities through arms transfers, advanced defense technology, and joint military exercises, thereby reinforcing Pakistan's position against India. With China providing around 75 percent of Pakistan's imported arms in recent years, the partnership not only bolsters Pakistan's conventional military power but also strengthens its nuclear deterrent.
- The CPEC serves as a strategic economic initiative, facilitating vital infrastructure development that connects Xinjiang to Gwadar, enhancing both countries' economic interests while simultaneously challenging India's sovereignty claims over contested territories. However, the CPEC has burdened Pakistan with unsustainable debt, contributing to growing financial dependence on China. Additionally, the CPEC projects have been subject to planning delays and have triggered security challenges, with insurgents (Baloch, Pakistani Taliban, Islamic State-Khorasan and various non-state actors) attacking infrastructure and Chinese personnel.
- In recent years, China has tried to diplomatically isolate India by engaging directly with Bhutan through the 2021 memorandum of understanding (MoU) and proposing closer bilateral ties. However, despite diplomatic efforts, China continues to build military infrastructure and exert pressure in disputed regions, notably through its new land border law and village settlements near Bhutan's borders. These actions signal China's intent to gradually alter the status quo and expand its influence in the region.
- The boundary dispute between China and Bhutan, centered on the strategic Doklam tri-junction (India-Bhutan-China), is vital due to its access to India's Siliguri Corridor. This area has witnessed tensions, such as the 2017 Doklam standoff, which highlighted India's support for Bhutan. Bhutan's boundary negotiations with China, ongoing since the 1980s, continue to be influenced by Indian security concerns.
- India remains Bhutan's key security partner, with strong economic ties and military cooperation, such as the Indian Military Training Team (IMTRAT). While China seeks to weaken India's influence by presenting itself as an economic partner, India continues to assert its role, offering Bhutan development aid and supporting its security concerns. Any boundary resolution with China will need to account for India's strategic interests, particularly in safeguarding the Siliguri Corridor.
- In Nepal, the political return of "pro-China" leader K.P. Sharma Oli amid China's growing regional influence highlights the potential for intensified competition with India in the Himalayan region. Yet despite China's rising economic and political clout, Nepal's non-alignment strategy, concerns about Chinese debt-trap diplomacy, and strategic hesitations suggest that China's dominance in Nepal is far from assured.

- India's deep-rooted ties with Nepal—spanning trade, infrastructure, cultural linkages, and regional security—remain significant. India's enhanced focus on its Neighborhood First policy, combined with new economic agreements like power trade deals, will likely ensure that India retains considerable sway in Nepal to counter Chinese influence.
- Nepal's geopolitical importance in the Indo-Pacific strategic competition underscores the need for India to collaborate with Western allies such as the EU, the U.S., and Japan. Coordinated efforts focusing on economic development, climate resilience, and countering Chinese hydro-hegemony could reinforce India's strategic position in the Himalayan region.
- Vis-à-vis Bangladesh, China has strengthened its ties through major infrastructure projects under the BRI, elevating their partnership to a “comprehensive strategic cooperative” level. Key initiatives include deep-sea ports and metro rail projects, positioning China as a critical partner in Bangladesh's development. However, Bangladesh faces potential strategic risks, including negotiating power, by increasing its financial and developmental dependence on Beijing.
- China's control over upstream water sources, like the Brahmaputra River, raises concerns for downstream countries like Bangladesh and India. China's hydroelectric projects may alter water flows, exacerbating environmental and agricultural challenges in Bangladesh, while using water as leverage in regional power plays, especially in relation to India.
- Bangladesh is navigating a complex geopolitical landscape, balancing engagement with China for economic growth while managing traditional ties with India and the West. The new Bangladeshi leadership seeks to safeguard its sovereignty and foster regional cooperation, but it must avoid the pitfalls of “debt-trap” diplomacy and manage tensions over water and security concerns.
- Countries like Nepal and Bangladesh are, however, approaching the BRI with caution, limiting their engagement due to concerns about unsustainable financial debts and project viability. They would be circumspect about China's high-interest loans that might lead to a Pakistan-like scenario, where the CPEC has triggered financial and security risks.
- Afghanistan, too, is on Beijing's radar. China is deepening ties with the Taliban, recognizing their envoy, and positioning Afghanistan as a strategic hub for the BRI. China's primary goals are security—preventing extremism from spilling over into Xinjiang—and economic gains through Afghanistan's untapped resources.
- While China thus far has not granted the Taliban full diplomatic recognition largely to avoid global backlash, China may not be averse to facilitating Afghanistan's access to China-led frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member in the future. It would serve China's long game to challenge the U.S.-led order while limiting India and the West's options in Afghanistan.
- Importantly, a normalization of the Taliban's “egregious systems of oppression” must not be allowed. Certainly, India should not allow for the Taliban's inclusion in coveted non-Western forums like BRICS or SCO, not before the political climate improves in Kabul. The regional powers must balance their immediate interests with long-term goals, navigating the intricate web of alliances and rivalries that define the current geopolitical context.
- India should play a crucial role in raising awareness of the risks associated with China's development model, advocating for transparency and sustainability. By partnering with countries like Japan, the EU, and the U.S., India must consolidate on an alternative development strategy to reduce China's influence in South Asia.

### **Resistance and Collaboration**

- Over the decades, China's control over the Tibetan Plateau, a major source of transboundary rivers like the Brahmaputra, Indus, and Mekong



crucial for Asia's water supply, has made Beijing a "hydro-hegemon" in South and Southeast Asia. China has developed the largest number of dams in the world and is now using hydropower as its main source of renewable energy. While addressing China's internal water and energy needs, its extensive infrastructure projects including dam-building and mining have triggered environmental degradation and displacement of local communities, as well as raised concerns among lower riparian countries like India and Bangladesh about potential misuse of water resources. Countries in South and Southeast Asia are also concerned that Beijing might play its powerful "water card" against them in the future.

- The Dalai Lama has been a consistent advocate for the global implications of Tibet's environmental challenges, urging international solidarity to tackle ecological neglect. His message is increasingly relevant as China accelerates exploitation in the region, using Tibetan resources as leverage in its broader geopolitical ambitions.
- The international community, particularly India, the West, and other Indo-Pacific powers, must increase efforts to address the Tibetan climate crisis. Collaborative scientific initiatives, such as satellite monitoring and regional climate adaptation strategies, are essential to mitigate the impact of China's eco-hegemony and promote sustainable management of the Himalayan ecosystem.
- India's strategic narrative should integrate ecological vulnerabilities, particularly in Tibet, as part of its balancing act against China. By emphasizing ecological interdependence and collaborating with democracies like Taiwan – which faces the prospect of forced reunification with China amid increased Chinese economic and military coercion – and partner states in Southeast Asia, India can strengthen its diplomatic position and help in addressing challenges linked to China's aggressive actions.
- The geopolitics of China's Himalayan strategy and India's Indo-Pacific strategy, including the Act East Policy, are converging into a singular "Himalayan-Indo-Pacific Theatre," where the policies of one will inevitably impact and have consequences for the other. Given this emergent framework, the Tibetan plateau can emerge as a central node for strategic balancing, having ramifications for key regional and systemic forces.
- India and Japan have deepened their strategic partnership to address China's growing influence, particularly in the sensitive Himalayan region. Their collaboration includes infrastructure development in India's North-East Region and connectivity projects extending to and the broader the Indo-Pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia. While Japan's primary concerns focus on maritime disputes, it is also alert to China's military activities along its borders, including the Himalayas. Japan's engagements with India, Nepal, and Bhutan, and its interest in developing industrial value chains in Northeast India, reflect a broader strategic awareness of this region. Japan's sustainable development model offers an alternative to the BRI, reinforcing Indo-Japanese ties in the Indo-Pacific security framework.
- The EU under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has adopted a firm stance against China's assertive foreign policy and human rights violations, particularly in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. The EU has also been alarmed by China's strategic alignment with Russia and its aggressive behavior in the Indo-Pacific and trans-Himalayan regions, driving a deeper reassessment of EU-China relations.
- Concurrently, the EU is also reconfiguring its approach to regional partners and states, who for long have felt neglected by the EU's excessive focus on China. There is also heightened awareness in Brussels of the urgency to better analyze both China's intentions and the regional states' response to China's actions in the trans-Himalayan region, including in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan or Mongolia.
- In this context, the EU views India as a crucial partner in its Indo-Pacific strategy, with security and defense cooperation gaining prominence.

Since 2022, the EU has sought to deepen ties with India as a counterbalance to China, emphasizing the importance of regional stability, military collaboration, and development in South Asia, especially in response to the BRI and its influence in the trans-Himalayan region.

- While EU member-states converge on the need to recalibrate ties with China and strengthen partnerships with like-minded countries, such as India, articulating a coherent, common EU-level strategy remains a challenge. The European Parliament plays a key role in driving critical narratives on China's regional posturing, human rights abuses, and its broader global ambitions, yet the success of this geopolitical shift hinges on the collective political will of member-states.
- The EU could support India and smaller South Asian states in their resort to international legal arguments and institutions to pressure Beijing to abide by global norms and conventions. New Delhi and other South Asian states could make a legal case against Chinese upstream river damming and its negative consequences for the region. Partners, like the EU with its significant legal expertise, can support this narrative by placing pressure on China to enact downstream risk-mitigation efforts required by international law.
- The Five Eyes nations (U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia, and New Zealand) have significant political, economic, and cultural interests, including national security, economic prosperity, and respect for international law and human rights, in the Indo-Pacific, and a certain complementarity with India. India's growing role as a global power and a strategic partner is seen as crucial for counterbalancing China's increasing assertiveness in the region, particularly in light of its territorial claims and military expansion in both the Himalayas and the South China Sea.
- China employs hybrid warfare tactics in the Himalayas, similar to its actions in the South China Sea, blurring the lines between war and peace. This includes aggressive territorial claims, border incursions, and the establishment of dual-use infrastructure that threatens the sovereignty of neighboring countries, especially India. The Five Eyes nations are increasingly challenged by China's military build-up and its capacity to exert influence through coercive measures that fall below the threshold of conventional warfare.
- The activities of the PLA in the Himalayas pose a direct threat to regional stability and the interests of the Five Eyes. As China expands its military presence and asserts its territorial claims, the likelihood of conflict increases, raising concerns about the potential for nuclear confrontation. The Five Eyes must navigate their relationships with India and other regional powers carefully to bolster security and maintain the liberal democratic world order in the face of China's growing ambitions.
- The Himalayas are pivotal for not just South Asia but also Eurasia, thus serving as one of the fulcrums that can decisively tip the global distribution of power. Eurasia, the "supercontinent" that comprises Europe, the Middle East, as well as South and East Asia, holds an outsized importance in global distributions of power due to its demographic size, resources, and political power.
- China's ambitions to dominate the Himalayas through infrastructure projects, military presence, and strategic alliances is rooted in its intent to become a Eurasian hegemon, and in turn to successfully contest for global supremacy. This also threatens to reshape regional stability and undermine India's influence.
- In response to China's assertiveness, India is strengthening alliances with like-minded "Rimland" states such as Japan, the EU, and the U.S. through initiatives like the Quad. This collective effort aims to counterbalance China's hegemonic ambitions in Eurasia, reflecting the enduring relevance of geopolitical theories that emphasize the importance of coordinated resistance from Rimland states to thwart potential Eurasian Heartland control.



Photo credit: Nomita Drall

# Introduction



# China's Securitization of the Himalayas: The Three-Initiative Way

Jagannath Panda

In recent years, the China-U.S. rivalry has transcended sectors – from economy and technology to diplomacy and clout in global institutions – and thus given rise to concerns about the emergence of a new Cold War. The evolving new Cold War perceptions are nowhere more prominent than in the Indo-Pacific – a land of growing economic opportunities amid escalating regional flashpoints and the West's abiding tensions with authoritarian regimes like Iran, Russia, and North Korea. The region, as the geopolitical epicenter, unfortunately has also been experiencing the side-effects of the war in its own vicinity (e.g., Hamas-Israel war in West Asia) but other regions (e.g., the Ukraine war and the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict), too.

Besides, core Indo-Pacific conflicts zones in the Korean Peninsula, South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait tensions have in recent years dominated the international headlines. For example, then U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 trip to Asia with the controversial stopover in Taiwan raised the temperatures in this fragile landscape several notches.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, China's military aggression in the South China Sea has caused not only caused the Southeast Asian claimant states like

the Philippines to strengthen security measures but also forced other Indo-Pacific states like the U.S. and the European Union (EU) to officially call out China's misbehaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, even as China's intimidation tactics in these maritime regions are being objected to by the international community, China feels confident and emboldened enough to replicate such strategies in the Himalayas, too.

Yet one subregion that often gets sidelined in these debates is the Himalayas, save for some attention drawn by the India-China border tussles, especially post the 2017 Doklam conflict (which also thrust Bhutan into global public eyes as a major party aggrieved by China for years) and the 2020 Galwan conflict, which truly tested the Himalayan stability. Tibetan affairs get an occasional mention, largely courtesy the Dalai Lama's international following, but a concerted attempt to bring to the fore the issues faced by the Tibetans due to Chinese repression has been majorly lacking.

One of the main aspects of China's coercion tactics is its policymaking including the use of "lawfare." The term "lawfare" here refers to China's "use of legalized international [and

domestic] institutions to achieve strategic ends.”<sup>3</sup> For example, China’s unilateral redrawing of maps in its neighborhood, be it in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh or of the 10-dash line in the South China Sea is an attempt to change and shape the narratives around territorial sovereignty. Another potent example is China’s passing of the Maritime Law and the China Coast Guard Law, as well as the Land Borders/Boundary Law in 2021. China’s rejection of the 2016 Philippines-China arbitration is another.<sup>4</sup> This tactic is part the widely discussed “three warfares” – the other two are “public opinion warfare” and “psychological warfare.”<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally, associated with the PLA’s actions, they are all part of China’s expanding political warfare, with which the Chinese military is closely interlinked.<sup>6</sup> Since the Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated the modernization of the military and simultaneously called on the PLA to participate more in foreign policy goals of the ruling regime, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), such an “integrated” approach has been the order of the day.<sup>7</sup> Further, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Xi’s trillion-dollar mega-infrastructure plan, as a political and military tool to expand China’s clout in the widespread regions, including Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin American, especially among the Global South countries, is another example.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this context that the rhetoric of the three recently released initiatives by Xi Jinping, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) must be viewed. Of course, the larger goal is

the upending of the US-led existing rules-based global liberal order.<sup>9</sup> However, China’s regional territorial adventurism (the Himalayas, Tibet, South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Taiwan Strait) and the blatant regard for international law and its rulings (e.g., China’s rejection of the 2016 Tribunal Award that favored the Philippines) are certainly a vital aspect of this.

This introductory chapter first looks into the three initiatives, particularly the GSI, and its potential impact on the Himalayas. Then it explores China’s activities in the Tibetan Plateau, including infrastructure onslaught, over-damming, exploitation of minerals, and greed for essential resources like water, as well as the repression of the Tibetan people and culture in brief. It also looks at China’s South Asian outreach, particularly in Nepal and Bhutan and the dangers for India. It argues that pooling resources among the “like-minded” Indo-Pacific partners and increasing ways to improve media attention on the impact of Chinese policies/actions in the Himalayas is the only effective way out. Finally, it briefly outlines the structure of this special paper.

### **Contextualizing China’s Recent Spate of Three Securitized Initiatives**

As China has amassed unprecedented economic, diplomatic, and multilateral clout, it has redirected its efforts toward controlling global governance. The fruits of such labor were palpably visible when China brokered a “peace deal” in early 2023 between longtime West Asian rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia by exploiting its leverages with its two partners.<sup>10</sup> That the deal was announced on the day Xi

secured his historic third term as Chinese president bears a mention at a time when China's role in exacerbating the impact of the COVID pandemic—be it in the controversial origins or the breaking of the China-dependent supply chains—and China's growing support of Russia were being heavily criticized.

To be sure, this global outreach started soon after Xi took office more than a decade ago with his BRI, which was intended to not just increase China's economic ties but also diplomatic and strategic goals—from promises of building world-class infrastructure projects to acquiring political stakes in the beneficiary countries, particularly in the Global South.<sup>11</sup> For example, by leasing or building naval bases or ports in Sri Lanka (e.g., increased naval presence at the Hambantota port), China has combined its economic, diplomatic, and military goals.<sup>12</sup> In the Himalayan region, too, the BRI's footprint in Pakistan or Nepal has had implications for China's regional dominance. In Pakistan, China's flagship USD 62 billion investment China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aims to grant China strategic access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea.<sup>13</sup> But the BRI has increasingly battled challenges, from increased awareness among beneficiary countries toward potential debt traps to corruption allegations.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although the BRI is still a major economic-political tool for China's global aims, the need for an overhaul and increase in impetus with other such schemes with a much grander scope and aims in tandem was on the horizon for some time.

It is in this context that Xi's latest develop-

mental, security and civilizational initiatives that aims to “build a community of shared future” need to be seen.<sup>15</sup> Notably, when Xi introduced his first initiative, the GDI, in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021, it was highlighted as a project to create a “new stage of balanced, coordinated and inclusive growth” amidst the challenges of a raging pandemic.<sup>16</sup> However, the idea was to launch a developmental initiative at an international multilateral forum to give legitimacy to China's hegemonic aims of building a multipolar world order with Chinese characteristics.

The launches in quick succession of the GSI (2022) and GCI (2023) only intensified the debates that China was securitizing its Sino-centric world building efforts.<sup>17</sup> They have also become policymaking guides, “strategic guidance,” by Xi Jinping to help realize his “China Dream” aspirations amid a fragile and dangerous global and regional security landscape.<sup>18</sup> There is a certain consensus particularly among Western commentators that such a “securitization” will seep into multiple levels of policymaking, in domestic, regional, and global domains.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, China will accelerate its efforts for “using these platforms to disseminate and gain legitimacy for its ideas,” particularly as its endeavors to create a regional security order mature.<sup>20</sup>

### **China's Tibet Takeover**

The impact of China's changing security lens has been felt the most in its restive provinces, particularly in Tibet and Xinjiang where China has over many decades brutally suppressed ethnic identities, languages, religions, and

cultures. Today considered an “inseparable” part of the PRC, China occupied Tibet in the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese authorities not only forced Tibet’s spiritual leader the Dalai Lama to flee into India in 1959, but have over the years ruthlessly dealt with the Tibetan separatist sentiment in Tibet or in even in neighboring states like Nepal where China’s influence is aplenty. As a result, hundreds of Tibetans have attempted self-immolations as a form of protest since 2009 against China’s continually increasing security measures.<sup>22</sup> As China increases surveillance and forced evictions and relocations, among other forms of exploitation including ecological, China’s GSI, GDI, and GCI will look to completely raze the ethnic communities.<sup>23</sup>

In this regard, China’s heavy investments into Tibetan Plateau have worsened the situation, with the Chinese military-led infrastructure development becoming ubiquitous. That the new initiatives, in the name of noble, but ultimately hollow, ideas like community of shared future will look to accelerate its onslaught of Tibetans is written on the wall. This is more so because since the BRI was launched, Xi has used enormous government funding to expand multimodal transport networks, primarily to help military logistics. As such airports and helipads are dual-use facilities. Besides, the construction of mega dams (projects on the sacred Yarlung Tsangpo and Mekong rivers) have not only made the Plateau—a vital part of the Third Pole—more vulnerable to the impact of the climate change, but also caused concern among neighbors (both South and Southeast Asia) about China’s plans for regional hydro-hegemony.<sup>24</sup> In

short, the talk of development is a cover for military aggression, which is set to increase with Xi’s aims for the Sino-centric world order vision.

Moreover, India is an important factor in the Tibetan issue, as not only shares an international border with Tibet but the Tibetan-government-in-exile is based out of the hilly Indian state of Himanchal Pradesh. Whether India will continue to play safe by not aggravating China (and its red line of the “one China” policy), or will India get aggressive in the face of newer rhetoric-based initiatives that aim to upend the existing order, only time will tell.

### **China’s South Asian (Himalayan) Infringements**

Naturally, as China’s rhetoric of security dominance has been updated (via the GSI, among others), China’s coercion using economic, lawfare, and military means has been par for the course, particularly in the Himalayan region. Be it the Land Borders Law that was passed in 2021, the release of new standard maps, the multiple conflicts with India at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), its advance of the BRI-led financial clout in Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, or intrusions into the Bhutanese territories in the recent past have all the makings of a regional hegemon. China’s strategic decision-making and accompanying pursuit of territories belies all talk of “good neighborly relations through dialogue and consultation,” or of “steering the human society toward the direction of common development, long-term stability and mutual learning among civilizations.”<sup>25</sup>



With India, China is not only engaged in military conflicts (Doklam, Galwan, and Tawang are the major ones in the recent years) along the border, but also undermining India's traditional influence in the Himalayas with ever-growing outreach to Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh (which is technically not a Himalayan state but a Bay of Bengal littoral, but China's over-damming of Tibetan waters particularly the Brahmaputra – among other such Himalayan pursuits – affects this region as a whole).<sup>26</sup>

With Bhutan, which does not share formal diplomatic ties with China, the latter's construction of roads and “new military storage bunkers” has come under scanner due to satellite imagery that have highlighted infrastructure building near the border.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Chinese military troops have been reported to be posted near certain remote Bhutanese territories. Amid a constant spree of territorial claims in Bhutan (e.g. the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary or in the Jakarlung Valley – the latter is expected to become Chinese territory as part of a potential China-Bhutan border deal), there are continuous speculations about China's “land grabs.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the renewed border negotiations between China and Bhutan have caused alarm in India due to the security ramifications of a Chinese upper hand in the area.<sup>29</sup>

In Nepal, whose domestic politics has been rather volatile for a number of years now, China's growing influence has not been only in infrastructure, digital, trade, and developmental investments but also politically.<sup>30</sup> It is common knowledge that China has looked to control

the factionalism among Nepalese left parties, even attempting to unify them – that did not last long.<sup>31</sup> Another important factor for China's interests in Nepal is the Tibetan issue. For years, China has tried to control Tibetans fleeing China via Nepal and Tibetan activities in Nepal by providing the Himalayan state with financial incentives.<sup>32</sup> More repression has followed, with the Nepalese forces aiding Chinese-led surveillance targeting Tibetan refugees in Nepal.<sup>33</sup>

India has been wary of these developments in China-Nepal ties, and of late rekindled its efforts to counter Chinese efforts by doubling down on its own projects (e.g., hydropower) and financial aid.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, the failure of China's much-anticipated BRI projects to take off in Nepal and lack of a positive outcome in Nepal's boundary dispute talks with China provide hope that the new GSI/GDI/GCI rhetoric will not hold much water for a geopolitically tense Nepal.<sup>35</sup>

Against such a scenario, it would be in India, West, and the other like-minded Indo-Pacific partners' best interests to pool in resources for creating a viable deterrence against China with the Himalayas as the focus.

### About the Stockholm Paper

This edited volume brings together papers to highlight the challenges and opportunities in mapping China's Himalayan hustle. It aims to advance key debates about the importance of this region to maintain a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and to defend the liberal international order. The special volume would also be a valuable contribution to the literature

on China's attempts to dominate the Himalayan region and its resources, and will generate new insights into how to integrate this strategically vital region into the Indo-Pacific construct.

Besides the Introduction, this volume has six sections. Section I focuses on the issues arising out of Himalayas as a strategic arena. It looks at China's revisionism in the Himalayas, in particular its neighborhood strategy. It also explores Japan's strategic outlook on China's Himalayan tactics, as well as the scope of India-U.S. cooperation in this Asian sub-region.

Section II focuses on the Himalayan factor within China's ideological framework including Xi's new security initiatives. Since Xi Jinping became paramount leader of the PRC in 2012, his policies have profound implications for the Himalayan region, which encompasses Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) within the PRC. While over the past few years, global attention has justifiably focused on China's repression of Uyghurs and other largely Muslim minorities, the Chinese Communist Party has also stepped up its policies of cultural assimilation in Tibet. Tibetan activism has been identified as one of the "five poisons" threatening the CCP rule, and the international relevance of the Tibet issue has presented a particular challenge to the propaganda apparatus. Xi has called for the Chinese propaganda apparatus to innovate in "concepts, content and methods", to better "tell the China story" to the world.<sup>36</sup> Beijing has published 19 white papers on Tibet since 1992, with a goal to present a government-sanctioned view of the developments in the region.

Section III examines China's cultural and religious oppression in Tibet and how China is suppressing Tibetan Buddhism. Given that most religions in China originated from abroad, Xi Jinping has scientifically defined the process by which these religions adapt and become supportive of socialism as 'sinicization.'<sup>37</sup> The CCP dream for Tibet is to create socialism with Chinese characteristics. Beijing's policies aim to control and reshape Tibetan Buddhism by promoting Chinese cultural assimilation and diminishing Tibetan religious practices as well as implementing the broader suppression of Tibetan identity. The chapters discuss how control over Tibet serves the CCP's goal to restore China's past imperial boundaries, a response to the Hundred Years of Humiliation and ongoing border disputes with India over contested territories. Without control over Tibet, the CCP fears that hostile external forces may have an opportunity to impinge on the CCP's China.

Section IV looks at the military angle to China's activities in the Himalayan region, including the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s intelligentization and techno-military strategies in the region. It examines how the PLA has been used in an increasingly assertive Chinese strategy to consolidate its claims in the Himalayan region and generally against India's interests. One chapter details the role of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in China's military buildup in the Himalayas, focusing on its actions to address the challenges of high-altitude operations. This section gives us an overview of China's broader military strategy in the region, including its missile capabilities and geopolitical objectives,

highlighting the implications for regional security and the ongoing tensions with India.

Section V explores China's activities in India's neighborhood. In particular, China's charm offensive in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan are discussed in the geopolitical context. The chapters look at the trajectory of relations and seek to analyze not only China's obvious outreach efforts but the extent of influence.

Section VI explores the imperative of international "like-minded" collaboration to counter China's Himalayan strategy, including the European perspective. Importantly, it examines the environmental and ecological dimension of China's hegemony over Tibet and its wider impact. Increased global awareness and action

is required regarding China's development policies in the Himalayas, encouraging democratic nations to recognize the broader implications of Chinese expansionism and to foster a comprehensive response that includes addressing human rights violations, environmental concerns and geopolitical strategies.

To add visual context for readers, special maps have been prepared on the Hindu Kush Himalayan region. These include river basins, major dams, mean annual temperature and total annual precipitation. One map depicts Buddhist places of worship across India, Nepal and China. Given the importance of connectivity in infrastructure development across the region, two maps on Asian highways and railways may aid readers in understanding the geographical spreads as well as gaps.

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## SECTION - I

# Himalaya in Today's Strategic Space

## Major River Basins of Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region



River Basins	Basin Area (Sq.Kms.)	Countries	Population (x 1000)	Population Density (Per Sq. Kms.)	Annual mean discharge m <sup>3</sup> /sec <sup>a</sup>	% of Glacier Melt in River Flow <sup>b</sup>	Water Availability (m <sup>3</sup> /person/year)
Amu Darya	5,34,739	Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	20,855	39	1,376 <sup>a</sup>	not available	2,081
Brahmaputra	6,51,335	China, India, Bhutan, Bangladesh	1,18,543	182	21,261 <sup>a</sup>	~ 12	5,656
Ganges	10,16,124	India, Nepal, China, Bangladesh	4,07,466	401	12,037 <sup>a</sup>	~ 9	932
Indus	10,81,718	China, India, Pakistan	1,78,483	165	5,533	up to 50	978
Irrawaddy	4,13,710	Myanmar	32,683	79	8,024	not available	7,742
Mekong	8,05,604	China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam	57,198	71	9,001 <sup>a</sup>	~ 7	4,963
Salween	2,71,914	China, Myanmar, Thailand	5,982	22	1,494	~ 9	7,876
Tarim	11,52,448	Kyrgyzstan, China	8,067	7	1,262	up to 50	4,933
Yangtze	17,22,193	China	3,68,549	214	28,811 <sup>a</sup>	~ 18	2,465
Yellow	9,44,970	China	1,47,415	156	1,438 <sup>a</sup>	~ 2	308
<b>Total</b>	<b>85,94,755</b>		<b>13,45,241</b>				

<sup>a</sup> The data were collected by the Global Runoff Data Centre (GRDC) from the following most downstream stations of the River Basins: Chatly (Amu Darya), Bahadurabad (Brahmaputra), Farakka (Ganges), Pakse (Mekong), Datang (Yangtze), Huayuankou (Yellow).

<sup>b</sup> Estimation of the meltwater contribution is difficult and varies in an upstream and downstream situation; approximates are given here. Source: IUCN et al 2003; Mi and Xie 2002; Chalise and Khanal 2001; Merz 2004; Tarar 1982; Kumar et al. 2007; Chen et al. 2007

This Map is prepared by Dr. Jagannath Panda, copyright: @jppjagannath1.

Map 1: Major River Basins of Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region



# A (Liberal) Himalayan Order is Integral to a Rules-Based Order in the Indo-Pacific

Jagannath Panda, Ryohei Kasai and Eerishika Pankaj

In June 2024, former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi minced no words in criticizing the Chinese government and President Xi Jinping for the persecution of Tibetans, including attempts to erase their culture.<sup>1</sup> Pelosi was part of a U.S. delegation that met with the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, India—where he has been living in exile since he was forced to flee Tibet in 1959 after an uprising against a decade-long repressive Chinese rule was brutally suppressed—and whom China considers a dangerous separatist, seeking to prevent all diplomatic contact with him.<sup>2</sup> But her acrimony went beyond empty rhetoric: Building on the U.S. Congress “Resolve Tibet Act” passed only days before her visit to Dharamshala, she heralded stronger U.S. support for the Himalayan region proclaimed by China as “Xizang.”<sup>3</sup> Her remarks have yet again brought to the forefront the fact that current Chinese militarization in Tibet remains a perennial concern not just for India, but for the U.S.—and its Indo-Pacific allies and partners.

For China, Tibet is one of the most decisive, however, not the only aspects of its growing Himalayan troubles. Most notably, China has a long-standing dispute with India, which has

kept getting more hostile with each passing year since Xi came into power—recall the 2017 Doklam stand-off; the defining 2020 Galwan Clash; and the 2022 Tawang skirmish, to name but a few prominent latest contentions along the LAC. Concurrently, China has been pursuing its “salami slicing tactics” strategy with the neighboring states, including the small land-locked Bhutan. Then there is the question of China’s increasingly unsustainable, “debt-trap” inducing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that has already cast a dark shadow on economically weaker Himalayan states like Nepal and Pakistan. Most importantly, China’s massive hydro-infrastructure constructions and upper-riparian-derived unilateral control of South Asian rivers that begin in Tibet have raised serious questions about the impact on Himalayan ecology and control of resources.<sup>4</sup>

Against such an overall bleak scenario, will the latest Pelosi visit engender greater geopolitical awareness and considered responses, beyond human rights, in the West about China’s tactics? Importantly, can the Himalayas as a whole be featured as a primary focus of the Indo-Pacific strategies, not just as a byline to specific conflicts be it vis-à-vis India or Tibet?

### Time to Talk about a Himalayan Liberal Rules-Based Order

Pelosi's meeting with the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE) and remarks evoke memories of her (controversial) 2022 visit to Taiwan, which intensified China's military maneuvers against the democratic island and precipitated the so-called Fourth Taiwan Crisis.<sup>5</sup> Not just Taiwan, but most countries in the Indo-Pacific, including South Korea—where President Yoon Suk-yeol opted not to meet the then U.S. House Speaker—worried about the repercussions on the region's already fractious ties.<sup>6</sup>

Yet that trip also brought unprecedented global attention to Taiwan, whose democratic credentials weighed heavy against China's autocratic, disruptive rule, and the surrounding region. Such a tactic, in turn, has proved consequential for globally publicizing the Indo-Pacific's maritime concerns, including the South China Sea disputes. The Philippines-China escalations that received widespread media attention, particularly after the 2017 Arbitral Tribunal backed the Philippines,<sup>7</sup> have in the last two years found a new level of international support.

For example, a bloc like the European Union (EU) that was for long neutral in its approach to such disputes has slowly started to align with the more stringent U.S. position by calling out China's "repeated dangerous manoeuvres", undoubtedly more so in the aftermath of the Ukraine war.<sup>8</sup> In any case, greater awareness in the international media about the repercussions of Chinese interference in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea has further popularized the Indo-Pacific construct.

Yet much of the narrative has automatically assumed that a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is primarily (and perhaps only) maritime in nature. This assertion is aided by the reality that maritime trade routes would be directly affected by China's actions, in turn impacting European/Western security and prosperity.

Yet, was China to become the 'Himalayan hegemon', the interdependent nature of the security dilemmas cannot ignore that a rules-based order in the Himalayan region is imperative for the stability, security, and prosperity of the Indian Ocean, South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. A key reason why this connection has not yet been made as clearly is that the focus by the West on Tibet has remained limited to the human rights aspect, highlighting it as the central cause of concern in the Himalayas. Without taking away from the criticality of the human rights question, it is important to also connect the human rights violations to the broader geopolitical agendas at play on the Tibetan plateau by the Chinese—a connection that needs to be closely examined.

Such a lens is critical in facets concerning trans-Himalayan and Tibetan studies, wherein geopolitics has often come second to human rights and environmental debates, often missing the connection between these issues as grander security narratives. For instance, with respect to the succession of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, few studies have looked at the geopolitics associated with succession politics, which will directly impact the bilateral relationship of countries across the world with China. This has meant that nations remain unprepared

to deal with the strategic realities of such a question—a fact China relies on to work in its favor.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly so, and more widely, issues of militarization/securitization in Tibet and adjoining areas as well as weaponization of natural resources need to be discussed in tandem with climate/ecological degradation and human security aspects in the Himalayas to preserve the Indo-Pacific's rules-based order.

Due to the interconnected nature of regional stability and security, the Himalayas are a critical strategic region influencing major geopolitical dynamics. Tensions here can spill over, impacting maritime and territorial disputes in the Indo-Pacific. A liberal rules-based order in the Himalayas ensures consistent principles of international law, mutual respect for sovereignty, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Without this, the broader rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific remains fragile and susceptible to power imbalances and regional conflicts. Therefore, integrating Himalayan security within the Indo-Pacific framework fosters comprehensive regional stability, enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of a rules-based international order.

### **Securitization of the Restive Himalayas**

In the 2000s, the Communist Party of China (CPC) launched its Western Development Strategy to offset the lack of economic reforms-led growth in the western provinces,<sup>10</sup> including the Buddhist-dominated Tibet and the Muslim-dominated Xinjiang, compared to the stupendous high-quality development in the eastern zones and the southern coast.<sup>11</sup> Using this “Go west” policy, the Chinese

government aimed its own funds, as well as foreign investment and development assistance in implementing the development of both coastal and inland areas to replace the backwardness with modernization, including new infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> The Xi Jinping “new era” large-scale development went on to incorporate eco-environmental protection ideals to further these aims “to achieve common prosperity for all the ethnic groups of the western region,” but more specifically to *consolidate* the frontier regions, often at the expense of the ecological needs of the region despite environment protection promises.<sup>13</sup> For instance, China's extensive modern-day mega-dam building that began with the construction of the Three Gorges Dam has already disrupted biodiversity, as well as caused droughts, floods, earthquakes, and massive displacement of people.<sup>14</sup>

In the more than two decades since the launch of this campaign, the Chinese government has doubled down its pursuit of these aims, which remain laced with empty rhetoric. The main intent is to exploit the region's abundant natural resources while building hard infrastructure to make civil-military logistics easier.<sup>15</sup>

To securitize and militarize the areas, China has implemented unsavory measures such as resettlements, intrusive laws, internment camps, forceful induction into the People's Liberation Army (PLA), increased surveillance, and accelerated assimilation.<sup>16</sup> The thinking in Beijing is that such tactics will not only repress separatist tendencies and neutralize respective languages and cultures but also help fortify the regions around the Himalayas with infrastructure that can be utilized to expand territory.

Similarly, the unabated infrastructure development, including airports/helipads, highways, oil pipelines, rail networks, and reservoirs, aimed at improving land-sea linkages for facilitating domestic economy is mainly a tool to expand “dual-use” of infrastructure, that is, national security interests in the garb of socio-economic growth.<sup>17</sup> For example, China’s increase in railway construction in Tibet<sup>18</sup> and “leapfrog development in general aviation” look to not just facilitate better access to neighboring provinces but also to land ports along the border areas for military purposes.

Already, the increase in stationed PLA troops and even nuclear weapons—China has in the past been accused of “conducting nuclear-weapons research on the Tibetan plateau and dumping radioactive waste” and also of building an “immense military bastion with tactical missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles”—have raised concerns about the impact of hyper-militarization on the fragile Himalayan region.<sup>19</sup>

Another vital geopolitical aim is to enable this region’s active participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) via initiatives such as the “Western Region Land-Sea Corridor” development announced in 2019.<sup>20</sup> This would improve connectivity and integration between China’s well-to-do and poorer, restive regions as well as with Eurasia, Central Asia, and South Asia.<sup>21</sup> Through avenues like a Himalayan Quad it has sought to establish with South Asian countries (Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) it has immense economic clout in, it has sought to further the geopolitically motivated aspects of BRI into greater intent.<sup>22</sup>

China has been investing in solar, wind, and hydro projects abroad in Central Asia and Latin America, among other regions.<sup>23</sup> Herein, China’s weaponization of water as the “upstream water hegemon”—with six major Asian rivers flowing into nearly 18 downstream countries—has aimed at controlling access and prioritizing its own “water sovereignty”, and often weaponizing water to achieve its national interests as seen during Doklam clash of 2017 with India.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Xi’s aim of building a “community of shared future among neighboring countries” comes under scrutiny as a concept: Particularly as China has been indulging in rewriting Himalayan territorial borders, e.g., by issuing “standard maps” (e.g., showing India’s Arunachal Pradesh and the disputed Aksai Chin plateau as Chinese territory) and by expanding into Bhutanese territories.<sup>25</sup>

### **Aiming Beyond Rhetoric**

Optimistically, one can hope that the latest round of support for Tibet in the U.S. Congress and the U.S. delegation’s visit to the TGiE would call for a new beginning of international action akin to international attention, including more foreign delegations, as with Taiwan in 2022.<sup>26</sup> But more importantly, it should initiate a multiplicity of debates questioning not just China’s long-standing repressive actions but also the international community’s tacit silence regarding Himalayan issues—from unfettered territorial expansion and instability to overexploitation and access to natural resources. For instance, the EU, which despite its focus on human rights in Tibet, is only starting to recognize Chinese coercion

globally. It may also facilitate discussions in the European Parliament around the aforementioned Himalayan concerns with broader implications.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that none of the major concerns regarding China in the Himalayas are new. For example, China has used Tibet and Xinjiang for nuclear bases since before 1964; the Tibetans have hence for long worried about the militarization of the region. Old reports dating back to the 1980s have highlighted how it is not just the Indian cities and industrial centers that are possibly within the range of China's "nuclear strikes, but also "all the major cities of central Asia", stressing the interconnectedness of security debates.<sup>28</sup>

Undoubtedly, in the years since the Chinese military modernization under Xi has begun, the threat has only accelerated. For instance,

satellite imagery in Bhutanese territory has confirmed China's gumption at changing the status quo in the Himalayas.<sup>29</sup> Notably, given the current sliding geopolitical landscape and Xi's focus on achieving "China Dream" goals,<sup>30</sup> including national rejuvenation and integration, the Indo-Pacific democracies have no choice but to put impetus into examining and upending China's attempts at sinicizing the Himalayan (dis)order. Conclusively, if the U.S. and the democracies in Asia and Europe such as the EU, India and Japan, are serious about the intent to preserve a rules-based order, then they must acknowledge that the threat from China is not limited to its so-called provinces in the Himalayas or the neighboring states—but covers China's multidirectional expansionism that has been going on for years.

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# Eroding Himalayan Borders: China's Strategy to Thwart India?

Darryl Lupton

There are conflicts in this world that seem truly intractable, for instance the Israel-Palestine struggle or the Jammu-Kashmir aspect of the Indian-Pakistan relationship. Yet the nearby border issues that exist between India and China should not be close to the complexity of finding a solution that plagues the aforementioned disputes. Nevertheless, for 75 years the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have been unable to resolve their border baggage left over from colonial times. Are there discernible reasons why a suitable resolution has escaped skilled diplomats from these two neighbors? This chapter will examine the possibility of finding a solution to border issues in the Himalayan region and what steps a proactive partner can take to achieve this goal. Lastly, an analysis of the aims and actions of the two Asian powers in this specific region will help to decipher their end games.

## Legacy of Colonial Borders

An historical overview of what brought two newly formed countries in the mid-twentieth century to loggerheads will help provide context. The legacy of colonial borders still spurs conflicts around the world and the same is true from the days of the Qing dynasty and British India. Initially, there was bonhomie

between the two neighbors who had recently shed their yokes from the Japanese and British, respectively. This friendship was described as "Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai" (Indians and Chinese are brothers). With the Korean War over and the Chinese having shown resolve and bravery against United Nations (UN) and especially United States (U.S.) troops, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Beijing in October 1954. As attested by records, Nehru and Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong bonded as potential heirs to the U.S.-led world order.<sup>1</sup> Yet the two political icons of their age were not entirely on the same ideological page: Nehru was the leader of the world's largest democracy, still a work in progress, yet also not wanting to side with the leading democracy, the U.S., against communism. Mao, having endured two decades of torturous events like the Long March, Japanese occupation, a civil war and battling 'imperialist forces' in Korea, sensed that the time was ripe to push for global revolution. The seeds were already sown for a competition of whose narrative would sway the newly independent powers. At the Bandung Conference the following year (1955) in Indonesia, India helped to 'introduce' the PRC to the rest of Asia. This "Asian-African" conference was a precursor



to the Non-Aligned Movement (1961) that promoted economic and cultural cooperation and opposed any form of colonialism. Nehru envisioned India as a leader of the non-aligned world, emphasizing peaceful coexistence, whereas Premier Zhou Enlai saw China as a revolutionary state that was willing to adopt a more confrontational approach to the West. Despite this subtle competition for influence due to strategic differences, there was still a generally cooperative relationship between the two aspiring great powers. However, as noted by Amitav Acharya, Bandung was the highpoint of their relationship.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Roof of the World', Tibet, is where the relationship came crashing down. After the Tibetan Uprising in 1959, the spiritual leader of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and thousands of supporters fled to India to escape the brutal suppression by the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The Chinese leadership resented India for giving the Tibetan refugees asylum and contended that they continued their resistance against the PLA from their new Indian base. As a consequence, the PLA fortified the border and clashes ensued with Indian border guards later that year, resulting in the first deaths of Indian troops protecting their country's boundaries.

### **Main Areas of Dispute**

As an overview, there are three main border areas that are disputed between India and China: the western, central and eastern parts.<sup>3</sup> The first primarily consists of Chinese controlled Aksai Chin, strategically important to China as it connects Xinjiang and Tibet and where Galwan river valley is located. The

middle sector is the least contested border, though it is in the vicinity of the strategically important Doklam Plateau, within Bhutan's borders, though claimed by China. The eastern sector relates to the British era McMahon line that separates southern Tibet from the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. These borders are not clearly delineated but there are rough Lines of Actual Control (LAC) that indicate where each army's troops patrol and consider de facto territory until a final agreement takes place. Naturally, this ad hoc state of delineation has precipitated numerous skirmishes, often with fatal casualties. After the 1959 border clashes, archive documents reveal that when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai met with Nehru in Delhi in April 1960, China offered to give up its territorial claims in the east if India also relinquished its claims in Aksai Chin.<sup>4</sup> History reveals this to be a regrettable rejection by Nehru, yet from his position, giving up territory he believed was truly India's, was not a patriotic compromise he could make. From China's point of view, 'securing the western border to ensure safety in the east' was a factor in their reasoning as relations with the U.S. and Japan were not optimal, coupled with being in the middle of the devastating Great Leap Forward that decimated tens of millions of Chinese through starvation, meant that China was willing to alleviate its western border issues with a land deal.

New found nationalism and vague borders meant that tensions mounted and in October 1962, China launched a calculated assault against India's border positions that caught the Indian army by surprise and they were overwhelmed by the PLA, though after a

month's campaign and being in a strong position to push further into India, Chinese troops were withdrawn. China felt they had made their point and taught India a lesson, without needing to occupy their new land gains. India felt betrayed by China's military adventurism that broke any trust there was between the two aspiring great powers and severely set back their relationship, which has never fully recovered.

To avoid clashes and maintain peace, India and China negotiated several border treaties between 1993 and 2013. One measure introduced to de-escalate conflict was to forbid soldiers to carry loaded weapons. This stipulation meant soldiers reverted back to medieval methods to assault each other, adding a gruesome twist to high altitude warfare. However, there appeared to be a change in strategy by the PLA from 2013 onwards, more incidents flared up on a regular basis, namely in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2017.<sup>5</sup> What might explain this shift? After the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, China felt that the U.S. was now in decline and that China's economic and governance system was superior, no need to "hide and bide" anymore as Deng Xiaoping had advised. President Xi Jinping felt it was time for China to 'stand up'. This became evident in China's island building campaigns in the South China Sea,<sup>6</sup> done while the U.S. was distracted with its flailing economy and believing China's assurances that the islands were for peaceful purposes and wouldn't be militarized. This pattern also clearly emerged with the advent of "wolf warrior" behavior from China's diplomats: Assertive actions that illustrated Beijing's confidence that the

'rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' had arrived and it was time for a changing of the international guard.<sup>7</sup> To the victor his spoils: China enforcing its arbitrary 9-dash line in the South China Sea affected the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia around the Natuna islands. An ocean and mountain range further west, India likewise felt this assertiveness in the Himalayas.

In 2017, Bhutan would feel this Chinese pressure to comply with its territorial claims.<sup>8</sup> After discovering China's tactics of changing the facts on the ground (or sea) by building a road into Doklam, a plateau close to where the borders of Bhutan, India and China converge, India was invited to stop the opportunistic construction. India showed its mettle by facing down China for 73 days, despite intermittent tussles. This road would have given China a strategic advantage as it could be used to speedily access the Siliguri corridor, a narrow band of strategic land that connects India with its otherwise estranged northeastern states.

The most violent incident on the Sino-Indian border occurred in June 2020. Again China's timing was opportune with the COVID pandemic raging around the world that distracted people's attention. A Chinese incursion happened a couple of months prior when troops pitched tents beyond the LAC and camped there, antagonizing the Indian military. In spite of Chinese promises to withdraw, troops remained and frustration led to a confrontation. In the mêlée, 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives and there were four reported PLA soldier deaths. Indian security experts like Jaydeva Ranade believe this attack

was premeditated with weapons prepared for the onslaught.<sup>9</sup> He also believes that the border conflict between China and India is about more than just occupying desolate land high in the Himalayas. Rather it involves a geopolitical struggle for dominance in the Indo-Pacific region and suppressing India's rise in the area.

Offensive realism is an international relations theory put forward by American scholar John Mearsheimer. It posits that great powers are power maximizing revisionists that aim to dominate the international system and do this by aggressive state behavior. At minimum, a great power must dominate its region as the hegemon and preclude any other state from challenging it. As states cannot ever be totally sure of the intentions of other states, they must use their offensive military capability to ensure their own survival and dominate others. This theory certainly helps to explain China's aggressive international behavior, especially since it chose to be assertive under President Xi. Its national narrative of being humiliated by stronger powers for 100 years provides motivation to build its military and project aggression and strength around the globe and hold onto or regain land from its days as an imperial empire under the Qing. For now, the PRC's land and sea claims lie in the East China Sea with Japan, the South China Sea littorals, and with 'reunifying' Taiwan. India is feeling this same determination for revisionism on its borders and Russia and Mongolia may well encounter the same in the future.

India sees itself as a major pole in a multipolar world and wishes to regain great power status and be a leader of its South Asia neighborhood

as well as the Indian Ocean region. Yet how does China view its relationship with India? Clearly not as equals and with an economy five times larger, a vastly superior military and being more advanced technologically, China has its reasons. However, with significant structural economic problems, demographic challenges coupled with a rapidly ageing population and pushback from the U.S., Europe and some neighbors like Japan and the Philippines (among others), China is not assured of overtaking the U.S. economically or militarily and achieving global dominance. China's approach to India has been to keep it destabilized in the Himalayas both by supporting Pakistan as a counterbalance and by ensuring that India uses its more modest military resources there rather than prioritizing its navy and challenging the PLA navy in the Indo-Pacific. Jagannath Panda has described China's decision-making in its border dispute with India and how China wants the entire geopolitical cake without sharing much with India.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, this means that the PRC wants to keep India preoccupied and destabilized on its northern borders without making any meaningful attempts to resolve its boundary lines. It knows that its far greater military budget can keep India subdued with its logistics advantage: Better infrastructure, including roads, railways and airports; and superior shelter and supply bases replete with underground bunkers.<sup>11</sup> It also has the ability and ambition to deploy autonomous systems, artificial intelligence, robotics and drones to the area to enhance intelligence gathering and reduce the number of troops needed. Malcolm Davis believes this progression from informationization to intelligentization

in warfare can give the PLA significant capabilities in sustaining combat capacity.<sup>12</sup> However, China wants to compartmentalize its actions and treatment of India at the border zones and have a normal relationship regarding economic issues that heavily favor China in the balance of trade; additionally, China wants to enjoy cooperation with India in multilateral forums. Understandably India, represented by External Affairs Minister Jaishankar, has lost faith in China's border tactics and is unwilling to separate this from the overall political and economic relationship. China's constant salami slicing tactics at the border coupled with deliberate border incursions leading to violence has exhausted New Delhi's indulgence and forbearance.<sup>13</sup>

### **India's Road Ahead**

India's solution to its 'China problem' should be to intensify its current strategies, that is, keep putting pressure on China to find a meaningful solution to border issues. In fact, this could be as straightforward as setting up a demilitarized zone in the most problematic and hostile areas. India could maintain its strategic autonomy and non-aligned status but keep working with partners like Quad members (the U.S., Japan, Australia and India) to improve and enhance its military capabilities. By sharing army intelligence and bases with continued joint military training, India can gain advantages

and accelerate its warfighting capabilities. Furthermore, military technological transfers from the U.S. and Japan would benefit all parties as strengthening India would make the Indo-Pacific more stable and counterbalance China in the region. All countries in the area would benefit by the 'balance of power' theory that suggests a more stable system results from an equilibrium of power. India does not have the budget to compete with China in its neighborhood to provide infrastructure and development, which is why the Quad should be further leveraged to provide public goods and needed infrastructure. This is evident with the 2020 agreement that involves Japan in helping to develop India's North-East.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. should do more to partner with India to provide infrastructure requirements for South Asia and counter Chinese influence in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, India has better future economic growth opportunities, a younger population and untapped projects like infrastructure development and further industrialization. These advantages need to be fully exploited and with China entering a possible Japan-like stagflation era, the future looks brighter for India catching up to its Himalayan rival. The balance of power may now be shifting in India's favor and with it a stronger negotiating position to achieve its aim to neutralize border tensions.

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# Fiddlers on the Roof: China's Strategic Interests in the Himalayas

Richard Ghiasy

## Introduction

The “Roof of the World,” more widely known as the Himalayas, is a formidable sight of natural beauty and extraordinary metaphysical significance. However, it is increasingly of geopolitical prominence, too. It is arguably the most geopolitically significant natural barrier on land anywhere on the planet and a strategic frontier that climatologically influences the livelihoods of East, South, Central, and Southeast Asia. Amidst growing Asian populations, changes in global and regional climates, and the growing need for fresh water for consumption and industry, the Himalayas are a critical determinant for many tens of millions.

To China, the Roof, driven by broader geopolitical strategies and partially instrumentalized through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is drawing increasing attention. Withholding territorial disputes, China holds up to 23 percent of the mountain range, notably below India and Nepal.<sup>1</sup> To China, which has security tensions on its eastern and southeastern flanks with the U.S. and its allies, and hypothetically also its north, if and when relations with Russia go sour as they have multiple times in history, the Himalayas hold immense strategic value as the source of the Yangtze river and as a buffer zone between it and its southern neighbors,

particularly an economically fast-growing India that has become more nationalistic and currently enjoys a period of significant geopolitical and geo-economic interest by the collective West, but also other states near and far.

Gone-south political relations with India are a considerable factor in Chinese calculations. China and India deploy large numbers of men and arms on the Line of Actual Control. Both sides are frantic about constructing, extending, and upgrading roads, rail, helipads, air facilities, and population relocation or encampments closer to the ill-defined 3,440 km border. China is upgrading and expanding the People Liberation Army (PLA) mobility and supply routes and is populating border and disputed areas through new and expanded villages. According to *The New York Times*, at least 90 new villages and expanded settlements have sprung up in Tibet since 2016, when China began outlining its border village plan in the region.<sup>2</sup> India, in turn, has responded with so-called “vibrant villages.” Of course, populating borderlands is an old historical practice; think of the Western frontier, Texas for America, or the Far East for Russia.

Despite double-digit rounds of political talks in the background since the Galwan skirmish with

clubs and stones in 2020, both sides continue to arm themselves to the teeth. Multiple military and diplomatic negotiations have failed to produce notable steps forward. This competition has manifested in infrastructure development (China in particular) and military posturing, increasing the risk of miscalculations and conflicts. What if high-tech and heavy gear are used next time instead of clubs? (Dis)Order in the Himalayas affects the order in Asia and (dis)order in that part of Asia affects the world, even if only ostensibly.

### **A Historically Peaceful Zone Now Holds a Fragile Peace**

In the pre-modern era, the Roof was a zone of simultaneous interaction and isolation. The Himalayas generally experienced long periods of—relative—peace, mainly due to their geographical isolation, the small size of their political entities, largely self-sufficient communities, and the cultural and religious cohesion fostered by Buddhism and Hinduism.

Furthermore, the region's rugged terrain, high-altitude environment, and long-standing Tibetan rule, marked by fluctuating degrees of control and autonomy, but with overall more substantial Chinese influence and control since the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), historically limited large-scale military engagements.

That peace is now substituted by tensions, anxiety, and outright fear on all sides, but arguably, it is led more by prospects of what China may, in theory, do. Indeed, the Roof remains a critical frontier in China's national security calculus. The Himalayan region is not just about securing borders; it also entails

gaining leverage over crucial water resources, too—the Brahmaputra, Indus, and Mekong rivers have their origins in the Chinese-controlled Himalayas. There are several concerns and tensions related to China's hydropower projects, dam constructions, and water diversion plans on transboundary rivers originating in the Tibetan Plateau and flowing into these countries—and how possible contamination or lessened flows could impact downstream countries. Amidst uncertainties amplified by climate change, water security, logically, ranks high. In fact, while the Roof to many may be considered politically as 'remote' or a 'periphery,' environmentally, it is very much at the center.<sup>3</sup>

There is no confirmed evidence that China has deliberately restricted or limited the water flow to downstream countries. However, several concerns and tensions exist related to China's hydropower projects, dam constructions, and water diversion plans on transboundary rivers. Of course, water and water sharing are a common right and plight of humankind and should never be politicized or weaponized.

Still, that prospect of diminishing water security, all the military muscle-building and flexing, and population relocations feed a sense of anxiety and perceptions of disorder. More than anything, the strategic rivalry between China and India is a crucial factor shaping the region's geopolitics and perceptions of anxiety. Under the aegis of the BRI, China's economic engagement in the Himalayas has increased its influence in the area. Through investments and loans, China has positioned itself as a critical financial partner for countries like Pakistan, Nepal, and, to a very minor degree, Bhutan. Hence, India's strategic

concerns are growing, leading to a complex web of ‘alliances’ and ‘counter-alliances’ that may have notable consequences for regional stability. Nepal continuously walks a tightrope, including concerning the BRI,<sup>4</sup> ensuring neither giant neighbor raises an eyebrow while simultaneously considering how it can best tap the luxury of having the world’s second and fifth largest economies as neighbors and their joint market of nearly three billion consumers. Nepal’s geographic location is simultaneously a blessing and a curse.

### **Leading by Example: The Himalayas as a Litmus Test**

The Roof’s developments also tie to the concept and actualization of order. International and regional order, a concept that Chinese policy practitioners and intellectuals are working hard to develop and implement further through concepts such as ‘indivisible security’ and ‘the shared future of mankind.’<sup>5</sup> India’s ‘The world is one family’ certainly also applies to the Roof.

Indeed, China’s ambitions and actions in the Himalayas have far-reaching implications for regional security and international relations. For most, not directly, but as China proposes to reform the international order for the better and promotes concepts such as ‘indivisible security,’ Chinese regional policies are automatically put under a magnifying glass.

Sadly, two of the world’s richest, oldest, and wisest civilizations, dating back over 4,000 years, are at loggerheads on their borders and, politically speaking, more broadly. These two civilizational bearers are supposed to be the wisest—after all, they are the cradles

of Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, and Hinduism, among other metaphysical traditions, yet all this wisdom is overlooked amidst their scuffles. Of course, ancient wisdom does not necessarily trickle down into policy circles nor replace realpolitik—still, though, it is striking.

When two significant powers collectively represent nearly 40 percent of humanity, they are responsible for thinking and acting sensibly. Instead, the two play a blame game, beating each other with stones and clubs during the 2020 Galwan standoff: What must Asia think when the two most prominent actors behave primeval? Will the world trust China and India to co-lead Asia or China and India to reform the Asian or international order for the better with such images? The intention of both sides to ‘turn the leaf’ on border disputes during the last round of diplomatic talks is positive.<sup>6</sup>

On the other hand, the terrain and the complexity of an actual line of control over areas that include rivers, lakes, ice, and glaciers at that height are not easy for either side, and both need to be commended for not using any bullets or bombs since 1962.

### **Conclusion**

China’s ambitions in the Himalayas have significant implications for regional security and international relations. The Himalayas are not just a geographical barrier but a critical strategic frontier that shapes the climatological and geopolitical dynamics of several Asian regions. China’s infrastructure development, economic engagement, and military presence in the region have heightened tensions with India and increased the strategic stakes for smaller



Himalayan states. While China—naturally—has a right to conduct policies on its territories as it pleases and trade with the region, the militarization on the border and perceived fears of escalation that may affect, *inter alia*, water security have created a negative perception vortex and adds to the multiple natural, political, and economic risks that already exist in and among the five Roof territory holders.<sup>7</sup>

The Roof will likely remain a flashpoint for geopolitical competition, given the longstanding and sensitive territorial disputes between Pakistan and India, with implications for regional stability and, potentially, global security. The strategic rivalry between China and India, coupled with the broader geopolitical

contestations involving other significant powers, underscores the complexity of the Himalayan region's geopolitics and the challenges it poses for policymakers in the years to come.

If China wants to promote its vision of indivisible security and a shared future for mankind, then it must put in more effort to discuss and seek solutions that foster an order that is less based on infrastructural and military prowess and more on understanding, resolving, compromise, and cooperation, including through cooperative mechanisms or bilateral agreements that better develop the management of water resources and lessen the concerns of both itself and its neighbors. If instruments such as the BRI can play a role, then kudos!

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# Himalaya in Japan's Strategic Discourse

Ryohei Kasai

Japan is increasingly proactive in maintaining peace, security, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific. As it promotes and work toward the realization of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” Japan has engaged with allies and like-minded countries in the region on bilateral basis as well as minilateral formats such as the Quad. While these engagements are not explicitly targeted to any specific country, one could easily assume that how to grapple with China occupies Tokyo’s strategic calculation. China’s rapid and robust military buildup and more assertive attitude beyond its borders are of serious concerns for Japan as their eastern neighbor’s activities directly affects its security.

## Japan's Growing Concerns Toward China

The National Security Strategy (NSS) disclosed by the Japanese government in December 2022 expressed growing concern about China’s expansionism. It says China’s current external stance, military activities, and other activities have become “a matter of serious concern for Japan and the international community” and present “an unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge in ensuring the peace and security of Japan.”<sup>1</sup> The NSS also stresses that Japan will “strongly oppose China’s growing

attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force, demand it not to conduct such activities, and respond it a calm and resolute manner,” adding that Japan will “strongly encourage China to improve transparency and to cooperate constructively with international efforts for arms control, disarmament and other such efforts.”<sup>2</sup>

Japan’s major concerns vis-à-vis China come from issues related to territorial disputes. The Senkaku Islands, located close to Okinawa, have been governed by Japan for nearly 130 years since they were officially incorporated into its territory in 1895. It was only from the 1970s that China started contesting Japan’s sovereignty over the islands.<sup>3</sup> China’s activities are getting more assertive in recent years, with more incidences of its commercial as well as Coast Guard vessels entering and crossing the waters around the Senkakus. Tokyo has also staged protests with Beijing over the latter’s unilateral developments and explorations of undersea oilfields in the East China Sea as the maritime boundary including Exclusive Economic Zone in the region has not been demarcated between Japan and China. In addition, the situation of the Taiwan Straits is another area where Japan is keeping a careful watch.

## How the Himalayas Figure in Japan's Strategic Calculation

While Japan sees these maritime challenges as its immediate concerns, at the same time it is equally getting more alert on how China strengthens its military activities along its borders and beyond, including the Himalayas. The 2024 edition of *Defense of Japan* (Defense White Paper) not only details China's decades-old military buildup but also refers to the border clash between India and China in May 2020 as one of the developments in China's relations with its neighbors in recent years.<sup>4</sup> The 2024 edition of *The Diplomatic Bluebook* does not specifically mention China's activities along its land borders but it does detail Japan's diplomatic engagements with India as well as the Himalayan countries including Nepal and Bhutan.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier too, there was a rare but more explicit reference to the region. In January 2015, Fumio Kishida, then serving as Foreign Minister under Shinzo Abe's cabinet, said "Arunachal Pradesh is a territory of India" and added "it is a disputed area with China" in a speech during his visit to New Delhi.<sup>6</sup> It was the first comment by Japanese leadership regarding their perception of the area. Understandably, this remark provoked China's immediate reaction. Hong Lei, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said in a press conference that "We are seriously concerned about this and have lodged serious representation with the Japanese side, asking Japan to make clarification and immediately remove negative implications arising from this."<sup>7</sup>

Most recently, the Himalayas, though in a limited and indirect manner, figured in Japan's strategic calculation. Kishida, now as Prime Minister, unveiled Japan's "New Plan" for

the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in a speech at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) in New Delhi on March 20, 2023. While Kishida mentioned South Asia as one of the "three important regions," he further elaborated on it with his intention to promote the "Bay of Bengal-Northeast India industrial value chain concept."<sup>8</sup> Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, two states that form a part of the land locked Northeast India, are in the eastern Himalayas. Japan has not worked on any development project in Arunachal Pradesh so far while in Sikkim, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has conducted a project for biodiversity preservation and forest management in the state. However, if the proposed industrial value chain takes shape, it would benefit not only Northeast India and Bangladesh but also Nepal and Bhutan by providing them land routes and an access to the Bay of Bengal.

There is also another significant factor in Japan's interests with the Himalayas: Tibet. Although there are no formal contacts between the Japanese government and the Tibetan government-in-exile based in Dharamsala, Japan has been one of the most popular destinations for the Dalai Lama's overseas visits for decades. The Dalai Lama visited Japan numerous times until the COVID-19 pandemic, preaching Buddhism and attending talk sessions in different cities. There is political support to some extent, too. There is a group called "the Parliamentary League on the Tibet Question" with members of the Japanese Diet. When the Dalai Lama visited Tokyo in November 2009, some members of the group including the chair and the deputy chair met him. It may also be recalled that during World War II, Japan kept

an eye on Tibet by dispatching several Japanese nationals for intelligence gathering.<sup>9</sup>

### Positive Aspects of Japan-China Relations

China's militaristic and economic rise is a matter of grave concern for Japan, prompting it to take a number of measures including raising defense capabilities and forging close partnerships with the U.S., India, and Australia among others. However, security is not the only domain that determines Japan's strategic calculation on China. As is the case for many countries in the Indo-Pacific, economy does matter. According to the Japan Customs, China (excluding Hong Kong) became the largest trade partner for Japan in 2007 and remains so to this date. In 2022, trade with China occupied 20.2 percent of Japan's total trade with its amount recorded the highest ever. Thus, while a concern about China's recession after the pandemic, slowing domestic demand, and growing labor wage caused Japanese industries to seek alternatives in the rest of Asia, it is likely that Chinese presence in the Japanese economy will only increase in the coming years. In addition, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which went into effect in January 2022, has paved the way for more robust trade between Japan and China.

An increasing number of Chinese living in Japan is another aspect of the bilateral relations. Immigration Services Agency of Ministry of Justice reports that out of 3.4 million foreigners living in Japan in December 2023, approximately 821,000 were Chinese nationals.<sup>10</sup> This means that the Chinese are the largest foreign community, followed by Vietnamese (565,000) and South Koreans (410,000). In 2023, Japanese

nationals living in China exceed 100,000, the second largest number after the U.S.

Furthermore, there have been some improvements in the bilateral relations, too. In mid-November 2023, Prime Minister Kishida met with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in San Francisco, the first such meeting in one year. Kishida also met with Chinese Premier Li Qiang when both leaders visited Seoul for the Japan-China-South Korea trilateral summit in May 2024. A Japan-China foreign secretary-level strategic dialogue was held in Tokyo in July 2024 for the first time since January 2020. Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa referred to "Mutually Beneficial Relationships Based on Common Strategic Interests" and building "constructive and stable Japan-China relations" in a meeting with her counterpart Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July 2024.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

For Japan, managing relations with China is getting more complex than ever. Growing Chinese activities in and around the territorial waters of Japan is of Tokyo's immediate and grave concern. But it is also necessary to assess Beijing strategic intentions not only in the east but also in its land borders. There is no doubt that the Himalayas is one of the flash points in Beijing's efforts to expand its influence in South Asia and beyond. It certainly affects India's national security. As Japan and India widen and deepen their "Special Strategic Global Partnership", it is expected that both countries will also discuss the issues, developments and implications on their respective security of the Himalayas in upcoming dialogues.

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# The Dragon's Frozen Gambit: China's Himalayan Chess Game and the West's Glacial Response

Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell

Those of you who still cling to the quaint notion that international borders are more than mere suggestions to our friends in Beijing, I invite you to embark on a journey through the treacherous terrain of China's Himalayan strategy. It is a tale that would make Machiavelli blush and leave even the most jaded of geopolitical observers slack-jawed in astonishment.

Let us begin with the annexation of East Turkistan, a land so brazenly rebranded as "Xinjiang" that one can almost hear George Orwell slow-clapping from beyond the grave. On October 12, 1949, Mao's legions swept across East Turkistan's borders with all the subtlety of a Soviet May Day parade. This was no mere border skirmish, mind you, but a full-scale invasion that would make even history's most rapacious conquerors blush with envy.<sup>1</sup>

The Communists, true to form, have peddled a narrative of "peaceful liberation" that is about as credible as a three-dollar bill. The grim reality, which they assiduously attempt to obscure, is a tale of wanton brutality that saw more than 120,000 East Turkistanis dispatched to their maker in the scant three years following

the invasion. One can only imagine the gleam in Mao's eye as he contemplated the strategic bounty and natural riches that this "new territory" would add to his burgeoning empire.<sup>2</sup>

But the Chinese dragon's appetite was far from sated. On October 7, 1950, Mao's red hordes, masquerading under the guise of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), descended upon the peaceful land of Tibet like locusts on a verdant field. In a display of overwhelming force that would make even the most ruthless of history's conquerors nod in grudging approval, the PLA swiftly encircled the hopelessly outmatched Tibetan defenders.<sup>3</sup> By October 19, a mere 12 days later, 5,000 Tibetan troops had laid down their arms, no doubt realizing the futility of resistance against the mechanized might of Communist aggression.<sup>4</sup>

This brazen act of conquest led to the farcical "Seventeen Point Agreement" of 1951—a document about as voluntarily signed as a confession extracted in the bowels of the Lubyanka. With a stroke of a pen dripping with coercion, Tibet was unceremoniously absorbed into the maw of the People's Republic of China.<sup>5</sup>

### Himalayan Treasure Chest

But why, you may ask, did the Communist dragon cast its covetous eye upon the roof of the world? The answer, my friends, lies in the cold calculus of geopolitical strategy and resource acquisition. Tibet serves as a veritable treasure trove for our Communist friends. It provides a strategic buffer zone against the democratic world, particularly India, allowing China to peer menacingly over the Himalayas like a schoolyard bully eyeing a defenseless child's lunch money.

The high-altitude fastness of Tibet also offers China a military advantage that would make even the most hawkish Pentagon planner salivate. From this lofty perch, the PLA can project power across the region with impunity, secure in their Himalayan fortress.

But the true jewel in this ill-gotten crown is Tibet's natural bounty. The region's vast mineral wealth and, more crucially, its water resources, have the Communist leadership rubbing their hands with undisguised glee. The Tibetan Plateau, poetically dubbed the "Asian water tower," feeds the great rivers that sustain much of Asia. In controlling Tibet, China holds the metaphorical tap for the region's water supply—a position of power that would make Machiavelli himself nod in appreciation.<sup>6</sup>

Now, let us cast our gaze upon the frozen chessboard of geopolitical intrigue known as Aksai Chin. This frigid, windswept expanse, claimed by India but clutched in the iron grip of Communist China, stands as a stark testament to the brazen audacity of Maoist expansionism.

Picture, if you will, the 1950s—a decade when America was preoccupied with Elvis and tailfins. Meanwhile, our red friends in Beijing were busily carving a road through this disputed territory with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop. This arterial abomination, grandiosely dubbed China National Highway 219, was nothing less than a concrete cord binding together two of China's most restive regions: Tibet and East Turkistan.

When India finally stumbled upon this asphalt intrusion, the reaction was, shall we say, less than cordial. The discovery lit the fuse that would ultimately explode into the Sino-Indian War of 1962—a conflict as brief as it was brutal. This month-long martial minuet, fought in the rarefied air of the Himalayas, ended with China strutting away with a cool 38,000 square kilometers of disputed real estate tucked under its belt.<sup>7</sup>

But why, you may ask, all this fuss over a barren, high-altitude wasteland? The answer lies not in what Aksai Chin is, but in where it sits. This desolate plateau, devoid of resources and human habitation, is the geopolitical equivalent of Park Place and Boardwalk combined. It is the linchpin in China's grand strategy to link its troubled western provinces, a high-altitude highway for projecting power across the roof of the world.

Next, we turn our attention to a geopolitical sleight of hand so brazen, it would make even the most shameless of three-card monte dealers blush with envy. I speak, of course, of the Shaksgam Valley—a frozen sliver of land in the heart of Kashmir, unceremoniously gifted



to Communist China by Pakistan in 1963 with all the nonchalance of a child trading baseball cards.<sup>8</sup>

This territorial tête-à-tête, enshrined in the Sino-Pakistan Agreement, is a document that India views with about as much legitimacy as a snake oil salesman's warranty. And who can blame them? For in one fell swoop, Pakistan managed to hand over a piece of real estate it had about as much right to as I do to the Moon.

But the true genius of this territorial acquisition lies in its military implications. The Shaksgam Valley offers China a significant strategic depth. From this lofty perch, the PLA can cast its watchful eye over the contentious borders of India, China, and Pakistan, including the Siachen Glacier—that frozen battlefield where soldiers fight not just the enemy, but nature itself.

Now, brace yourselves for the pièce de résistance of China's Himalayan strategy: Mao's "Five Fingers of Tibet" policy—a concept so poetically menacing, one might think it was dreamed up by a Bond villain. Picture, if you will, Tibet as the palm of a grasping hand, with five eager fingers stretching out to tickle the underbelly of South Asia: Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>9</sup>

From Sikkim to Arunachal Pradesh, from Bhutan to Nepal, China's influence creeps like a shadow at dusk, slowly but inexorably engulfing the region. Through territorial disputes, infrastructure projects, and economic enticements, Beijing seeks to redraw the map of South Asia in its favor.<sup>10</sup>

## How Can the U.S. Respond?

So, what is to be done in the face of such brazen expansionism? How can the United States, that oft-maligned but indispensable nation, leverage China's "Five Fingers of Tibet" policy and its occupation of Tibet, East Turkistan, and other territories to formulate a more robust policy against China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific?

First and foremost, we must shine a spotlight on the human rights abuses in Tibet and East Turkistan with the intensity of a thousand suns.<sup>11</sup> By raising awareness and applying diplomatic pressure, Washington can rally international support to condemn China's actions. This approach aligns with America's values and traditions of advocating for human rights and can serve as a moral counterweight to China's narrative.

Second, the United States must deepen its alliances with countries in the Indo-Pacific region, such as India, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian nations. By fostering closer military and economic ties, Washington can create a united front to counter China's expansionist policies. The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is a prime example of such coalition, though one hopes it will grow more teeth in the coming years.

Third, economic measures must be brought to bear. Washington should implement targeted sanctions against Chinese entities involved in the occupation and exploitation of Tibet and East Turkistan. Additionally, promoting alternative trade routes and economic partnerships can reduce dependency on China and weaken its economic leverage.<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, the United States must enhance its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region to serve as a deterrent to Chinese aggression. This includes conducting joint military exercises with allies, increasing naval patrols, and investing in advanced military capabilities to ensure readiness and interoperability.

Fifth, Washington should lead diplomatic efforts to recognize the historical and cultural significance of Tibet and East Turkistan. By supporting the Tibetan and East Turkistani governments-in-exile and civic organizations, the United States can challenge China's narrative and assert the right to self-determination for these regions.<sup>13</sup>

Last, but by no means least, Washington must wage a vigorous campaign of information warfare to counter Chinese disinformation. By investing in capabilities to expose China's historical revisionism and human rights abuses, supporting independent media, and leveraging social media platforms to disseminate accurate information, the United States can help puncture the bubble of lies Beijing has so assiduously cultivated.

In conclusion, China's geopolitical strategy in the Himalayas is a multifaceted endeavor, driven by a combination of economic ambitions, strategic

interests, and political objectives. It is a complex interplay aimed at securing China's position and influence in this critical region. The United States and its allies and partners must respond with equal complexity and determination if we are to preserve the principles of freedom, democracy, and human rights in the face of such relentless expansionism.

As we survey this icy impasse, we must ask ourselves: At what point does the free world's silence in the face of such territorial legerdemain become complicity? It is high time we cast off the blinders of diplomatic niceties and confront this affront to international order with the full force of our convictions. The stakes are nothing less than the future of Asia and, by extension, the world. Let us hope that in the corridors of power in Washington, there are still those with the vision to see the danger and the courage to act before it is too late.

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# Will China Win in Creating an Asian Security Order?

Richard Ghiasy and Jagannath Panda

During April 18-23, 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a three-nation tour of Cambodia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.<sup>1</sup> The visit is part of a packed diplomatic agenda, already in motion in the first five months of the year, which looks to consolidate China's status in Asia as the prime geo-economic and geopolitical influencer. Visits by leaders and other high-level officials, including from the Global South and rich European states like France and Germany, to China and by President Xi Jinping and high-level Chinese officials to various parts of the world, particularly in Asia-Pacific, will also test the waters for China's recently unveiled three world order-building projects, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).<sup>2</sup>

Notably, diplomatically, politically, and economically, China has already exponentially leapfrogged ahead of other regional and global giants. Yet, thus far, China has been lagging in building an effective Asian security order, naturally one centered on Chinese interests. Importantly, China appears to be very aware of the complexity of promoting and developing an Asian security order: That is to say, the institutions and principles that guide security relations between states.

But could the three new initiatives be the solution for an Asian security order?

## A Pan-Asian "Processual" Chinese Vision?

To a degree, China has a vision *for Asia's security order through its emergent GSI*.<sup>3</sup> Still, it is primarily processual, i.e., the process and principles of multilaterally achieving a security order rather than a set-in-stone vision for an Asian security order. This processual vision is pan-Asian, but China's rhetoric adjusts to regional variation, reflecting regional realities.

There is, of course, no single Asian security order or architecture. Nor is there unanimity on the number of security orders in Asia, their scope, and their specifics. Therefore, one way to "dissect" Asian security order is regional—even if these do not operate in silos. The five Asian regions, West (the Middle East), Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia, have dissimilar and varying degrees of security order.

China's geographic position in Asia grants it a unique (dis)advantage. China is positioned amidst these five regions. If we include Afghanistan in West Asia, China is contiguous to all five Asian regions—the only Asian nation to which this applies. This gives China a stake

and role in all of Asia's security orders, from landlocked Central Asia to the other four with their strong maritime dimensions.

How do these five regions figure in China's security ordering priorities?

### **Ranking Asia's Regions in China's Security Order**

Distant as it sits from China, the West-Asian security disorder does not amply affect China's security, and its substantial fossil fuel imports have seen little impact from regional armed conflict. Rather, Central Asia and its periphery have historically been a significant threat to China's security. Today that is no longer the case. Russia, the Central Asian states, and China have found a calm, predictable *modus vivendi* in a region with a wide range of mostly Russian-dominated security-ordering institutions.

Like West and Central Asia, Southeast Asia, too, lacks a resident great power. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a "soft-edged" non-threatening supranational body that touts its centrality and normative value, i.e., inclusive, cooperative, and multilateral security ordering norms. It is no threat to China. Yet, the geographic crux of the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy sits right at Southeast Asia and its waters, and it is in this theater that Sino-U.S. contestation arguably plays out the strongest.

Dissimilar to Southeast Asia, South Asia has a minimal security order, primarily due to the geopolitical rift at the heart of the region between the most prominent players, India and Pakistan. To thwart India's rise and to establish a more permanent role in the region and the

Indian Ocean's security order for its supply lines, China is quite actively engaged in the security ordering process in South Asia. China is also unnerved by India's growing high-tech-oriented cooperation with the U.S.,<sup>4</sup> as well as India's newly found resonance within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.)—China is especially averse to the Quad and looks at it as a Cold War-era relic (an "Asia-Pacific NATO").<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the diverse regions of interest, it is in East Asia, where the U.S., with its treaty alliances with Japan and South Korea, has been holding strong, that China—the region's foremost resident leader—will be looking to reconfigure the Asian security order. Yet, it is also the most complex region in which to do so.

### **China's East Asian Paradox**

Of the five regions, China has the most paradoxical relationship with the U.S.-led East Asian security order. When the U.S.-led West welcomed China to the Western liberal order in the 1970s, China acquiesced to U.S. security hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. As a result, China has been a significant beneficiary, perhaps the largest in Asia, of the primarily U.S.-led and sustained liberal international order. Economically, this order powered the globalization that has driven much of China's modernization, and the increasingly more networked U.S.-led hub-and-spokes alliance system (HAS) in the Asia-Pacific has helped keep the peace in China's maritime periphery so that it could prosper.

However, this is the flank from which the most consequential security threats emanate for

China's core interests, increasingly driven by expanding Indo-Pacific strategies and actions, because China's primary urban and industrial centers lie at or near its eastern and southeastern shores.

China, thus, has significant issues with the HAS. Also, HAS is more of a security architecture through its firm commitments. However, these issues have been around long before China (re)gained great power status. China already called for revisions in 1997 when it, in a joint declaration with Russia, called for greater multipolarity in the international order, touted Westphalian sovereignty and territorial integrity, spoke of a "new era," and opposed (U.S.-led) security alliances.<sup>6</sup> China thus questioned the U.S. security role and collective security principles long before it regained great power status.

### Changing Security Concepts: Will the GSI Gain Traction?

Importantly, it was in that same year (1997) that China proposed a "new" interpretation of "security," "the New Security Concept."<sup>7</sup> This vision promoted *common security*, in later concepts also referred to as *universal security* and increasingly as *indivisible and cooperative security* (the prior is a concept also endorsed by Russia but with 1970s European origins) and promoted UN/UN charter centrality, multipolarity, multilateral security cooperation, dialogue, and diplomatic and economic cooperation over regional military blocs and military alliances — also known as *collective security*.

However, of late, China has increasingly promoted geographically more ambitious and

marginally more specific security visions in the President Xi administration. These are the "New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation" in 2014,<sup>8</sup> the 2017 "Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation" white paper,<sup>9</sup> culminating in the broad-principles anchor concept GSI in 2022, and the updated 2023 version that calls for global input.

The GSI, an operational work in progress, delegitimizes the U.S.' collective and highly material security approach, which does not espouse security with development or non-traditional security. The GSI may shape perceptions and principles across Asia and the globe, particularly among those disillusioned with the U.S.-dominated international security order and those who want to avoid a destabilizing Sino-U.S. showdown. It may gain traction in Central and West Asia and parts of South and Southeast Asia, undermining the U.S.' role and vision for an Asian security order.

### Assimilating the "Push Factors"

Zooming out from the regional to the continental, in a sense, China is "forced" to adhere to an open-ended multilateralist vision for Asia's security order. The "push factors" run across scope and geography, civilizational diversity, geopolitics, power balancing, and legitimacy. From a security lens, China needs to consider the role of 14 diverse land neighbors and a range of maritime neighbors.

These neighbors include three great/major powers (Russia, India, and Japan), four nuclear-armed states (Russia, India, Pakistan, and North Korea), a "recalcitrant" North Korea, a rising and no-pushover Vietnam, two great

technological powers (Japan and South Korea), and the increasingly more-networked HAS. From a maritime perspective, contrary to the U.S., Europe, and India, China is “boxed in” by rival security allies and partners.

Moreover, contrary to Europe and the U.S. in their respective continents, China must deal with the wardens of four civilizations with distinct characteristics and aspirations: Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, and Western through the U.S. presence and influence—all spread over a gigantic terrestrial and maritime expanse. In addition to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, there are regional flashpoints and territorial disputes, an arms race, intense regional and extra-regional geopolitical rivalry, and an increasing range of non-traditional security threats. Furthermore, many actors, such as India and ASEAN, seek to absorb and dilute Chinese centrality in Asian security ordering through multilateralism.

### **China’s Global South-Oriented Non-Western Forum Outreach: A Game Changer?**

Operating in such a challenging environment, China creatively seeks to create a new Asian security order. One vital way has been to financially and geopolitically influence the Global South countries via outreach through non-Western-led forums such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), as well as through its widespread Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—not just an infrastructural project but a geopolitical tool to undermine the U.S.-led order.<sup>10</sup> Then there is

the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the pan-Asian security forum with the largest number of Asian participants, which China is looking to transform into a security-oriented multilateral platform.<sup>11</sup> Notably, both CICA and the SCO have greater resonance in continental Asia.

Nonetheless, these forums have indeed become the fulcrum of China’s Global South wooing. The expansion of SCO and BRICS as well as the growing interest in being included in these forums, Argentina’s rejection of the BRICS membership notwithstanding,<sup>12</sup> is being heralded in the Chinese media as a sign of “political autonomy” for the developing world.<sup>13</sup>

In the era of receding multilateralism and resurgence of dormant wars (Eastern Europe and West Asia, to name two), as well as the increasing importance of middle/smaller states to major powers, the argument is compelling enough. Moreover, China projects itself as a developing country—something President Xi emphasized at the 2023 BRICS summit.<sup>14</sup> To capitalize on the developmental aspects with continuous stress on building a “shared future for mankind” through solidifying bilateral relations is a part of this Chinese narrative as was noticed in Xi Jinping’s recent visit to Europe, particularly to Serbia and Hungary, if not France. What could appear as a case of twisted logic, perhaps, is China’s self-identification with the marginalized Global South, along with China’s financial clout, which makes it an attractive partner.

But will such a collaboration lead to an Asian security order?

Unlikely, if only due to Asia's sheer geographic size and the multitude of actors, large and small, civilizational wardens, and extra-regional actors' commitment such as the U.S., the EU and the UK. For example, throughout maritime Asia, China operates in a grey area between complicity with and resistance to the U.S.-led security order—the latter's perceived legitimacy by regional countries is robust going by the “exceptional durability” of the U.S. alliances/partnerships, its track record in sustaining a safe Asian maritime environment since the end of World War II, and to balance China.<sup>15</sup>

China has barely been able to undermine this legitimacy. Given China's claims over most of the South China Sea (now a 10-dash line),<sup>16</sup> incursions into disputed waters, and lack of experience in providing public security goods or security guarantees to other states, why would Asian states unreservedly give up a security guarantor, the U.S., for an untested China?

As a result, China needs a sound strategic alternative to the status quo and must abide

by a multipolar maritime Asia that includes the U.S. and other major powers, including Russia, India, and ASEAN. The country's open-ended and processual-oriented security visions reflect pragmatic awareness and acceptance of this reality. However, a plural Asia where external actors, such as the U.S., play a limited role would be Xi's (and the CPC's) strongly preferred outcome.

In sum, even as China progressively enhances the institutional capacity and membership of preferred and near-exclusively Asian security platforms such as CICA and the SCO and conceptualizes newer forms of security initiatives and principles such as common security, it is to be seen to what degree its GSI reverberates among Asia's political and security elites. Xi's ‘Asia for Asians’ call in 2016 mostly fell on deaf ears, but we shouldn't expect the same from the GSI.

*Note: This chapter was first published in The Diplomat on May 18, 2024.*



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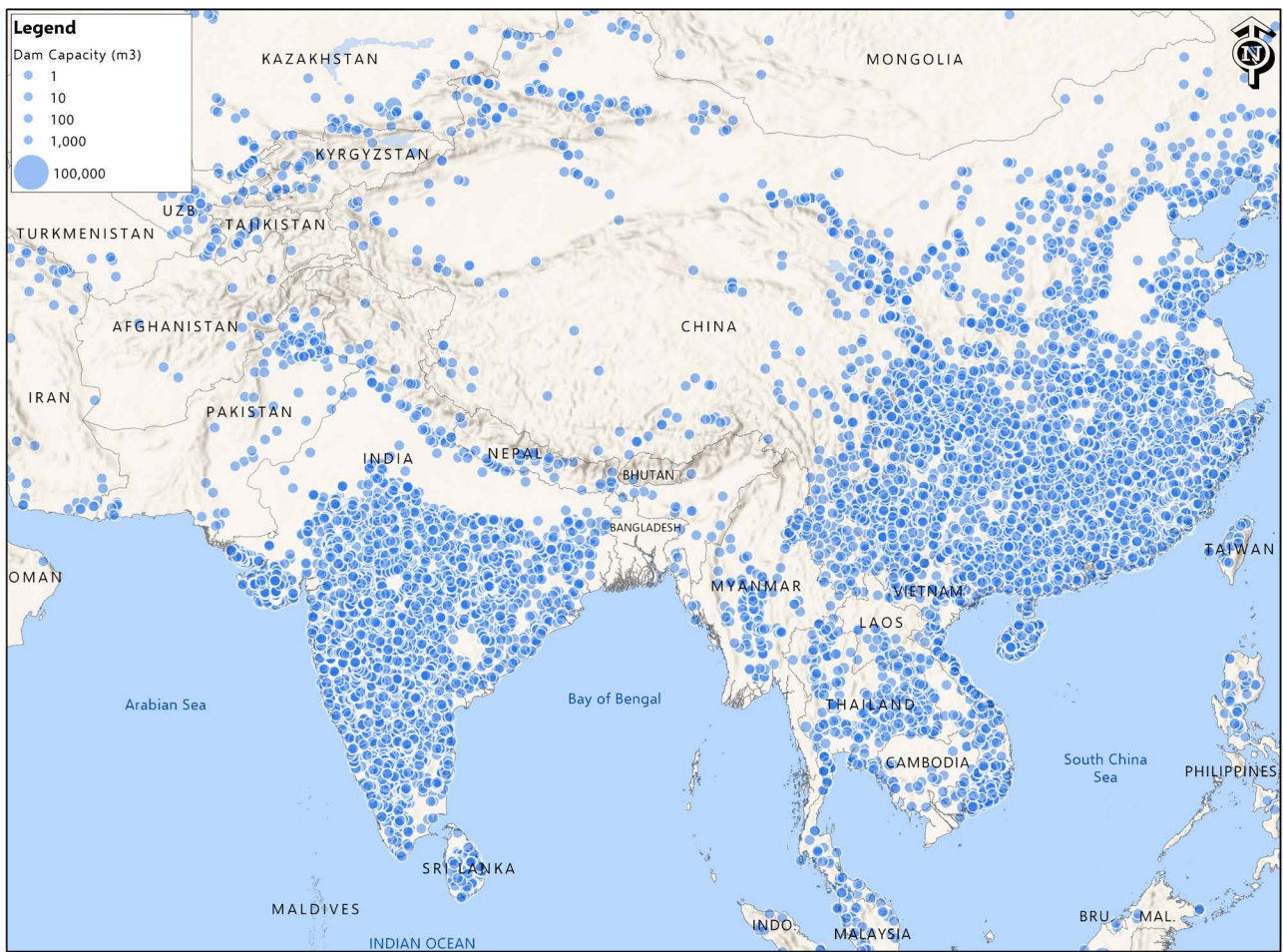
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## SECTION - II

# Himalaya in China's Communist Vision

## Major Dams in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region



This Map is prepared by Dr. Jagannath Panda, copyright: @jppjagannath1.

Source: Global Dam Watch Database Ver.1.0

Map 2: Major Dams of Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region.

# Chinese Leadership Thinking and Decision-Making Process on the Himalayas

**Interview with Shannon Tiezzi,  
Editor-in-Chief, The Diplomat  
By Dr. Jagannath Panda**

## **How does the Himalayan region factor into China's contemporary neighborhood policy? How do you explain Xi Jinping's policy towards the Himalayan region?**

Security concerns are the driving factor in China's Himalayan policy—which makes it something of an exception in China's neighborhood diplomacy. In relations with other neighbors, such as Central Asia and Southeast Asia, China has largely resolved any territorial disputes and settled its borders. The obvious exception is the South China Sea, but even that cannot be said to pose a direct security threat to mainland China. Those maritime disputes are more a matter of national prestige and economic benefit.

The Himalayas are different. China's western regions—Xinjiang and Tibet—are culturally, linguistically, and religiously distinct from the rest of China. Not by coincidence, these regions were also previously independent realms, and from the time of annexation by the People's Republic of China local yearnings for

independence have always existed. In Tibet, this took the form of armed resistance—including with backing from U.S. intelligence—in the 1950s and 1960s. In Xinjiang, sporadic terrorist attacks and mass riots from the 1990s to 2010s underlined the extent of the native Uyghur population's discontent with Chinese rule.

While Beijing has instituted repressive crackdowns on all expressions of Tibetan and Uyghur identity, it remains paranoid about the so-called three evils of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism. China is also well aware that the Tibetan and Uyghur peoples have religious, cultural, and even kinship ties across the Himalayan borders, where PRC policy cannot reach.

China's diplomacy toward its Himalayan neighbors thus aims to cement security in its restive far-west. In Nepal, this means gaining influence with leading politicians, largely through offers of economic largesse, in order to secure promises that Kathmandu will control the Tibetan refugee population. In Pakistan and

Afghanistan (to stretch the Himalayan region to its maximal definition), this means using similar economic carrots to win buy-in for counter-terrorism operations targeting Uyghurs (and China makes little distinction between militants and peaceful followers of Islam).

In India, China has a two-fold concern: Attempting to stymie what it views as Tibetan separatism, emanating from the government-in-exile in Dharamshala, India, while also shoring up its strategic position through creeping advances along the Sino-Indian border. Beijing has direct security concerns related to the precise location of the border, which can impact military logistics in the event of a contingency in far-flung areas of Xinjiang and Tibet.

China clearly prioritizes this concern over softer attempts to influence India and Bhutan, as seen by its willingness to rely on unilateral actions and military force to change the status quo along the border. But, as noted above, even China's "soft" economic diplomacy in the Himalayas is ultimately aimed at achieving national security goals.

**In what ways is China expanding its revisionist goals in the trans-Himalayan region through the BRI projects? What are China's near-term and long-term plans in the Himalayan valley?**

China's Belt and Road Initiative projects in the Himalayan region help advance its security interests, as outlined above. Beijing sees the BRI, with its associated loans and entanglement of Chinese companies in sensitive infrastructure

projects, as a way of expanding its influence.

In the particular case of Pakistan, China also waded into the India-Pakistan Kashmir dispute by going out of its way to make sure the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passed through Gilgit-Baltistan—the northern part of Kashmir, which is administered by Pakistan but claimed by India. In this instance, the BRI serves as a means of consolidating Pakistani control over a disputed border region, mirroring China's own infrastructure build-ups along the Sino-Indian and Sino-Bhutanese borders.

More broadly, China hopes to ingratiate itself with leaders in the Himalayas through the BRI. It has achieved only limited success, however. Despite signing a BRI cooperation agreement in 2017, Nepal and China have not agreed on, much less implemented, a single Belt and Road project—under any of the many governments and parties that have shuffled in and out of power since. In fact, China's attempt to include its construction of the Pokhara International Airport under the BRI umbrella met with significant pushback from Kathmandu.

Rather than concerns about Chinese influence per se, funding has been the major sticking point: Nepal does not want to take on billions in loans, while Beijing is reluctant to commit to grants to bankroll the projects. So the BRI has stalled in Nepal, and with it China's major lever of influence.

Beyond loans, however, engagement with Chinese companies, particularly state-owned enterprises, necessarily requires counterparts to acquaint themselves with China's top-

down, authoritarian model. While China does not explicitly seek to undermine democracy abroad—unlike the former Soviet Union—its non-transparent approach to investment and political decision-making often encourages corruption and autocracy in leaders already inclined in that direction.

The hidden risk of the BRI, therefore, is that partner countries will internalize and adopt China's willingness to trample the rights of citizens in the name of economic "progress"—and embrace China's push to create an alternative world order free from the doctrine of universal values.

**How can the international community, primarily the EU—which considers China a strategic competitor—as well as the United States—for whom China poses a "pacing," existential threat—and its regional allies and partners, including India—China's regional rival that has most to lose in the Himalayas—collaborate to outmaneuver the Chinese strategy for exercising total dominance over resources?**

The most obvious way to counteract China's influence is to offer alternatives to funding for badly needed infrastructure projects, including extraction of natural resources. This is not news to policymakers in India, the EU, or the United States; both the Quad and the G-7 have rolled out their own infrastructure initiatives to rival the BRI.

The difficulty is that this effort cannot be framed as "outmaneuvering China," even if that is

the end goal. Any hint of such a motive will lead to increased pressure from Beijing on the recipients to reject the offer—and could also foster resentment among Himalayan countries that they are being treated as "pawns" in a larger geopolitical struggle.

We have already seen an example of this, when Nepal's parliament came very close to rejecting a USD 500 million grant from the United States due to concern that accepting the badly needed funds would tie Kathmandu to the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is seen as "anti-China."

With that in mind, the EU may be best positioned to offer a neutral alternative to infrastructure funding, as U.S. and Indian aid is often viewed through a political lens and thus can be controversial. "Like-minded" partners like Japan—which has an active infrastructure partnership with India in the Northeast—are other possibilities.

Another key way to avoid the perception that "besting China" is the main objective is to undertake more outreach to understand local needs and desires. This would let Himalayan leaders—hopefully through a consultative process that takes into account the public's view—select priority projects, and thereby provide a refreshing antidote to China's top-down approach.

**What are the ways through which the Chinese activities in the Himalayan states could be highlighted in the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress? What tactics can India, the**

**EU, and the U.S. together employ to undo China's clout in the Himalayas?**

I'll focus on the U.S. Congress. The U.S. legislature is keenly interested in the competition with China at the moment, and regularly holds hearings on related issues. In September alone, the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee held two separate hearings on Chinese influence and great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China also regularly hosts hearings on related issues.

Arranging a congressional hearing specifically

on China's strategy and influence in the Himalayan region could help raise awareness about this issue and how it relates to the broader strategic competition underway in the Indo-Pacific.

Indian think tanks could also partner with their counterparts in the United States and Europe to hold track two dialogues and/or public conferences highlighting these issues. Increased discussion about the problem can pave the way for some of the actions discussed in the previous question.



# Himalaya in Xi Jinping's Security Outlook

Jingdong Yuan

China's rise to great-power status has drawn growing attention from the academia and policy communities alike. Under Xi Jinping, who assumed China's top leadership in 2012-13, Beijing has undertaken a proactive diplomatic agenda to enable it to achieve the ambitious goals of rejuvenating the Chinese nation and realizing the Chinese Dream. China has over the past decade applied both hard and soft power to extend its influence and advance its geostrategic, economic, and foreign policy objectives. It has been actively promoting its models of security governance and economic developments, strengthening and expanding institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation where it wields significant influence, and launching the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that connects China to key parts of the world for investment and commerce, and gains access to resources ranging from energy to critical minerals. Increasingly, the South Asian subcontinent moves from a periphery to a vital piece on China's grand chessboard.

## South Asia in Beijing's Security Outlook

While analyses of Chinese foreign policy have typically focused on the growing Sino-U.S. strategic rivalry and Beijing's diplomatic

entanglements in East and Southeast Asia, in particular the Taiwan Strait, it is clear that South Asia has always featured in the country's foreign relations. During the Cold War, and since the late 1950s until the late 1980s, Chinese diplomacy toward the region was largely driven by its animosity with India due to the unresolved territorial disputes. This informed a policy of supporting Pakistan in its conflict with India and making inroads into the region by providing military assistance to other South Asian states. With the end of the Cold War and the gradually improving bilateral ties with India, Chinese policy toward the region has shifted toward focusing on developing political and economic ties with the region, and pursuing a more even-handed approach to managing its relationships with both India and Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

China's South Asia policy is part and parcel of its overall grand strategy, which aims to maintain regional peace and stability for economic growth; reassure its neighbors through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, and reiterate its intent to follow a path of peace and development; protect its core national interests including sovereignty and territorial integrity; and strive for greater foreign policy influence given the region's (and maritime

South Asia in particular) strategic location in the Indian Ocean, which has become vital for China's energy security and international trade.<sup>2</sup> In particular, three post-Cold War developments in South Asia have influenced Beijing's perception of Himalaya in its security outlook. First, a changing strategic landscape in the subcontinent. The rise of India as a major Asian power presents China with both opportunities and challenges and managing this complex relationship will have a significant impact on whether and to what extent China's South Asia policy can succeed in achieving its key objectives. India's growing security ties with the United States, its participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and its support of a rules-based international order compete with Chinese security interests and norms. With a fast-growing economy in recent years and demographic advantages, India under Modi is becoming a formidable competitor for influence in the Global South even as New Delhi pursues a multi-alignment strategy to form security and economic partnerships with China-wary powers in the Indo-Pacific region: Australia, Japan, Vietnam, among others.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Pakistan's place in China's South Asia strategy has also undergone notable changes, not only in the context of potential Sino-Indian rivalry but increasingly also its crucial role in assisting China with regard to ethnic separatist and terrorist activities in Xinjiang. Increasingly, Pakistan has also become an important piece of the BRI, where the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a critical geo-economic undertaking with significant implications for China's energy security.<sup>4</sup> Finally, maritime South Asia has become a strategically vital

part of China's foreign policy objectives of seeking and protecting energy security and for implementing its ambitious BRI, of which the CPEC has become an important flagship project. The importance of the Indian Ocean cannot be over-emphasized as it carries nearly 80 percent of China's oil imports from the Middle East and the Gulf region, as well as more than half of its exports to West Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>5</sup>

### **India and Pakistan: Rudders in Beijing's Himalayan Strategy**

These developments likely influenced Chinese South Asian diplomacy at the beginning of the Xi administration. Premier Li Keqiang made his maiden overseas trip to the region in 2013, visiting India and Pakistan. This was followed by Xi's own visit to India in 2014, where he met the newly elected Indian Prime Minister Modi. Modi returned the visit in 2015, and there were high hopes that finally, the two countries were to join hands in building an 'Asian century'.<sup>6</sup> However, the early optimism was overshadowed by perennial and increasingly more frequent disputes over their shared 3,440-km border that remains undemarcated and maintained through a Line of Actual Control (LAC). Several border clashes have taken place over the past few years, including, most prominently, the June-August 2017 standoff in the Bhutan-China-India tri-junction of Doklam, the June 2020 clash in the Galwan Valley resulting in at least 20 Indian and four Chinese casualties in 45 years, and the December 2022 clash along the LAC in the Tawang sector.<sup>7</sup> 21 rounds of India-China corps commander level meetings have been held so far and partial detachment of troops near the LAC has taken place. However, both sides have continued to fortify and build up infrastructure

and logistics along their respective sides of the LAC, with significant increases in the deployment of forces and equipment.<sup>8</sup>

The China-India disputes are an important consideration in Beijing's policy toward Islamabad, with three objectives: Seeking Islamabad's assistance in stemming extreme ethnic separatist and terrorist elements posing a threat to China's north-western region and Chinese personnel working in Pakistan; developing Pakistan's infrastructure such as the Gwadar Port and the CPEC; and maintaining defense and security cooperation, while trying to assuage India's concerns and suspicions.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the ties between Chinese and Pakistani militaries remain strong, from cooperation in developing new fighter aircraft to joint military exercises. Chinese assistance to Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs has been well documented.<sup>10</sup> Pakistan is China's largest recipient of arms sales. Between 2019 and 2023, 82 percent of its arms imports came from China, compared to 69 percent in 2014-2018.<sup>11</sup> The CPEC is a 3,000-km network of roads, railway, and pipelines from China's Kashgar in Xinjiang to the Gwadar port in Baluchistan. In addition, power plants, industrial parks, and other infrastructure would also be constructed under the CPEC umbrella.<sup>12</sup> The driving force behind this is China's growing demand for raw materials, resources and secure routes for their transportation to and from the Persian Gulf through Pakistan, to Western China. However, instability in Pakistan and security issues surrounding CPEC projects have caused much delay, increased costs, and raised serious questions about its successful completion.<sup>13</sup>

### **Into Maritime South Asia**

While India and Pakistan remain the focal points of Beijing's Himalayan policy, China has also extended its diplomatic reach into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's perspectives on security developments and its growing interest in maritime South Asia have been informed and influenced by three sets of key considerations. First, China's perceived maritime interests have expanded and constitute an increasingly crucial component of the country's overall economic development due to the rising international trade portion of its gross domestic product (GDP) and its growing energy and raw materials imports. Second, Beijing sees a 'Malacca Dilemma' in the form of a potential bottleneck or at a minimum a node of extreme vulnerability should hostile state(s) seek(s) to block transits of energy and other resources headed to China. And finally, as its dependence on and stakes in access to maritime traffic continues to rise, China is witnessing an expanding internal debate about whether it is a continental or maritime power and, to the extent that it is the latter, how a balance can be struck between asserting China's maritime rights and interests by developing the necessary naval capabilities and not causing unnecessary alarm in the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>14</sup>

While the 1980s and 1990s witnessed Beijing's efforts to expand and promote bilateral ties with a number of IOR countries, including economic assistance and conventional arms sales, China recently has become increasingly involved in developing economic ties with these maritime states, primarily in the form of infrastructure projects building airports, ports, bridges, residential housing, and port cities/commercial centers. Initially, these projects

appeared to aim at developing alternative land routes for oil transports should maritime passages be disrupted.<sup>15</sup> Gradually, Chinese objectives have expanded to creating a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence in Indian Ocean littorals: Chittagong in Bangladesh; Hambantota in Sri Lanka; and infrastructure investment in the Maldives for housing, tourism facilities, and a bridge connecting Male the capital and the country's international airport. The BRI is both the culmination and the platform to further expand and consolidate Chinese presence and hopefully, growing influence in maritime South Asia.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter examined China's strategic interests in South Asia, its approaches to bilateral ties with the region's two nemeses—India and Pakistan, and maritime countries in the region, and its efforts in promoting China's broader geopolitical and economic interests in the larger Indian Ocean Region. While noting that the Himalaya has increasingly become an important consideration in Beijing's security outlook under Xi Jinping, compared to its approaches to relations with Northeast and Southeast Asian countries, and its relations with the United States, Beijing's South Asia policy remains secondary in its overall strategic consideration. At the same time, it is quite obvious that China has become more active, and there have been greater economic ties with, and activities in these countries, and with growing stakes. It would be anticipated that Beijing would seek to promote and at a minimum, protect its growing interests, and to advance its foreign policy agendas.<sup>17</sup> It will understandably use its power resources, or tools

to shape events and affect policies of the target countries to a direction it favors, and hence it should, and probably has exercised influence.

China-South Asian relations, and especially how Beijing develops its policy toward, exercises influence over the subcontinent, and consolidates its position vis-à-vis India, raise four important issues. First, it should go beyond China's relations with India and for that matter, Pakistan, to review the historical contacts Beijing has had with the subcontinent's other countries, and examine the rationale, approaches, and limitation of Chinese efforts in maintaining, expanding, and promoting ties with these relatively smaller countries in what is arguably considered India's sphere of influence. To what extent does China's policy toward India, for better or for worse, influence, facilitate, and constrain its desire and ability to craft its policy toward, and develop relationships with, other South Asian countries? On the other hand, how does China's policy toward the latter inform and reinforce its ties with India, and what specific strategic-diplomatic, economic-commercial, and socio-cultural/ethnic objectives does Beijing want to achieve through the development of these ties?

Second, while there is a strong assumption of the so-called 'all-weather' relationship between China and Pakistan, and especially its origin and continued role in serving the interests of Beijing and Islamabad in constraining India, it needs to take a serious look at its Pakistan policy in response to the challenges and emerging issues facing this special relationship, and in managing the increasingly palpable divergence and different priorities that could and have created frictions between China and

Pakistan. Will Beijing begin to use coercion in addition to inducements and persuasion in managing its relationship of Pakistan? Third, one important variable that can affect China's South Asia policy is the role of the United States, in particular the growing U.S.-India ties since the Clinton administration and perhaps an emerging China-India-U.S. triangle. Changing Chinese attitudes and reactions to the growing India-U.S. partnership are a good indicator of how Beijing assesses potential threats and reflects the level of its growing confidence in New Delhi's foreign policy orientation.

Finally, current literature tends to treat China's policies toward India and South Asia as if

somehow they operate in a particular vacuum and on their own merits. Instead, one must place these policies within the larger framework of China's rising power status, its ambitions and ambivalence, and the priorities of Chinese foreign and security policies in regional and global contexts.<sup>18</sup> Only by understanding Beijing's grand strategy can one more fully appreciate the change and continuity, and the specificities of China's approaches toward the subcontinent. That may provide some indication of whether, to what extent, and how Beijing will seek to exert influence over the maritime South Asian states given their place in China's grand strategy and hence and weight and priority they deserve.

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# China's Tibet Propaganda in the New Era

Filip Sebok

While over the past few years, global attention has justifiably focused on China's repression of Uyghurs and other largely Muslim minorities, the Chinese Communist Party has also stepped up its policies of cultural assimilation in Tibet. One of the key policies has been the substantial increase of compulsory education of Tibetan children in boarding schools with Mandarin curricula, which has been another step in erasing the unique Tibetan culture.<sup>1</sup> Hand in hand with the intensifying policies aimed at eliminating any challenge to CCP rule and PRC's territorial integrity, and imposing its homogenizing narrative of Chineseness, Beijing has also focused on reshaping the narrative around its policies in Tibet towards regional and global audiences.

## Tibet as CCP Propaganda Priority

The controversial nature of China's policies in Tibet has led to the CCP seeing the management of the global discourse on the issue as one of its priorities early on. Tibetan activism has been identified as one of the "five poisons" threatening the CCP rule, and the international relevance of the Tibet issue has presented a particular challenge to the propaganda apparatus. This issue was clear before and during the Beijing Olympics in 2008. The suppression of the

uprising in Tibet at the time led to international outcry, manifesting also in the disruption of torch relay activities before the Olympics.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese propaganda on Tibet has received a new impetus under Xi Jinping, who has put a premium on China increasing its discourse power internationally to deflect criticism of China's policies and actively shape the global debate, including on Tibet.<sup>3</sup> Xi has called for the Chinese propaganda apparatus to innovate in "concepts, content and methods", to better "tell the China story" to the world.<sup>4</sup>

Beijing has published 19 white papers on Tibet since 1992, with a goal to present a government-sanctioned view of the developments in the region. The most recent White Paper on Tibet was published in November 2023, titled "CPC Policies on the Governance of Xizang in the New Era: Approach and Achievements."<sup>5</sup> The document claims positive results in all areas of socio-economic development, including in "heightening the sense of Chinese identity". The White Paper embeds the developments in Tibet into the larger efforts to "rejuvenate the Chinese nation". The document does not, however, discuss the increased use of the boarding school system or other controversial policies.

Beijing has also organized international “Forums on the Development of Tibet,” with the 7th Forum held in Beijing in 2023.<sup>6</sup> These fora, with attendance both from China and abroad, have been used to highlight the success of CCP policies in Tibet, focusing on the economic and social development, protection of culture and environment and the supposed political autonomy of the region. The 2023 forum, for example, highlighted the success of the government in eradicating extreme poverty in Tibet as part of national efforts, with the region previously being the “only provincial-level contiguous poverty-stricken region” in the country.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2024, the Tibet International Communication Center was set up at the *Xizang Daily*, targeting the “telling of Xizang’s story well to the world”. At the opening ceremony for the Center, Tibet’s CCP Secretary Wang Junzheng stressed the importance of “creating a positive external public opinion environment for building new socialist modern Tibet”.<sup>8</sup>

One of the more recent specific techniques of the PRC propaganda on Tibet has been its effort to replace the very name of “Tibet” with the Mandarin “Xizang” in international discourse.<sup>9</sup> The coordinated effort started in 2022 and has aimed at diluting the recognition of Tibet as a separate issue and undermining its international relevance as a region with a history and culture that is distinct from that of the PRC.

### **Delegitimizing the Dalai Lama**

An important feature of the PRC propaganda on Tibet has been its effort to delegitimize the status of the Dalai Lama as a religious and political leader of Tibetan Buddhists, and supporters

of the Tibetan cause both among the Tibetan population and abroad. The “Dalai Clique” as CCP propaganda refers to the supporters of the Dalai Lama, is often linked with the image of old Tibet before Chinese occupation as a feudal system of serfdom in the service of the Dalai Lama when a vast majority of people were living in abject poverty. In contrast, the PRC control is presented as a prerequisite for progress that Tibet has achieved and a cornerstone of stability. In turn, the activities of the “Tibetan separatists” are portrayed by Chinese propaganda as the sole source of social instability and ethnic disunity in the region.

The Chinese propaganda often refers to the Dalai Lama as “a wolf in sheep’s clothing” that seeks to foment secessionist activities and violence.<sup>10</sup> China has strived to discredit the Dalai Lama globally, and prevent officials of other countries from meeting with him, as well as other representatives of the Tibet government-in-exile. For example, Beijing supported a Dorje Shugden movement, an entity associated with the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, in its activism and protests against the Dalai Lama abroad.<sup>11</sup> China has also supported the defaming and smear campaign against the Tibetan leader. For example, Chinese propaganda has taken advantage of and amplified the controversy over a supposedly inappropriate encounter between the Dalai Lama and a young Indian boy that was captured on camera in April 2023.<sup>12</sup> While there is no doubt that the source of the controversy, that became global, was in large part genuine, and the Dalai Lama even later apologized for the incident, Chinese media have embedded the incident into the larger efforts to discredit the Dalai Lama and the cause of Tibet abroad.<sup>13</sup>



With the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama becoming older, the focus of Beijing has shifted to preparing for the issue of succession and the selection of the new Dalai Lama. After the Dalai Lama hinted that his successor might reincarnate in India in 2019, the Chinese government responded that the reincarnation “must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions.”<sup>14</sup> Beijing is claiming sole authority in deciding on the succession, based on the ‘2007 Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas’ issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. The document, among others, stresses that “the reincarnation of a living Buddha shall follow the principles of safeguarding national unity, safeguarding national unity, safeguarding religious harmony and social harmony, and maintaining the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism”.<sup>15</sup> As the succession comes closer, the Chinese government is preparing for the eventual controversy over the succession issue, in which it will strive to present its selection of the new Dalai Lama as legitimate in front of domestic and global audiences, and delegitimize the rival claimant, likely to be chosen abroad.

### Using Foreign Voices

As is usual practice in PRC overseas propaganda, it often focuses on showcasing international support for its policies by highlighting supportive voices among foreign governments, media, academics and other stakeholders. Through these efforts, CCP propaganda seeks to imbue its propaganda with legitimacy, presenting the supportive voices as authoritative and genuine, and representative of a majority global opinion. For example, in August 2023, China invited foreign country diplomats to Tibet via a letter

to the UN Headquarters in Geneva, which was accepted by 11 developing countries, including China’s close international partners – Venezuela, Nicaragua, Belarus, Pakistan, and Cuba.<sup>16</sup> According to the Chinese MFA, “The envoys spoke highly of China’s people-centered development approach and efforts in fully safeguarding human rights of people of all. At the 2023 Forum on the Development of Xizang, the Nepalese Ambassador to China was quoted as saying that “the new journey of Xizang is heading to the correct part of modernization and making Xizang a new Xizang”.<sup>17</sup> In November 2023, China organized a tour for journalists from 22 countries to Tibet, with participants quoted as being impressed by the region’s socio-economic development and the preservation of culture.<sup>18</sup>

In its activities, Chinese propaganda has made use of foreign media to carry its desired messages on Tibet. In his 2022 article on the Tibet propaganda work, the Propaganda Minister of Tibet AR noted success in embedding Tibet special issues in foreign mainstream media, such as *Washington Post* and the *Telegraph*, and inserting coverage of Tibet issues in Chinese diaspora overseas media through “Tibet Today” special editions.<sup>19</sup>

Showcasing the adaption to new technological trends, Chinese propaganda has also made increasing use of influencers,<sup>20</sup> both domestic and foreign to showcase the government-sanctioned picture of Tibet and deflect foreign criticism. These supposedly independent influencers are in fact directly selected and managed by professional agencies, and vetted for their political stance, to ensure they present a

desired picture of Tibet that highlights economic progress, ethnic harmony, and protection of cultural heritage and environment under the leadership of the CCP.<sup>21</sup>

### **Going Forward: Increasing Control**

The policies of the Chinese leadership towards Tibet reflect the effort of further homogenization of identities that are distinct from the centrally defined concept of Chineseness. These policies are developing with the stated objective of improving the socio-economic situation in Tibet, bolstering the unity and stability of this important border region, and ultimately, reinforcing the political security of the CCP rule. In a larger perspective, they reflect the growing importance of the security lens in China's governance under Xi Jinping's comprehensive security concept.<sup>22</sup> Through this lens, any developments in Tibet that would lead to independent development of the culture, religious affairs, and real autonomy would be a direct threat to CCP rule.

With its efforts to popularize the use of the term of "Xizang" and preparing to claim the

right to oversee the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama, China is also increasingly striving to project the image of absolute control over the development in Tibet to the outside world, and diluting any sense of Tibetan cultural and political existence that is not subject to the PRC jurisdiction.

The CCP's efforts to control the Tibetan population do not stop at Chinese borders. Beijing has long pressured the Nepali government which hosts a large Tibetan refugee population to crackdown on any dissident activities in the country.<sup>23</sup> This has been a part of the larger campaign of transnational repression by Beijing which has taken various forms, including surveillance, harassment, and threats to relatives residing in China. While due to its own political tensions with China, India, which hosts the Tibetan government-in-exile, has been more resistant to Chinese pressure over the issue, the problem of the spillover of China's efforts to control the Tibetan population and the international discussion about Tibet merit close observation.

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# Xi Jinping's Revisionism in Tibet: What the World Needs to Take into Account?

Aneta Rothová

## Introduction

Tibet gives China its Himalayan presence, which has always been of strategic importance to whoever ruled from Beijing.<sup>1</sup> The Himalayas separate China from India, the world's most populous country that is increasingly becoming China's rival in competing for geopolitical influence in South and Southeast Asia. As Tim Marshall puts it in his famous book on geopolitics: "If China did not control Tibet, it would always be possible that India might attempt to do so."<sup>2</sup> Hence, the Chinese People's Liberation Army entered Tibet in 1949, definitively defeating the resisting Tibetans in 1951. Over a decade later, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) was created and integrated within the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The Tibetan people tried to oppose Chinese rule. First, during the 1959 uprising and most recently, during the protests of 2008. But Beijing has been undertaking various measures to sustain its hold on the region. What are those measures? And what could be their implications for China's Himalayan neighbors?

Coming from Beijing to Tibet, one cannot help but notice extensive Chinese nationalist propaganda, restricted religious freedoms and freedom of expression, increased surveillance,

and more frequent police and military roadside checkpoints.

To keep its rule and influence over Tibet (along with its borders and natural resources), Beijing needs to keep its power solid. Although there are many ways in which China has been doing so, such as military and infrastructure buildup, this chapter will focus on Beijing's use of propaganda, and control over Tibet's water resources. These developments have implications for India, as it shares borders with TAR and therefore is largely affected by China's policies.

## Beijing's Propaganda of "National Unity", "Ethnic Harmony" and "Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism"

Trying to instill the Chinese nationalist cause into Tibetans, albeit so far unsuccessfully, has become one of the cornerstones of Beijing's approach towards Tibet over the past decade—the effort is to secure Tibetans' loyalty, or at least their support, for the Chinese communist regime.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda is present across the whole TAR. The CCP is trying to frame the narrative of its rule



Monument to the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (*on the far left*) at Potala Square in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, erected in 2002.

(Credit: Aneta Rothová)



Chinese communist monument in central Lhasa depicting the supreme leaders of the PRC: Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping, and Jiang Zemin, commemorating “the 70th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet.”

(Credit: Peter Dosedla [https://www.instagram.com/peter\\_pydyglobetrotter\\_dosedla/](https://www.instagram.com/peter_pydyglobetrotter_dosedla/))

over Tibet as “liberation” or “democratic reform”. Tibetans are prompted to “national” or “citizenship awareness” as “people with national unity are the happiest and a country with national unity is the most powerful.”

There is no roof in Tibet where the Chinese communist flag is not waving, while displaying the flag of Tibet in any form is prohibited. China has been also trying to rebrand the name “Tibet” to “Xizang”,<sup>3</sup> which means “the place of social stability and consolidated border defense.”<sup>4</sup> This highlights the importance of Tibet’s strategic location for the CCP and perhaps its fear of any social unrest or popular uprising by ethnic Tibetans. However, this name has so far only been used in narrative,<sup>5</sup> not as an official name of the TAR.

The CCP is trying to persuade the local people that the regime is providing peace and prosperity: “The grassroots party organization is the key to maintaining the ideology of national unity, leading the people to prosperity, maintaining social stability, protecting the borderland territories, and serving as the fortress of the resolute fight against secessionism.”

Implying that Tibetans should not try to separate from China, the Chinese government is stressing the importance of “protecting the unity of the motherland,” “strengthening ethnic unity” and promotion of “the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.”<sup>6</sup>

Over the decades, China has been using a host of repressive policies to maintain control

over the Tibetan population and to promote Chinese nationalism. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the measures in detail, but to summarize in the words of Tibetan scholar Robert Barnett: “China is indeed minimizing the role of the Tibetan language in schools, insulting the Dalai Lama, denying Tibetan history, persecuting dissidents, relocating nomads, and trying to adapt popular understandings of Tibetan Buddhism so that the religion emphasizes or mimics (“Sinicizes,” as the state puts it) neo-Confucian values, amid numerous other repressive policies.”<sup>7</sup>

It is hard to assess the implications of these policies on the broader Himalayan region. Many Tibetans fled to India, Nepal, and Bhutan throughout the second half of the 20th century, escaping the repressive policies, but an outflow of Tibetans in the following years is highly unlikely. The number of Tibetans escaping from China has decreased in recent years,<sup>8</sup> although it is not clear whether the drop has been caused by a lack of motivation or opportunities. It is true, however, that the Chinese authorities have tightened their grip on Tibetans’ lives through intensive surveillance, border control and restrictions on movement that make it harder for Tibetans to leave TAR. According to reports, ethnic Tibetans often face obstructions and delays when applying for travel documents<sup>9</sup> and academics, religious figures or dissidents can be denied travel.<sup>10</sup>

Out of the Himalayan countries, India holds a special position since it hosts the majority of Tibetan migrants and refugees, including the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration

(CTA). India has been able to use Beijing’s sensitivity to political dissent to its advantage. For example, in 2018 when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held the India-China Informal Summit with Xi Jinping, the Indian government prohibited officials from attending events organized by the CTA to commemorate its 60-year exile in India.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, should the relations between India and China deteriorate on other issues, such as border disputes, India can voice a political message to the Chinese government through its relations with Tibetan dissent. As relations between China and India oscillate between cooperation and conflict, Tibetans are caught in the middle.

### **Control over Freshwater Resources**

China’s use of Tibet’s natural resources can be viewed as another means of exercising control over the region. Tibet is especially rich in water resources as well as solar energy. Eight of the major Asian rivers, including Brahmaputra, Indus and Mekong originate in Tibet, which is why the Tibetan Plateau is often called the “Water Tower of Asia”.<sup>12</sup> With its rivers providing water for more than one billion people,<sup>13</sup> Tibet provides fresh water for approximately 20 percent of the world’s population.<sup>14</sup>

The Chinese government has been trying to make use of this vast energy potential. According to a study by the advocacy group International Campaign for Tibet, there were at least 25 hydropower projects (completed, under construction or proposed) in TAR in 2019.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the major water dam constructions have been on the Yarlung Tsangpo River

(Brahmaputra in India) as it is deemed to have the lowest rate of utilization. The first hydropower station on the river was opened in 2015 and three other projects are underway. China claims the dams are being constructed with legitimate aims of generating clean energy and for irrigation, but the constructions on the Yarlung Tsangpo River has sparked concerns and opposition of not only environmental and human rights activists, but also neighboring countries such as India.<sup>16</sup>

Yarlung Tsangpo River (or Brahmaputra) is of particular importance to northern India, supplying up to 40 percent of its water.<sup>17</sup> However, as a downstream state, India does not have much control over it. Indian authorities have voiced concerns that the Chinese projects could cause floods or droughts<sup>18</sup> if China decided to redirect some of the additional water from the river to its more arid regions for irrigation.<sup>19</sup> China's dam construction has been accused of causing droughts in the past. For example, since 2019, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia have experienced several severe water shortages related to China's Mekong River dams, causing harm to the local agriculture and people's livelihoods.<sup>20</sup>

Although these impacts can be unintended, another concern for India is a deliberate tampering of the water levels or the water quality.<sup>21</sup> As the Yarlung Tsangpo River flows from Tibet into Arunachal Pradesh,<sup>22</sup> a territory disputed by both China and India, there are concerns that China's motive for the construction of the hydropower projects is to strengthen its bargaining position vis-a-vis India.<sup>23</sup> There was one instance in 2017, when the Brahmaputra stream showed signs of contamination, which raised questions about China's upstream intentions.<sup>24</sup> Finally, there are concerns that, should a conflict between China and India arise, China might "weaponize" the Tibetan water resources by cooperating with other downstream states, such as Pakistan, to obstruct Indian interests. Experts warn that such actions could escalate tensions and lead to a conflict involving not only China and India, but the larger Himalayan region.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Acknowledgement***

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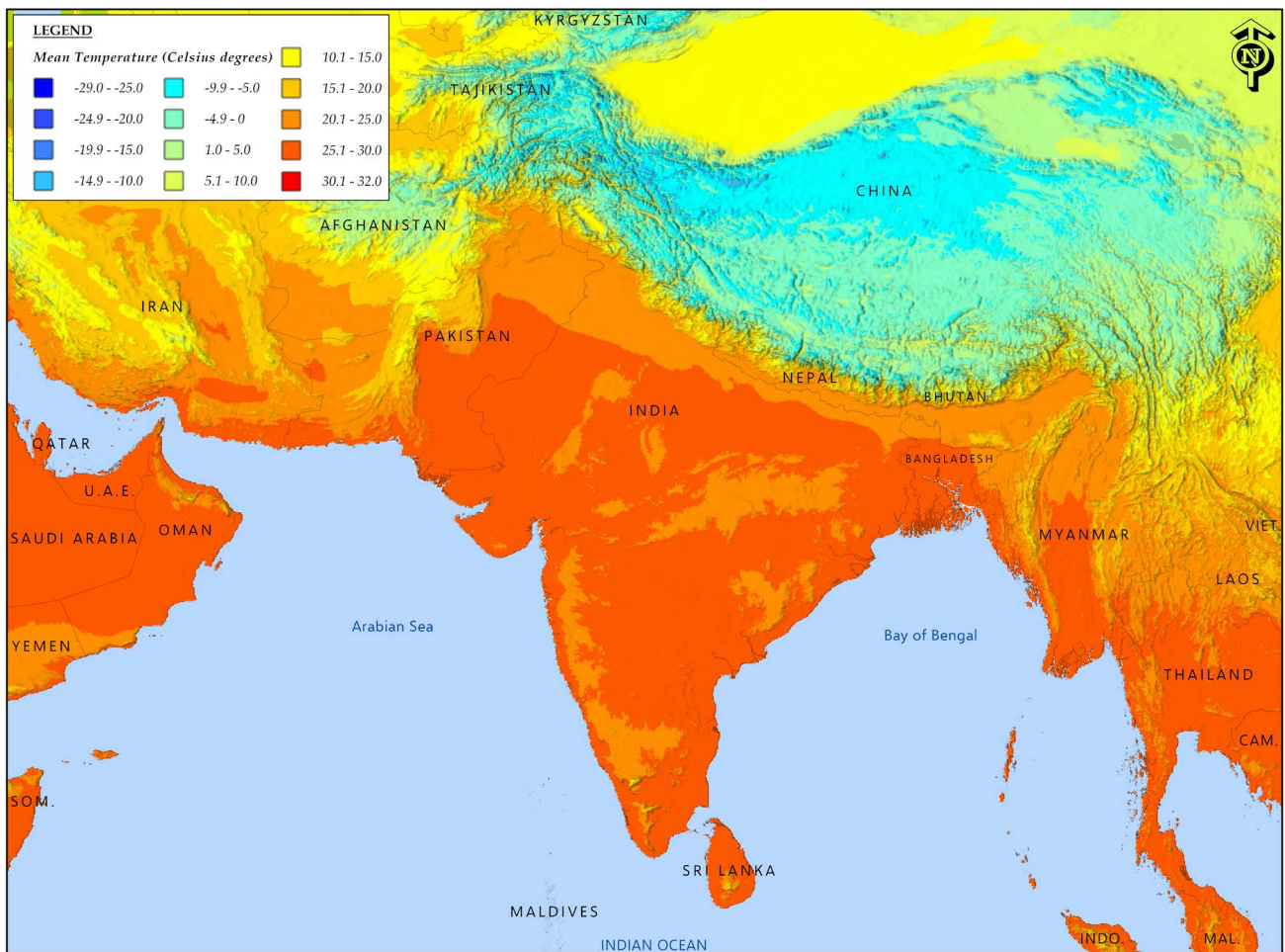
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### SECTION - III

# Sinicization of Tibet

## Mean Annual Temperature in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region



This Map is prepared by Dr. Jagannath Panda, copyright: @jppjagannath1.

Source: WorldClim- Climate Data

Map 3: Mean Annual Temperature in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region

# Religious Oppression in Tibet and its Impact on the Himalayan States

Jonathan Ping and Anna Hayes

## Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) dream for Tibet is to create socialism with Chinese characteristics. The broad suppression of Tibetan culture and religion aims to maintain party authority, and the international community has regarded its extreme, rights-violating methods as cultural genocide since 1950.<sup>1</sup> The repressive policy is rooted in the Qing Dynasty's annexation of Tibet, which informs the CCP's view of the PRC's territorial integrity, despite Tibet's period of independence. Control over Tibet serves the CCP's goal to restore China's past imperial boundaries, a response to the Hundred Years of Humiliation and ongoing border disputes with India over contested territories.<sup>2</sup> Without control over Tibet, the CCP fears that hostile external forces may have an opportunity to impinge on the CCP's China.

## The Sinicization of Tibet

China's interest in Tibet predates the CCP and PRC. In the 1700s, the Qing Dynasty used military force to expand its influence in Tibet, ultimately annexing the region during the Qianlong Emperor's campaigns, along with Xinjiang and Mongolia. After the Qing Dynasty fell, Tibet experienced self-governance as an independent state, ruled by both secular

and Lamaist bureaucracies.<sup>3</sup> Qing colonial conquests shaped China's boundaries and inform Beijing's concept of territorial integrity in the modern state. When the CCP secured victory in the Chinese Civil War, they desired to control the former territories of the Manchu Empire. Despite armed revolts and strong resistance by the Tibetans to renewed Chinese rule, in 1950, Mao Zedong sent the Eighteenth Army of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to 'liberate' Tibet through military force. The Battle of Chamdo occurred in October 6-24, 1950, resulting in Tibet being forced to accept annexation into the PRC. However, the Tibetans appealed to the United Nations to recognize their independence. While their appeal failed (due to British and Indian vetoes), Beijing was forced to acknowledge the Tibetans as a distinct ethno-religious group. This resulted in the Seventeen Point Agreement, which saw Beijing pledge to provide the Tibetans limited autonomy within the Chinese state. However, this condition was only applied to the territory later called the Tibetan Autonomous Region (conferred on September 9, 1965), not the entire Tibetan plateau homeland encompassing parts of Yunnan, Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan.

Post-annexation, tensions simmered, with

periodic outbreaks of guerilla warfare. In March 1959, fearing the Chinese government might arrest the 14th Dalai Lama, a protest-turned-revolt broke out in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa. On March 19, the PLA began a four-day campaign in Lhasa and wider Tibet to crush the riot, and thousands of Tibetans were killed.<sup>4</sup> On March 31, the Dalai Lama fled to India, renouncing the Seventeen Point Agreement and forming the Tibetan government-in-exile (TGiE).<sup>5</sup> The CCP then moved against the theocratic and landed elites inside Tibet, confiscating property and land and closing some monasteries.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the pledged autonomy did not eventuate, and the process of sinicization in the region intensified. Mao Zedong stressed that Tibetans (and other minority nationalities) belonged under the Chinese nationality (*Zhonghua minzu*), a pan-ethnic cultural and political identity aimed at assimilating minority nationalities into the dominant Han mainstream cultural and political identity. Tibetans faced severe violence during the Cultural Revolution, when minority cultures and religious identities were targeted as counter-revolutionary threats to the party, embodying the ‘Four Olds’ (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits). Few monasteries survived this period.<sup>7</sup>

While a large PLA presence remained in the region, there was a relaxation of control within the region in the early years of reform and opening. However, following further unrest (1987-1989), more repressive control returned to the region, including an influx of Han cadres to oversee ethnic Tibetan counterparts and ensure there were no political deviations.<sup>8</sup> Han Chinese entrepreneurs opened many

private businesses in the region, and by 2000, the Han population had doubled.<sup>9</sup> With job opportunities mostly going to Han migrants to the region, the income gap between Tibetans and Han increased, further fueling tensions. These problems were exacerbated by the introduction of the Great Western Development Scheme (2000), which focused on increasing infrastructure and economic prosperity in China’s frontier regions. However, the strategy resulted in what Andrew Fischer called ‘disempowered development’ because the economic benefits of the strategy ultimately went to Han migrants rather than the minority nationalities who were supposed to benefit from the scheme.<sup>10</sup> This led to a further divide in the income gap within the region along ethnic lines. Moreover, the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in 2006 made Tibet more accessible to Han migrants and was an effort by Beijing to ‘bring Tibet closer to China’, thereby further sinicizing Tibet.<sup>11</sup>

During the same period, Tibet experienced cultural genocide with the de-emphasis of Tibetan language and culture within education, alongside a favoring of instruction in Mandarin Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Despite Beijing’s ‘Bilingual Education Policy’ in Tibet, the system favors Han Chinese teachers who do not speak Tibetan, making Mandarin the primary language of instruction, replacing Tibetan.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, state-controlled boarding schools have been established across the region to enable Tibetan children to be removed from family, home, culture and language in a sustained effort at forced assimilation and sinicization.<sup>14</sup> Exacerbating what is lost during the educational experience in Tibet, Tibetan

university graduates also find it difficult to attain employment due to the large numbers of Han migrants in the job market, and they are frequently given jobs in areas outside of their expertise.<sup>15</sup>

After the 2008 unrest, blamed on ‘hostile external forces’, Tibet saw increased restrictions on religious life, tighter controls on monasteries, heightened surveillance, and efforts to ‘seal off Tibet from destabilizing [sic] external influences’.<sup>16</sup> More Han cadres have been sent to the region, and under Beijing’s ‘stability maintenance approach’, political re-education programs, arbitrary detention, and long-term imprisonment have been introduced.<sup>17</sup> There are also accounts of DNA harvesting, iris scanning and the widespread collection of biometric data, like in the Uyghur homeland (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region).<sup>18</sup> After years of Beijing’s failed attempts at ‘buying social stability and popular support in Tibet’, and the resilience of Tibetan Buddhism against Beijing’s sinicization efforts, Tibet remains a persistent issue for Beijing.<sup>19</sup> Under Xi Jinping, Tibetans are increasingly seen as a threat to the CCP, prompting him to call for an ‘impregnable fortress’ around Tibet to ensure ‘national unity’ and stability.<sup>20</sup> Beijing’s focus on Tibet is about more than just domestic matters. As Sarada Subhash identifies, its shared “borders with Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and critically, India, makes it a critical component of China’s securitization strategy in the remote Himalayan regions.”<sup>21</sup> Beijing’s efforts to sinicize Tibet extend beyond domestic assimilation, aiming instead to control Tibet as a key component of its broader strategy in the Himalayan region.

## Motivations of the CCP and Regional Impacts

The CCP is a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party. Vladimir Lenin’s concept of the vanguard party entails an elite leadership maintaining a *constant struggle* for socialism by building a *collective alternative* against *dangerous thought*.<sup>22</sup> The CCP aims to shape the beliefs of the working and peasant classes, indoctrinate them, and unify them in class warfare against an imagined capitalist class.<sup>23</sup> The CCP does not tolerate alternative thought systems. Tibetan Buddhism, like all religions, involves belief in a supernatural power, faith and worship, a moral code, and a community of believers—elements the CCP claims as its exclusive domain. Those who reject the party’s role and its class warfare mandate face re-education or destruction. As a vanguard party with a messianic mission to create socialism, the CCP enforces policies that violate human rights and provoke conflict in Tibet and the surrounding Himalayan states—Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

Thus, Tibetan Buddhism is labelled *dangerous thought*, threatening the party’s authority, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and the PRC’s claimed territorial integrity based on the historical Chinese empire and its perceived hegemony. Celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the party in 2021, President Xi Jinping declared:

Only socialism can save China, and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China ... we will never allow anyone to bully, oppress or subjugate China. Anyone who dares try to do that will have their heads bashed bloody against

the Great Wall of Steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.<sup>24</sup>

However, the people of Tibet disagree, as expressed by the statement of the Kashag on the sixty-fifth anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day:

The Tibetan Buddhist culture which is based on core practice of love, compassion and altruism is pitted against violent and revolutionary struggle built on self-promotion by communist regime ... Ordinary [sic] followers of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet are subjected to constant threat of persecution and hatred ... The Central Tibetan Administration is committed to pursuing the Middle Way Policy to resolve the Sino-Tibet conflict through dialogue. Therefore, we reiterate that the PRC government must immediately cease its misguided policy of eradicating the Tibetan identity and culture ... .<sup>25</sup>

Self-determined development is arguably the most functional rather than a form that is imposed; but under the CCP, Tibetans are denied this form of development.<sup>26</sup> Instead,

Tibetans are coerced into accepting the CCP's socialism, experiencing cultural genocide through sinicization. This affects the Himalayan states, especially India, which hosts the TGiE, as Beijing's anxiety over Tibet and fears of 'hostile foreign forces' in this tightly controlled region have broader negative impacts.

The dysfunctional policies of the CCP, in constant struggle for socialism, enflame territorial disputes and limit Beijing's ability to compromise for mutual benefit.<sup>27</sup> Territorial insecurity undermines state security and acts as a trigger for conflict between nuclear-armed China, India, and Pakistan. Human insecurity in Tibet affects those wanting to leave or who have already departed since the 1950s. Poor infrastructure isolates communities, impeding development, while tensions between China and India hamper global progress. Regional conflicts could destabilize the global political economy. The CCP's policies in Tibet and the Himalayas primarily serve its own interests.<sup>28</sup> Restoring Tibetan culture and religious freedom and mitigating external shocks may depend on ending CCP human rights abuses, a change that could come if the Chinese people pursue these goals themselves.

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# Silencing Tibet: Xi Jinping's Religious Diplomacy and its Implications for the Himalayan Region

Ute Wallenböck

Since Xi Jinping became paramount leader of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2012, his policies have profound implications for the Himalayan region, which encompasses Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) within the PRC. His influence extends across economic development, cultural and religious identity, environmental sustainability, and human rights in the Himalayan region which is renowned for its rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity. And as Tibet has long been a center of Tibetan Buddhism and a cultural bridge between the Himalayan region and China, the activities of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Tibet not only destabilizes the region but also affects the cultural and religious dynamics of neighboring countries. Historically, Tibetan Buddhism has significantly influenced the cultural, spiritual, and social landscapes of the region, and hence the question about how Xi Jinping's policies on religious control affect the relationship between Tibetan Buddhist communities in the Himalayas and the modern Chinese state arises. The reasons for that are manifold: Xi's political assertiveness has led to heightened tensions in border disputes, particularly with India, while his emphasis on cultural assimilation seeks

to align local practices with Chinese socialist values. Tibet's name has already been replaced by 'Xizang' as the Romanized Chinese name on Chinese official diplomatic documents in October 2023. As countries of the Himalayan region contend with increasing Chinese influence, the preservation of their cultural and religious identities becomes closely tied to Tibet's fate. While some seek to distance themselves from Tibetan influence, others aim to leverage its historical prestige.

Xi Jinping's approach to religious politics and diplomacy in Tibet involves a two-pronged strategy of internal suppression combined with external diplomatic efforts. Internationally, Beijing promotes its narrative of freedom of religious belief. As a matter of fact, Article 36 of the Constitution of the PRC assures citizens the freedom of religious belief.<sup>1</sup> It is further stated that individuals are free to "believe in or not believe in any religion," suggesting that for the atheist CPC, this freedom is more about freedom *from* religion than the right to practice it. Moreover, religion "shall not be subject to control by foreign forces." Given that most religions in China originated from abroad, Xi Jinping has scientifically defined the process



by which these religions adapt and become supportive of socialism as ‘sinicization.’<sup>2</sup> This can be described as a combination of state-sanctioned religious teachings and socialist propaganda taught by party-approved clergy, a promotion of political loyalty rather than of spirituality. Thus, domestically, the focus is on controlling and assimilating Tibetan Buddhism to align with CPC goals by fostering relationships and extending China’s cultural footprint throughout the region. China’s approach to religious diplomacy has become a key element of its foreign policy, reinforcing the ‘sinicization’ of religion as essential to the development of religious practices.<sup>3</sup>

Xi, whose wife practices Tibetan Buddhism, and his mother was buried according to the full rituals of that faith,<sup>4</sup> further believes that religion and other aspects of civil society pose significant threats that need to be strictly controlled. In fact, his leadership can be characterized by a significant strengthening of state control over various aspects of China’s society by putting emphasis on China’s dream of the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the CPC has intensified efforts to regulate and oversee religious practices, often framing these efforts as necessary for maintaining national unity and stability. For instance, to separate Buddhism from Tibetan culture, monks are being urged to use Chinese translations of scriptures instead of the traditional Tibetan language.<sup>6</sup> Actually, Tibetan can be seen as a transnational language across the Himalaya due to its religious role. Then, as highlighted in the report of his inspection tour to Qinghai in June 2024, Xi Jinping encouraged the Tibetan Buddhist community

to uphold patriotism, promote religious and social harmony, and contribute positively to Chinese-style modernization.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, as stated by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA),<sup>8</sup> named the ‘government-in-exile’ by the Indian government, Beijing’s rule amounts to “cultural genocide”. Current findings of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) also indicate a rise in surveillance and security measures targeting Tibetan Buddhists, resulting in limitations on their peaceful religious practices. Many Tibetan Buddhists have been arrested and imprisoned for participating in these activities or for possessing materials associated with the Dalai Lama. Some have been sent to ‘political re-education’ camps to deter self-immolation, and reports have emerged of Tibetan Buddhist monks dying while in custody.<sup>9</sup> It can be stated that Beijing promotes Buddhism as a form of soft power to strengthen its influence in Tibet and across the Himalaya, aiming to present a narrative of harmonious governance while undermining the traditional authority of Tibetan religious leaders.

Similar to China, India, the birthplace of Buddhism, utilizes Buddhism for diplomacy and cultural preservation, strengthening ties with Southeast Asian neighbors who share the faith. Delhi views the preservation of Buddhist traditions as essential for enhancing international relations and supporting its diverse population. Moreover, India is the political refuge of the Dalai Lama, leaders of various Tibetan Buddhist schools, and a significant Tibetan population since 1959, and hence sees Tibet largely as a Tibetan Buddhist buffer in the high-altitude Himalayas to counter Chinese

influence.<sup>10</sup> Beijing's influence on Tibetan Buddhism contrasts sharply with India's role, highlighting the complex dynamics between the two nations regarding the Tibetan issue.

Meanwhile, Delhi's support for Tibetan religious freedom as a challenge to its sovereignty and territorial claims, demonstrates its ability to challenge Beijing's position on Tibet and use this issue within its broader geopolitical strategy. The use of India's relationship with the Dalai Lama and the government-in-exile is referred to as the 'Tibet card' to exert pressure on China. One media report went to the extent of saying that the Dalai Lama was in effect the "defence minister for India in the Himalayas" and that the "Buddhist community is the frontline defender for India,"<sup>11</sup> which was denounced by the Chinese state. Then, when in June 2024, U.S. diplomats travelled to India not only to meet the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, but also the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to pressure China on the Tibet issue, which was again strongly criticized by Beijing. In fact, Delhi was signaling a potential change in India's stance on Tibet. Then, on July 12, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden signed the Resolve Tibet Act, which states that Chinese policies are systematically suppressing the ability of the Tibetan people to preserve their way of life. The Act is the U.S.' commitment "to advancing the human rights of Tibetans and supporting efforts to preserve their distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage."<sup>12</sup> This has been seen as interference with China's internal affairs and has been condemned for breaking international law by Beijing. Not only New Delhi and Beijing, but Washington is also now involved in this geopolitical landscape.

Nepal on the contrary, sandwiched between India and China, has been a focal point for Beijing's ongoing attempts to oversee, or at least exert influence over, the appointment of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders. Moreover, Nepal is one neighboring country where China is leveraging Tibetan Buddhism to enhance its regional influence. Beijing has been developing linkages with Nepal since 1955 and has assisted Kathmandu in various sectors, including education, health, culture, and infrastructure development, and moreover Nepal signed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) agreement with China on May 12, 2017.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as part of the BRI, China is developing Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, and has offered Nepal \$3 billion for a tourism project<sup>14</sup> that includes temples, and a Buddhist university. Recently, the relationship between the two countries amid the existing political climate is significantly strengthening. Nepal's government even began suppressing non-political Tibetan cultural expressions, targeting not just Tibetan refugees but also Nepali citizens. Thus, in Nepal, where Tibetan Buddhism has significant cultural influence, China's growing presence has led to increased restrictions on Tibetan refugees and their religious activities. According to the USCIRF report, the legal framework in Nepal imposes restrictions on religious activities, particularly targeting the Tibetan community. The report notes that "the Tibetan Buddhist refugee population has faced continued legal impediments to their right to freedom of religion or belief."<sup>15</sup> These challenges are attributed to the policies and regulations of the Nepalese government, which reportedly constrain and restrict the religious practices of Tibetans, particularly those associated with the Tibetan

Buddhist faith. For instance, China is exerting influence over border monasteries by selectively funding them and pressuring their leaders to align with its ideology. Even in Nepal, Beijing gives strong signals to keep Tibetan Buddhism under the Party's control.

Beijing's policies aim to control and reshape Tibetan Buddhism by promoting Chinese cultural assimilation and diminishing Tibetan religious practices as well as implementing the broader suppression of Tibetan identity. Meanwhile, Xi is using 'sinicized' Tibetan Buddhism to foster a collective we-feeling, thereby potentially

providing a conduit to influence political decision-making. By curbing Tibetan religious and cultural practices, China aims to consolidate its power across the Himalayas, strengthening its geopolitical position and securing its borders against potential dissent. These actions extend beyond Tibet, affecting neighboring countries like Nepal, where China seeks to prevent any pro-Tibetan movements and assert its influence over the region. India, on the other hand, has rethought its position on Tibet. However, both countries use Buddhism as their power tool but with different approaches.

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# China's Stranglehold on Tibet Extends Far Beyond Human Rights

Mark S. Cogan

The phrase “Free Tibet” is so ubiquitous to so many, that it has almost lost its meaning. Why does Tibet need to be freed, and from whom? Tibet has been occupied by Communist China since 1950, after the controversial Seventeen Point Agreement created a semi-independent state, although signed without the authorization of the 14th Dalai Lama. So worried were the Tibetans, that in 1959, a rebellion began where the Dalai Lama escaped and remained in exile. The consequence of that rebellion was an undoing of the tenets of the Agreement and the beginning of decades of social, cultural, and political repression.

Perhaps the most famous Tibetan case was that of Tashi Tsering, the late and well-known educator who in August of 1999 attempted to raise the Tibetan flag in a public square, before being severely beaten by security forces and sentenced to 15 years in prison.<sup>1</sup> The case became a focal point for human rights abuses in Tibet, where, at the time, hundreds of political prisoners languished behind bars, many for their religious beliefs. More than 20 years later, the depth and breadth of Chinese human rights abuses across much of its territory that contains national minorities has increased, as has international pressure

on Beijing to adhere to international norms. Human rights in Tibet has since then become both a *cause célèbre* in continental Asia as well as a matter of international urgency, but Chinese repression of Tibetans remains largely unchanged<sup>2</sup> according to the U.S. State Department in 2023, yet issues of enforced disappearance, torture, or cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishment by the government, arbitrary arrest or detention, a highly politicized judiciary, and a rise in transnational repression against Tibetans now residing in another country have become normalized through regime propaganda, security policies, and persistent interference at the international level.

Recently, the trend of academic and political discussion has seen the issue of transnational repression become a growing concern for China's many minority groups, including the Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang region of Western China,<sup>3</sup> Hong Kongers who fled the once cosmopolitan city after the Umbrella Revolution of 2014 and the implementation of the draconian “Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region” in June 2020<sup>4</sup>, and now as many as

150,000 Tibetans that live outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, including those who have fled to the United States, India, France, Australia, and Canada.<sup>5</sup> According to a 2024 report by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD), the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing puts significant pressure on variety of communities to which it labels “the five poisons.”<sup>6</sup> Tactics include the weaponization of relatives in Tibet by means of threats, harm or various forms of manipulation, as well as instances of surveillance conducted on foreign soil by Chinese nationals, particularly of diaspora groups. As is the case in Hong Kong, intimidation also includes attempts to undermine the livelihoods of Tibetan exiles, including the prohibition of foreign remittances or money transfers from relatives.<sup>7</sup>

Tibet, like Xinjiang and Hong Kong, is of major significance to Beijing, even though individual and group identities are not characteristically Chinese. In the years after Hong Kong’s reunification with China after 99 years of British control, Hong Kongers developed an identity of their own, rather than categorizing themselves as Chinese. Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang, a sparsely populated, far-flung region which borders the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are of Turkic heritage, and often refer to the region as East Turkistan.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Tibetans do not consider themselves Chinese and also inhabit a vast, largely unpopulated region. The commonality of the three—which are all distinct—is that each poses both an internal and external security risk to Communist China and each contains assets of irreplaceable value to Beijing and the world.

### **The Challenges for Beijing**

The security challenges for Beijing are extraordinarily complicated with regard to Tibet, as China has long accused its rival neighbor, India, of interfering in its internal affairs and supporting what it deems “Tibetan separatists.”<sup>9</sup> As its border dispute with New Delhi has flared up, with Tibetans actively serving in India’s Special Frontier Force (SFF),<sup>10</sup> Beijing has spent additional resources and attention on the region. Plus, like in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, China has feared that the pursuit of autonomy in Tibet would both weaken its position and internal legitimacy, and ostensibly, start a chain reaction of separatism that would destabilize mainland China.

The other concern for China is the preservation of Tibet’s vast natural resources, of which the water supply in the Tibetan Plateau has been described as the “Water Tower of Asia,”<sup>11</sup> where despite some political scientific controversy to that affixed label, it provides freshwater to approximately 2 billion people and supports ecosystem services for many of the major rivers in China, including the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. However, climate change has begun to threaten the natural resources that the Tibetan Plateau has for mainland China. Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has connected it to many of the fastest growing Asian economies (Kyrgyzstan and Bangladesh) and its slowest (Pakistan), but these same economies—including China’s rivals—rely on the freshwater runoff that is now under considerable stress.<sup>12</sup> As the meltwater that protects Asia from severe drought declines due to climate change,<sup>13</sup> China has added impetus to defend what it has repeatedly claimed as

its own since the Mao Zedong era.<sup>14</sup> While China's reputation in other parts of Asia has soured over its damming of the Mekong River, Tibet plays an important role in ensuring national food security, particularly through robust agricultural production. However, the two challenges for Beijing—national security and food security—collide in Tibet, given its proximity to rival India and the prolonged dispute over Ladakh and a nearly 1,600 kilometer Line of Actual Control (LAC) that marks the contested boundary between two. Any movement by New Delhi that would interfere with either threat to mainland China will have serious implications for Tibet.

### **China's Anti-Human Rights Strategy**

At the international level, China maintains control over Tibet through a thorough understanding of the many weaknesses of human rights enforcement mechanisms, particularly by the United Nations. Quite simply, the UN is still based on the notion of sovereign equality and China leans heavily on a strict interpretation of Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, where other member-states are not authorized to “intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.” While not directly connected, China repeatedly uses similar language when subject to criticism by other member-states. For example, when the Biden administration passed legislation urging resolution to the Tibet-China dispute, Beijing insisted that the United States “cease using Tibet-related issues to interfere in China's internal affairs and to avoid actions that could harm Tibet's development and stability,” also referencing the possibility of sparking a pro-independence

movement and an increased threat of “anti-China separatist activities.”<sup>15</sup>

That same strategy is also employed when China faces challenges to its human rights records, through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which takes place every five years, or through various UN Treaty Bodies, which accompany any treaty to which China is a party to.<sup>16</sup> Knowing the mechanism well since its first UPR in 2009, China has managed to avoid the brunt of major criticism of its poor track record in Tibet, with just 23 states making critical recommendations at its latest UPR in 2024.<sup>17</sup> And while the uptick in the number of states appears promising, it is the equivalent of fool's gold in reality.

It is commonplace for China to augment the progress made from previous UPR cycles, but also issue periodic National Reports that provide little to no substantive measurement. In the 2024 UPR held in January, China did not mention Tibet specifically, but in response to recommendations made by other member-states, China noted that it upholds “the equality of all ethnicities, [and] respect[s] the religious beliefs of the people and protect the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic groups. We are cracking down on all types of illegal and criminal behavior in order to maintain the long-term stability of society”, the latter sentence a reference to the ongoing security challenges mentioned earlier.<sup>18</sup> Instead, China directs attention to a larger aim, which the CCP under Chinese President Xi Jinping, has deemed a “great rejuvenation” where all Chinese territories “follow a Chinese path of human rights development, actively participate

in global human rights governance and promote all-around advancement of human rights.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, in response to the recommendations made in 2024 by mostly Western states, China grouped Tibet into the same category as other ethnic and political minorities, and reiterated that Beijing’s positions on minority issues were about “safeguarding the national sovereignty, security and unity of China” and accused other UN member-states of “weaponizing human rights issues.”<sup>20</sup>

The other tactic employed by China has little to do with human rights on the surface, but Beijing’s emphasis on robust bilateral relations. China has long engaged in no-strings-attached development ties with African states over the course of decades, slowly shaping outcomes such as the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> With the lone exception of a brief rejection of China’s attempt to erase Taiwan from recognition in the Pacific Island States (PIS), Beijing maintains an ironclad of alliances globally that mitigates the potential challenges to its record on the international stage.<sup>22</sup> Central Asia is a case in point. Chinese foreign policy in recent years has been reassessed and rebranded with a greater role for what it has called global governance, a poor euphemism for a more sinister mechanism for empowering institutions that can undermine the post-war international order. For example, China created the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2022<sup>23</sup> and quickly reached out to Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the former of which experienced political unrest that unnerved the CCP. Using mechanisms and institutions like the GSI not only shore up anxieties over separatism and political

instability in Tibet and farther to its western frontier, but they provide aid and cover to states with similar internal security problems.

### The Path Forward

By creating both interdependent and dependent relationships in different corners of the globe, China not only has built up a seemingly legitimate defense against Western human rights norms, but also creates a phenomenon known as norm diffusion, where the impermissible patterns of behavior are slowly disrupted over time, negating decades or even centuries of “ripened” international norms. The conventional wisdom is that the degree of diffusion of international human rights norms depends on domestic and transnational actors who set the conditions for change.<sup>24</sup> While ostensibly outdated now, the strength of the networks and international institutions are supposed to increase pressure on the norm-violating states through “moral consciousness-raising”, and challenge norm-violating governments by creating a transnational structure to pressure governments from “from above” and “from below.”<sup>25</sup> China has interrupted this process by targeting countries that are both above *or* below, or whether they are major trading partners or have minimal bilateral relations with Beijing. The difficulty in combating this kind of norm diffusion is that it requires a similar effort by Western governments to challenge the diffusion of international human rights norms by providing reasonable or equitable alternatives to governments who have already been recipients of Beijing’s development assistance or that now have had access to infrastructure loans. In Central Asia, the GSI offers states flexibility,



but also the risk of becoming dependent on China. In theory, as Southeast Asian states have found along the Mekong River countries, with the exception of Laos and Cambodia, it became more prudent for each to balance their options by also enhancing ties with the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

With the scale of China's investments from the Indian Ocean and across the Pacific Ocean, it will be nearly impossible to compete with

Beijing's investments, but through smarter bilateral ties, particularly in creating reasonable alternatives and establishing the groundwork for a long-term, stable economic partnerships, the current international order will be able to preserve the integrity of the international human rights system, and present a formidable challenge to China's attacks on Tibetan and other ethnic minorities at the international level.

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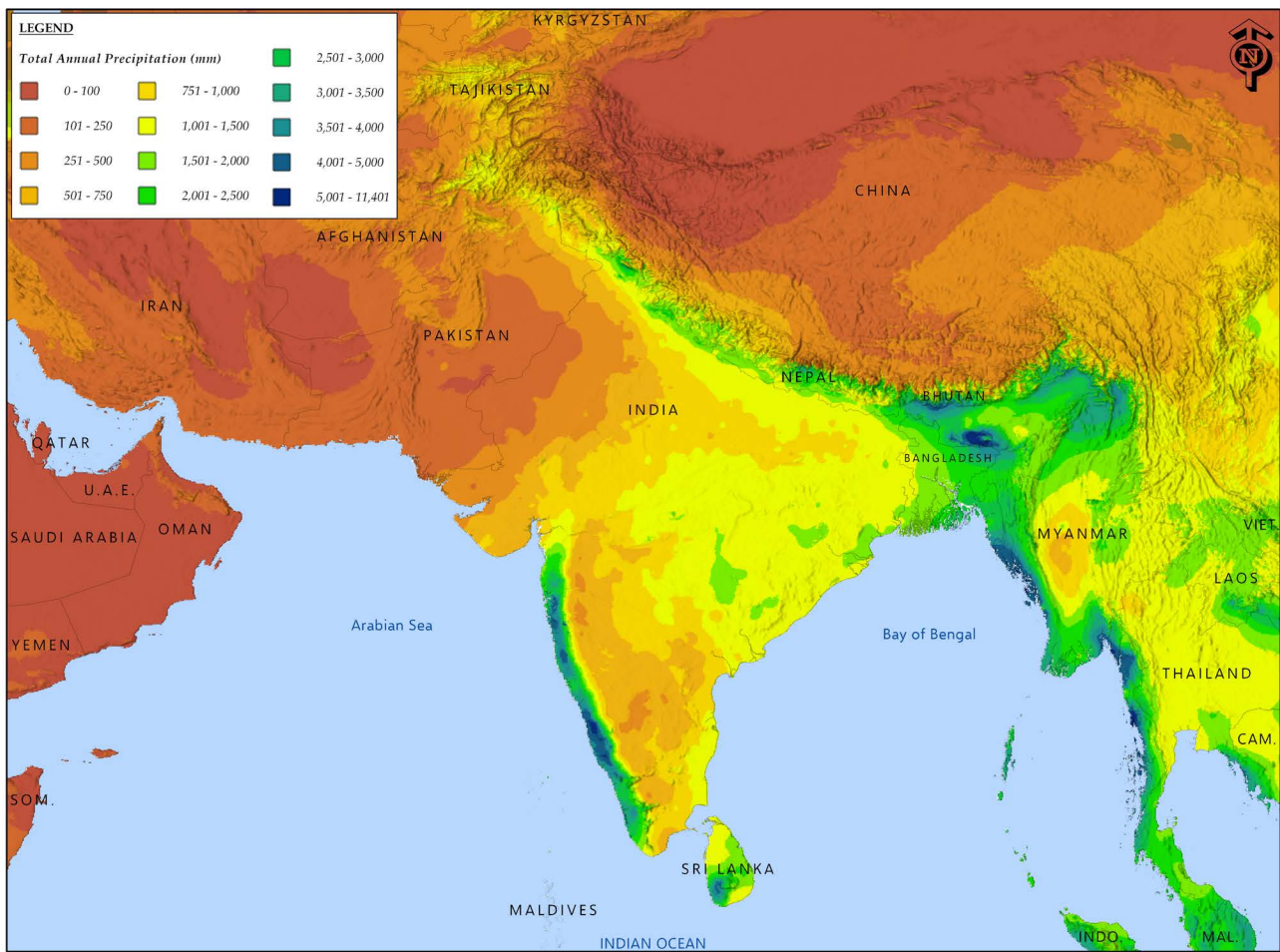


Photo credit: Daniel Prudek / Shutterstock

## SECTION - IV

# Between PLA's Muscle and China's Hustle

## Total Annual Precipitation in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region



This Map is prepared by Dr. Jagannath Panda, copyright: @jppjagannath1.

Source: WorldClim- Climate Data

Map 4: Total Annual Precipitation in Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) Region.

# People's Liberation Army: A Chinese Pivot in the Himalayas?

Niklas Swanström

The Sino-Indian border has been under a great deal of tension since 1962 when the border experienced the first large-scale armed conflict, a conflict in which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Communist Party of China came out victorious. Since then, a precarious relationship between China and India has been ongoing, with some years of cooperation combined with military tension and always much suspicion. This chapter will not try to explain the relationship between China and India or to propose solutions to the conflict. Instead, it will examine how the PLA has been used in an increasingly assertive Chinese strategy to consolidate its claims in the Himalayan region and generally against India's interests.

A part of the PLA strategy has been to keep the proverbial teapot boiling to ensure that tension remains and that the claims from the Chinese side are kept alive. This is partly done by protesting and countering India's actions and ensuring that troop movements have been triggering the Indian side. This strategy is, of course, something that Beijing would vehemently deny. They see themselves as the region's stabilizing force and as providing a positive balance to India. The Chinese strategy is directly connected to national Chinese

law that is used to legitimize the claims and effectively reduces the impact of international law. The actions from the PLA and by extension the Chinese government is nothing different from the strategies that have been used in the South China Sea, over the Taiwan Straits, and disputes over other territories that China argues are inseparable parts of China, or legitimate Chinese interests.

To effectively ensure such strategy China, and the PLA, has isolated the issue and ensured that it is not internationalized, very much in line with other Chinese border and interested conflicts. Keeping it warm but refraining from escalating the issue to a military confrontation until it desires would be in China's interest.

## What Has PLA Actively Been Doing?

The PLA's most obvious actions are the military operations conducted between India and China, but many authors have covered these elsewhere, and a simple search on the web can inform an interested reader. What is important to understand is how these operations have effectively established a Chinese advantage in the region, ensuring more maneuverability from the PLA, as well as securing the relative strategic advantage the PLA has over the Indian Armed Forces.

China, often through the PLA, has been building a permanent presence in the Himalayan region that has not only increased the PLA's strike capability but also improved social and economic infrastructure in the region. The Chinese side has developed a coherent strategy for using the PLA to construct infrastructure that could be of dual use. It should be noted that this development is not seen by the author as necessarily negative or positive, but the impact has had some very important strategic advantages for the PLA.

China has sent hundreds, if not thousands, of PLA troops with what is considered road-building equipment, and it is beyond doubt that the PLA constructs on disputed territories to enforce territorial claims and improve operations in the region. This strategy is not too different from the maritime strategy China employs through the Chinese navy, which constructs infrastructure in the South China Sea to enforce its legal claims and support functions. This has connected the villages and cities of Tibet with the rest of China, but also created an economic and social development in Tibet that is rather substantial and in diametrical contrast to the Indian failure to create socio-economic development on its side. This does not only have a strategic advantage, but also a socio-economic impact that is undeniable.

As part of consolidating its control and ability to counter India militarily, China has been investing in establishing a large number of dual-use facilities, such as airports and heliports.<sup>1</sup> This is connected to the overall transport network that China has been successfully constructing to connect every corner of China

with each other. This significantly improves the PLA's logistical capabilities and ensures a rapid stream of troops in and out of the region when increased troops or rotations of forces are needed.

Additionally, it has been noted that after the clash in 2020, the PLA has been constructing defensive positions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to support a strengthened PLA engagement in an operation known as the 506 Special Mission.<sup>2</sup> The results of this have been termed by the U.S. Department of Defense as a "large scale mobilization and deployment of PLA forces along the LAC".<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the PLA positioning and construction of reinforcement positions, see Dennis Blasko's excellent analysis of the region.<sup>4</sup>

It is estimated that there are around 40,000 troops stationed in the Tibet Military District, a figure probably greatly underestimated when considering support functions, border police, paramilitary units, People's Armed Police, and counter-terrorist forces focusing inwards toward the Tibetans. To that, should be added the possibility of quickly rotating a large proportion of the estimated 235,000 troops that are in the Western Theater Command of its 2,000,000 large armed forces. With the improved infrastructure, these troops, and extensive military material, are accessible when needed.

The large number of Chinese troops in the Tibet region also makes it easier to control possible domestic riots, not least from Tibet nationalists, but also helps the Chinese government in the process of Sinicization of the region. The

Tibetan support is prompted not only by force; the Tibet Military District has five Tibetan Major Generals in prominent posts along with 7,487 Tibetans on active duty as of 2020,<sup>5</sup> of which most, if not all are stationed in Tibet, according to private conversations. By making the Tibetans involved in the defense of Tibet, it is hoped that they could be used to both stabilize the border but also create stabilization internally in Tibet.

The PLA investments in the region has not only had a military impact, but the secondary effects have had a positive impact on infrastructure and economic development, and this is on average far better on the Chinese side than on the Indian side, which puts China at an advantage, not even considering the geographical advantage. A 2023 study comparing Ladakh and Tibet revealed that Ladakh was behind in all areas, including GDP/capita, military resources, and infrastructural development.<sup>6</sup> In Tibet, this is evident by looking at the railway and highways that not only connects the Himalayan region to the rest of China, but also connects the PLA infrastructural development with the overall development. It has to be noted that the economic impact is broader than the simple military effect, something that could partly be attributed to the PLA efforts. The total road mileage in Tibet has gone from 7,300 km in 1959 to 118,800 km in 2021, resulting in an expansion of five kilometers per day on average. This development has been given additional support through the 2020 Work Symposium, headed by President Xi.<sup>7</sup> Significant new infrastructural networks that connect the region to other military areas in China and possible trade infrastructure include the extension of the

road in the Chumbi Valley to the Doka La Pass and the Hotan-Shigatse railway line, to mention only two of many.

### **What is the Future Direction?**

Chinese analysts have been clear that the U.S. engagement with India, starting with the U.S.-Indian exercises in the Himalayas in August 2022, is a provocation to Chinese legitimate concerns and instills fear in Beijing of a two-front war in the Straits and the Himalayas.<sup>8</sup> The response from China has been resolute, but not desperate, with improvement of the troops and equipment. Currently, we have the 52<sup>nd</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Mountain Brigades and 85<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Brigade that are specialized on high-altitude warfare in the region, but most importantly there is a secure infrastructure in place that could provide rested troops, equipment, food, etc., something that Chinas “enemies” do not have to the same extent. This chapter has not even been looking at the new units that will be attached to the disputed areas in terms of the new types of warfare, for example cyberwarfare, or the aerial units that are quickly being attached to the Tibet Military District.

What has been most striking, up to date, with the PLA in the disputed, and bordering areas, is the rapid development of infrastructure, not only in terms of bases and forward positioning but also transportation, aerial and land. It would be easy to dismiss this as having only important military implications, but it will connect Tibet with the rest of China and ensure a close socio-economic connection, for better or worse. It seems plausible to assume that the influx of further investments will ensure a stable development for the PLA, reinforcing its military prowess

but also Beijing's socio-economic control over the region, and bordering areas, such as Nepal.

Is this then a concern? China and the PLA have been balancing India, and vice versa, but the trend is towards the negative. Xi did not participate in the G20 meeting in India in September 2023, a clear indication that China is not sure about its future relations with India. We can see investments in infrastructure and military units in the region that indicate concern. The impact is not only on the military side, water scarcity in the area, being only one example of this, recently making the residents of the village Kumik on the Indian side of the LAC relocate—the possibility of more deserted villages could mean another advantage point

for the PLA.<sup>9</sup> With the improved Sino-Russian relations, it is plausible that competence and manpower of the PLA will be directed to the Indian border rather than the Russian.

It is increasingly evident that the PLA will enjoy a number of advantages in relation with its Indian counterpart and India has been slow in relative terms to react to the Chinese changes. It is also evident that Beijing is not interested in resolving the issue other than enforcing Chinese claims or escalating it too much. This indicates continued instability and “salami slicing” in the Himalayas, where the PLA will be a primary tool, similar to the PLA Navy in the South China Sea.



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# The Role of the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in China's Himalayan Strategy

Brian Iselin

The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) plays a crucial role in China's strategy in the rarified Himalayan region, where military, geopolitical, and strategic interests converge. As China seeks to secure its borders and assert its influence in South Asia, the PLAAF's contributions have become increasingly significant. This chapter examines how the PLAAF supports China's broader objectives in the Himalayas through its airpower, infrastructure development, missile defense, and surveillance capabilities. By focusing on the PLAAF's specific functions, this analysis underscores the importance of air power in China's military posture in this region.

## Airbase and Infrastructure Development

China's strategic emphasis on the Himalayan region demands a robust and resilient infrastructure capable of supporting sustained military operations in incredibly difficult conditions. The PLAAF has played a leading role, and spearheaded the construction and upgrading of airbases and heliports across the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Xinjiang, regions characterized by their challenging high-altitude environments. These developments are essential for maintaining a

strong military presence and for enabling rapid responses to potential conflicts along the border with India.

Since 2017, China has established or renovated 37 airports in these areas, with 22 of them serving military or dual purposes.<sup>1</sup> In 2022, it was noted that China is constructing three additional airbases in Xinjiang, close to the border with India.<sup>2</sup> The PLAAF's focus on infrastructure development in such inhospitable terrains demonstrates its strategic foresight in overcoming the logistical challenges posed by the Himalayas. These airbases are not merely defensive installations; they serve as critical hubs for the rapid deployment of forces, logistics management, and sustained air operations. The high-altitude bases, such as those in Ngari Gunsa and Hotan, are strategically positioned to facilitate quick mobilization and provide logistical support for both routine patrols and emergency deployments.

The expansion of airbases also allows the PLAAF to enhance its power projection capabilities across the region. The strategic location of these bases provides China with the ability to exert influence over key areas, such as the Aksai

Chin region and the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This infrastructure supports not only the movement of troops and supplies but also the deployment of advanced aircraft, thereby ensuring that China can maintain air superiority in the region. Additionally, the presence of dual-use airports underscores the PLAAF's ability to integrate civilian infrastructure into its military strategy, thereby extending its operational reach and flexibility.

The logistical aspect of these developments cannot be overstated. The high-altitude terrain of the Himalayas presents significant challenges, including thin air that reduces aircraft performance and the need for specialized equipment to operate in extreme weather conditions. The PLAAF has addressed these challenges by investing in technologies and infrastructure that mitigate the impact of altitude on both personnel and equipment. For instance, the use of specially designed oxygen systems and acclimatization protocols for pilots and ground crew ensures that the PLAAF can maintain operational readiness at these altitudes.

The infrastructure built by the PLAAF is also instrumental in supporting other branches of China's military, such as the People's Liberation Army Ground Force (PLAGF). The interconnected nature of these facilities means that the PLAAF plays a central role in ensuring the overall effectiveness of China's military operations in the Himalayas. By providing logistical support, rapid deployment capabilities, and air cover, the PLAAF ensures that ground operations can be conducted with the necessary speed and efficiency, thereby enhancing China's overall strategic posture in the region.

### **Missile Defense and Air Superiority**

The PLAAF's role in China's Himalayan strategy extends beyond infrastructure; it is also integral to the country's missile defense and air superiority efforts. The deployment of advanced missile systems, such as the HHQ-9 long-range surface-to-air missiles, has significantly enhanced China's ability to secure its airspace and deter potential threats from India.<sup>3</sup> These systems are strategically placed to protect key military installations and infrastructure, thereby reinforcing China's defensive perimeter in the region.

The HHQ-9 missile system, modeled after the Russian S-300, provides the PLAAF with a formidable air defense capability. It is capable of intercepting both aircraft and incoming missiles at various altitudes, making it a critical component of China's layered air defense strategy. The deployment of such systems in the TAR and Xinjiang regions underscores the importance that China places on securing its western frontiers. The strategic positioning of these missiles ensures that China can maintain air superiority over contested areas, including those near the LAC.

In addition to air defense, the PLAAF's missile capabilities contribute to its broader strategy of deterrence. The ability to launch precision strikes against key Indian targets serves as a powerful deterrent, preventing escalation by demonstrating China's capacity to inflict significant damage in response to any aggression. The PLAAF's missile arsenal, particularly the Dongfeng (DF) series, includes missiles with ranges extending from 180 kilometers to over 13,000 kilometers.<sup>4</sup> This extensive range

allows China to target critical Indian military installations with limited warning, enhancing its offensive capabilities and reinforcing its strategic posture in the region.

The PLAAF's missile defense systems are also complemented by its advanced fighter aircraft, which are equipped with the latest avionics and weaponry. The Chengdu J-20 stealth fighter, for example, represents a significant leap in China's air combat capabilities. This aircraft is designed for high-altitude combat and is equipped with sophisticated radar-evading technologies, making it a formidable adversary in the region.<sup>5</sup> The integration of such advanced aircraft into the PLAAF's arsenal ensures that China can maintain air superiority even in the challenging conditions of the Himalayas.

The combination of missile defense systems and advanced fighter aircraft provides the PLAAF with a multi-layered approach to air superiority. This approach not only secures China's airspace but also allows for the projection of power beyond its borders. The ability to conduct air patrols, enforce no-fly zones, and engage in electronic warfare further enhances the PLAAF's dominance in the region. These capabilities are crucial for maintaining the balance of power along the LAC, where tensions between China and India frequently escalate.

The strategic importance of the PLAAF's missile defense and air superiority efforts is further highlighted by the ongoing military buildup in the region. As India continues to modernize its own air force and missile capabilities, the PLAAF's ability to counter these developments is critical to maintaining China's strategic

advantage. The deployment of the HHQ-9 and other advanced systems serves as a clear signal to India that China is prepared to defend its interests and respond to any perceived threats with overwhelming force.

### **Airlift and Rapid Deployment Capabilities**

One of the most significant challenges faced by any military force operating in the Himalayas is the logistical difficulty of moving troops and equipment across the region's rugged terrain. The PLAAF has addressed this challenge by developing a robust airlift capability, which is essential for ensuring that China can rapidly deploy forces to key locations along the LAC.

The PLAAF's fleet of transport aircraft, including the Y-20 heavy transport plane, plays a critical role in this effort.<sup>6</sup> The Y-20, capable of carrying large payloads over long distances, is designed to operate in the high-altitude environments of the Himalayas. This aircraft enables the PLAAF to quickly transport troops, armored vehicles, and other critical supplies to remote areas, thereby ensuring that China can respond swiftly to any military developments along the border.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the Y-20, the PLAAF uses a range of other transport aircraft, including the Il-76 and the Shaanxi Y-9, to enhance its airlift capabilities. These aircraft are equipped with advanced navigation systems and reinforced airframes, allowing them to operate in the harsh conditions of the Himalayas. The ability to airlift heavy equipment, such as artillery and armored vehicles, directly to the frontline provides China with a significant tactical advantage, as it reduces the time required to

reinforce positions and respond to potential threats.

The PLAAF's airlift capabilities are not limited to the transportation of troops and equipment. They also include the ability to establish and maintain forward operating bases (FOBs) in remote areas. These FOBs serve as critical nodes for sustaining long-term military operations, providing a base of operations for air and ground forces alike. The PLAAF's ability to quickly establish these bases in contested areas is a key component of China's broader strategy to assert control over disputed territories.

The strategic value of the PLAAF's airlift capabilities is further underscored by the need to maintain supply lines in the Himalayas. The rugged terrain and harsh weather conditions make ground transportation slow and unreliable, particularly during the winter months when many roads become impassable. The PLAAF's airlift capabilities ensure that essential supplies, including food, ammunition, and medical equipment, can be delivered to frontline troops regardless of the conditions on the ground.

The PLAAF's airlift capabilities are further complemented by its helicopter fleet, which includes the Z-20 and Mi-17 helicopters.<sup>8</sup> These helicopters are essential for conducting air assaults, medical evacuations, and reconnaissance missions in the mountainous regions of the Himalayas. The ability to deploy helicopters for rapid insertion and extraction of special forces provides the PLAAF with a flexible and responsive means of addressing emerging threats along the LAC.

The integration of airlift and rapid deployment capabilities into China's Himalayan strategy allows the PLAAF to maintain a high level of operational readiness. This readiness is critical for deterring potential aggression from India and ensuring that China can respond to any military developments in a timely manner. The ability to quickly reinforce positions and establish new FOBs gives China a significant strategic advantage, allowing it to maintain control over key areas and project power across the region.

### **Surveillance and Reconnaissance**

In addition to its airlift and missile capabilities, the PLAAF plays a critical role in surveillance and reconnaissance operations in the Himalayas. These operations are essential for maintaining situational awareness and ensuring that China can anticipate and respond to potential threats along the LAC.

The PLAAF's surveillance capabilities are supported by a range of advanced technologies, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and satellite-based systems.<sup>9</sup> UAVs such as the Wing Loong and CH-4 are deployed to monitor Indian troop movements, infrastructure developments, and other activities along the border. These UAVs provide real-time intelligence that is critical for strategic planning and decision-making. The ability to conduct continuous surveillance allows the PLAAF to detect and respond to any changes in the operational environment, ensuring that China remains one step ahead of its adversaries.

In addition to UAVs, the PLAAF's reconnaissance efforts are supported by manned aircraft such

as the KJ-500 airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft.<sup>10</sup> These aircraft are equipped with advanced radar systems that can detect and track aircraft, missiles, and other airborne threats over long distances.<sup>11</sup> The KJ-500's ability to provide early warning of potential air incursions is a key component of China's air defense strategy, ensuring that the PLAAF can respond quickly to any threats to its airspace.<sup>12</sup>

The PLAAF's surveillance and reconnaissance operations are not limited to aerial platforms. The use of satellite-based systems provides China with a comprehensive view of the Himalayan region, allowing for the detection of troop movements, infrastructure changes, and other strategic developments.<sup>13</sup> These systems are essential for long-term monitoring and provide the PLAAF with the intelligence needed to support both defensive and offensive operations.

The integration of surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities into the PLAAF's operations in the Himalayas is essential for maintaining China's strategic advantage. By providing real-time intelligence and early warning, these capabilities ensure that China can respond to any threats with the necessary speed and precision. The ability to monitor and track the movements of Indian forces also provides China with the information needed to conduct precision strikes and other targeted operations.

Moreover, the PLAAF's surveillance capabilities play a critical role in supporting China's broader geopolitical objectives in the region. By maintaining a constant watch over the

Himalayas, the PLAAF ensures that China can protect its interests and assert its influence in South Asia. The ability to conduct continuous surveillance also provides China with the leverage needed to negotiate from a position of strength, as it can respond to any developments that may threaten its strategic goals.

### **Supporting Broader Geopolitical Objectives**

The PLAAF's role in the Himalayas is not limited to direct military operations; it also supports China's broader geopolitical objectives in the region. The air force's capabilities are instrumental in securing the success of strategic initiatives such as the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>14</sup>

The THMCN, a component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to enhance connectivity between China and South Asian countries. The PLAAF supports this initiative by providing the necessary air cover and logistical support to protect the infrastructure associated with the THMCN. This includes the safeguarding of roads, railways, and pipelines that are critical to the success of the BRI in the region.<sup>15</sup> The PLAAF's ability to maintain air superiority ensures that these projects can proceed without disruption, thereby enhancing China's economic and geopolitical leverage in South Asia.

The CPEC, which links Gwadar Port in Pakistan to China's Xinjiang region, is another critical component of China's strategy.<sup>16</sup> The PLAAF plays a key role in securing this corridor by

providing air patrols and surveillance along the route. This not only ensures the safety of the infrastructure but also allows China to project power across the region. The strategic importance of the CPEC cannot be overstated, as it provides China with direct access to the Arabian Sea and secures a vital trade route that bypasses the Strait of Malacca, a chokepoint that has long been a concern for Chinese strategists.

The PLAAF's involvement in these initiatives highlights the interconnectedness of military and economic strategies in China's approach to the Himalayas. By integrating its military capabilities with its economic objectives, China ensures that it can protect its investments and maintain a dominant position in the region. The PLAAF's ability to secure these projects from potential military threats is crucial to the success of China's broader strategy in South Asia.

### **Assertive Military Posture**

China's military strategy in the Himalayas has been characterized by an assertive posture, often described as "salami slicing," where incremental territorial claims are made without provoking direct military conflict.<sup>17</sup> The PLAAF is central to this strategy, providing the airpower necessary to enforce these claims and deter any potential responses from India.

The PLAAF's role in this strategy involves regular air patrols and the establishment of air dominance over contested areas. By maintaining a continuous presence in the skies, the PLAAF ensures that China can assert its claims and respond swiftly to any attempts by India to challenge these assertions.<sup>18</sup> The use of advanced

fighter aircraft, such as the J-20, in these patrols underscores the PLAAF's capability to project power and maintain control over key areas.

Furthermore, the PLAAF's ability to conduct rapid deployments and establish forward operating bases in contested regions provides China with a significant tactical advantage.<sup>19</sup> These bases serve as staging grounds for air operations, allowing the PLAAF to respond quickly to any changes in the operational environment. The presence of these bases also signals China's intent to maintain a long-term presence in the region, further reinforcing its territorial claims.

The PLAAF's assertive posture is not limited to direct military actions. It also includes psychological operations aimed at deterring India from escalating conflicts. The regular display of military might through air shows, exercises, and the publicized deployment of advanced aircraft serves as a reminder of China's capabilities and its willingness to defend its interests.<sup>20</sup> This psychological aspect of the PLAAF's strategy is designed to discourage India from pursuing aggressive actions and to reinforce China's position as the dominant power in the region.

The PLAAF is a central component of China's Himalayan strategy, contributing to the country's military, economic, and geopolitical objectives. Through the development of airbases, the deployment of advanced missile systems, and the enhancement of airlift and surveillance capabilities, the PLAAF ensures that China can maintain its territorial integrity and respond to any challenges along the LAC. The

air force's ability to integrate these capabilities with broader strategic goals, such as the success of the THMCN and CPEC, underscores its importance in securing China's interests in South Asia.

As tensions between China and India continue to simmer, the PLAAF's role will likely become even more significant. The ongoing military

buildup in the region, coupled with the PLAAF's advanced capabilities, positions China to maintain a strategic advantage and influence the balance of power in the Himalayas. The PLAAF's contributions to China's military strategy are not only crucial for immediate tactical success but also for securing long-term geopolitical objectives in one of the world's most contentious regions.



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# The PLA's Intelligentized War in the Himalayas

Malcolm Davis

The future of warfare and military technology is inexorably trending towards a meeting of human and machine, working side by side, in a highly digitized and networked battlespace. For China's People's Liberation Army, the goal of 'intelligentization of war' is a natural next step on from 'informationization of war'—the integration of information-led military capabilities with networked battle management systems, precision strike capabilities and advanced command and control.<sup>1</sup> The PLA is making swift progress towards largely achieving the latter and is aspiring for the former. The application of critical and emerging technologies underpinning these concepts opens up new ways to fight, particularly in hostile operational environments, and it doesn't get that much more hostile than in the Himalaya mountains that delineates the border between China and India, along with other smaller states—Nepal and Bhutan, as well as Pakistan.

This chapter seeks to explore how the PLA is evolving its military capability for intelligentized and informationized warfare in the Himalayas, and the implications these developments will have for India's ability to counter Beijing's geostrategic ambitions in the region. The PLA is moving towards a joint and integrated force for war in a multi-domain environment, and

this demands a willingness to embrace new technologies rapidly. The most recent Chinese Defence White Paper—*China's National Defense in the New Era*—released back in 2019, brings the importance of informationization and intelligentization to the fore. It states:

*“Driven by the new round of technological and industrial revolution, the application of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), quantum information, big data, cloud computing and the Internet of Things is gathering pace in the military field.... New and high-tech military technologies based on IT are developing rapidly. There is a prevailing trend to develop long-range precision, intelligent, stealthy or unmanned weaponry and equipment. War is evolving in form towards informationised warfare and intelligent warfare is on the horizon.”*<sup>2</sup>

The PLA's National Defense University defines intelligentization as “...integrated warfare waged in land, sea, air space, electromagnetic, cyber and cognitive domains using intelligent weaponry and equipment and their associated operation methods, underpinned by the [Internet of Things] IoT information system.”<sup>3</sup> Intelligentization in warfare is a natural step for the PLA seeking to maintain a tactical



**Figure 16.1 The Operational Picture in the Himalayas**

Source: @IndoPac\_Info at [https://x.com/IndoPac\\_Info/status/1833864881516482588](https://x.com/IndoPac_Info/status/1833864881516482588)

and operational level advantage in situational awareness, and an ability to operate in hostile environments. In particular, the application of human-machine teaming is likely to have significant implications for PLA operations in the Himalayan region.

For PLA operations in the Himalayas, informationization and intelligentization offer new ways for PLA forces deployed in this very harsh environment to operate across an increasingly sophisticated and complex logistical network of roads, bases, airbases, and communications systems. Traditional human-centric forces led by PLA soldiers remain of primary importance, but these forces will in time be complemented by advanced autonomous systems and supported by long-range fires. They will be informed and assisted through the application of AI, and where necessary, be able

to generate effects through advanced airpower. PLA space capabilities will provide assured intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance as well as satellite communications for forces deployed in the region. Whilst actual confrontations between PLA and Indian forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) remains ‘low-tech’—involving unarmed combat or even using basic clubs, for how long this very low intensity confrontation remains so is open to challenge, particularly if the PLA can leverage advanced autonomous capability whilst reducing the risk of human personnel in the field. The key issue emerging from this transformation is how the application of intelligentization in warfare will affect the balance of power in this region, and whether Chinese forces can use advanced technology to gain a military-tactical advantage that will embolden Beijing towards new provocations within the region.

China and India confront each other over the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (see map) but this is poorly demarcated. As a result, the LAC is disputed, leading to frequent skirmishes between Chinese and Indian troops—notably, the 2020 Galwan Valley clash that resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese soldiers.<sup>4</sup> More recently a similar clash in 2022 occurred at a different area along the China-India border, along the McMahon Line, also disputed, that is located in the Tawang region.<sup>5</sup>

Across the entirety of the Himalayas, China continues to use a combination of hard and soft power to increase its influence, whilst seeking to weaken Indian influence. For an example of soft power, China has used debt trap diplomacy through investment via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to gain greater influence over weak states such as Bhutan and Nepal, and also Pakistan. A harder approach sees China's use of non-military infrastructure, such as the damming of key rivers to give it the ability to directly control key resource flows in a way that can be coercive when applied to states adjoining Chinese territory, which are dependent on the flow of water from the Himalayas.<sup>6</sup> China uses all aspects of state power—including military force—to strengthen its influence and presence in the region, dominate small neighboring states, and seeks to undermine Indian influence.

China has been engaging in a military buildup through infrastructure, such as roads, airbases, and rail connectivity. This infrastructure allows the PLA to operate and deploy to the border areas rapidly and sustain military operations in harsh terrain more easily in a manner that

gives the PLA's forces a tactical advantage. For example, China has constructed a network of roads through the Tibet Autonomous Region, and along the LAC, to enable rapid troop movement to key points along the LAC and ensure adequate logistic support for PLA forces deployed on operations. China is also engaging in high altitude training, including regular high-altitude exercises in the Tibet region.<sup>7</sup> These involve joint operations, combined arms operations, including with support from PLA forces outside of the immediate region, such as PLAAF and PLARF, as well as space assets.

China has built new airfields and upgraded existing ones, to support the deployment of PLAAF combat aircraft and helicopters, support the operations of UAVs and allow logistics and tactical mobility by tactical transport aircraft. China has also expanded rail networks and is planning new rail links that will boost the PLA's ability to transport troops and equipment rapidly from interior regions to frontline areas.<sup>8</sup> The PLA has developed and built forward supply bases close to the LAC and provided shelters to support troops in the field. The FSBs reduce the supply lines, ensuring greater readiness of forward deployed PLAA troops near the LAC.

### **Unleashing Intelligentization**

Yet in spite of these investments into logistics, the very harsh environment of the Himalayas, in terms of challenging terrain and high altitude, makes it difficult for either side to make strategic gains in terms of capturing large amounts of terrain.<sup>9</sup> The nature of terrain in the Himalayas is unsuitable for heavy armored forces such as MBTs and AFVs, so the PLA is stressing development of lighter armored vehicles such

as the Type 15 light tank, which can operate at high altitudes. PLA special forces capabilities, including mountain warfare units, are also of key importance, given the high altitude, harsh terrain and inhospitable climate. It's clear that a traditional approach to military operations that works effectively in lower altitudes and open terrain, is completely ill-suited for operations in the Himalayas.<sup>10</sup> Milliff argues that “..terrain and environment, as the third belligerent in the Sino-India border dispute, promotes low level instability but constrains escalatory potential.”<sup>11</sup> This means that for the PLA—and for India—the conflict in the Himalayas remains stuck and unresolvable.

As China builds infrastructure to boost its presence, China's investment in advanced autonomous weapons and AI as a key part of intelligentized warfare means that one future aspect of PLA operations in this region could include extensive use of unarmed and armed drones in support of ground forces. This could change the dynamic across the Himalayas in Beijing's favor. There is a great deal of focus on tactical and operational level ISR, through both satellites and UAVs to ensure real time intelligence that can monitor Indian military operations and deployments. China has also deployed electronic warfare capabilities to disrupt Indian C4ISR and jam Indian access to GPS.

Under its approach to ‘intelligentization’ in war, the PLA is exploring the use of AI and autonomous systems for logistics, reconnaissance and combat roles, which could then operate in difficult terrain, such as that found along the LAC in the Himalayas. In

the future, it is highly likely that autonomous systems including armed drones will be an increasing feature of PLA operations in the region, with traditional human-centric forces operating alongside robotic systems overhead. The low cost of such technologies allows high volumes of acquisition, to allow the PLA to increase its combat mass without necessarily increasing its human footprint on the ground. The latter would be exceedingly difficult operationally and logistically, for little military gain. Instead, through investment into intelligentization, the PLA can bypass these logistical and infrastructure challenges that would be associated with building up traditional forces and still deliver useful military effect. The question that emerges is whether intelligentization can then fundamentally shift the military balance in China's favor and whether such a shift would embolden Beijing to behave more provocatively in the Himalayan region?

### **The Depopulated Battlespace**

The development of human-machine teaming, the application of AI, and the employment of swarming autonomous systems opens up new approaches to warfighting. The creation of tactical reconnaissance strike complexes that link autonomous systems undertaking intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance with long-range fires has already been demonstrated on a daily basis in Ukraine, creating ‘sensor to shooter’ ‘kill-webs’ that can operate with humans ‘on the loop’ providing oversight and management, rather than ‘in the loop’ through maintaining direct control.<sup>12</sup> Chinese development of swarming unmanned autonomous systems (UAS) would add mass

to this capability, allowing large numbers of drones that are either unarmed and tasked to provide ISR, or armed with lethal payloads for attacking personnel and vehicles. In the harsh environment of the Himalayas, such swarms of armed and unarmed drones, linked to long-range fires, and feeding information into AI managed command and control systems, could give the PLA a significant tactical advantage as they hunt and overwhelm Indian forces. Such a networked depopulated battlespace could allow the PLA to effectively circumvent the environmental and operational challenges of deploying traditional forces that demand a human presence at front-line positions in a harsh operational environment.

Although drones cannot seize and hold terrain, they can, if employed effectively, be employed to identify, target and coordinate attacks against an opposing force from long-range fires, or if they are armed, close with and attack an enemy force directly, neutralizing that force's combat capability. The advantage of swarming low-cost high-volume autonomous systems that can generate mass, together with persistent surveillance and targeting of a system of ISR systems would make it difficult for Indian forces to hold positions in the face of such a threat.

For every military technology there is always a counter, and the case is no different for autonomous systems and AI as the basis of PLA Intelligentized Warfare. India's investment into defensive systems to defeat large swarms of PLA

autonomous systems—'counter-UAS' (C-UAS) would be an essential step for the Indian military to defeat such a threat. Developing the means to attack the 'sensor to shooter' 'kill-web' through electronic warfare (EW), cyber operations, and kinetic attacks against key components of this type of military technology to reduce the effectiveness of PLA capabilities would also need to be explored. If necessary, Indian forces would need to invest in symmetrical capability to PLA intelligentized warfare, with their own investments in swarming UAS, and development of AI enabled command and control.

What emerges is a new military-technological contest in the Himalayas that could see a shift away from human operations in such harsh terrain to a future depopulated battlespace with humans managing military operations in the rear—assisted where appropriate by AI enabled command and control—and the 'sharp end' is largely robotic. At the strategic level, such an outcome would end the tactical paralysis of both Chinese and Indian forces across the Himalayas. China is almost certain to invest in these types of new military technologies under its approach for intelligentization of warfare in coming years. In order to avoid being placed in a disadvantageous position, India must respond to this challenge. A failure to do so would see India lose its ability to counter Beijing's determination to erode Indian military capability and strategic influence in the Himalayas. Beijing would be emboldened to be far more aggressive in challenging Indian forces in theater and Indian interests more broadly.

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# China's Techno-Military Strategy in the Himalayan Region

Debasish Sarmah

## Introduction

The words 'China' and 'territorial disputes' go hand in hand when it comes to the country's policy towards and relationship with nations it shares land and maritime borders with. It has managed to sour its relations with 15 (16 including Tibet) neighboring nations in the past 75 years.<sup>1</sup> From Mongolia in the north to the Koreans and Japan in the east, India, Nepal and Bhutan in the west and south west to almost all of the Southeast Asian countries to its south, it has spawned one border dispute after another since the end of World War II, and all based on its own versions of 'historical events and narratives'.<sup>2</sup> These nations are still engaged in negotiations with China to resolve such disputes while China continues to harass them with its military-or-civilian-militia-led skirmishes, and attempts to bend international law at its will.<sup>3</sup> Various scholars have researched and presented their findings on what China aims to achieve in the South China Sea (SCS), and the means it is employing to accomplish those goals. Jihyun Kim's article perfectly sums up such findings about China's territorial disputes in the SCS.<sup>4</sup> While China's maritime disputes get a fair bit of scholarly attention, the land disputes have sparked relatively less curiosity in scholars, albeit with an uptick in recent times. This chapter will focus primarily on the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Himalayan region, look at the history of

the regional powerplay, consider extra-regional factors, examine why the traditional Western way of looking at strategy will not help in understanding China's Himalayan gambit, and explore the Chinese techno-military blueprints for the Himalayan chessboard.

## A Brief Look at the Past

It was the year 1950 when Tibet woke up to the forceful grip of the Chinese state over its entire sovereign territory. The goal of Mao Zedong's forces was to take control of a land that had been "an inseparable part of China since ancient times."<sup>5</sup> The Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) claims that Mao 'liberated' Tibet because it had been under Chinese "jurisdiction and governance" since the Yuan Dynasty (1271). With the annexation of Tibet, China managed to successfully expand its borders to the Himalayan mountain ranges, with India, Nepal, and Bhutan as its newfound neighbors. The three neighboring nations were on their guard in the face of an expansionist China. Bhutan and Nepal were too weak to resist a Chinese expansion into their lands, and India had gained independence from the British only five years ago. But before any such fears could come to fruition, revolt [against Chinese occupation] broke out in Tibet, and thousands died at the hands of Chinese forces.<sup>6</sup> The Tibetan head of state, the Dalai Lama, most of



his ministers, and around 80,000 Tibetans fled to India in 1959. The PRC now rules Tibet with an iron fist and uses propaganda as a tool to whitewash the Tibetan language, history, and culture.<sup>7</sup>

Mao's China grew increasingly hostile against India following the latter granting asylum to the Dalai Lama, and after a few failed diplomatic talks to settle a mutually agreed international border, the Chinese invaded the Indian territories to the north and east of the Himalayan range, only to withdraw to its pre-war positions after a month.<sup>8</sup> The two nations clashed again in 1967, and occasional standoffs between the two armies became the new normal, with 1986, 1987, 2013, and 2017 being the most notable ones since 1967.<sup>9</sup> Following a deadly skirmish between the two armies in 2020,<sup>10</sup> both sides lost soldiers, and their bilateral relations have only gone downhill since then.<sup>11</sup>

Nepal and Bhutan have both been traditionally closer to India due to the shared cultural, linguistic, religious, and people-to-people ties that go back centuries. Since Nepal's adaptation of a new constitution in 2015, the country has been governed by alliance parties with communist ideological leanings. Bhutan, too, has embraced democracy in 2018 with considerable efforts from the King, who remains the head of state. The changed political landscapes in both nations presented an opportunity for them to play a balancing act between India and China.<sup>12</sup> The Nepalese government is now ideologically and diplomatically closer to China, but the population remains culturally closer to India, giving the latter an upper hand in influencing public opinion in the country.<sup>13</sup> Bhutan

continues to maintain closer relations with India, but with a growing Chinese footprint in its diplomatic dealings.<sup>14</sup>

### **Chinese Military Capabilities and Activities in the Himalayan Region**

To understand China's military strategy in the Himalayan region, it is paramount to take a glance at Chinese military capabilities and activities in the region.

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Western Theater Command is responsible for defending China's mountainous western border, from the Karakoram ranges to the eastern end of the Himalayan ranges. The responsibility is shared between the Xinjiang (XMD) and Tibet Military Districts (TMD), with direct and close monitoring from the Central Military Commission (CMC). The XMD commands a versatile force of four combined arms divisions, an "information support brigade, intelligence and reconnaissance brigade, artillery brigade, air defense brigade, army aviation brigade, special operations forces (SOF) brigade, electronic countermeasures (ECM) brigade, engineer regiment, and a chemical defense regiment."<sup>15</sup> The TMD is also in command of a diverse strength of "three combined arms brigades, an artillery brigade, air defense brigade, army aviation brigade, SOF brigade, ECM brigade, engineer and chemical defense brigade, communications brigade, information support brigade, and intelligence and reconnaissance brigade."<sup>16</sup>

Although the region was militarized with almost one-third of the PLA Ground Force's (PLA-GF) strength, the buildup of PLA combined forces in the region was ramped up in 2020 after the

deadly clash with Indian forces in eastern Ladakh resulted in numerous casualties on both sides. The PLA had set up fortified defensive positions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India to accommodate a reinforced combined arms division. Following that, a number of highly significant military infrastructure projects around the disputed Pangong Tso lake have been completed, as detailed in a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS) China Power project.<sup>17</sup> The report shows a large military base with new division-level headquarters and garrison that was constructed in merely two years. It also highlights other important military developments in that area, including the construction of roads and supporting infrastructure and a new radome facility for signal-based intelligence (SIGINT). On top of this, the report shows a bridge being built across the lake. Two years later, the bridge is now completely operational, as revealed in an NDTV report.<sup>18</sup> It will substantially ease the logistics operations and troop movement of the PLA. Another report suggests the construction of new tunnels, helipads, airfields with longer runways, bunkers, underground shelters, artillery positions, and ammunition dumps along the LAC.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Technological Edge**

Moving on to the technological side of things, it is fair to say that China is now a technological giant, and its military capabilities back that claim. The Strategic Support Force (SSF) is responsible for the entire civil-military cyberspace environment in China. Months after the border clash with India, Chinese hackers breached the Mumbai power grid, causing a widespread power blackout and subsequently targeted

Indian ports and railway infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> In 2022, a 'Chinese state-sponsored' cyber-attack targeted the power grids throughout India.<sup>21</sup> It was a clear signal from the Chinese, that they could bring Indian critical infrastructure to a halt in the event of a future clash between the two nations. The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has also demonstrated its technological superiority in the region. China boasts an air force with technological marvels such as the J-20 5<sup>th</sup> generation stealth fighters (200+) whereas a similar Indian platform is still in its developmental stages.<sup>22</sup> On top of that, China's arsenal of modern air assets far outweighs India's, which still consists of significant number of legacy platforms such as the Anglo-French SEPECAT Jaguar and the Soviet MiG-21. Even in air transport, China has a relatively larger fleet of aircraft. All in all, the Chinese air capabilities are technologically superior and numerically higher than their Indian counterparts.

The same goes for air defense (AD) platforms where China boasts large numbers of advanced AD systems, such as the Russian S-400 and Chinese HQ-22. Most of these technologies have started appearing in the areas under the jurisdiction of the TMD. A report citing recent satellite imagery mentions J-20 fighters and Y-20 transport aircraft at military installations in the region.<sup>23</sup> Another report mentions the deployment of S-400 AD systems in both the TMD and XMD.<sup>24</sup> It is noteworthy that the majority of Chinese military platforms are indigenous and would be able to go on with maintenance, repair, and re-arm activities in a war or war-like situation, while India may struggle to do the same due to diplomatic red tape with

its largely imported arsenal of weapons. China also has a relatively coherent military structure supported by Theater commands whereas India is still in the process of implementing the same. One article says, “The harsh reality India faces is that for the foreseeable future, there will continue to be an asymmetric balance of power in favor of China.”<sup>25</sup>

### Civil-Military Activities in the Eastern Foothills

While China is devising a myriad of capabilities in the military domain, it continues to parallelly develop the versatility of its civil-military tactics. In the SCS, it employs civilian militia vessels to conduct obstructive maneuvers and other hostile actions against navies and fishing vessels of Southeast Asian nations.<sup>26</sup> The naval militias also intrude into the maritime boundaries of these nations in the name of ‘Chinese territorial claims.’ China resorts to similar tactics on its border with India. In the eastern Himalayan ranges, it has been setting up over 600 ‘dual use’ border villages (*Xiaokang*).<sup>27</sup> China claims that these villages are being constructed to house local Tibetans scattered around the mountainous region and eliminate poverty by offering them employment opportunities.<sup>28</sup> However, the hidden fact is that there are numerous concrete structures in such villages to also accommodate PLA officers and soldiers. One report points out that “this arrangement can be helpful during wartime, and the local population can work as porters.”<sup>29</sup>

On top of the military aspect of these villages, another far-reaching implication can be the showcasing of economic growth through infrastructure development and tourism

economy to the population on the Indian side of the border. The population on either side of the border share culture, history and some level of linguistic similarity. Seeing prosperity on one side of the border could have an appealing effect on the population on the Indian side, similar to that of the population on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border, fueling pro-China sentiments while ultimately strengthening the Chinese claim to the region.

### Ends, Ways and Means

Western, and especially American, discussions on strategy have been dominated by the concept of ‘ends + ways + means = strategy,’ first introduced in 1989, by former US Army War College professor Col. (ret) Arthur F Lykke Jr.<sup>30</sup> Although this approach has its merits, it simply limits itself by ignoring other essential realities of the ‘areas of operations’ such as an adversary that continuously seeks to disrupt efforts to implement strategies, or the fact that war, or strategic powerplay in the Sino-Indian case, itself is an everchanging and evolving environment where all three of these elements must be constantly modified or upgraded. An adversary, no matter how weak, cannot be fully understood. Intelligence may help, but many characteristics of any adversary will always remain in the dark until the point of contact. Prussian military commander Helmuth von Moltke had said, “No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy’s main force.”<sup>31</sup> This was evident during China’s ‘salami slicing’ tactic against India in the Himalayas.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned earlier, the 2020 clash was deadly, but the reason the situation deteriorated to that extent was because the Chinese forces, as part of their ‘salami

slicing’ tactic, had moved into a contested area between both nations and had set up camps.<sup>33</sup> When the Indian patrols reached the area, they confronted the Chinese troops who claimed to be within Chinese territory and refused to withdraw, leading first to verbal altercations and then intense hand-to-hand combat. In this case, the Chinese were caught off guard by the intensity of the Indian pushback against their belligerent move and the Indians too were not prepared for the kind of weaponry the PLA was bringing. Both sides faced unexpected scenarios only after the first point of contact. Reports say that the Chinese have been reimagining their tactics (ways) and upgrading resources (means) to reach the desired outcomes (ends) since that incident.<sup>34</sup>

Another aspect the ends-ways-means-based strategic thinking leaves out often is the “spiritual aspect of war that goes to the question of will,” said Thomas E. Ricks in an article.<sup>35</sup> In the article, he also quoted US Department of Defense’s (DOD) Christopher Mewett, “War operates according to the influence of those tendencies that are essential to its nature: instinctive passions born of violence; chance and uncertainty; and its subordination as an instrument of policy.” Going by the moral of this article, it is worth pondering on whether the Chinese strategists are ready to send soldiers, who have not seen the realities of a literal war since the Sino-Vietnamese conflicts (from 1979 into the late 1980s), into a conflict with a nation like India that has engaged in multiple wars with Pakistan throughout the 1990s and still continues to experience and learn from insurgencies in its northernmost and north-eastern frontiers.

So, only the simplified concept of ‘ends-ways-means’ will not really get one much closer to understanding China’s strategic thinking, which is mostly drawn from the nation’s early strategic masterminds, like Sun Tzu.<sup>36</sup>

### Sun Tzu’s Teachings in the Himalayan Front

Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (*Sūnzi bīngfǎ*) is a marvel among scholarly works in the military strategy domain. Unlike the ‘ends-ways-means’ strategic thought, the Chinese acknowledge that the nature of warfare is unstable, it constantly changes, and wars cannot be fought with overly rigid and pre-planned strategies. Understanding China’s Himalayan strategy would require a deep dive into Sun Tzu’s “way of deception” concept.

In Chinese strategic thought, the success of the way of deception depends on a few key points:<sup>37</sup> “1) supremacy of unconventional warfare as opposed to the conventional (*Join battle with conventional tactics and achieve victory through unconventional tactics*); 2) value of ‘cheating’ as a traditional underpinning of deceptive warfare; 3) imperative to focus on benefiting from and controlling one’s superiority in warfare; 4) weakening an adversary’s warfighting capability by focusing on morale, psychology, stamina, cohesiveness, etc., thus causing the enemy’s strong points to become weaknesses.” A point-by-point breakdown of these four points shows a clear correlation between Sun Tzu’s teachings and China’s activities in the Himalayan region.

The first point can be explained by the increasing Chinese military presence in the mountainous region. The large-scale deployment of troops,

upgrading military infrastructure along the border, etc., are all indications of the PLA entering the staring contest at the border with conventional means while quietly intensifying their unconventional capabilities, such as secretive nuclear bases, swarm drones, proxy forces, etc.<sup>38</sup>

On the second point, it is important to not take the meaning of ‘cheating’ literally. Cheating, in this instance, implies that deception must be used as a tool to prolong an issue that keeps an adversary engaged, both diplomatically and militarily, on more than one front. On numerous occasions, the Indian Minister for External (Foreign) Affairs, Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, has blamed China for refusing to observe ‘longstanding written agreements’.<sup>39</sup> He also said that the ties between both countries are ‘abnormal’ due to China’s violation of ‘border management agreements’.<sup>40</sup> These hostile actions by China clearly have residues of deception. Committing a violation of agreements and then denying it or pinning the blame on its adversaries is not an unusual characteristic of Chinese foreign policy.<sup>41</sup>

The third point talks about maintaining and benefitting from superiority over the adversary. As discussed in detail earlier, the Chinese military holds superiority over its Indian counterpart when it comes to modern military technology and cyber warfare. It works as a deterrence where Indian forces would rather have a defensive posture than an offensive one. Indian military leaders’ very carefully crafted language whenever they’re asked about any Chinese ‘misadventure’ is evidence of that and is the opposite of the strong language used against Pakistan.<sup>42</sup>

The fourth point of Chinese deceptive tactics is psychological warfare. Here, it is important to put the emphasis on the “thus causing the enemy’s strong points to become weaknesses” part. India prides itself on having a diverse, multi-ethnic populace and, hence, a military with identical attributes. The aim of the Chinese strategy is to plant seeds of doubt and disloyalty in Indian soldiers and citizens living in border areas. As pointed out above, the Indian population in its shared border with China is at the risk of being manipulated with propaganda and charmed with stories of prosperity and happiness in the ‘dual-use villages’ on the other side of the border. On the military side of things, a recent example of China’s deceptive (albeit failed) tactics to create disorder among Indian forces at the border was the use of loudspeakers to play Punjabi songs to the home-sick troops as well as ridiculing the soldiers and officers for the disparity in their economic backgrounds.<sup>43</sup>

Although the given examples clearly show China’s deceptive ways, it is important to realize their end game because, without that, an understanding of their strategy cannot be established.

### **The Taiwan Factor**

China has been claiming Taiwan to be its part for decades, and the Taiwanese, with diplomatic, military, and logistical support from the US and its allies, have been refusing to bow down.<sup>44</sup> The Taiwanese are determined to establish themselves as a sovereign independent nation in the eyes of the entire international community, because a fair share of nations and intergovernmental organizations still maintain the ‘One China’ policy and are reluctant to

accept Taiwanese sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> This stalemate between the two nations has been intensifying in recent years. China has been constantly violating the Taiwanese ‘air defense identification zone’ (ADIZ) with dozens of its military aircraft and conducting military drills simulating a blockade of Taiwan.<sup>46</sup> In response, Taiwan has been conducting counter drills replicating a Chinese invasion.<sup>47</sup> On top of that, to China’s distaste, the U.S. has been providing Taiwan with state-of-the-art military equipment to defend itself.<sup>48</sup> The U.S. and its allies have also been conducting freedom of navigation exercises through the Taiwan Strait and maritime military patrols around the Taiwanese shores.<sup>49</sup> China looks at these developments with growing unease, and it sounds like the drums of war when Chinese President Xi Jinping talks of taking Taiwan one way or the other.<sup>50</sup> He has publicly called for the troops to be ready for war on multiple occasions. During China’s annual parliament session in 2023, he said that China was preparing for war and told his generals to “dare to fight.”<sup>51</sup>

The reason Taiwan is being mentioned is because China’s overall strategy in the Himalayan region crosses over with India’s significant economic interests in Taiwan and its relation to China’s oil imports, a rather important commodity in the event of war. As much as 80 percent of Beijing’s oil imports pass through the Malacca Strait,<sup>52</sup> and right next to the strait is the Andaman and Nicobar Command, an integrated tri-service command of the Indian Armed Forces. This gives India a scenario where it keeps its economic interests in Taiwan intact without the risk of a direct confrontation with the PLA. That is because India has more than sufficient military capability in the Indian Ocean Region

(IOR) to blockade the strait, cutting off China’s oil trade and crippling its military, in the event of a Sino-Taiwanese war.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

In the case of a war with Taiwan, China cannot afford to fight against the U.S. and its allies too, who have continuously shown commitment to come to Taiwan’s aid if China invades, while looking over its shoulder to see if India has made any moves on the Himalayan front.<sup>54</sup> For the time being, China’s sole Himalayan strategy is to keep India busy with border issues while it significantly upgrades its military capabilities in the region. China, from past experiences, is well aware of the fact that even though the Indian military may not be on par with the PLA, they are experienced and geared up enough to give China a bloody nose.<sup>55</sup> Beijing also believes that as long as the border issues stay unresolved, New Delhi will continue to remain uneasy while occasionally heating up the situation will keep India off-balance.<sup>56</sup> It is noteworthy that China and India have recently held their 30<sup>th</sup> round of border talks, which India claims were launched to re-establish the status quo ante after the 2020 clash.<sup>57</sup> The border talks remain fruitless, and for China, it is just another diplomatic gimmick to keep India busy. Attaining and maintaining a decisive Chinese military edge over India will also work as a deterrence, in the event of a potential Indian blockage of the Malacca Strait. The Chinese strategy is to keep India occupied with countless problems in the Himalayas while it consolidates its military power to the point where India would be left with no choice but to stay on the defensive even if a necessity to join other nations in an offensive against China in the future arises.

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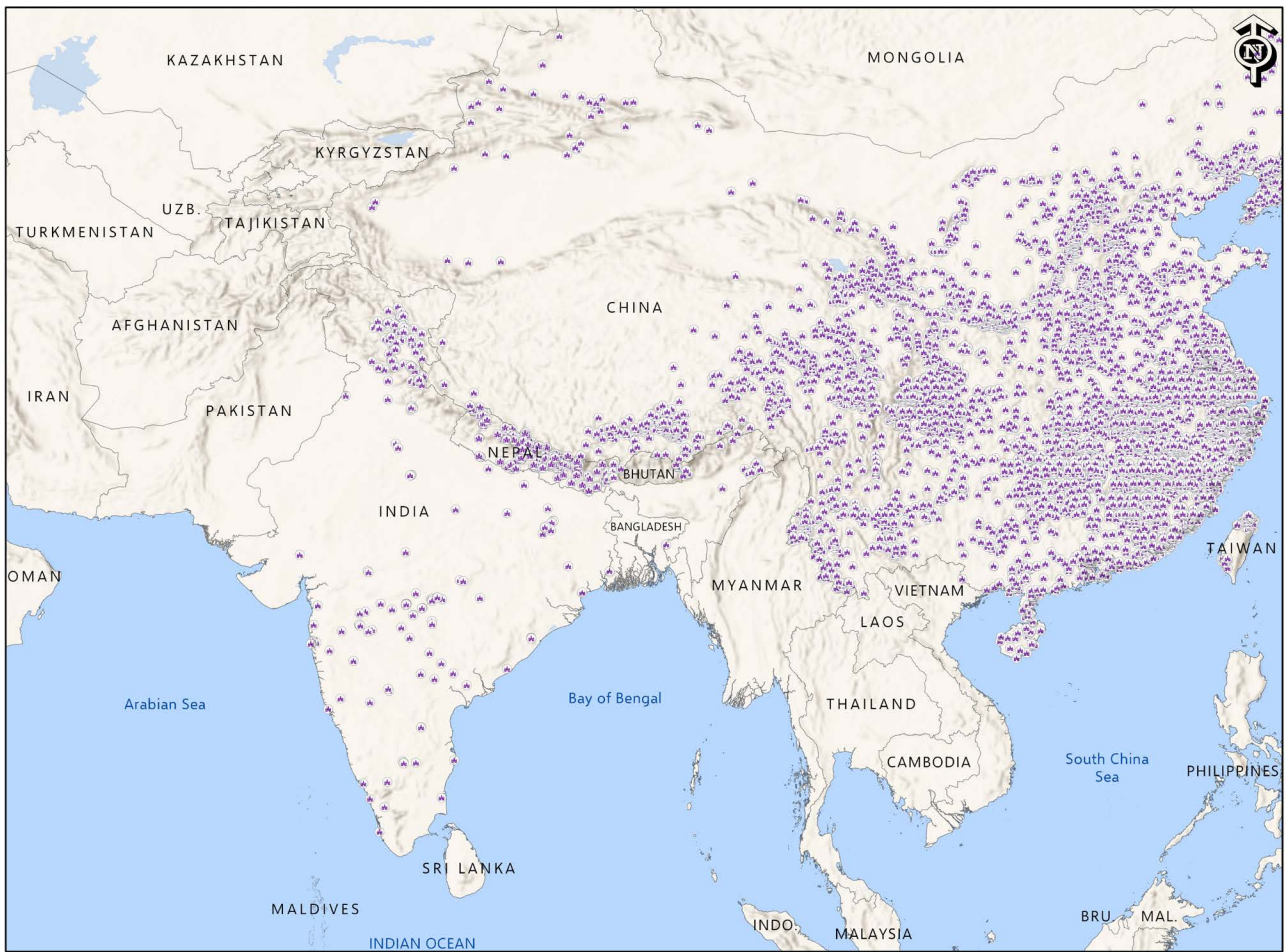


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## SECTION - V

# Nations and Neighbors in the Himalayas

## Buddhist Places of Worship - India, Nepal & China



This Map is prepared by Dr. Jagannath Panda, copyright: @jppjagannath1.

Source: OSM (India & Nepal), Center for Buddhist Studies, BGIS Data Ver.1.1 (China)

Map 5: Buddhist Places of Worship - India, Nepal & China.

# 70 Years of “Panchsheel”: China’s (Un)Peaceful Betrayal

Jagannath Panda and Alexander Droop

In April 2024, India and China commemorated the 70th anniversary of the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence,” or commonly known in India as the “Panchsheel Agreement,” being first formally articulated in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the “Tibet region of China” and India. But amid the great din of hostilities, there is more than a little doubt that the two sides will pause to re-calibrate their downward spiraling bilateral trajectory based on the noble, and perhaps even naive, principles of Panchsheel.

For China, the Xi Jinping “new era” certainly expounds on values through the lenses of aggression, militarization, expansionism, securitization, and the like. China has in the last decade, increased its ambit of “core interests”<sup>1</sup>—from considering only Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as internal matters to now also including the East and South China Seas and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territorial quest. Vis-à-vis India, its expansionist ambitions are as clear in the Himalayas, as they are in the Indian Ocean Region where China’s clout is ever-growing. In such a scenario, could “Peaceful Co-existence” ever make the cut? It is unfortunately only a rhetorical question, and the answer is a resounding no.

Little wonder then, that India has no reason to mull over whether China could be trusted as an Asian partner. Historically and even today, China has continued to betray India’s trust by seemingly reaching out for “win-win” cooperation and the spirit of neighborliness to create a “community of shared future,” without intending to resolve the border question—the root cause of such mistrust. The Himalayan incursions (or transgressions); repeated clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC); massive border infrastructure build-up; establishment of military-civil village settlements along the border; and lawfare such as redrawing of maps or enacting controversial laws, among other such actions, convey the true story of China’s empty “neighborhood diplomacy” rhetoric.

## History Comes Calling

Undoubtedly, the Panchsheel Agreement in its essence represented a noble and ideal framework to create an international order that in actuality strives for peace and stability. It was in such a spirit<sup>2</sup> that Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru included their vision of Panchsheel in their 1954 joint statement. It is important to note that while Premier Zhou is generally credited as the first to put forward the “Five Principles of Peaceful

Co-existence”<sup>3</sup> —the term “Panchsheel” also has a contested origin story, with experts widely believing it to be derived from the “five precepts”<sup>4</sup> of the ancient Buddhist texts, and not from Sanskrit as is sometimes held—it was Prime Minister Nehru and his gigantic stature as a statesman leader who was responsible for propagating the ideals globally.

The five principles that were proclaimed<sup>5</sup> as the basis of the 1954 India-China agreement are mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; mutual non-interference; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful co-existence. The overarching moral significance of the tenets notwithstanding, the joint proclamation also had other geopolitical truths for India: To win the larger acceptance of China in the hope of countering China’s possible subversive actions in the Himalayan region,<sup>6</sup> particularly in Bhutan and Nepal, (and also in Sikkim), and destabilizing the hard-won Indian independence. Moreover, the idea was also to create an Asian solidarity, perhaps a new non-Western “axis in world politics”.<sup>7</sup> It could also be seen as a precursor to the “Asian century” narrative propounded in strategic circles in the recent past, which has since fizzled out given the abiding growing China threat.

Keeping aside the optimism inherent in the larger geopolitical aim, China’s invasion of Tibet in 1950 should have created more of a concern in India about China’s not-so-chaste intentions, especially as Tibet ceased to be a buffer zone. In the face of China’s annexation and its brutal suppression<sup>8</sup> of the Tibetan resistance in 1959, India—despite its close

cultural ties with Tibet—chose not to intervene militarily. Instead, it pursued a non-violent path of resistance by welcoming a significant influx of Tibetan refugees. India provided these refugees with asylum,<sup>9</sup> land, and financial support, facilitating the establishment of a thriving democracy in exile.<sup>10</sup> This Tibetan democracy, sustained by Indian resources, became a symbol of India’s commitment to maintain the principle of “Peaceful Co-existence”.<sup>11</sup>

Through its generosity, India positioned itself as a regional protector of religious and political freedoms, countering China’s authoritarian ambitions. By doing so, India enhanced its influence beyond South Asia, reinforcing its role as a defender of democratic ideals and religious liberty.<sup>12</sup> However, China’s response—marked by stoking anti-India sentiment and intimidating Indian traders in Tibet—exposed its true intentions. The provision of asylum to the Dalai Lama and India’s non-violent resistance strategy further strained relations, foreshadowing the enduring tensions between the two nations.

Following the annexation of Tibet, Beijing sought to further pursue its ambitions of hegemony in the Himalayan region. Starting from 1956, China began with the construction of highways and “border posts” in the Aksai Chin area.<sup>13</sup> New Delhi issued strong protests against this behavior. Despite this, India in a pursuit of regional stability and peace sought a diplomatic solution. Despite Indian efforts, the parties could not significantly ease the prevailing border tensions.<sup>14</sup> Chinese infrastructure projects continued and Beijing sent frequent patrols along the LAC, regularly venturing into Indian territory.<sup>15</sup> Tensions came

to reach a boiling point in 1960. China had established numerous border posts and there were even cases of Indian servicemen being taken prisoner by Chinese forces.<sup>16</sup> New Delhi reached a consensus that different measures had to be taken and devised the “Forward Policy”.<sup>17</sup>

Viewed from a 2024 perspective, the events leading up to India’s “Forward Policy” reveal important insights into China’s strategic thinking. The infrastructure buildup, “salami-slicing”<sup>18</sup> tactics, and grey-zone maneuvers employed by China in the Himalayas<sup>19</sup> said to be characteristic of “Xi’s new era”,<sup>20</sup> are not recent developments in Chinese foreign policy. Xi appears to be following the blueprint laid by his predecessors in the CCP, continuing a revisionist agenda. This strategy, grounded in a long-standing vision of reasserting China’s historical borders, has shaped its geopolitical conduct for years.<sup>21</sup> The accuracy of these concerns became evident when, in 1962, China waged an “unprovoked and unexpected” a war against India,<sup>22</sup> betraying the trust supposedly established through the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. While India’s “Forward Policy”<sup>23</sup> of 1961 is sometimes cited as the trigger for the conflict, the underlying expansionist mindset of China was already in motion. Although relations normalized after the 1962 war, it certainly laid the foundation for the long-standing hostilities between India and China, which have been crystallized after the bloodshed in the Galwan Valley in 2020.

### **Arunachal as a Linchpin for India’s China Woes**

The North East Frontier Agency (now the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh) was a

prime focus in the 1962 War—the other being Ladakh—where India faced a crushing defeat. In March 2024 as China released the fourth list of “standardized”<sup>24</sup> names in what China calls “Zangnan (the southern part of Southwest China’s Xizang Autonomous Region,” or simply south Tibet), Arunachal Pradesh as a continuing core target for Chinese Himalayan expansionism was reiterated. China released the first list in 2017—the year of the Doklam stand-off<sup>25</sup> when India eked out a psychological victory due to its firm military response and deft diplomacy. India has outright rejected the Chinese intent to redraw international boundaries by “assigning invented” names as “senseless attempts.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Xi Jinping’s aggressive new era policies, including renaming places, inventing new maps, and enacting laws like the Land Borders Law, as well as China’s objections to Indian and Tibetan leaders visiting India’s own state of Arunachal Pradesh as a new “red line” highlight the insidious impact of its expanding “core interests.” Xi is also in a militaristic zeal to expand Himalayan territories via massive infrastructure build-up, including “Xiaokang” (well off) border defense villages<sup>27</sup> along India’s border with the Tibet Autonomous Region, as well as in disputed China-Bhutan territory;<sup>28</sup> or through the controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects with the Himalayan states of Pakistan and Nepal. In this context, particularly, Pakistan is unlikely to reconfigure its ties with China, which exerts immense financial control over Pakistan with its BRI support centered around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), about which India has security concerns. Moreover, Pakistan’s current political and economic instability will hardly impact its strong military-economic ties<sup>29</sup>

with China, constituting a potential double threat for India.

On the other hand, Nepal exercises a balancing act between its super-neighbors China and India even as China looks to check India's traditional influence in Nepal through investments and developmental assistance.<sup>30</sup> Of late, New Delhi's diplomacy is turning the tide in India's favor by strengthening its outreach via new economic deals to counter China's clout.<sup>31</sup> China is also seeking to wrest control of natural resources in the Himalayas, including neighbors access to water, via building massive "hydropower and water diversion" projects,<sup>32</sup> endangering the entire Himalayan ecosystem in the process. In this context, Arunachal Pradesh is significant for China to enhance geographical, geostrategic, and geopolitical sway<sup>33</sup> in its race to become the Himalayan hegemon.

As the 2022 Tawang clash highlighted,<sup>34</sup> China's transgressions into Indian territories are unlikely to abate.<sup>35</sup> Even as stale negotiations on the border continue in the wake of the deadly 2020 Galwan clash, China's claims to pursue "win-win" cooperation are entirely overshadowed by Xi's security-obsessed foreign policy endeavors.<sup>36</sup> Against such a scenario, India must strengthen its borders and recalibrate its diplomatic channels to prepare for unexpected Chinese violations.

### **Regrouping with the West – Need for an Indo-Pacific Himalayan Solidarity?**

China is being increasingly seen as a common threat for India and its Indo-Pacific partners: Australia's 2024 defense strategy has highlighted China's "coercive tactics" amid growing regional

conflict.<sup>37</sup> Japan's 2022 defense strategy focused on China as the primary threat.<sup>38</sup> The Philippines has been strengthening its defense tie-ups, including with India, amid China's "escalation of its harassment" in the South China Sea.<sup>39</sup> The U.S. already prioritizes China as the biggest threat, a "pacing threat."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, even as the European Union (EU) only calls China a "systemic" challenge, it is clear that China's coercive policies, including unfair trade practices and human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang, have compelled Europe to re-configure its China stance, especially in the wake of the Ukraine war and Russia's "no limits" partnership with China. China has reacted sharply to such developments by calling them out as "fanning"<sup>41</sup> or "hyping"<sup>42</sup> the China threat.

The widespread coverage of the "new normal" in Taiwan and the continuing militarization of the Taiwan Strait during and after the Asia visit of former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022 have further highlighted China's dangerous intimidation of democracies in the region. The rather real possibilities of a Taiwan emergency arising out of Xi's need for forced reunification and its claims over the entirety of the South China Sea have also alerted the Indo-Pacific partners to be prepared for a regional crisis in the near future.

Yet, somehow, Himalayan concerns have been overshadowed by China's maritime threats and are often seen by the West as a result of the bilateral fight between India and China. It is this aspect that Indian diplomacy needs to course correct. The China-India boundary dispute is indeed a bilateral affair, and the West should not interfere in the negotiation process or have a say.



However, as the West is perturbed about China's military adventurism in the South China Sea, it should also be concerned about China's military adventurism in the Himalayan region, more so maybe given its technological superiority here. The Himalayan region certainly needs greater international awareness and interest in both the public domain and among lawmakers/policymakers, in the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament (in the West) for instance.

India, on its part, needs to develop a parity of understanding with the West, and vice-versa, on how to question China internationally on its military activism across the Himalayan region that reiterates China's image as a radical revisionist power with unilateral hegemonic interest. The recent recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of Indian territory by the United States has strengthened India's and in turn the partners' hand against China.<sup>43</sup> The

bipartisan Senate resolution has also condemned China's unilateral attempts to change the status quo along the LAC.<sup>44</sup> More such collaborative actions are the need of the hour. The EU needs to take strong note of such developments if it aims to find strategic compatibility with India, bilaterally and regionally, in the Indo-Pacific.

In short, through its aggressive economic, psychological, diplomatic, and military tactics across the region from the Himalayas to the Indo-Pacific maritime regions, China is only intent on upending the liberal global order with a Sino-centric model. China's commitment to "peaceful co-existence" is empty rhetoric. Ironically, President Xi in 2014 quoted the great Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore,<sup>45</sup> "If you think friendship can be won through war, spring will fade away before your eyes." China will do well to heed its own counsel.

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# Pakistan at the Core of China's Himalayan Strategy?

Amrita Jash

Pakistan is central in China's Himalayan strategy, serving as a crucial linchpin for its regional ambitions. While China calls its friendship with Pakistan "iron brothers", Pakistan describes it as "higher than the mountains, deeper than the sea and sweeter than honey".<sup>1</sup>

Broadly, both sides dub the friendship as that of "good neighbors, close friends, iron brothers and trusted partners",<sup>2</sup> but more importantly, rather than just calling the ties 'strategic or cooperative', the bilateral relationship is termed as an "All-weather Strategic and Cooperative Partnership". The essence of the enduring 'all-weather friendship' in the last 73 years is well-noted in the joint statement between Beijing and Islamabad, signed during Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's official visit to China in June 2024, which categorically states:

The two sides agreed that Pakistan and China are All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partners and ironclad friends, and the two countries have always understood, trusted and supported each other. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties 73 years ago, Pakistan-China relations have stood the test of changing international environment and have been as solid as a rock, and as unshakable as a mountain. The Chinese side reiterated that the Pakistan-China relationship is a priority in its foreign relations. The Pakistani side underscored that the Pakistan-China relationship is the cornerstone of its foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

The statement thus, reaffirms that for Beijing, Pakistan is "a priority". This 'prioritization' can be further linked to China's Himalayan strategy based on the lens of great power politics, where the Himalayas appear as "the space in which India, China and their allies meet, contest, occasionally fight, and eventually compromise".<sup>4</sup> Himalayas, therefore, is the space where the three nuclear-armed neighbors are caught in a triangle of mutual enmity.

The Beijing-Islamabad dynamic is particularly important given China's unresolved border dispute with India, especially in the Aksai Chin region—where both countries are engaged in a stand-off in Eastern Ladakh since 2020. Pakistan, therefore, being a close ally looms large in Beijing's Himalayan calculus, where its geopolitical significance inadvertently contributes to counterbalancing India. In addition, both Beijing and Islamabad are politically inclined to support each other's sensitive issues—for China, it is Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan; and for Pakistan, it is Kashmir.

In other words, Pakistan's geographical location is critical for China. Given its proximity with India and Afghanistan, Pakistan provides China with a crucial gateway for a strategic foothold in South Asia as well as offering

access to the Indian Ocean. With this, Beijing can project its influence in a region where India is a dominant player, thus, counterbalancing India's regional influence.

**A Militarily Strong Pakistan is in China's Interest**

China provides military aid and technology to Pakistan, which enhances Islamabad's military capabilities and strengthens its position vis-à-vis India- thus, reinforcing China's strategic partnership with Pakistan.

Despite not being a formal alliance, the China-Pakistan military partnership has deepened significantly over the years. China perceives Pakistan as a key military ally, especially in defense technology, arms sales, and joint military exercises, as highlighted in the 2003 Joint Declaration between China and Pakistan, which outlines:

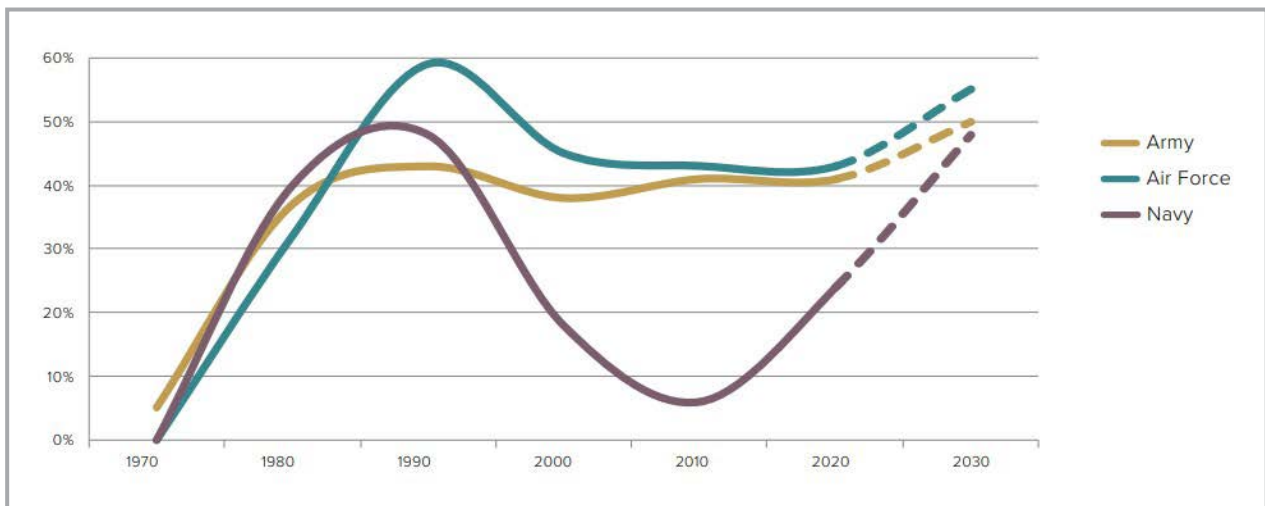
The two parties attach great importance to the role of the China-Pakistan Defense and

Security Consultation Mechanism in promoting military-to-military exchanges and cooperation. To develop defense cooperation, the two parties should, on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, continue to actively conduct exchanges and cooperation at all levels and in all fields, including exchange of visits, personnel training, armed forces training, culture and sports.<sup>5</sup>

China plays a significant role in shaping Pakistan's combat capabilities and conventional defense, justified by China's arms transfers to Pakistan replacing the United States (U.S.) as the dominant supplier of arms. According to SIPRI's report, based on arms transfers between 2019 and 2023, China ranked fourth globally, selling arms to 40 states, with major recipients being Pakistan with 61 percent of China's arms exports, followed by Bangladesh with 11 percent and Thailand with 6 percent.<sup>6</sup>

This rapid rate of arms transfer, when calculated based on trend-indicator value (TIV),<sup>7</sup> is found that the estimated value of Chinese arms

**Figure 19.1: Total Share of China's Military Supplies to Pakistan, by service (1970-2020) and projected to 2030**



Source: Adapted from Lalwani, 2023.

transferred to Pakistan in the past 15 years (USD 8,469 million TIV) is nearly equal to the estimated value of arms transferred to Pakistan by China in the previous 50 years (USD 8,794 million TIV)—since 2015, China has provided nearly 75 percent of all of Pakistan’s imported arms (by TIV).<sup>8</sup> Today, China is the dominant supplier of weapons and platforms in all three services, as noted in Table 19.1.

**Table 19.1: Top Supplies by Service**

Service	Total Platforms from China (%)	Total Platforms from the U.S. (%)
Pakistan Air Force	45	20
Pakistan Army	42	33
Pakistan Navy	22	2

Source: Compiled by author with reference to Lalwani, 2023.

Pakistan has been a major recipient of Chinese military hardware which includes fighter jets, naval vessels, and missile systems (see Table 19.2). For instance, in April 2024, China launched the first of the eight Hangor-class submarines to be built for Pakistan,<sup>9</sup> adding a new dimension to the military cooperation.

Over the years, China has become pivotal in grooming Pakistan’s offensive capabilities, as justified by the key trends in its arms transfer to the three services:<sup>10</sup> First, China is the Pakistan Air Force’s largest supplier of combat attack platforms. Second, it is the largest provider of the Pakistan Army’s offensive capabilities, including a majority of tanks and howitzer and rocket artillery systems. Third, despite being diversified in terms of sourcing ships, the majority of Pakistan Navy’s combat power—measured in combatant ship displacement and missile cells—is from China.

**Table 19.2: Key Arms and Platforms Supplied by China to Pakistan**

Designation	Description	Armament Category
LY-80 SAMS and FM-90 SAMS	SAM System	Air Defense System
LT-2	guided bomb	Missiles
LS-3 and LS-6-500	guided glide bomb	
FM-20	SAM	
LD-10	anti-radar missile	
PL-5E	SRAAM (short-range air-t-o air missile)	
PL-12	BVRAAM (beyond-visual range missile)	
QW-1 Vanguard	Portable SAM	
C, 606, C-802, C-802A, CM-401 and CM-400AKG	anti-ship missile	Sensors
WMD-7	aircraft EO system	
YLC-18, Jy-27 and IBIS-150	air search radar	Artillery
SH-15 155mm	self-propelled gun	
A-100 300mm	self-propelled MRL	
C-602 CDS	Coastal defense system	
Wing Loong- 1 & 2, CH-3	armed UAV	Aircraft
Ch-4A	UAV	
J-10C and JF-17 Thunder/ FC-1	FGA-aircraft	
ZDK-03	AEW&C aircraft	
WZ-10	Combat helicopter	Ships
Azmat	Corvette	
Type-054A	Frigate	Armored vehicles
VT-4	Tank	

Source: Compiled by the author with reference to SIPRI Arms Transfers Database<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, not just conventional arms, China has also been supportive of Pakistan’s nuclear program, to counterbalance India’s

nuclear capabilities and enhance Pakistan’s security and deterrence posture.

In making Pakistan a nuclear power, China passed the entire design for a nuclear weapon in the 1980s—the only country to ever do so. China has also provided Pakistan with weapons-grade uranium sufficient to put together two nuclear devices and helped develop Pakistan’s ballistic missile program. Chinese institutes and companies have been sanctioned by the U.S. for supplying missile-applicable items to Pakistan. The most recent on September 12, 2024, when the U.S. Department of State imposed sanctions on Beijing Research Institute of Automation for Machine Building Industry among other companies, accusing it of working with Pakistan to procure equipment for testing rocket motors for the Shaheen-3 and Ababeel systems and potentially for larger systems.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, China has also helped to build Pakistan’s civilian nuclear energy program. With the largest nuclear power plant ‘Chashma-5 under construction since 2023 (estimated to contribute 1,200 megawatts of electricity daily to the national grid), Beijing so far has installed four nuclear power generation units in Chashma, collectively generating about 1,300 megawatts, with China providing enriched uranium for fuel.<sup>13</sup> The other two are K2 and K3 reactors in the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant.

Another feature of China-Pakistan military ties is demonstrated in their joint military exercises (see Table 19.3) aimed at counter-terrorism, aerial combat, maritime security and operational coordination.

**Table 19.3: China-Pakistan Joint Military Exercises**

Exercise Name/ Frequency	Branch	Focus
<b>Bilateral Exercises</b>		
Shaheen Series Annual/Biennial	Air Force	Air combat, joint aerial maneuvers
Sea Guardians Biennial/ Occasional	Navy	Maritime security, anti-piracy and anti- submarine warfare
Friendship ( <i>Youyi</i> ) Series Annual/Biennial	Army	Joint ground operation, tactical coordination
Warrior Series Annual/Biennial		Counter-terrorism, special operations
Zarb-e-Azb Occasional		Counter-terrorism, asymmetric warfare
<b>Multilateral Exercises</b>		
Peace Mission (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) Biennial	All three services	Counter-terrorism, multilateral security operations
Aman (Hosted by Pakistan) Biennial	Navy	Maritime security, anti-piracy

Source: Compiled by author

These combat drills aim at enhancing interoperability between the two militaries, reinforcing their strategic partnership by building mutual trust and strengthening combat preparedness. For instance, comparing the 2019 “Shaheen (eagle) VIII” exercise to the previous drills, Senior Colonel Du Wenlong had stated:

The biggest feature of the joint training this time is that it’s conducted in a back-to-back manner, whereby neither party is informed of the other’s situation and has to find it completely depending on the early warning aircraft, predict its operations and immediately change the training plan. The training is more confrontational than previous ones that followed a pre-arranged plan. [...] Since it’s back-to-back without

the communication of any information, the “Shaheen (eagle) VIII” joint training features a keener sense of unfamiliarity and is very close to real-combat environment, with its indicators and plans all reaching the real-combat level.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, these joint exercises are aimed at maintaining China’s influence by balancing India’s growing military ties, especially with the U.S. and other Quad (Australia and Japan) partners. To note, of all countries, India has the maximum joint military exercises<sup>15</sup> with the U.S., both bilateral and multilateral.

### **Securing Sovereignty and Gaining Strategic Foothold through CPEC**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major component of Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a cornerstone of China’s Himalayan strategy. As China’s 15-year, USD 62 billion investment in Pakistan and the flagship project of its BRI, CPEC is seen as an “economic peg” in the wider strategic relationship between Pakistan and China.<sup>16</sup> The infrastructural project which started with an investment of USD 46 billion in 2015 saw an increase in outlay to USD 65 billion in 2022.<sup>17</sup>

The objectives of China’s Himalayan strategy can be understood from a two-fold perspective: First, securing its sovereignty by countering India’s sovereignty. Geographically, CPEC connects Kashgar, a city in China’s northwest region of Xinjiang, to Pakistan’s southern port city of Gwadar in Balochistan by a network of railways, highways, airports, and energy pipelines for trade and tourism purposes. As a result, CPEC runs through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is

a severely contested territory between India and Pakistan.

India claims the entire former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of its territory based on the instrument of accession signed in 1947. Because of this, New Delhi considers Pakistan’s control over the western portion as illegal and thus, defines this area as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Important to note, that under the Sino-Pakistani boundary agreement of 1963, Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley of Aksai Chin to China, which India does not recognize given its sovereignty claims over the territory. Therefore, asserting that Kashmir is an “integral and inalienable” part of India, in August 2019, India abrogated Article 370 of its Constitution and gave assent to the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019.<sup>18</sup> In raising opposition to India’s move, China’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement, saying:

China deplores and firmly opposes this. India is challenging China’s sovereign rights and interests by unilaterally revising domestic law and administrative division. This is illegal, null and void. It will neither change the fact that the relevant region is under China’s actual control nor produce any effect.<sup>19</sup>

CPEC, thereby, is linked to China’s apprehensions over the threat to Aksai Chin from India—mainly to the 179-km-long part of China’s Western Express Highway (G219) through Aksai Chin that connects Kashgar in Xinjiang to Lhasa in Tibet.<sup>20</sup> For instance, India’s 255-km-long Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Begh Oldie (DSDBO) runs almost parallel and at places very close to the Line of Actual Control



(LAC) with important communication arteries to the CPEC over Khunjerab Pass, and the G219 lies immediately to the north of the Karakoram Pass. Therefore, infrastructure and military logistics under CPEC can be seen as ways to check and counterbalance India's infrastructure build-up in proximity to the LAC.

Undisputedly, with CPEC, China poses a challenge to India's sovereignty over Kashmir, as well-witnessed in the Indian Government's official position which iterates the concerns over CPEC, stating that:

the inclusion of the so-called illegal 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) as a flagship project of 'OBOR/BRI', directly impinges on the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity of India. This so-called illegal 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) passes through parts of the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh which are under illegal occupation of Pakistan.<sup>21</sup>

Second, gaining strategic maritime access through the Gwadar Port. It is the third most important deep-sea port in Pakistan after Karachi and Qasim and is located at the junction of international sea shipping and oil trade routes, connecting three regions—Central Asia, South Asia and West Asia.<sup>22</sup> CPEC, therefore, provides regional connectivity.

It provides security to its shipments from West Asia given the port's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz. And especially concerning India, the Gwadar port provides China with direct access

to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. Gwadar, therefore, is a core component of Beijing's maritime military strategy, as China's 2013 "Blue Book" on the Indian Ocean adds that "if India or the US impede the attainment of its objectives (in the Indian Ocean), it would not desist from resorting to confrontation".<sup>23</sup>

CPEC, therefore, is a broader geopolitical initiative aimed at expanding China's influence not just in South Asia but in the Indian Ocean Region and countering India's dominance. Thus, it provides China with a strategic buffer, ensuring that it has a militarily strong ally in Pakistan bordering India as well as aids its regional influence in countering India's growing partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.

## Conclusion

Pakistan, therefore, is central to China's Himalayan strategy. By bolstering its key ally, China seeks to create a two-front strategic challenge for India, aligning with China's broader Himalayan ambitions. Acting as a crucial strategic partner, China's 'all-weather ties' with Pakistan, on one end, enhance Beijing's regional influence in South Asia, and on the other end, is pivotal to Beijing's countering strategy towards India. It can, therefore, be said that Pakistan has become indispensable to China's strategic calculus and thus, the 'all-weather partnership' is here to stay for the long haul. The closer military ties in all possibility might embolden into a formal alliance in the near future.

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# China's Connectivity Charm Offensive in Pakistan: Lessons for South Asia

Rahul Karan Reddy

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 3000-km long, USD 62 billion stretch of connectivity infrastructure takes pride of place in China's overseas ventures as the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) crowning jewel. Since its inception in 2013, a decade of Chinese investments into Pakistan's energy, transport and mining sector has produced an unsustainable debt burden and cultivated deep dependencies in China's favor. South Asia's states are increasingly watchful of this dynamic playing out in their own countries, wary of China's connectivity charm and wiser to Beijing's overtures.

## China's Charm

China's connectivity charm was greeted with optimism in the hope that CPEC would bridge significant deficits Pakistan faced in the availability of suitable transportation, energy and trade facilitation/logistics infrastructure. Pakistan faces a USD 124 billion infrastructure deficit<sup>1</sup> over the next two decades and loses 4-6 percent of its GDP due to infrastructure insufficiency. Moreover, Pakistan has an energy crisis,<sup>2</sup> characterized by a deficit of 6000 MW and unreliable access to electricity that costs households USD 4.5 billion annually, about 1.7 percent of GDP.<sup>3</sup> The poor quality of

transport and energy infrastructure is reflected in Pakistan's Logistics Performance Index (LPI) score of 2.42 (ranked 122 of 160 countries),<sup>4</sup> an indication that the country's trade facilitation infrastructure cannot support the growth of trade and industry. This was China's opening.

China's investments and loans for the CPEC were presented as a solution to these challenges, swaying political and intellectual elites in Pakistan with promises that "by 2020 major bottlenecks to economic and social development shall be addressed" and by 2025, the "industrial system will be complete and people's livelihoods significantly improved".<sup>5</sup> Data on Chinese investments in Pakistan shows that since 2013, 81 percent of China's development finance, excluding budgetary support provided to shore up Pakistan's foreign reserves, was channeled into the energy and transport sectors.<sup>6</sup> Although CPEC investments into Pakistan's connectivity infrastructure may have had short-term benefits, the complications and risks of Pakistan's deepening dependence on China have surfaced over the past few years.

## The Curse

CPEC projects have overpromised and under delivered, exposing the difference in the stated

benefits of China's development partnership and its actual outcomes. Projects in Pakistan have been afflicted by various planning issues and delays, inflating costs and diminishing their impact. In the transport sector, of the 24 projects part of CPEC, only 6 have been completed.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the Main Line 1 Railway project, the costliest project of CPEC, has stalled due to a lack of funds, doubled in cost and scaled down repeatedly to manage costs and expectations.<sup>8</sup> Even Pakistan's Planning Commission has assessed the project to be unviable due to reductions of speed, line capacity and axle loads.<sup>9</sup> In the energy sector, 14 projects have been completed<sup>10</sup> adding 8500 MW of capacity to the grid, but the capacity of transmission lines, grid stations and distribution transformers has not kept pace with newly installed generation capacity, dampening the impact of CPEC energy projects.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan continues to grapple with an energy crisis and insufficient infrastructure, largely because China's investments have not translated into gains in productivity and economic growth. Moreover, CPEC has triggered financial and security risks for Pakistan.

Nearly all of China's investments in Pakistan are in the form of loans, not grants. Between 2000 and 2021, only 8 percent of China's development finance to Pakistan was Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and 89 percent was comprised of loans.<sup>12</sup> As a result, over the course of two decades, Pakistan has accumulated USD 30 billion of Chinese debt, which accounts for approximately 30 percent of Pakistan's external debt.<sup>13</sup> Some analysts have argued that this figure is an underestimate and the actual sum is USD 67 billion, given that

countries tend to underreport their debt owed to China.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Pakistan has repeatedly sought debt rollovers from China over the last few years, most recently for USD 15 billion in May 2024<sup>15</sup> and another USD 2 billion two months before that.<sup>16</sup> Even Beijing has stepped back from financing new and existing CPEC projects, in response to the financial unviability and unsustainability of the CPEC.<sup>17</sup> For other South Asian countries, Pakistan's financial indebtedness to China has emerged as an alarming example of the consequences of overreliance on China's development partnership.

China's widespread presence in Pakistan has also nested the CPEC within the country's volatile security environment. CPEC projects and Chinese nationals have been attacked in Pakistan several times and face threats from Baloch insurgents, Pakistani Taliban, Islamic State-Khorasan and various non-state actors. In March 2024, an attack by Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP) on Chinese nationals travelling to the Dasu hydroelectric project site killed five Chinese engineers<sup>18</sup> and in the same month, eight armed attackers of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) targeted the Gwadar Port, the centerpiece of the CPEC.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the manner of CPEC's implementation has exacerbated tensions between Pakistan's central government and the provinces,<sup>20</sup> sparked protests<sup>21</sup> across the country and created non-traditional security risks for communities. For instance, the presence of Chinese fishing trawlers near Gwadar has exacerbated the concerns of local fishing communities who are already wary of Sindh-based trawlers fishing illegally

in the waters off the coast of Balochistan.<sup>22</sup> Such security dynamics have compounded the challenges of implementing CPEC projects and underscored the complications of China's involvement in South Asia's complex political-security landscape.

Pakistan's engagement with China has also created trade dependencies and a cycle of deficits and debt. While China exports around USD 21 billion (2022) to Pakistan and accounts for 28 percent of its exports, Pakistan only exports USD 2.8 billion (2023) to China.<sup>23</sup> The widening current account deficit diminishes Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves, which requires budgetary assistance from China in the form of infusions of foreign exchange. China's commercial banks and state-owned enterprises have provided loans on numerous occasions to shore up Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves and prevent the country from defaulting on debt.<sup>24</sup> This cycle of deficits and debt has normalized a pattern of overreliance on China's development finance.<sup>25</sup>

### South Asia's Reactions

Countries in South Asia like Nepal and Bangladesh who are part of the BRI have engaged with the initiative in a more limited and cautious manner. In Nepal, there have been no BRI projects initiated as yet even though the MoU on BRI was signed by both parties in 2017. Officials in Nepal's government have been reluctant to accept China's loans and are yet to finalize the BRI implementation plan.<sup>26</sup> For example, although China unilaterally classified the Pokhara International Airport as part of the BRI, Kathmandu refused to do

the same, insisting that the airport has nothing to do with the BRI.<sup>27</sup> Nepal has also been reluctant to engage with the Trans Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN), reiterating its preference for grants, not loans, and indicating its cautious approach to China's connectivity infrastructure proposals.

Bangladesh too has been a cautious borrower and refrained from making China its main lender. Bangladesh has negotiated BRI projects well by securing low interest rates, long maturity periods and ensuring that China's share of total external lending remains a manageable 6.81 percent.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Bangladesh has rejected BRI project proposals that are economically unsustainable, like the Sonadia Port project, and even blacklisted Chinese companies like the China Road and Bridges Corporation for tax evasion. The government has investigated several Chinese companies for fraudulent business practices, demonstrating its willingness to elicit compliance from Chinese entities in the country.<sup>29</sup> It has also balanced China's provision of connectivity infrastructure by inviting India, Japan and multilateral institutions to provide the same infrastructure.

That some of South Asia's governments are taking a cautious approach to China's offers of providing connectivity infrastructure is an indication that they are taking a closer look at the BRI and how it has played out in countries like Pakistan. The hidden dangers of overreliance on China for development finance like indebtedness, security risks and underwhelming outcomes are deterring South Asia's governments from buying into the BRI.

### **India as a Gateway for Greater Engagement**

India has played an important role in shaping these cautious responses to the BRI by highlighting its pitfalls and questioning the initiative's lack of transparency and unsustainability. Several efforts have been made to educate and train officials from countries in South Asia to observe and navigate the hidden dangers of China's connectivity and development initiatives. At the same time, Delhi has also demonstrated the

success of its own development outreach model in South Asia as an alternative to the BRI. To match China's development diplomacy, India is also inviting partners like Japan, European Union and the U.S. to enhance their development and diplomatic engagement with South Asian states. As a gateway for greater engagement in South Asia, India is well positioned to decrease the influence of China's outreach and present a credible alternative to China's development partnership.

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# China and Bhutan: Boundary, Bilateral, and India

Eerishika Pankaj

The Himalayan borders, once a natural strategic buffer between neighboring states, have become a focal point of South Asian geopolitical tensions post China's invasion of Tibet in 1950s, transforming the region into a hotspot of rivalry.<sup>1</sup> Beyond its own unresolved contentious border dispute with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), New Delhi's key role as a regional net-security provider and global diplomatic power has seen it emerge as a vital actor in the China-Bhutan boundary dispute as well. The standoff in 2017<sup>2</sup> at the Doklam tri-junction between China-Bhutan-India—claimed by both China and Bhutan—remains one of the staunchest shows of New Delhi's support for Thimphu.

Although Bhutan follows the one China policy,<sup>3</sup> it does not have diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC)—but the two states have maintained trade and cultural ties.<sup>4</sup> In this context, Bhutan's boundary dispute with China has always carried a unique diplomatic hue, with 25 rounds of boundary talks and 14 expert group meetings having been conducted from 1984 till 2024 in attempts to find a resolution.<sup>5</sup> These bilateral boundary negotiations, initiated in the 1980s, have primarily centered on the 270 square kilometer

stretch at the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction, a strategically vulnerable area providing access to India's northeastern states via the narrow Siliguri Corridor.

It was this same tri-junction that became the flashpoint of the 2017 Doklam crisis when China's military attempted to build a road in the contested region. Despite the faith and importance accorded to these deliberations, it is important to remember that both these dialogue mechanisms were halted post the Doklam standoff in 2017, restarting only in April 2021,<sup>6</sup> therein showing that conflict over sovereignty supersedes what vestiges of diplomatic correspondence Bhutan and China directly maintain.

## A Friend in Need, But Not Deed?

Critically, as the 2012 agreement between India and China on the “Establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs” decided, tri-juncture boundary points require trilateral consultation.<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that the historic signing of the Bhutan-China memorandum of understanding (MoU)<sup>8</sup> in 2021 on a “Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiation” must

be viewed, with India as a critical, but largely excluded, actor. While India has remained cautious in its response to the MoU, concerns quickly mounted over Bhutan's shifting alignment with China, with South Block worrying about it potentially eroding India's influence over its historically close ally. India's exclusion from the negotiations was also lauded in Chinese state-media as a major diplomatic win for Beijing where the narrative pushed is one of India attempting to "take control" of Bhutan.<sup>9</sup>

Continuing on their trajectory of 'warming' relations, the 25th round of boundary talks between Bhutan and China in 2023 caused even greater concern for India due to the sideline meetings between Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and Chinese vice-president Han Zheng with Bhutan's foreign minister, Tandi Dorji.<sup>10</sup> In these meetings, Chinese leaders pledged to expedite the boundary demarcation process and proposed establishing formal bilateral diplomatic relations with Bhutan, a suggestion warmly received by Bhutan but one that has raised alarm in India.<sup>11</sup>

However, on the one hand, even as China has pushed to improve diplomatic ties with Bhutan, with the long-term goal of formalizing them, it has continued on the other hand with boundary provocations into Bhutan via consistent buildup of border villages—this tied together with China's new Land Border Law only causes more concerns.<sup>12</sup> Such land-grabbing attempts by China in Bhutanese territory in the backdrop of China's bid to push forward with the MoU show its charm-offensive led repeated attempts in changing the status quo unilaterally.

Furthermore, as details regarding the exact 'three steps' of the MoU remain unreleased till date, it is gathered that the negotiations will be guided by the existing agreements between Bhutan-China such as the 1988 Joint Communiqué on the Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Boundary and the 1998 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace, Tranquillity and Status Quo in the Bhutan-China Border Areas.<sup>13</sup> The need to refashion and upgrade the same before proceeding with complete implementation of the MoU is critical, especially in the aftermath of Beijing's new Land Border Law which seeks to legitimize use of civilian settlements to aid Chinese territorial claims.<sup>14</sup>

Alarming for India, establishment of direct diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China could also open Bhutan to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) pressure, possibly leading to an economic debt trap and loaning of strategic land upon non-repayment of loan, as seen with Sri Lanka. Any potential for Bhutan's inclusion in the BRI is the primary scenario that India will seek to derail. Delhi for its part has pushed its outreach to Bhutan more strongly to counter growing Chinese influence; the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Bhutan in March 2024 saw the announcement of India's development support of Nu. 100 billion (INR 10,000 crore) for the mountain country's 13th Five Year Plan period.<sup>15</sup> Bhutan also felicitated Modi with the Order of the Druk Gyalpo, its highest civilian award, in a strong show of mutual respect between the two countries.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, India's newly appointed Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri also chose to visit Bhutan in July 2024, marking his first foreign

visit since assuming the office and reiterating the importance Bhutan holds in India's foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> Concurrently, private enterprise led infrastructure development projects are also taking shape, with India's Reliance Infrastructure and Reliance Power landing a landmark deal totaling almost USD 1 billion to develop Bhutan's largest green energy power project.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the project for building the first cross-border railway link between India and Bhutan also saw approval in 2024, with a funding of INR 3,000 crore to facilitate trade between India-Bhutan-Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup>

### Looking Ahead: Securing the Eastern Himalayas

Ultimately, China's advances in Bhutan have direct linkage to Beijing's India calculus, the LAC and the Himalayas. The Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship, signed between Bhutan and India in 1949, stipulated that India would refrain from interfering in Bhutan's internal governance, while Bhutan would align its external relations with India's advice.<sup>20</sup> This agreement allowed Bhutan to maintain internal autonomy, with India overseeing its foreign affairs. Since the time of this treaty, China has remained a guiding factor behind Thimphu-Delhi ties; the treaty itself must be viewed in context of Mao Zedong's Communist Party of China (CPC) victory in the Chinese Civil War the same year.

From Bhutan's perspective, the CPC posed a threat to both its autonomy and cultural identity, given the party's opposition to the feudal, theocratic, and monarchical systems prevalent in Bhutan and Tibet. Bhutan's initial alignment with India thus reflects both historical patterns

of cooperation shaped by British colonialism and a reaction to the rising China threat in the region—the latter still remains a core concern today, and for the foreseeable future as well.<sup>21</sup>

China's historical territorial claims over parts of Bhutan have fostered close Bhutanese-Indian ties, unified in their opposition to China's designs in the Eastern Himalayas. Hence, finalizing any resolution on the tri-junction point without including India is a pipe-dream for the Chinese, and the same is a fact they recognize. Even at the most recent 14<sup>th</sup> Expert Group Meeting,<sup>22</sup> initial focus as part of moving forward with the three-step roadmap discussions have not reported any debates on Doklam and Sakteng (which borders Arunachal Pradesh).

By reaching a thorough settlement on the boundary with Bhutan, Beijing would acquire advances into the South Asian country via trade, tourism, and investments, consequently promoting China's hand to extend its clout in the area and especially in the Himalayan region.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, unilateral wins in the Himalayas and LAC will only encourage similar Chinese actions in other parts of the world, specifically the broader Indo-Pacific region, making protection of sovereignty in the trans-Himalayas integral to a rules-based order beyond the region as well.<sup>24</sup>

As one of the 'three steps' it is indeed plausible that China would push Bhutan for a "definitive" response on the territorial dispute. Such a deduction has basis in China's 2020 "package solution"<sup>25</sup> offer to Bhutan to settle the boundary dispute by referencing its 1996 proposal for a territory swap wherein China

would give Bhutan the disputed areas in the north in exchange of disputed areas in the West—especially Doklam.<sup>26</sup> Repeated claims by the Chinese on Bhutan's eastern boundary at Sakteng are also a well-rounded pressure tactic that will see inroads in the MoU negotiation to conclude a border deal, especially as India has sought to build a road in the region that would allow quick access for Indian troops to Tawang (which China has long claimed as its own as part of broader claims on Arunachal Pradesh).<sup>27</sup>

For China, in South Asia, Bhutan emerges as a 'last frontier'<sup>28</sup> to conquer—diplomatically, economically and politically. Furthermore, in its broader India strategy, China has gradually but surely sought to limit India's soft and hard power in the region, focusing increasingly on New Delhi's area of strategic influence in its neighborhood such as countries of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. India nonetheless retains considerable leverage over Bhutan through security, economic ties, and shared cultural history. Bhutan's reliance on India for military support—the Indian Military Training Team

(IMTRAT), responsible for training personnel of the Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) and the Royal Bodyguard of Bhutan (RBG), celebrated its 61<sup>st</sup> raising day in Bhutan in 2023<sup>29</sup>—particularly in safeguarding the Siliguri Corridor, suggests that any boundary agreement with China will not proceed without taking into account India's security concerns.

However, China's diplomatic skill lies in playing on Bhutan's desire for greater autonomy, presenting itself as a partner in resolving long-standing issues and potentially offering economic inducements to shift the balance. This could weaken India's traditionally dominant role in Bhutanese affairs. For India, the challenge will be to assert its security concerns and maintain its influence while respecting Bhutan's sovereignty. Going forward, China-Bhutan relations may evolve toward greater engagement, but not without considerable caution from Thimphu, given the implications for India-Bhutan ties. Bhutan for its part must navigate a delicate balancing act—achieving a resolution with China without alienating India.

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# Nepal Is Hardly Beijing's Best Bet in Himalayas: Will India Win the Long Game?

Saroj Kumar Aryal and Jagannath Panda

In July 2024, Nepal's fractious politics witnessed yet another churning in a span of months: 72-year-old veteran politician Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli of the Communist Party of Nepal—Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN—UML)—labeled “pro-China” by the Chinese media in his first term itself—won the vote of confidence in the Parliament soon after being sworn in as prime minister for the fourth time.<sup>1</sup> Days after, Foreign Secretary Sewa Lamsal left for Kunming, China, to deliver the keynote address and hold bilateral meetings with high-level officials at the fifth China-South Asia Cooperation Forum—China's attempt to coalesce South Asian states, but excluding India, to create a “regional Himalayan bloc” as part of its Sino-centric global order agenda.<sup>2</sup> Do such events imply that China is gaining an irreversible edge over India in the neighborhood?

The answer is more complicated than what the headlines suggest as China's controversial “lumping” of projects like the China-funded Pokhara International Airport under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Nepal's reported investigation into the project indicate.<sup>3</sup>

Besides, the new government is yet another coalition based on a recent deal forged between the two largest parties the Nepali Congress

(NC) and the CPN—UML, which among other factors also includes sharing the prime ministerial position between Oli and the NC President Sher Bahadur Deuba.<sup>4</sup> However, the new alliance is largely expected to still bring stability although the previous Pushpa Kamal Dahal-led “left-unity” coalition broke down only months after without any major apparent disagreements.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the formation of about 13 governments in just over a decade and a half since Nepal became a federal democratic republic in May 2008 has already prompted deeper questions about domestic politics and its repercussions for not only Nepal's economy and good governance but also its foreign policy. This sounds promising for India, which has been looking to curb China's growing role in Nepalese domestic economy and politics.

But will Modi's post-election (2024) version of the already tested Neighborhood First policy be able to incorporate the lessons learned to retain India's traditional stronghold?

Also, what will the ensuing domestic and regional politicking mean for Nepal's engagements with China and India, notwithstanding the reservations about such simplistic characteri-

zation as the Nepali Congress widely seen as “pro-India” and CPN-UML as “pro-China”? With China also attempting to align South Asian states under its umbrella in its new avatar as a so-called global “peacebuilder,” be it between Iranians and Saudis or uniting Palestinian groups, will Nepal follow China’s diktats or retain its autonomy?<sup>6</sup> Can India’s burgeoning economic, high-tech, and security bonhomie with the West, including the European Union (EU), help its Nepal outreach?

### **Nepal a Lynchpin of China’s Himalayan Strategy? The Jury Is Out**

At the outset, the return of Oli does not bode well for India. This is primarily because Oli is often seen as a China backer due to his tough stance on India in his previous tenures including the adoption of a new federal constitution that resulted in a crippling “undeclared blockage” by India.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it was his concerted outreach to China concluding in multiple bilateral agreements including a transit trade treaty to reduce dependence on India and other infrastructure-, connectivity-related deals via the BBRI that fuelled India’s concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Multiple initiatives, from advancement of hydropower projects funded or operated by Chinese companies like the Upper Marsyandi to the operationalization of the Nepal-China cross-border optical fiber link, China’s inroads into the Nepalese economy, resources, technology, and politics are undoubtedly gaining steam.<sup>9</sup>

In exchange for the Chinese largesse and under pressure from China, Nepal also has shown complete support for the “One China” policy, tightening its forces against Tibetans in the

name of not allowing the use of Nepali territory for “any anti-China or separatist activities.”<sup>10</sup> So much so that the Nepali government’s restriction of Tibetan rights under Chinese pressure has also been acknowledged by the Human Rights Watch in 2022.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, as per Nepalese political observers, the Chinese ruling regime has been known to favor the communist parties, especially the now-split Nepal Communist Party (NCP), and has even in recent times been trying to unite the left parties.<sup>12</sup> According to the Chinese state media, Deuba is a U.S. and Indian ally.<sup>13</sup> But as the constant regime change calculi suggests, domestic politics is not beyond changing alliances, the stress on non-alignment in official Nepali diplomatic rhetoric notwithstanding.

More to the point, despite both Oli’s and Dahal’s (another so-called pro-China leader) headline-making visits to China in recent years, in so far as Indian concerns are linked, the BRI project implementation plan is yet to see the light of the day. As of now, no single project has been greenlit due to a lack of consensus over a funding model despite reports that Chinese investments into the BRI countries in 2023 have accelerated overall.<sup>14</sup>

Nepal signed the BRI framework agreement way back in 2017, broadly aiming to connect trade, facilities, and people, as well as foster financial integration under a “new economic order.”<sup>15</sup> The tall claims have atrophied amid Nepal’s fragile political climate and growing concerns about the BRI as an unsustainable and often debt-inducing project with expansionist ulterior motives. Reportedly, Nepal prefers grants and



not loans, presumably to avoid getting caught in “debt-traps”; and China is not inclined to accede to this demand.<sup>16</sup>

Notably, as far as Chinese President Xi Jinping’s three latest projects that aim to incentivize the non-Western world into joining China’s vision of the multipolar world are concerned, namely the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), Nepal has disappointed China. While agreeing to be part of two small projects under the GDI that align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Nepal (that too under a “pro-China” Dahal) opted out of the GSI, highlighting its policy of non-alignment and Nepal’s decision to stay away from the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific construct.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, recent reports of Chinese “interference” into Nepalese territory—despite denial from the Chinese side about any encroachments—would have put additional pressure on the Nepalese government not to grow too complacent about Chinese financial overtures.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Nepal’s strategic importance to China—be it as a vital resource for water and hydro-power generation; as a gateway into South Asia, India’s traditional backyard; or as a means to control the sizable Tibetan refugee population and their activities in Nepal—indicates that the landlocked Himalayan state will see China dangling more financial and political incentives both to gain greater access to the Asian subregion and to create more viable conditions for a Sino-centric world order.

### **India May be Down but Not Out**

Regardless of China’s greater, clout, resources, and even capabilities, India’s decades-old influence in Nepal cannot simply be mitigated, let alone erased. Nepal’s diplomacy, too, recognizes the imperative to continue persisting with political hedging in the garb of non-alignment, rather than take sides under most conditions.<sup>19</sup> So if Nepal is a willing participant in China’s BRI and accepts funding for hydropower and infrastructure projects, the former has also signed a long-term power trade agreement with India to export 10,000 megawatts of electricity, among several other productive deals including on renewable energy and community development projects.<sup>20</sup> In the digital sphere, too, via India’s widely successful United Payments Interface (UPI), the India-Nepal connectivity will not only facilitate cross-border transactions and “create new avenues for trade” but also enhance financial robustness for Nepal.<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, Nepal not only has open borders and deep cultural linkages with India but its primary economic relationship is also with India.<sup>22</sup> India is Nepal’s largest trading partner, provides transit for almost all of Nepal’s third-country trade, and accounts for a large chunk of “inward remittances.”<sup>23</sup> Also, despite Nepal escalating the border dispute with India by “unilaterally” updating maps, particularly after 2020—the year becomes significant because of the India-China Galwan conflict—Oli has pointed to India-Nepal diplomatic mechanisms as the way ahead, signaling a non-confrontational start to the new coalition.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, one of the major reasons for Nepal’s deep reluctance to China’s claims about projects

like the Pokhara airport into the BRI fold is India's objections to the BRI; India has thus far refused to allow direct flights between Pokhara and Indian cities, adding to the airport's financial feasibility woes.<sup>25</sup>

Besides, India's Neighborhood First policy has received a major fillip in the Indian government's new term, with Nepal as a special beneficiary. First, Modi's swearing-in ceremony in June 2024 was attended by several leaders of the neighboring states, including Dahal.<sup>26</sup> Second, a month later, India in its budget for the Ministry of External Affairs in the new fiscal year increased allocations to Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles.<sup>27</sup> Both factors highlight India's intent to address the China factor and the Nepalese leadership's will to pursue national interests despite political or ideological differences with the Indian side.

### **Will India's Indo-Pacific Partners Play Ball in Nepal?**

Keeping in view both South Asia's lack of regional integration and China's military and ecological threat in the Himalayan region, be it via the Line of Actual Control (LAC), territorial adventurism in Nepal<sup>28</sup> or Bhutan, or eco-dominance of the Tibetan Plateau resources and repression of the Tibetans, the only pivotal way out is through international cooperation with "like-minded" partners, particularly the EU, Japan, and the U.S.

For example, when China was looking to further restrict Tibetan rights in Nepal via the signing of a treaty on extradition with Nepal,<sup>29</sup> the pressure from the international community, including the U.S. and the European states, was

reportedly responsible for curtailing this reach.

In this context, the U.S. has been well aware of China's Himalayan agenda as is evidenced through growing U.S. engagement with Nepal.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Nepal has been careful in rejecting the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy and State Partnership program due to their "security" angle contradicting Nepal's non-aligned policy.<sup>31</sup> However, despite similar sovereignty concerns, Nepal has signed the Millennium Challenge Corporation's Compact, underlining U.S. investment of about USD 500 million in Nepal's power and transport infrastructure.<sup>32</sup> The U.S. now needs to have a South Asian policy that echoes or correlates with India's regional vision centered on *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* but taking into account the China threat.

Moreover, a U.S.-Japan partnership in the Himalayan region including in Nepal can be influential given that Japan already has a strong investment outreach in Northeast India. Similarly, the EU via its Global Gateway connectivity strategy is already helping improve infrastructure development in Nepal; but better coordination with India could enhance the strategic aspects.<sup>33</sup>

It is imperative that India utilizes its growing economic, technological, and security ties with the West to highlight its Himalayan concerns. The threat from China in expanding its hydro-hegemony and the overall threat to climate change due to excessive Chinese actions, from mining to dam-building, on the Tibetan Plateau, should be enough to formulate a collaborative action plan. Nepal's strategic location and enhanced ties with China make it a vital cog

in such a cooperative plan especially given the right incentive.

As such, an optimistic perspective would serve Nepal well in a divisive regional landscape, where Nepal's two nuclear neighbors India and China are looking to establish Himalayan dominance amid the broader regional strategic competition between India's Indo-Pacific partner the U.S.,

and rival China. So will autonomous thinking among Nepal's foreign policy makers. Stable domestic politics and wooing by both India and China amid a fractured regional political climate may just provide the right momentum for Nepal's embittered economy.

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# Can China Leverage Its Himalayan Strategy in a Defiant Bangladesh?

Léna Fargier and Jagannath Panda

In late September 2024, Chief Adviser to the new interim government of Bangladesh Muhammad Yunus welcomed “bigger” Chinese investment in Bangladesh by China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi when the two leaders met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York.<sup>1</sup> In a hotly contested Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape, China’s concrete support for solar panel manufacturing brings out China’s imperative to seize the “revolutionary moment” in Bangladesh. In contrast, the US and European leaders’ generic support has stood out.<sup>2</sup>

China has also been careful to maintain its outreach with the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – rivals of the ousted Awami League, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s party that is currently facing an unprecedented leadership crisis.<sup>3</sup> The rehabilitation and rise of the Jamaat-e-Islami, a reportedly fervently “anti-India” Islamist party, could have ramifications for India’s security and ties with Bangladesh, which had stabilized under the relatively “secular” and “pro-India” Hasina.<sup>4</sup>

For the politically fragile Bangladesh particularly after the downfall of the longest-serving but repressive Hasina’s regime after weeks of violent mass protests, Yunus’s trip to the latest UNGA

including bilateral meetings with top Chinese, US, and European leaders – barring India, which was conspicuously absent from Yunus’s bilateral radar – highlights the new Bangladeshi leadership’s intent to gain what could be called a new “reforms-based” legitimacy from the international community at large.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, it also puts the spotlight on the Bay of Bengal littoral’s strategic importance for not only China’s access to the Indian Ocean region but also the Himalayan regional order, courtesy China’s hydro-hegemony aims that adversely affect the downstream countries like Bangladesh and India.<sup>6</sup> But what do the new, emerging political debates and the balancing for power domestically and regionally mean for Bangladesh’s future? Will China’s new security-oriented rhetoric gain sway? Or will the Indo-Pacific stakeholders, primarily India and the West, be united in not only supporting the democratic forces in Bangladesh but stemming China’s Himalayan and broader regional agenda?

## China’s New Bulwark in South Asia?

Over the last decade, China has employed its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to transform Bangladesh in energy, transport, and

infrastructure sectors, primarily as a vital link to the Indian Ocean for bypassing the Malacca Strait. According to some official estimates, as of 2023 China has released about US\$4.45 billion for 35 BRI projects.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, China's efforts to strengthen bilateral ties with Bangladesh across political, strategic, and economic fronts intensified under Hasina's 15-year long era, notwithstanding her burgeoned ties with India that respected the latter's security concerns.

The Bangladesh-China relationship notably advanced during Hasina's visit to China in July 2024. This visit led to the two sides upgrading their partnership from "strategic" to "comprehensive strategic cooperative," a title that China uses for some of its close partners in Southeast Asia or even the European Union (EU; simply "comprehensive strategic" for the latter).<sup>8</sup> This elevation marks a significant milestone in the cooperation between the two nations, with China expressing a strong interest in supporting Bangladesh's economic and social development, mainly through major infrastructure projects.

Among the key initiatives are the Payra deep-sea port, a significant infrastructure project to enhance Bangladesh's maritime capabilities and boost trade, and various rail and metro projects, including Metro Rail Line 2, intended to improve urban transportation and connectivity<sup>9</sup>. These projects align with the BRI goals and represent substantial investments to bolster Bangladesh's infrastructure and economic growth.

Moreover, China's official approval and support of Bangladesh's economic progress and goals,

such as graduating from UN Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026 and achieving the "Smart Bangladesh" vision by 2041, demonstrates Beijing's strategic interest in maintaining strong ties with Dhaka.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, China also sees Bangladesh as a key potential partner for the recently launched Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), China's version of the new world order. Chinese President Xi Jinping has particularly aimed to popularize his security-obsessed objectives via these initiatives in the Global South countries.<sup>11</sup>

### **Not a Smooth, nor an Uncontested Run**

Nonetheless, there are challenges and limitations for China achieving its desired outcomes. Despite the aforementioned advancements, some of Bangladesh's expectations, particularly regarding immediate financial assistance, have not fully been met. For example, China has offered aid through grants and concessional loans, but negotiations on a US\$5 billion loan in Chinese currency remain unresolved.<sup>12</sup> Indicating complexities in securing the desired level of financial support.

Domestic critics have also pointed to the lack of any mention in Dhaka's recent engagements of China's involvement in Teesta river water management project.<sup>13</sup> India's rejection of Chinese involvement in such initiatives has been a major reason for Bangladesh's inability to pursue a Chinese investment on a disputed issue.

While Chinese investments provide crucial

capital for development, they also risk increasing dependence on Beijing, which could undermine Bangladesh's sovereignty and alter the regional balance of power.<sup>14</sup> China's attempts to control the Himalayan water resources, a crucial part of China's regional strategy, are a part of the same agenda.

### The Himalayan Dilemma

Water resources, particularly the great Himalayan rivers such as the Brahmaputra (called Jamuna in Bengali, Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibetan, and Yarlung Zangbo in Chinese) play a pivotal role in the geopolitical dynamics between India, China, and Bangladesh. These rivers are crucial to Bangladesh's economic and food security, providing essential water for irrigation, drinking, and overall livelihoods. However, Chinese hydroelectric projects upstream have created significant concerns for Bangladesh and other downstream countries.<sup>15</sup>

China's ambitious dam projects, such as the Zangmu Dam on the Brahmaputra River, and investment proposals in the water sector in downstream countries could alter the water flow significantly. Such alterations, including straightening of "braided rivers" and changing their natural course, will lead to severe consequences for Bangladesh, which relies heavily on these rivers for its agricultural and freshwater needs.<sup>16</sup> Variations in river flows due to China's over-damming has already resulted in devastating floods and debilitating droughts in Southeast Asia, impacting regional food security and economic stability.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, the water diversion due to multiple dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo will cause far-

reaching consequences for climate change in the Tibetan Plateau, in turn affecting neighbors India and Bangladesh.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the water crisis will become a strategic lever in Sino-Bangladeshi relations, with China using its control over these vital water sources to exert diplomatic and economic pressure on its neighbors. In particular, China will use the water leverage with Bangladesh and other Himalayan neighbors to coerce India, and in turn pursue Sino-centric regional dominance aims.

The Himalayan region is experiencing increased effects of climate change, such as glacial melting, erratic monsoon patterns, and over-extraction of water resources for agriculture and industrial use. In Bangladesh, the reduced flow of rivers including the Brahmaputra has raised concerns about water shortages and environmental degradation. The flooding in Bangladesh during 1987 and 1988, along with ongoing water management challenges, underscores the critical need for effective and sustainable water resource management.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, China's construction of dams and control measures in upstream areas have sparked fears of increased vulnerability during the rainy season and inadequate water release during dry periods.<sup>20</sup>

This situation has transformed water resource management into a diplomatic battleground, with each country striving to secure reliable access to these essential resources. Efforts to address these challenges have included various cooperation agreements between China and Bangladesh to share data on river flows and collaborate on infrastructure projects. However, Bangladesh remains concerned that these agreements may not fully mitigate the risks



posed by Chinese projects. Additionally, China's water diplomacy, which includes investments in local water management systems, increases Bangladesh's dependence on China, potentially limiting its negotiating power.

Security concerns, such as territorial disputes and competition over water resources, further complicate the complexity of managing transboundary water resources.

Water infrastructure, viewed as a potential threat, can lead to mistrust and tension among neighboring countries. Bangladesh faces the challenge of balancing cooperation with China while managing its relationships with India, which is also impacted by Chinese upstream projects.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, critics in Bangladesh have also bemoaned India's disinterest in resolving Bangladesh's water concerns. For example, although India and Bangladesh share 54 rivers, progress on "equitable water sharing" of transboundary rivers including the renewal of the Ganges water-sharing treaty (expiring in 2026) has been a constant struggle due to India's domestic concerns.<sup>22</sup> Hasina could not facilitate the all-important Teesta water treaty with India despite her reported closeness with the Modi government. Yet, reportedly, she was looking to hand over the billion-dollar Teesta river restoration project to India.<sup>23</sup> And not China, which had shown a keen interest and had already designed a proposal to finance the project.<sup>24</sup> With the new politics in motion, the fate of the project would be again up for grabs, although the three sides working together on the river project seems unlikely.

Despite these challenges, there is potential for cooperative management of water resources. Practical cross-border cooperation and development mechanisms, including agreements on river basin management, can help mitigate conflicts and ensure equitable access to water. In this context, Bangladesh must navigate carefully to protect its interests while leveraging opportunities for collaboration to address the broader regional water crisis.<sup>25</sup>

### **Reassessing Regional Alliances: Constancy in Change?**

More importantly, geopolitical sensitivities will play a crucial role as Bangladesh hedges its bets with major powers. Bangladesh is eager to drive economic growth through accessible Chinese investment but must remain cautious of potential pitfalls, as predatory loans tied to "debt trap diplomacy" could lead to destabilization. At the same time, as Dhaka navigates regional and domestic complexities amid heightening tensions, it must manage the geopolitical pressures from the Indo-Pacific powers, particularly neighboring economic giant India and the U.S. while recognizing that Bangladesh's interests regarding China often diverge from those of India and the U.S. While Hasina seeking refuge in India has not been the best optics, the latter has recently faced greater heat after being accused of interfering in Bangladesh's recent politics both by the ousted Hasina and China – bringing to the fore again the U.S.' controversial past in dealing with ruling regimes in the Global South, be it in Afghanistan or the West Asia/Middle East.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, India has been Bangladesh's leading partner historically, with deep-rooted

cultural, economic, and political ties. And although Bangladesh's (aforementioned) growing engagement with China or Hasina's ouster has affected the regional balance of power and stirred concerns about the potential erosion of its traditional ties with India, the story is far from over.

Bangladesh's recent engagements with India, including Hasina's visit to Delhi in 2024, underscore the desire to maintaining a balanced approach. The latest joint statement was a future-oriented document covering critical areas such as economic cooperation, connectivity, energy, and water resource management, including the stalled Teesta River treaty.<sup>27</sup>

Even assuming the lack of trust between India and the Awami League's rivals, which would potentially rule Bangladesh in the near future, due to historical concerns, this is a new era where middle and smaller economies have been leveraging what they bring to the table. Both India and Bangladesh would be keen to pursue their own interests, especially in the economy, and an Indian engagement with reportedly "pro-China" parties is not beyond comprehension. Two cases in point are the Maldives and Nepal,

where India has made efforts to cover lost ground (to China). They will however have to come to a mutual understanding on deeply contentious concerns such as water sharing and terrorism.

But first, the new government in Bangladesh will have to reconfigure democratic institutions for better governance and ensure the well-being of its embattled economy.<sup>28</sup> India, on the other hand, will need to work harder to develop the trust factor in a scenario where South Asian neighbors, including in Bangladesh, are doubting its sincerity and intent.<sup>29</sup>

Notably, India and Bangladesh must coordinate with the West, particularly the U.S. and the EU, keeping their respective distrust for the West in check. Yunus's U.S. visit is certainly a positive reflection of Bangladesh's post-Hasina outreach to the West. Beyond countering China's over-aggressive tactics in the region, such coordination is important for India and Bangladesh to build greater economic wealth and global profile, and in turn, have control over their respective strategic autonomies and essential resources like rivers.

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# China's Gamble in Afghanistan: Opportunities and Perils in the Himalayan Context

Marta Chiusi and Jagannath Panda

In September 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, at the third informal meeting of the foreign ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran on Afghanistan, called the transition under the Taliban as “stable,” effectively highlighting China’s tacit support of Afghanistan’s “de facto authorities.”<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban’s swift return to power has redefined the geopolitical landscape in the region.

All four states mentioned above have started varying degrees of engagement with the Taliban, with China earlier this year going as far as recognizing the former Taliban spokesperson Bilal Karimi as an official envoy to Beijing.<sup>2</sup> Although China has been cautious, Beijing has been navigating the complex relationship with the Taliban through pragmatic engagement centered on significant economic interests, strategic ambitions, and security concerns.

In contrast, the West, particularly the United States and the European Union (EU), has largely disengaged from the new Taliban-led Afghanistan. India, a growing strategic partner of the West, has managed to maintain relations without isolating the Taliban regime, but its

presence in Afghanistan remains limited to a “technical mission”, a low-level engagement compared to China’s.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, India has not been keen to revitalize the dysfunctional South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), of which Afghanistan is a member. The organization has been hampered by political tensions, especially between India and Pakistan, which have stalled progress on regional cooperation initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Notably, Wang Yi’s remarks at the 79<sup>th</sup> UNGA invoking multipolarity and Global South aspirations reflect China’s larger intent to assimilate authoritarian regimes under its banner to challenge the U.S.-led liberal world order. China’s Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), aimed at promoting a “community for shared future,”—a euphemism for Sino-centric world order—are likely to be open to the Taliban in the new Cold War against the West.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, China’s continuing outreach to the Taliban also has a regional agenda of undermining India’s position in South Asia—its main rival in the Indo-Pacific that is aligning

with the U.S. to counter China—particularly through China’s Himalayan strategy.<sup>6</sup> This strategy that encompasses financial incentives via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and fear of reprisals or land grabs, amid growing control of Himalayan resources like water and minerals, has already squeezed India’s subregional dominance, with Nepal and Bangladesh firmly in China’s grip despite increased caution and hedging.<sup>7</sup>

Would China be willing to fully recognize the Taliban regime diplomatically in the near future? Could China-led regional mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) be the next stop for an internationally isolated Taliban? What would China’s overall Taliban strategy mean for India and the West?

### **China-Taliban 1.0: Decades-long, but Murky Linkages**

China’s interactions with Afghanistan under the Taliban date back to the late 1990s. In the intervening years before the Taliban was pushed out in 2001, Beijing maintained a low-level but increasing diplomatic engagement with the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> Pakistan, China’s long-standing partner, and Taliban’s close ally, was the main facilitator for these purposes. Formally, China never recognized the Taliban and its approach was primarily defensive and “pragmatic”: Ensuring stability at the China-Afghanistan border, preventing the spread of Islamic extremism into Chinese provinces, and discouraging Taliban support for Uyghur separatist movements in Xinjiang.<sup>9</sup> In return, the Taliban sought Chinese economic support and diplomatic legitimacy, particularly to stave off sanctions and international isolation.<sup>10</sup>

However, Beijing’s efforts did not yield the desired results, as the Taliban remained unwilling to sever ties with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) a Uyghur militant group. Despite multiple attempts to foster economic cooperation and prevent extremist influence from spilling over into China, the Taliban continued to harbor these groups.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these challenges, China continued its back-channel talks with the Taliban, though their relationship remained “limited and largely transactional.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Beijing’s mistrust in the Taliban regime was highlighted through secret dealings via the Pakistani intelligence network, while it sought security cooperation through regional partnerships, particularly with Central Asian States under the “Shanghai Five” (now the SCO), to address the threats of Islamic fundamentalism, separatism, and terrorism.<sup>13</sup>

Further, after the 9/11, attacks, China cautiously supported the U.S.-led war on terror, linking the longstanding Uyghur separatist activities to broader terrorism, while continuing to hedge its bets by maintaining informal connections with the Taliban through intermediaries like Pakistan.<sup>14</sup> Such connections came in handy after the U.S.’ withdrawal from Afghanistan which created a political void in this part of the Himalayas and allowed a Chinese upper hand visible today.

### **China’s Taliban New Outreach: Boost to the GSI Aims?**

With the Taliban’s return to power, China started to publicly acknowledge the Taliban as the de facto authority in Afghanistan with more bilateral meetings, including with high-level

officials such as Wang Yi, being publicized from 2021 itself.<sup>15</sup> For the Taliban, too, today China is no longer a rising power but an established superpower rivaling the U.S. and looking to build its own Sino-centric (authoritarian) world order, as Chinese president Xi Jinping's emphasis on the recently launched GSI highlights.

Simultaneously, China's strategy has been heavily influenced by its goals of improving connectivity, enhancing security, and securing access to vital resources like minerals, oil, and gas, which aligns with its broader objectives under the BRI in the Himalayan region.<sup>16</sup> In particular, China views Afghanistan as a key geographic backbone in its vast BRI landscape, especially the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a project India has consistently opposed due to sovereignty issues, particularly the CPEC's "illegal" extension into third countries.<sup>17</sup>

Extending these infrastructure projects into Afghanistan would give Beijing greater access to Central Asia and beyond, opening pathways to the Gulf States, Europe, and Africa. Not to mention the CPEC's main aim is to provide China with access to not just the Gwadar port but also the strategic, disputed Himalayan region of Gilgit-Baltistan, Gwadar's link to Xinjiang.

Economically, Afghanistan offers significant untapped potential, particularly in the mining and energy sectors.<sup>18</sup> In recent years, Chinese companies have been negotiating with the Taliban to renew old contracts and start new ones, even as China's previous performance in BRI projects and other investments, such as the

long-delayed Mes Aynak copper mine, has been described as "lackadaisical."<sup>19</sup> At the same time, China's investments in Afghanistan remain a high-risk endeavor: Afghanistan's political instability and the threat posed by militant groups make long-term engagement uncertain.

As such, China has not formally recognized the Taliban government. This measure is driven by the optics to avoid being the first major power to legitimize the Taliban in light of the larger international community's stringent objections to the Islamic group's repressive policies toward women and ethnic minorities, rather than Beijing's earnest intention for women's rights or dignity per se. However, by nominating a new ambassador in Taliban-controlled Kabul and recognizing the Taliban's envoy to Beijing, China has effectively legitimized the Taliban rule alongside wider economic engagement.<sup>20</sup>

China's motivations are clear: A stable Afghanistan under Taliban rule is seen as preferable to the chaos of unchecked extremism, which could have devastating consequences for China's domestic security. Thus, China's engagement with the Taliban is less about cooperation or development and more about risk mitigation for China's ruling regime.

Moreover, China's success in establishing the Iranian-Saudi Arabian "peace deal" and the U.S.' declining relevance in being able to contain wars and conflicts is of concern.<sup>21</sup> It has certainly given China the confidence to aim for becoming the leading security and development superpower in conflict zones like Afghanistan that require massive reconstruction and are well-suited to the authoritarian, anti-West

worldview promoted by Xi's recent initiatives such as the GSI.<sup>22</sup>

Notably, such an aim could also result in China enlisting the Taliban-led Afghanistan as an SCO member, with support from Russia and other Central Asian states that are all engaging with the Taliban at different levels. It is unclear if India would play ball considering the security implications of China's Taliban outreach.

### India's Taliban-Shaped Dilemmas

While China maneuvers to secure its economic foothold and address security risks, its expanding influence directly challenges India's long-standing investments in pre-Taliban Afghanistan. India has historically contributed to infrastructure development, humanitarian assistance, and institution building in the war-torn country.<sup>23</sup> New Delhi's greater involvement has been driven by its desire to ensure, a stable, friendly government in Kabul and counter Pakistan's influence and, importantly, now China's.

However, the Taliban's closeness to both Pakistan and China—the twin threat to India's existential security—and China's growing influence in South Asia through the BRI and the CPEC have complicated matters. The Taliban's rise in Afghanistan adds another dimension to the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Himalayan region.

In this context, India's "delicate" stance on the Taliban contrasts with China's pragmatic engagement.<sup>24</sup> While China has been more active diplomatically, facilitating trilateral talks by involving India's foe Pakistan, and investing in Afghanistan, India has opted to take a more

reserved approach. In what could be called "mixed messaging", India has re-opened its mission in Kabul, suspended the Afghan embassy, canceled Afghan visas, engaged in dialogue with the Taliban, pursued trade, and is considering restarting infrastructure projects.<sup>25</sup>

As India navigates this shifting landscape, its relationship with Iran, exemplified by the Chabahar port project, becomes important to counterbalance China's expansion in Afghanistan bilaterally, and trilaterally with Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> Chabahar offers India an alternative route to access Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan altogether; India has already been utilizing it for trade with Afghanistan. It will also help the Taliban reduce its dependence on Pakistan for trade. As a result, the Taliban has reportedly invested USD 35 million in this port and welcomed India's 10-year-long management rights pact with Iran.<sup>27</sup> It highlights the scope for India to strategically engage with the Taliban amid the latter's distancing from Pakistan.<sup>28</sup>

However, challenges remain. The latest is the Israel-Hamas war that has escalated and spread out to Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iran: This will further impede the full implementation of the Chabahar port, an already delayed project.<sup>29</sup> With China's growing investment in Afghanistan, India's efforts to leverage its position in the broader region have become increasingly complicated. Meanwhile, India's reluctance to engage openly with the Taliban has left it marginalized in the evolving power dynamics of Afghanistan. This cautious stance, while showcasing India's moral high ground, may limit its strategic options in a region where China's influence continues to grow.



### **(Indo-Pacific) Engagement with Taliban: Mitigating Necessary Evil(s) or Ceding Moral Ground?**

Notwithstanding India's aforementioned developments vis-à-vis the Taliban, India has not made public overtures to them, emphasizing instead the diplomatic presence of the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" and not the "Islamic Emirate," the term used by the Taliban.<sup>30</sup> Though India maintains a technical team in Kabul, it has called for an "inclusive Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled" peace/reconstruction process without compromising the interests of women or minorities—a stance that places it closer to the West's outlook.<sup>31</sup> India has also made the right noises by publicly emphasizing humanitarian assistance and education, particularly for girls including through e-portals.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, China's pragmatic engagement, which borders on diplomatic ties and allows for greater strategic maneuvering in the Himalayan South Asian region, may reduce its international standing as a responsible global power. In such a scenario, India will need to navigate these dynamics carefully to maintain its regional influence. But to counterbalance China's expanding role, India must coordinate with the Himalayan neighbors, the Central Asian states (particularly those in the SCO), the U.S., and the EU to open communication channels with

the Taliban that take into account the United Nations-led talks with the Taliban.

Importantly, a normalization of the Taliban's "egregious systems of oppression"—as called out by UN Secretary General António Guterres—should not be allowed.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, India should not allow for the Taliban's inclusion in coveted non-Western forums like BRICS or SCO, not before the political climate improves in Kabul.

That said, the strategic choices made by China, India, and the West will be critical in determining the future stability and power dynamics in the region. They must balance their immediate interests with long-term goals, navigating the intricate web of alliances and rivalries that define the current geopolitical context.

With the Taliban looking to join an expanded BRICS and Afghanistan already an observer in the SCO, China would be keen to bring another isolated authoritarian regime to its side.<sup>34</sup> The West and India must capitalize on the Taliban's hunger for international legitimacy working through India's existing (official and unofficial) outreach with the regime to counter China's game plan. The democratic Indo-Pacific partners must, however, be cautious not to capitulate on all principles under the guise of practical cooperation or humanitarian needs, à la a resolutely security-minded China.

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## SECTION - VI

# Resistance and Collaboration

## ASIAN HIGHWAY NETWORK



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Source: UNESCAP, Asian Highway Route, 2019

Map 6: Asian Highways

## TRANS ASIAN RAILWAY NETWORK



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Source: UNESCAP, Trans-Asian Railway Network, 2021

Map 7: Asian Railways

# Beijing's "Hunger for Power" and "Thirst for Water": China's Hydro-Hegemony and Its Potential Impact on South and Southeast Asia

Antonina Luszczkiewicz-Mendis

## Significance of Tibetan Water Resources to Beijing

The mountainous and scarcely populated Tibetan Plateau is one of the main sources of freshwater in the world. It has metaphorically been called the "Third Pole," as it is the third largest area of frozen water after the North and South Poles.<sup>1</sup> Apart from being the source of Yangtze and Yellow Rivers which are vital to China, it is also the starting point for many transboundary rivers that serve as a lifeline to South and Southeast Asia: The Indus and Brahmaputra<sup>2</sup> which flow down through India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as the Irrawaddy and Mekong in Southeast Asia.

The annexation of Tibet in 1950 by the People's Liberation Army gave the communist government in Beijing control over these river sources and, consequently, turned the newly emerged People's Republic of China (PRC) into a hydro-hegemon. Over the decades, China has developed the largest number of dams in the world<sup>3</sup> and is now using hydropower as its main source of renewable energy.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the PRC seems to be prepared not only to face the challenges of the ongoing global climate change, but also to steadily increase the production of

electric energy—thus, quenching both its "thirst for water" and "hunger for power."

However, China's hydro-projects in the Himalayas have raised a lot of controversy as they have led to environmental degradation through irretrievable modification of the landscape and deforestation.<sup>5</sup> Reportedly, constructing river dams has also resulted in forced relocation schemes of the local population, followed by the demolition of historically significant religious sites.<sup>6</sup> Finally, China's infrastructural projects on transboundary rivers have been a source of distress for the lower riparian countries of South and Southeast Asia, concerned that Beijing might play its powerful "water card" against them in the future.<sup>7</sup>

## Is Water China's Geopolitical and Geo-economic Weapon?

Thanks to a vast network of river dams, China is now able to manipulate the water level on transboundary rivers: On one hand, it can release tons of water, causing floods beyond its borders; on the other, water storage and diversion may potentially result in drying up some territories downstream.<sup>8</sup> However, it should be stressed that China is not capable of dehydrating all

downstream areas by simply “turning off” the “taps,” as these territories gain additional water from other tributary rivers as well as the rainfalls. Nonetheless, Beijing’s hydro-activity may have serious implications for people and entire ecosystems in the countries of South and Southeast Asia. Alarmingly, there have already been many red flags about how Beijing might potentially turn access to freshwater into its geopolitical and geo-economic weapon.

*First*, China has been reluctant to participate in multilateral water conservation projects and has refused to sign international treaties on water-sharing. Indeed, China does have bilateral agreements with some of its neighbors—such as an agreement on sharing water data on the Brahmaputra River with India;<sup>9</sup> importantly, however, Beijing voted against the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997.<sup>10</sup> Based on the principles of mutual benefit, the treaty aims to establish norms for cooperation and management schemes over transboundary rivers among riparian countries.<sup>11</sup>

*Second*, China’s maneuvers on its transboundary river dams have been highly controversial and have raised suspicions about Beijing’s real intentions. This could be best observed in early 2021 when China cut the water flow on the Mekong River by 50 percent without prior warning. According to Beijing’s official explanations, it was necessary for a three-week power-line maintenance project. It resulted in a one meter drop of water level which affected the lives of millions of people along the waterways in the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

Reportedly, it disrupted their fishing and farming livelihoods as well as floating markets and coastal houseboat communities that rely on river transportation.

### Hydro-Politics in China-India Relations

In addition to China’s operations on the Mekong River, the practices of water-sharing on Brahmaputra have been a matter of increasing concern for the government in New Delhi. The lack of warning from Beijing about the upcoming flood in September 2017—despite the existing agreement on water data-sharing—as well as the contamination of the Siang River in the Indian state of Assam in December 2017 raised New Delhi’s suspicions about China’s upstream activities.<sup>13</sup> Some experts have linked these incidents with the Doklam standoff that involved Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayan region in summer 2017. Against this backdrop, the two water-related incidents were interpreted by some experts as Beijing’s retaliation against New Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

Should this supposition be correct, it would mean that freshwater may now be used as a weapon to harm, punish, or pressure other states with regard to military issues, political decisions, economic cooperation, and other matters that are—after all—not directly related to water resources. This presents a particularly dangerous vision for China-India relations and the disputed area of Arunachal Pradesh—controlled by India but claimed by China as the southernmost tip of Tibet. It is of great importance in the battle for hearts and minds of the Tibetan population, as Arunachal Pradesh’s Tawang district—the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama—is a major holy site for Tibetan



Buddhists.

Risking the increase of tensions with Beijing, India has been expediting its own dam projects in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>15</sup> Reportedly, a senior Indian government official told the *Times of India* that it would be naïve to trust Beijing, therefore “India too needs its counter-contingency plans on a mission mode” to secure its own water resources.<sup>16</sup> All things considered, the dispute over Arunachal Pradesh seems to present a tri-challenge to China-India relations—in regard to the border issue itself as well as ideology and water resources. This triple combination is what makes the prospects of finding a peaceful resolution to the China-India territorial dispute bleaker.

### **China, Water, and Mistrust**

During the United Nations Water Conference held in New York in March 2023, the international organization raised the alarm that the ongoing

global climate change increases “water scarcity and the potential for conflicts between countries over resources.”<sup>17</sup> Disturbingly, the rivers originating in the Himalayas seem to be good candidates to illustrate this grim prophecy. The tributary states in South and Southeast Asia fear that by manipulating the water level, Beijing might try to bend them to its will—forcing to act in concordance with its political, economic, or even military interests.<sup>18</sup> It is still unknown whether China will be bold enough to use water as a geopolitical and geo-economic weapon in the future; however, regardless of Beijing’s real intentions, the lack of transparency as well as uncertainty about the far-fetched goals of the PRC have been—quite naturally—increasing mistrust among the downstream states. In such atmosphere, establishing and developing water-sharing and data-sharing cooperative schemes seems highly challenging.

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# Dalai Lama's Climate Advocacy "Plus": Can Like-Minded Solidarity Beat Chinese Coercion on Tibetan Plateau?

Jagannath Panda and Ana Carolina De Oliveira Assis

Earlier this year, at the ninth International Conference of Tibet Support Groups (TSGs)—a political advocacy meeting for raising awareness about Tibetan issues—held in Brussels, with over 170 delegates from 40 countries around the world, the Dalai Lama in his message highlighted Tibet's environmental concerns as a global problem.<sup>1</sup> This is not the first time the revered Tibetan leader has tackled climate change, particularly the effects of ecological degradation due to wanton human activities.

Over the years, be it his speech at the "Endangered Tibet" conference in 1996 or his remarks at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) to name just a couple, the Dalai Lama has not only cautioned about the global ramifications of "ecological neglect" on the Third Pole but also emphasized the vitality of the "spirit of solidarity and cooperation" to counter such *transnational* challenges.<sup>2</sup>

But if the world at large has thus far remained relatively unmindful of heeding the Buddhist leader's words, what is the relevance of the Dalai Lama's climate advocacy today? First, there is the direct correlation of his teachings

on the interdependence of species on each other and on nature, and the impact of human-driven environmental changes, including severe water shortage.

Second, the significance of the Dalai Lama's efforts in advocating for climate action is related to the geopolitical aspect of China's repression of Tibetan people and culture, as well as accelerating Tibet's climate crisis through myriad infrastructure developments (from mega-dams to over-mining). In this context, the Dalai Lama has also not shied away from calling out China for not just "neglecting" the ecological devastation in the Tibetan Plateau, but actively participating in the overexploitation of natural resources, such as through mining and damming, "without proper environmental safeguards."<sup>3</sup>

The third reason is the current extremely divided political landscape where the democratic states, and not just in the West, are increasingly recognizing the imperative to counter China's militaristic aims, including in Tibet. China's financial and diplomatic support of several authoritarian regimes like Russia, North Korea, and Iran have also created greater concerns

about the dangers to the liberal order. Thus, today, there is potential for greater receptivity more than ever.

Against this scenario, what is the extent of Chinese activities on the Tibetan and Himalayan ecology? What specific measures must the West and India take to address the ecological balance in the Himalayas?

### **Assessing the Climate Crisis in the Third Pole**

The Tibetan Plateau and its surrounding mountainous areas are commonly considered the “Third Pole” because they are home to the largest reservoir of glaciers and ice sheets on earth after the Arctic and Antarctica polar regions. In effect, several major rivers such as the Mekong, Salween, Yellow River, Yangtze, the Yarlung Tsampo (the Brahmaputra in India), the Indus (or Sengge Chu, the Lion River, in Tibetan), Irrawaddy (likely from the Sanskrit term *airāvati*, the Elephant River), Ganges, Sutlej, and the Karnali (called Mabja Tsangpo, the Peacock River, in Tibet and Ghaghra in India) rise in the Plateau.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it serves as the “Water Tower of Asia,” providing fresh water and vital sources of livelihood to billions of people not just in Tibet but across countries in South and Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the Plateau is not only one of the most biodiverse regions in the world but also rich in minerals, including rare earth reserves. Additionally, it is surrounded by four biodiversity hotspots—biologically diverse but threatened areas—namely the Himalayas, Mountains of Southwest China, Mountains of Central Asia, and Indo Burma.<sup>5</sup> These

hotspots are not immune to the repercussions of climate change, including glacial melting and extreme weather events like flash floods. This is exacerbated by increased human activities—from unbridled infrastructure development to increased hostilities in the Himalayas.

In such a scenario, it is time that the world and its leaders champion an ethical approach to climate-change solutions including proper and widespread dissemination of information among the general populace, something the Dalai Lama has always underscored. However, the challenges are far from over: The rise in decibel levels in the U.S.-China hegemonic battle post-Russia’s Ukraine invasion means that the Chinese will stake a claim over Tibetan resources more aggressively than ever.

### **China’s Infrastructure Spree: Unlikely to Slow Down?**

China has been systematically undertaking infrastructure development in Tibet and Xinjiang over the last 20 years. However, this has had devastating results for the fragile Himalayan ecology, and lowland areas have witnessed increased flooding. The intensive infrastructure buildup has led to habitat fragmentation and increased air and noise pollution.

In 2006, after the Golmud-Lhasa railway line became operational, there was a massive boom in mining operations on the Tibetan plateau.<sup>6</sup> Mining exploration revealed that there were deposits of over 110 types of minerals across 3,000 sites, with a value of more than USD 125 billion. This included large deposits of copper, chromium, gold, and lithium, as well as oil and gas reserves. The heightened mining activity led

to protests by Tibetan nomads, citing poisoned drinking water and the killing of herd animals. In the meanwhile, dam-building expanded considerably across the plateau. Moreover, there are reports of the forced re-settlement of Tibetan nomads to make way for mining and hydropower projects, done in full collusion with foreign joint venture operations.<sup>7</sup>

Between 2021 and 2025, China has planned expenditure of approximately \$30 billion on infrastructure projects in Tibet under the 14th Five-Year Plan:<sup>8</sup> “By 2025, Tibet will exceed 1,300 km of expressways and total to over 120,000 km of highways.” This comprises roads, railways, airfields, border villages, telecommunication facilities, and hydroelectric projects.

Moreover, China’s construction of hydroelectric projects on the river Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) such as the 60-gigawatt megadam is concerning for downstream states like India and Bangladesh.<sup>9</sup> It will impinge on the availability of water in downstream nations, not to mention the implications on security including the potential for future conflicts. It is important to note that in Chinese President Xi Jinping’s security-obsessed worldview, water is not a global common but a leverage to solidify access to the region’s, in turn global, domination.

As a result, the vision of a Sino-centric order as a “community with a shared future for mankind”<sup>10</sup> is hogwash intended to mislead the international community by sidestepping China’s repressive policies in Tibet (and elsewhere) that have accelerated climate change

via coercive acts such as increased mining of valuable minerals, building “dual-use” infrastructure, and “whole-village” relocation of Tibetan nomads/herders,<sup>11</sup> who are essential to maintaining the ecosystem of the plateau.

The consequence of all this activity is the rapid degradation of delicate environs and habitats, such as wetlands, alpine meadows, and forests. Several endangered species, including the snow leopard and Tibetan antelope, which reside here are thus further vulnerable. Not only is wildlife threatened, but a recent study indicated that if the prevailing temperature trends continued, the Himalayan glaciers might disappear entirely, “having a significant impact on regional water supplies, hydrological processes, ecosystem services, and transboundary water sharing.”<sup>12</sup> Studies show the Tibetan Plateau is warming three times faster than other parts of the world, leading to retreating glaciers.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the international community needs to act fast to not just counter China’s policies but also for climate action.

### **Of Global Concern: India & the West Must Join Forces**

Clearly, Europe and the West must include the Himalayan region in their environmental strategies, since the climate crisis in the Third Pole will escalate into a global emergency soon enough. Concurrently, China’s recent militarization efforts in the Tibetan Plateau that have transformed Tibetan villages into resettlement zones through massive industrial projects including dual-use infrastructure such as building helipads, highways, oil pipelines, road and rail networks, and dams must be countered together.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, India faces even more onerous direct challenges due to its Himalayan territories coming under threat from climate change – and thus is central to the China calculus. In addition, India’s decades-long border dispute with China and the risks associated with China’s growing eco-hegemony including unrestricted access to Tibet’s critical water resources are also no less a threat.

Against this scenario, the fast-changing conditions at the Third Pole have not received the same attention as those at the North and South Poles.<sup>15</sup> Often, the mainstream media in particular has focused excessively on the disputed borders rather than the region’s environment that is relevant for global well-being. This needs to change, and a concerted approach to increase public awareness should be one of the main targets.

More importantly, reliable, informed, up-to-date scientific knowledge is essential to tackle this crisis. That being said, Europe and the West must collaborate with India and other “like-minded” nations to develop scientific programs for environmental and climate change monitoring and include both ground-based and satellite-based monitoring.

Moreover, as the partnerships within the still-emerging US-led Indo-Pacific economic and security architecture continue to take shape, it is important to include the Himalayan climate and geopolitical concerns into the mix. Naturally, bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral cooperation that earnestly works at mitigating factors that accelerate climate change are all equally vital.

In this regard, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)’s Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP) is a welcome initiative. While it recognizes the need for “integrating resilience” into policies from investments to governance,<sup>16</sup> the Quad must look into including the Third Pole specifically in this ambit. Similarly, the G7’s push to address the triple global crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution is admirable, the urgency is for such rhetoric not to remain “paper tigers.”<sup>17</sup>

As the group of 198 countries that have ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change get ready to meet for the COP29 to be held in Baku later this year, new frameworks and partnerships will be needed to scale up climate cooperation, particularly for the three polar regions. This is all the more pertinent as the COP29 Presidency’s plan is based on two mutually reinforcing parallel pillars.<sup>18</sup> The first to get all parties to commit via national action plans and the second to ensure the availability of finance so as to enable action, thereby reducing emissions, adjusting to climate change and addressing damages. COP29 must integrate the mountain region’s challenges into the negotiation tracks.

Hopefully, the debates this year will focus beyond energy transition and into the ways to control extensive damage by human actions and greed for more resources and power, particularly in politically and ecologically sensitive regions like the Tibetan Plateau. The international community, including decision-makers and the private and public sectors, needs to be involved in regional

cooperation ventures in the Himalayas to ensure accountability, maintain transparency, and take responsibility. After all, the environmental degradation of the Himalayas will have widespread consequences.

Last but not least, the world's leaders will do well to remember what the Dalai Lama cautioned nearly 30 years ago about developing

a “greater sense of universal responsibility”<sup>19</sup> for global well-being, as well as creating mechanisms to “investigate, analyze and then try to overcome contradictory ideas”<sup>20</sup> to solve even environmental problems – words to live by.

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# From the Himalayas to the Sea: The Himalayan-Indo-Pacific Theater

Medha Bisht

The geopolitics of the Chinese Himalayan strategy and India's Act East Policy are two distinct discourses that emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. Both these discourses were significant as they animated Asian geopolitics in distinct ways. The first discourse brought upfront discussions around Chinese inroads into South Asia, and the second discourse highlighted the need for India to go beyond South Asia and 'look' towards Southeast Asia. The comparative patterns of these engagements reveal interesting insights where a distinct internal and external balancing act on the part of both China and India is observed. It is against this backdrop that this chapter offers two propositions. First, China's Himalayan and India's Indo-Pacific strategies are giving rise to a singular Himalayan-Indo-Pacific (H-I-P) theater, where the policies of one will inevitably impact and have consequences for the other. Second, given this emergent framework, the Tibetan plateau can emerge as a central node for strategic balancing, having ramifications for key regional and systemic forces.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that an emerging dialectical framework is being witnessed in India-China relations in South and Southeast Asia. While in the short term, this

dialectical engagement could lead to skirmishes and low-intensity conflicts, in the long term, the country that can synergize its diplomatic narrative with available opportunities could influence the direction of the diplomatic winds to its strategic advantage. I argue that developing a strategic narrative on Tibet could enhance India's balancing act. However, geo-economy must be brought upfront to effectively communicate this narrative and inform India's geo-economic and geopolitical narrative. What should be the contours of this narrative and how this narrative should be constituted is what this chapter dwells upon.

## Understanding the H-I-P Theater

If one takes cognizance of the current trajectories of the balancing behavior being exercised by both China and India, a distinct internal and external act of balancing can be witnessed. For instance, in the case of China, an internal act of balancing is being manifested around activities of a military buildup, which are reflected in the nature of the emergent force structures, the upcoming air bases, the heliports and the air defense structures along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Significantly, in the border villages, particularly in the Tibetan plateau, large-scale civilian infrastructure settlements are

coming up (known as the Xiaokang villages) with a combination of both civilian and military components. Meanwhile, in the fourteenth five-year plan (2021-2025), the Communist Party had noted that dams would be built in the lower reaches of Brahmaputra and sure enough facts around the Medog project (China's super dam) boast of a 60,000-megawatt dam, which will have three times the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. Meanwhile, externally, China has been proactively engaged in its peripheral diplomacy with the South Asian neighbors, particularly Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. While Bhutan-China negotiations have moved forward to a considerable degree, China has been informally making inroads into Bhutan, particularly in the crypto-mining sector. In fact, in 2021, total Chinese imports to Bhutan were INR 4 billion, which rose to INR 12 billion in 2022.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, China has framed its bilateral relations with Bhutan as 'two countries which are linked by mountains and rivers.'<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Bangladesh, China is one of the primary investment partners, particularly in the ports and connectivity projects, submarine bases and renewable energy. The presence of China, particularly in the Bay of Bengal area, which is in close proximity to India's Andaman and Nicobar Command, is an issue of concern for India.<sup>3</sup> In Nepal, too, one has observed strategic convergence between Nepal and China with regard to the Mahakali Kalapani dispute, which came up as a contentious issue between Nepal and India in 2020. China is also heavily investing in Nepal's physical and social infrastructure, technical training and skill-building programs, including areas closer to the Tibetan Autonomous Region.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, India has been building up its internal capacity to respond to these patterns. India is coming up with the Arunachal Pradesh Highway Frontier, which will be completed in 2027. There is an East-West Connectivity Corridor named as the Vibrant Village program.<sup>5</sup> Notably, dams are coming up in Arunachal Pradesh, which while a strategic response to China, have also created downstream riparian fears. India is also rebalancing its core structures, focusing on mountainous strike formations. In fact, the United States is an important collaborative partner of India, where both have been conducting high altitude training exercises<sup>6</sup> related to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and operations related to peacekeeping. Interestingly, India's external balancing act is opening up in Southeast Asia in significant ways. India's relationship with the Philippines and Taiwan has considerably improved over the previous months. India's strategic partnership with Australia, Japan and the U.S. also become important from the perspective of strategic alliances.

Thus, these developments suggest that an interesting strategic board is emerging, where the Himalayan and Indo-Pacific strategies converge, giving rise to a distinct Himalayan-Indo-Pacific Theatre. While much has been written on these turns and orientations, ecological sensibilities are conspicuously absent from these discussions. In many ways, this could be tactical myopia as the basis of these geo-economic and geopolitical discourses are built on narratives around economic growth and prosperity, which, if not assessed holistically, can have huge ecological costs for both the South and Southeast Asian countries in the near

future. A primary reason for this is that most of these development discourses are taking place in an ecologically fragile region—the Hindu Kush Himalayan mountain ranges—which, while known for its rich biodiversity hotspots, is also familiar for geo-political contestations. It would be appropriate here, therefore, to reflect on the emergent ecological narrative and the relevance it holds for the Himalayan-Indo-Pacific Theatre.

### **The Ecological Lens**

The ecological lens is important because it helps understand the consequences of these geo-economic and geopolitical developments. If one looks the Himalayan landscape primarily through the lens of ecology, a different configuration of forces emerges. The Himalayas are distinct for many reasons. These are young mountains that are still growing. We know that Northeast India is a seismic zone prone to earthquakes and landslides. Infrastructure and dam-building activities, therefore, will have consequences. So while connectivity projects are being planned out, if adequate land-use planning measures are not undertaken, there could be cascading disasters primarily because of the interference that natural disasters like cloud bursts or glacial lake outburst floods shall have with the debris of infrastructure and the human settlements that along riverine areas.

The second ecological characteristic is related to the nature of Himalayan rivers. Given the industrialization and dam-building activities going on in Tibet. The Himalayan Rivers carry a lot of sediment, and these sediments directly affect the delta's health in the Bay of Bengal. This is critical because it tells us how upper riparian interventions impact and connect to the lower

riparian areas. Therefore, any intervention that happens due to deforestation, mining, and dam building, among others, will impact the Himalayan rivers. Significantly, during the Paris Summit in 2015, the issue of the Third Pole was raised. Scientists have claimed that a 1.5° Celsius rise is too hot for the glaciers in the Himalayan region. In a scenario where there are flash floods, the gnawing questions of adaptation and resilience remain. It has also been pointed out that a 1.5-degree Celsius rise would be 0.3 degrees higher in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region.

Further, concerning the land use policies in Tibet and the nature of environmental degradation, one cannot treat Tibet as an internal affair of China. The role played by Tibet, particularly in the global climate system, is being highlighted. Therefore, what happens in the Tibetan Plateau influences the climate and atmospheric changes in Asia and Europe. Last of all, the dam race happening in the lower stretches of the Brahmaputra has been highlighted due to ecological reasons. These dams are cast as renewable energy projects, but given the social and cultural consequences, both countries must also take cognizance of ecological costs. With this ecological backdrop, potential social, economic and political reconfigurations could exist.

### **Building a Narrative**

The central question is how India can leverage ecological sensibilities to build a narrative around the ecological vulnerabilities of the Tibetan plateau. This is strategically important for two reasons. First, the issue at stake concerns India and lower-riparian countries

like Bangladesh and Mekong. Second, the narrative will also benefit countries that are seeking to counter-balance China in the Indo-Pacific. However, this narrative should not just be a tactical move but should factor ecological interdependence into the act of balancing. This is important because, at the economic level, we all know that food, energy and water systems are linked and interdependent. In both South Asia and the Mekong countries, the agricultural sector is the backbone of the economy. Water scarcity can not only impact the region in terms of food security but can also make the lower Mekong countries dependent on China. From a social lens, the Mekong countries face much water diversion. Drought is giving rise to a distinct migration pattern which is also being linked to human trafficking.<sup>7</sup> The political aspects in Southeast Asian countries need to be considered due to the potential high dependence on China. If one looks at the project patterns of the BRI in Southeast Asian<sup>8</sup> countries, they primarily benefit the elites. In fact, from an ecological perspective, the entire discussion on connectivity is influenced and disrupted by the ecological factor, which is crucial. How one thinks about basin river management and understanding the consequences and impact of upper riparian interventions on lower riparian areas becomes an important aspect for India to consider. Beyond just human rights and religious freedom, India needs to take up the issue of environmental degradation being undertaken on the Tibetan plateau.

The 2024 ISEAS Asian Survey Report claims that while China is the most influential economic, political and strategic partner, India, in contrast, has been considered as one

of the least influential in these aspects.<sup>9</sup> Lack of awareness about India's geopolitical position, influence, and ambition could be a reason for this. A three-pronged policy based on Taiwan, freedom of navigation, and Tibet should be the building block for India's strategic narrative for balancing China. On the economic front, India's growing engagement with Taiwan in creating an eco-system around semiconductors has been well received. However, one of the key challenges is balancing it with not only low-end labor migrants but also high-end labor, which remains a priority for Taiwan. How the eco-system is synergized with STEM talent to benefit the Indian demographic dividend should also be taken care of.

Second, freedom of navigation and the rule of law is the act of moral balancing that India should continue. This is particularly relevant to the case of the Philippines, and the moral stand it has taken vis a vis the arbitration case of 2016 should be reiterated, which would also help safeguard its economic interests by securing its trade routes that connect the Indian Ocean with the Pacific and securing a strategic edge with Japan and the United States. While India is not directly related to developments in the South China Sea, it does have strategic ramifications for unfolding developments in the Himalayas.

Third, ecology is an important issue that cannot be ignored. In many ways, Tibet's large-scale urbanization and industrialization have jeopardized the young Himalayas, which are still formative. Considering Tibet as a global common is almost a strategic imperative, and diplomatic resources should be channelized

consciously in this direction. Recently, the Dalai Lama highlighted Tibet's problem as a global climate problem.<sup>10</sup> This should bode well for Southeast Asian countries, too, which have long been at the receiving end of glaring water shortages due to the ecological imbalance being

created by China in Tibet. However, India must keep ecology at the center of its transboundary cooperation. The new turn in water diplomacy in the BBIN region<sup>11</sup> provides favorable conditions for sharpening India's balancing act in the H-I-P theater.

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# Reaching New Heights: The China Challenge and India-Japan Strategic Cooperation for Himalayan Security

Astha Chadha

During his September 2024 visit to Brunei, Indian Prime Minister Modi asserted that New Delhi would support “development, not expansionism” alluding to Beijing’s increased economic and military presence in the Indo-Pacific as well as the great power competition in the region that adversely impacts security in the Global South.<sup>1</sup> The statement did not come as a surprise as India-China relations have plummeted since their military stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) before and even during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, when read together with PM Modi’s April 2024 statement wherein he placed India-China relations at the core of regional and even global peace, the focus was as much on the security in the seas as was in the Himalayas. Interestingly, in his March 2024 official visit to New Delhi, Japanese PM Fumio Kishida unveiled his “new plan” for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and elaborated on the same in his speech “Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner.”<sup>2</sup> The subsequent documents published in April showed a map of Japan’s connectivity initiative’ wherein ‘Improvement of North East Road Network’ in India’s sensitive Himalayan states appeared alongside other infrastructure

development ventures in the wider Indo-Pacific. While India-Japan collaboration in the Indian Ocean as well as in the wider Indo-Pacific has been well-examined,<sup>3</sup> a relatively under-focused aspect of their strategic and global partnership is in the heights of the Himalayan region. This chapter examines the Indian response to the China challenge, and the role of New Delhi’s strategic partnership with Tokyo in ensuring Himalayan security.

## India’s Policy Response to China’s Himalayan Hustle

India-China relations when viewed through the lens of their dispute along the LAC, can be summarized as a discontinuous series of Beijing’s assertive abrasions in Himalayan territory, and New Delhi responding to the same. Such was the case, when India-China clashed in Ladakh region in 1962, or at the Sikkim border in 1967, wherein an unprovoked Chinese assertion, led to an armed conflict between New Delhi and Beijing. The period thereafter only witnessed military build-ups and stand-offs that were resolved diplomatically such as the 1986-87 Sumdorong Chu standoff in Tawang. After decades of silence wherein China rose to a global

power status, and India began catching up as a growing regional power, the 2013 Depsang stand-off between Indo-Chinese forces against destabilized the already unclear borders between the two nations. It was not a one-off incident and was followed by a large stand-off in 2017 in the Bhutanese territory of Doklam, raising security concerns for all Himalayan neighbors. While the Doklam stand-off was de-escalated, the 2020 Galwan Valley clash between Indian and Chinese troops set the tone for post-COVID-19 pandemic Sino-India relations. This was the most severe conflict in decades and led to casualties, a diplomatic fallout, and a series of skirmishes in the following two years along the LAC, resulting in minor injuries to soldiers, but adversely affecting any probability of Himalayan peace and stability.

When viewed in the context of broader geopolitical dynamics, Chinese behavior in the Himalayas is a reflection of its strategic stance in disputes with maritime neighbors in South China Sea, East China Sea, and even beyond in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. There are similar patterns of Chinese state behavior wherein Beijing vehemently objects to infrastructure activities by another nation but expects silence when China begins construction of a bridge, road, dam or an artificial island in or around a disputed territories or close to militarized areas. Any attempt to alter Himalayan or maritime status-quo by China appears unlikely to be result of a provocation, as Beijing has officially claimed. For instance, amassing troops armed with hand-to-hand combat weapons in the Galwan Valley or against Philippine Coast Guards, appears to be pre-meditated and planned tactics to intimidate neighbors and

signal strength to Western powers.

Another commonly observed tactic in Chinese diplomatic artillery is renaming disputed territories. For instance, to assert its claim on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh,<sup>4</sup> Beijing has been officially renaming cities and villages in the state since 2017, followed by more lists in 2021, 2023 and even 2024. The Indian response to the same was presented by External Affairs Minister Dr. S Jaishankar who stated that “Arunachal Pradesh was, is and will always be a state of India. Changing names does not have an effect.”<sup>5</sup> However, renaming territories has a wider implication than just ‘changing a name’. Disengagement with Chinese troops at the LAC is far from complete as Beijing continues to militarize the region further, establish dual-purpose villages that serve as surveillance centers, and manages to keep the conflict alive.

As a result, India has adopted a multi-pronged foreign policy to address Chinese military build-up and infrastructure development by upgrading its own capabilities, increasing military presence along the LAC,<sup>6</sup> stressing on Self-reliant India policy (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*) to decrease dependence on China, restricting Chinese economic presence in Indian markets and most importantly, carefully selecting like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific to achieve all these objectives. In New Delhi’s understanding, it needs to address China’s aggressive and assertive actions by building better infrastructure along the LAC and collaborating with Himalayan nations in bilateral or even multilateral development projects, to ensure trans-Himalayan connectivity and its indispensable integration into the Indo-



Pacific security continuum. As a result, its relations with Japan as a partner of choice have progressed from being a Special Strategic and Global Partnership to develop and connect India to the Indo-Pacific, into a comprehensive strategic alignment in the sensitive and conflict-ridden Himalayan region.

### India-Japan Alignment in the Himalayas

Japan is an important strategic partner to India, but its unique position as the only country that has been welcomed by New Delhi for Himalayan security needs careful examination. Japan understands the implications of a conflict with China over disputed territories, given its own history of raising concerns over the change to status quo in and around the Senkaku island chain.<sup>7</sup> The Senkaku islands dispute remains active with a potential for armed conflict in the seas as China has developed Air Defense Identification Zone in the area, and regularly patrols the claimed islands. Japan responded to these assertions in 2022 in its House of Representatives by upholding the importance of upholding human rights in China's Xinjiang region, Tibet, Southern Mongolia and Hong Kong.<sup>8</sup>

While both New Delhi and Tokyo refrained from joining the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Japan-India Special Global Strategic Partnership prioritizes quality infrastructure developments in India and its neighboring nations, including the Himalayan countries, and intends to overcome challenges to infrastructure projects faced by BRI such as debt financing, sub-standard quality or uneconomical projects such as in Africa or in

Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> Japan's New Indo-Pacific rests on a key pillar of promoting regional connectivity with India as an important partner and complements India's Act East Policy wherein Tokyo has a quintessential role to play in the vision of a free, open, inclusive and rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific commons that now tactically include the Himalayas.<sup>10</sup>

Even diplomatically, Japan has backed the Indian position and claims on its territories along the LAC such as Tokyo's recognition of Arunachal Pradesh as an inalienable part of India at the expense of Beijing's strong objections, as per a 2015 statement made under PM Abe administration, by then Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida (current Japanese PM) regarding Japan's absent development projects in the contested state.<sup>11</sup> Not long after the statement, and immediately following the June 2017 Doklam stand-off, India and Japan established the Act East Forum (AEF) in September 2017 focused on dual objectives of developing India's North-East region (NER) and promoting intra-NER connectivity as well as its linkages with Southeast Asia.

Consequently, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) declared several projects in NER in its 2017-19 India policy's action agenda for regional development:

- Projects for regional development in NER (Urban) focused on sanitation and infrastructure needs for the region through the provision and improvement of housing, public transport, *Swachh Bharat* (Clean India), electricity generation and heavy industry projects

- Projects for regional development in NER (Rural) catered to economic security of the NER with a focus on income-generation, and enhancing basic services such as education, health, drinking water, sanitation, preserving culture, history, and heritage such as through bamboo use promotion in NER
- Projects for reducing disparities specifically looked at vulnerable and fragile regions of India, identified as North-East, coastal areas and islands, North Himalaya, deserts, etc.

Thus, the India-Japan partnership for Himalayan security can be visualized on two fronts as a long-term strategy towards multi-dimensional security of the sensitive Himalayan region. As a partnership with a wide scope, it includes economic security of communities to ensure their sustainable livelihood in the fragile NER. The Himalayan ecosystem is fragile, and any infrastructure activities without accounting for environmental impacts can significantly harm the ecology, and the future of indigenous communities. Japan's expertise on development with a focus on sustainability, project feasibility, environmental security, economic support to communities and gender mainstreaming highlights its role as a quintessential partner for Himalayan development. Japan is engaged in similar projects in Nepal and Bhutan ranging from infrastructure development, environmental preservation, disaster risk reduction, to income-generation and health security.

As a partnership in geographical spheres, the Indo-Japanese Himalayan strategy keeps Indian

NER and other landlocked states at the core that extend into the wider connectivity with the Indo-Pacific as follows:

- Development of NER and other Himalayan territories: This includes NER connectivity to the rest of India including social and environmental sustainability, people-to-people exchanges, in conjunction with development of 'Smart Islands' that can contribute to enhancement of landlocked NER's connectivity with other regions within and around India.
- Enhancing connectivity with Asia: Japan-India cooperation to connect Southeast Asia to Himalayas via the Bay of Bengal, such as Bangladesh's Japan-funded Matarbari port for building a regional industrial value chain in cooperation with India. In addition, Japan has also committed to development in the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) regional initiative by identifying 11 corridors crucial for regional connectivity through bilateral, trilateral (with India) or multilateral infrastructure projects.
- Greater connectivity with Africa and the Indo-Pacific: India and Japan-led Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) aimed at building industrial corridors and industrial networks for the development and progress of Asia and Africa within the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>12</sup> While the AAGC has under-performed its potential, it signals an alternative channel for Indo-Japanese investments and diplomatic outreach to Indo-Pacific's under-focused regions, including the Himalayan states.

Thus, Japan's commitment to Himalayan security and connectivity emphasizes the importance of the region in Indo-Pacific geopolitics and the strength of the India-Japan partnership.

## Conclusion

India-China strategic rivalry along the LAC reflects the complex and ongoing nature of the India-China border dispute, which remains a sensitive and critical issue for both nations. The situation also demonstrates the perils of an unresolved border that remains open to state interpretation based on history, tactical advantage or geopolitical leverage over a strategic rival. Despite diplomatic efforts to resolve the LAC disputes and maintain peace along the border, India's learning from the China challenge has been instrumental in carving New Delhi's policy towards Beijing that asserts no return to "business as usual" with China unless disengagement at the borders is complete. China's Himalayan assertiveness is equally significant as its military ventures in the Indian Ocean, to push New Delhi into aligning with the Japan-crafted and U.S.-led Indo-Pacific security vision.

The India-China border dispute is unlikely to be resolved in the short-term through dialogue alone; however, military disengagement on mutually agreeable terms would be in the national interests for both nations, only if it is accompanied by political commitment to stable and secure borders along the LAC and trust-building exercises. As far as security of

Himalayan states is concerned, New Delhi has moved past its amateurish strategic thinking to keep the region isolated and under-developed to deter Chinese counter-development on the other side of the border as well as Chinese troop mobility utilizing Indian infrastructure. Despite the policy, China's border infrastructure as well as troop deployment far exceeds what India has achieved in the past decade. Hence, while New Delhi struggles to entirely decouple from its dependence on Chinese economy, its security compulsions have brought it closer to Western powers like the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific and even in the Himalayas such as for military preparedness through joint exercises (2022 Yudh Abhyas in Himalayas) for simulated combat scenarios in mountainous terrain.

While Japan has financed infrastructure projects in India's NER as well as in other Himalayan states, it has refrained from inching close to disputed territories through its investments to avoid antagonizing China. However, Japan's very engagement in India's NER represents a broader Indo-Japanese vision to promote trans-Himalayan as well as Himalayan-Indian Ocean connectivity and promote its linkages to the wider Indo-Pacific region. It also provides an alternative to Beijing-led infrastructure initiatives in Himalayan states. Thus, while India's strategic conundrum on the nature of its future engagement with China remains unclear a stable India-Japan relationship anchors strategic signaling to Beijing that New Delhi has reliable partners.

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# China's Himalayan Hustle: A View from Brussels

Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy

In recent years, perceptions of the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) across the European Union (EU) have deteriorated to an unprecedented low. Under European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's leadership and her hawkish stance on China, member-states have converged in committing, at least at the level of official statements, to take concrete measures to address threats associated with Beijing's global expansion.

"How China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations going forward," said Commission president in 2023, indicating that the EU is not interested in going softer on China.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the EU's alarm due to the Russia-China strategic alignment, the bloc's skepticism has been on the rise for over a decade, as it has witnessed China's assertiveness gradually grow in the Indo-Pacific region.

The EU has repeatedly condemned Beijing's human rights violations in Hong Kong, Tibet and Xinjiang, its hybrid warfare in the Taiwan Strait, its military behavior in the East and South China Seas and along its border with India, its distortive trade practices and race for technology, as well as information manipulation

and influence operations. Europe has also been alarmed by Beijing's attempts to promote its authoritarian alternative for global governance in its neighborhood and beyond, at the expense of the existing, rules-based order.

Beijing's approach to its trans-Himalayan neighbors has entailed economic incentives, infrastructure development promoted under the hyped-up slogan of 'connectivity', cultural engagement and diplomacy under its flagship foreign policy program, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These different tools have been all designed with the strategic aim to extend China's strategic influence. Chinese-funded economic corridors such as the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN) have shaped the strategic, social and political landscapes of the countries they pass through, with significant geopolitical implications for the entire region, impacting India, a key regional player and partner.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, the EU is rethinking not only its approach to China, but also the way it relates to regional partners, who for long have felt neglected by the EU's fixation with China. Rethinking its China policy has entailed

heightened awareness in Brussels of the urgency to invest in better understanding not only China's intentions in the trans-Himalayan region, but also how the concerned regional states, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan or Mongolia, respond to China's assertiveness and navigate regional tension.

### The Leading Voice

In the eyes of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), as articulated in their 2023 report on EU-China relations, "China is moving into a new era of security and control characterized by an increasingly assertive economic and foreign policy, employing grey-zone activities."<sup>3</sup> Beijing extending a diplomatic, technological, and economic lifeline to Moscow in its aggression against Ukraine since February 2022 is just the most recent, and arguably the most significant factor contributing to the collapse of China's image in Europe.

The European Parliament (EP) has significantly and consistently shaped the bloc's approach to China. As such, concerning the border dispute between India and China, in January 2024 MEPs noted that "the situation is fragile and there is increasing militarization, which has the potential to intensify and affect the wider security landscape in South Asia and global security". MEPs also underscored "to both parties the critical importance of resolving the issue peacefully through dialogue."<sup>4</sup>

The tone of the EP resolutions helps illustrate that a robust EU-level, China-critical narrative has emerged in the Brussels bubble, a commonly used reference to the EU institutions, and has

made space for a separate narrative supportive of Taiwan as a like-minded partner for Europe in its efforts to push back against China's authoritarian agenda.<sup>5</sup>

In response to Beijing's regional posturing, the EU is reinforcing relations with like-minded partners exposed to China's assertiveness. Just two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Commission president visited India. The visit's aim was to advance cooperation with one of Europe's most important partners in the Indo-Pacific, a partnership that had already become "strategic" in 2004. Mindful of the importance that India has historically attached to its own ties with Russia, and considering an assertive China in the Indo-Pacific endangering regional peace and stability, Europe has sought to elevate ties with India.

In her opening speech at the 2022 Raisina Dialogue, Delhi's flagship geopolitical conference, Commission president said: "The outcome of Putin's war will not only determine the future of Europe but also deeply affect the Indo-Pacific region and the rest of the world. For the Indo-Pacific it is as important as for Europe that borders are respected. And that spheres of influence are rejected. We want a positive vision for a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific."<sup>6</sup>

The same year, the EU and India held their first security and defence consultation, a sign of the increasing importance of security cooperation in the partnership.<sup>7</sup> The two sides consider security and defence a priority area of the partnership, with the EP urging both to "make tangible advances" in this regard. MEPs called on the EU to hold bilateral security dialogues

on an annual basis with the greater involvement of EU member-states, with the aim to effectively promote shared security, stability and peaceful development in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

### Challenges Ahead

Speaking of EU-China relations in a plenary debate in April 2023 Commission president said: “We can – and we must – carve out our distinct European approach that also leaves space for us to cooperate with other partners, too.”<sup>9</sup> Europe understands that in order to reposition itself in the Indo-Pacific, consolidating ties with partners bilaterally and with the region as a whole, will be key. Europe sees India as a key partner in its Indo-Pacific Strategy adopted in 2021, and key to Europe’s contribution to peace and stability in the region, whatever shape this contribution might take. In this process, the EP has supported a sustainable and credible shift in the EU’s strategic positioning.

Notwithstanding differences in Europe’s perceptions of China and Russia, two difficult partners in their own ways, there is convergence between EU member-states that they must rethink their approach to both, and reinforce ties with like-minded partners. The challenge lies in articulating an EU-level strategy that all member-states embrace, that rebalances bilateral ties and adjusts the bloc to the new geopolitical reality. Ideally, a common strategy would secure that member-states work together, not against each other, as they engage third partners, and embrace a common strategic vision for the EU in the Indo-Pacific.

The good news is that member-states are aligned in appreciating the importance of repositioning

Europe in the Indo-Pacific by relying on closer ties with regional states, in particular India as a like-minded partner. The EP’s role in consolidating this approach has been significant, despite the fact that member-states decide on the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Through the work of its Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET), the EP has maintained a consistent and critical focus on China, its regional posture, including in the trans-Himalayan region, and its global ambitions.

In this region a special focus has been China’s abysmal human rights record, with MEPs condemning it in annual reports and urgency resolutions, through public hearings or plenary debates. Concerning China’s influence over regional states in the trans-Himalayan region, the EP’s focus on Tibet has stood out in particular, approached from the perspective of human rights, environmental protection and climate change, as well as through China’s resistance to Europe’s calls that Beijing live up to its own commitments to respect fundamental freedoms in Tibet.

For Beijing, Tibet is a non-negotiable issue. Therefore, Beijing considers any proposal to discuss Tibet, even if it concerns environmental protection which is vital to advance China’s development, an interference into China’s domestic affairs. Furthermore, Beijing’s treatment of the issue of the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama matters to those who follow Tibetan Buddhism across the Himalayas, from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh, and into Mongolia. The way Beijing manages the reincarnation issue and interacts with international norms in the process has therefore broad implications.<sup>10</sup>

### **A Question of Political Will**

The future of the EU's approach to China, its ability, and most importantly its political resolve to urge Beijing to respect its international commitments as the "responsible" power it claims to be, depends on member-states. Yet, the EP's voice and weight is not to be dismissed in the process, in particular given the EU's 'Team Europe' approach in the EU's external relations. This approach is another indication of a maturing EU when it comes to its narrative, designed to ensure a coordinated and comprehensive response between the EU and its member-states, seen as the backbone of a "geopolitical" Europe.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately however,

following up on this narrative is the test the EU is yet to pass.

The EU's relationship with China is one of the most intricate and important anywhere in the world, according to the EU's top leadership. How Europe manages this relationship will be a determining factor for Europe's future economic prosperity and national security.<sup>12</sup> How regional Himalayan states manage their ties with China and engage in strategic coordination with each other, will equally shape China's behavior and can help push back against its assertiveness in the Himalayan region.



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# India-EU Ties: Reconciling Strategic Perceptions over Chinese Revisionism in the Himalaya

Nicolas Blarel

Over the last two decades, there has been a notable increase in India's ties with the European Union (EU), building on the establishment of the India-EU Strategic Partnership in 2004. Ties were further boosted in 2022 by the relaunch of the negotiations for an EU-India Free Trade Agreement alongside the announcement of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC).<sup>1</sup> Pledges for strategic cooperation have also mentioned hard security challenges posed by China's rise, notably when it comes to preserving a stable order in the Indo-Pacific. Europe's rising disillusionment with China—the EU's 2022 Strategic Compass has moved to labelling Beijing as a “systemic rival”<sup>2</sup>—and embrace of the Indo-Pacific construct via its 2021 strategy for cooperation<sup>3</sup> have provided room for discussion between the EU and India over China's rising assertiveness in both the economic and territorial realms. However, until recently, the EU and its member-states had mainly acknowledged India's concerns over China's mounting maritime outreach in the Indo-Pacific, and more specifically in the Indian Ocean, and had not specifically referred to China's territorial revisionism in the Himalayan region.

However, India, and smaller regional actors like Bhutan and Nepal, have regularly highlighted the broader negative ecological consequences of China's large-scale infrastructure build-up in the wider Himalayan region, via Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects such as the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN).<sup>4</sup> Given the heightened stage of the long-time rivalry between India and China, every issue—whether troop movement and building of military bases, or hydropower projects—becomes a zero-sum game.<sup>5</sup> This makes it harder for India to solve its border conflict with China. How can the EU credibly signal to New Delhi that it takes its concerns over Chinese adventurism seriously? What role can the EU then play in mitigating the existing security dilemma in the Himalaya?

## What is at Stake in the Himalayan Region and How Does it Affect the EU?

India and China have been embarked on a four-year military standoff involving thousands of soldiers along their disputed border. The stand-off started in May 2020 when Indian and Chinese forces clashed in the Galwan Valley,

killing 20 Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese ones.<sup>6</sup> Since then, officials from both countries have met numerous times to try to agree on a disengagement of troops from the area with no success. India has accused China of unilaterally trying to revise the border by sending troops beyond the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the countries. While it is in both China's and India's interest to settle the dispute, Beijing has been reluctant to engage in negotiations about the LAC. At the eve of the BRICS regional grouping October 2024 in Kazan, a tentative deal on patrolling the disputed Himalayan frontier was reached.<sup>7</sup> The dispute along the border has been illustrative of the enduring rivalry and mistrust between the two countries, which is shaping the security and ecological landscape of the Himalayan region.

Given Europe's trade and investments with the region and the complex interplay of relations between China and India, this militarized dynamic can have severe consequences not just for the region, but for Brussels as well. As mentioned, the Indo-Pacific has generally been the focus of EU-India strategic discussions. The omission of the Himalayan theater is significant given how Trans-Himalayan Chinese energy projects have severe repercussions on India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and various Southeast Asian states. The Tibetan plateau is the largest source of fresh water for South and Southeast Asia, supporting one-eighth of the world's population.<sup>8</sup> China has established a system of hydroelectric dams on two of the largest rivers flowing from the Himalayas: The Mekong and the Brahmaputra. China also intends to build

another dam and hydropower plant on the Great Bend along the Brahmaputra.<sup>9</sup> This new project was announced during the Summer 2020 military crisis with India. These various mega-dam projects run the risk of affecting the flood control or the ecological environment of downstream areas and are perceived as tools of political influence given the acute geopolitical tensions in the region. As the lowest riparian state on the Brahmaputra, India has little leverage to shape water politics.

These projects are also key for China's broader energy policies and climate diplomacy, notably in its negotiations with the EU. As the biggest energy consumer on the planet, it aims to become the largest hydropower producer in the world, to develop its thermal energy production, and to maintain its eco-friendly credentials at the global stage. As the EU and China continue their High-Level Environment and Climate Dialogue and fix targets, the ecological consequences for South Asia of China's energy policy choices need to be considered.<sup>10</sup> If the EU's intention is indeed to support India's rising position in the Indo-Pacific, as well as enable small states in the region to be less dependent on China, then a greater recognition of the broader ecological ramifications of these projects is necessary.

### **What Could the EU Do?**

To address the ecological and geopolitical challenges cited above, the EU could help India through three ways, and build on an existing template of development and environmental initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, given EU's reputation as a normative power pushing for robust green standards. First, the EU could help

affected actors in the Himalaya by providing information about Chinese infrastructural development and its consequences. Building on the examples of successful cooperation in the Indian Ocean and CRIMARIO II, notably over the collection, fusion, analysis and sharing of relevant information to fight against the risks and threats which the region has in common like climate change,<sup>11</sup> the EU could play a similar role in offering a data repository, building on satellite sensing and the Copernicus program, for instance, to disseminate information about the physical impacts of various infrastructural projects.

Second, the EU could support India and smaller South Asian states in their resort to international legal arguments and institutions to pressure Beijing to abide by global norms and conventions. Over the past three years, the EU and its member-states have accumulated significant legal expertise and capacities and have set up programs for the sharing of information and best practices, notably to help Indo-Pacific states improve their maritime domain awareness.<sup>12</sup> Such cooperative schemes could be emulated in the Himalayan region. In that context, New Delhi and other South Asian states could make a legal case against Chinese upstream river damming and its negative consequences for the region. Partners, like the EU, can support this narrative by placing pressure on China to enact downstream risk-mitigation efforts required by international law.

Third, the EU could help develop Global Gateway Initiative plans in the Himalayan region, as EU sponsored projects through this

scheme prioritize sustainable development, clean energy, and green transportation and infrastructure. Through these projects, the EU could help affected actors invest in alternate sources of energy, like solar power, which would help decrease the reliance on the Brahmaputra's water flows. More India-EU collaboration through Global Gateway and direct trilateral cooperation with regional Himalayan actors like Bangladesh, Bhutan, or Nepal could be considered on disaster relief or other contingency measures to help mitigate the effects of Chinese infrastructural policies.<sup>13</sup> This investment in capacity building and the provision of public goods in areas where the EU has a considerable experience would be an important signal of commitment to the welfare of the Himalayan region.

### **Encouraging Further EU-India Strategic Convergence in the Himalayan Region**

Security cooperation is likely to become an increasingly prominent component of the EU-India relationship in the future, but before the EU signals a stronger stance on the Sino-Indian border disputes, the EU and India need to develop and institutionalize a strategic dialogue to reconcile their threat perceptions. The first EU-India Security and Defense Consultations were held in June 2022 in Brussels, heralding a new phase in bilateral security discussions. During these consultations, both parties discussed ways to increase cooperation in the co-development and co-production of defense equipment, including India's participation in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).<sup>14</sup> India and the EU could further build on U.S.-India relations and develop a similar "2+2" model

for defense and security discussions, in which the EU commission's high representative and defense commissioner could meet with India's defense and external affairs ministers. Such a forum could enable India to convey its security concerns over Chinese revisionism the Himalayan region, and in parallel, European leaders could also emphasize their own apprehensions vis-à-vis Russia's aggressive behavior. There are already some points of strategic convergence, as the Russia-China nexus has been a source of growing concern for both India and the EU.

Beyond the European Commission, the EU Parliament has also signaled greater convergence with India's security concerns over time. On a recent visit to New Delhi to discuss common security challenges and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Nathalie Loiseau, the chair of the European Parliament's subcommittee on security and defense, has highlighted that defense and security cooperation was becoming a more important pillar of the India-EU partnership as democracies worldwide were facing threats from authoritarian regimes.<sup>15</sup> The European Parliament's statements have also evolved on the condemnation of China's activism in the Himalayan region. If the European Parliament called for both "India

and China to avoid any further escalation" in June 2020,<sup>16</sup> a January 2024 recommendation directly denounced "any attempts to unilaterally change the border status quo, such as by China in 2020" on the Himalayan border and welcomed "India's efforts to contribute to regional stability by engaging with the region". In this statement, the European Parliament also called on both parties to "resolving the issue peacefully through dialogue and in line with the norms of international law".<sup>17</sup>

There will, of course, be more barriers to overcome. In order to more explicitly support India's red lines in the Himalaya, European leaders will expect India to be more critical of Russia's actions in Ukraine. In parallel, India is likely to remain skeptical about the EU's relationship with China, and its ability to explicitly condemn Chinese adventurism on the Himalayan border. But the political leaderships, with a new mandate post the respective elections in 2024, have a perfect opportunity to embark into a comprehensive security dialogue that can include discussions over the Himalayan region. The bilateral summit of 2025 could be a potentially useful platform to signal this new direction.

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# China's Himalayan Adventures: Impact on Five Eyes' Interests in the Indo-Pacific

Joseph Varner

The Five Eyes of the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have deep political, strategic, economic and cultural interests in the Indo-Pacific region, and complementarity with India in particular. Those broad interests might include national security, economic prosperity, respect for international law and human rights, democratic values, public health, protecting the environment and enhanced engagement in the region with partners to shape those interests. Many Five Eyes nations have historic family and cultural ties in Asia and there can be little doubt that the dynamics of the region would shape the lives of those states for generations to come.

## The Dragon in the Room

The Indo-Pacific is 40 economies strong, with a population of over four billion people, and \$47.19 trillion in economic activity. From a geostrategic point of view, the U.S. and the other Five Eyes countries have important ties that go back to before World War I (1914-1918). Now, the dragon in the room is an ever increasing and powerful China politically, economically, and militarily and it is on the economic and military level that Beijing is making its presence felt to the Five Eyes. This leads one to question what is the impact of China's Himalayan adventures on the Five Eyes interests in the Indo-Pacific

security environment? If this was a hockey season discussion, a favorite Canadian sport, India would be a first-round draft pick for U.S.-led alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. There are clear mutual interests that could bring this team together even with India's closeness to Russia and its non-aligned status, though the latter seems to be eroding by the day.

In terms of the Five Eyes, the United States has long been a Pacific power, and it has key military allies in the region including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand. The United Kingdom once the world's greatest naval power still has territorial possessions in the Indo-Pacific region and in Commonwealth member countries like India, Australia, and New Zealand that go back to the day of the British Empire. Australia and New Zealand are in some ways on the frontline of the Indo-Pacific security dynamic and it is not by accident that Australia is a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) the so-called Quad of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, the Five Eyes and AUKUS of the United Kingdom, Australian and the United States. Often forgotten about, the Five Powers Defence Arrangements, brings together Five Eyes members the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand with Malaysia and Singapore

in the event of armed aggression against Malaysia and Singapore and sadly, Malaysia's offshore is under pressure from Beijing. Canada tends to dither in the Indo-Pacific but again has close allies in the western Pacific like its Pacific neighbor to the South the United States. It also has a large Asian diaspora that in Canada's case are still closely influenced by events abroad, and this has the potential to motivate those diasporas to engage politically in the Canadian democratic process as we have now seen in the on-going public inquiry on foreign influence. There is great complementarity between the Five Eyes states and India including a rich and sometimes very painful history in terms of the British Empire and the First and Second World War (1939-1945) and several institutions related to democracy.

### Chinese Expansionism

The 'dragon in the room,' over the last decade or so from the Five Eyes perspective, has been China which is viewed as threatening its Indo-Pacific neighbors with violence and claims on their territory including but not limited to India, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines and the rule of law and Liberal Democratic World Order. Many expect China to try and seize Taiwan by force of arms by 2027 and Taipei's offshore front-line positions near the Chinese coast and the Pratas are under constant threat of attack and seizure. Beijing routinely threatens Japanese interests in the Senkaku Islands and now Okinawa. The last few years have seen China force its way into the Philippines exclusive economic zone to try and seize territories it claims like Thitu inhabited by Philippine citizens. China has demonstrated a thirst for resources and territories in the

Himalayas at India and other countries expense.

Many news articles have focused on the threat posed to the Indo-Pacific region and Five Eyes allies by China and its growing military power. China has the world's largest standing military at about two million people under arms. The world has watched the more than doubling of China's nuclear warheads, its large and diverse missile force, growth of the Chinese Navy to 355 plus warships, and Beijing's program to catch up to the United States on quality and quantity of fighter aircraft. China's theatre-level missile forces are deployed to threaten a devastating attack on India, the United States and Five Eyes allies' forces and bases in the region at the outset of any conflict, while Beijing's strategic deterrent threatens US cities in North America and India cities in the Subcontinent. Without doubt the US and its Five Eyes allies are increasingly faced with the decision to re-entrench their position in the Indo-Pacific region or leave their allies and each other exposed to Beijing's threats and bullying. While the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada could withdraw from the region, which would be catastrophic, in real terms, their regional allies and Five Eyes allies in Australia and New Zealand cannot and India in terms of complementarity is in the same boat.

India is an increasing global great power, an economic power, and a political power, in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond that the Five Eyes have a kinship with that cannot be ignored. It is first and foremost a democracy in a region sometimes troubled by that concept of governance, a member of the Quad, a key potential strategic ally of the United States,



Australia and Japan, and a key trading partner now and in the future for the Five Eyes. New Delhi is in the strictest terms a huge potential ally in confronting the scourge of Islamic extremism in the Indo-Pacific and beyond emanating from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics. From a strategic point of view, India is a major regional nuclear-armed counterweight to China that guards the Indian Ocean and its vital sea lanes to and from Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Five Eyes democratic allies in the Western Pacific particularly, Australia and Japan. Beyond those Five Eyes interests, India is a key potential ally for NATO and Israel against Islamic extremism and a potential diplomatic back channel for the Five Eyes with Russia, and BRICS of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. In real terms in China is to be contained and Russian behavior is to be moderated New Delhi, and the Indian government have a key role to play.

### **China's Gray Zone Tactics**

Chinese activities the Himalayas in some way mirror their activities in the South China Sea where China has been militarizing real and artificial islands and using legal diplomatic arguments to counter its neighbors' plans in the disputed waters in short hybrid warfare. Hybrid warfare is an amalgam of political, unconventional, and conventional actions geared to subvert and destroy a target state without crossing the threshold to open war. In hybrid warfare, the lines between war and peace are blurred and used against the target state. China uses every national tool at its disposal in Hybrid warfare to enforce its will in the 'gray zone' from the military to the China Coast Guard, to the China's Maritime Militia. Part

of Chinese 'gray zone' tactics using levels of coercion below the use of lethal direct force that could lead to war revolve around both pushing its neighbors out of the South China Sea and normalizing its presence there two formalize its control. These gray zone tactics have ranged from pushing opponents with law, diplomacy, and gentle harassment, to the use of water cannon, laser dazzlers, communications and navigation jamming, ramming attacks, and using knives, sticks, rocks, and swords anything short of a gun battle. To date, the United States, the Quad, the Five Eyes and regional allies have failed to find an effective means to counter China is the gray zone short of the use of lethal force, where international law and naming and shaming Beijing only go so far to resolve conflict.

Along India's frontier with China and in the Himalayan region, China has followed a similar pattern of hybrid gray zone attacks to challenge India's and other state's sovereignty in the region. The backdrop to this long-standing conflict is that both India and China are nuclear-armed and any conflict that turns hot could have far ranging repercussions that threaten the peace and stability of the entire Indo-Pacific region. Alarmingly China seems predisposed to gambling with the threat of a nuclear confrontation and as undeterred as Beijing is in the South China Sea. India and China fought a war in 1962 over part of the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) and Indian territory along it that led to an Indian military defeat. Since that bloody limited war, China has attempted repeatedly to push back the LAC at India's expense. China has placed at least 200,000 troops on India's frontier to

counter some 150,000 or so Indian soldiers. All along the LAC, China is constructing new roads and dual use infrastructure such as airfields, bridges, storage facilities and barracks to facilitate and support the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in military operations. Chinese dual use militarized villages have also turned up on what was once the sovereign territory of Bhutan, and Nepal as it expands its boundaries by stealth and India with some 200 plus of these villages near its frontier is likely next. India for the most part has continued to build up its strategic infrastructure along the 2100-mile line of LAC with some 90 dual use connectivity projects on the books.

China has carried out border incursions on what is Indian territory in 1962, 1975, 2013, 2017, 2020-22, building fortifications, attacking neighboring Indian units, and leaving evidence of their presence on Indian territory to socialize and normalize their presence in remote Northeastern India. China has even issued maps showing it with parts of Indian-controlled territory in the north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh and the disputed Aksai Chin and renamed 30 places in India's Arunachal Pradesh with Chinese names as part of a ploy to normalize its 'salami slicing in the Himalayas and elsewhere. China played the same see through game with Japan, Russia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Recently, Chinese images have surfaced on social media suggesting Chinese troops were at least 60 kilometers into Arunachal Pradesh, a northeastern Indian

state that China calls "South Tibet." Like the South China Sea, no tactics have successfully combatted or deterred China's gray zone tactics in and along the LAC.

## Conclusion

There is much that requires further examination of China's territorial ambitions in the Himalayas and elsewhere that has a direct impact on the interests of the Five Eyes in the Indo-Pacific. Five Eyes interests in India's well-being are political, economic, military strategic, and cultural, and India's interests in the Five Eyes are very similar and as a counterbalance to China. India and the Five Eyes both want to manage or resolve conflicts with China to maintain the peace and the Liberal Democratic World Order, if possible, but that increasingly looks unlikely as Beijing seems more and more inclined to roll the dice in its territorial ambitions in the region. India's non-aligned status and its relationship with Russia are potential limitations in an alliance and the same could be said when the Five Eyes members dally with Pakistan. But Chinese behaviour in the Himalayas and South China Sea is an important cross-over of intersecting interests that in a sense bring about the Quad. New Delhi's wrangling with an ever-aggressive China in the Himalayas, has sent a strong message to the Five Eyes, and a warning that with China now claiming to be a 'near' Arctic and Antarctic state that the United States and Canadian Arctic could be the next area to experience Chinese interventions and gray zone tactics with implications for NATO's northern flank.

# Geopolitics in the Himalayas: China's Strategy, and What "Rimland" States like India Can Do About It

Brendon J. Cannon

## Introduction

In the high-stakes world of global power rivalries, the towering peaks of the Himalayas are likely equal in importance to the tropical waters of the South China Sea. The mountainous Roof of the World holds the literal high ground leading to South and Central Asia and thus one of the fulcrums that can decisively tip global distributions of power in favor of one state or another. Dominance over the "Heartland" of Eurasia, which includes the Himalayas, could even pave the way to gaining global supremacy, British geographer Halford Mackinder theorized over a century ago.<sup>1</sup> A few decades later, Dutch-American political scientist Nicholas J. Spykman showed the other side of the "Eurasian hegemon" coin when he highlighted the strategic importance of Eurasian littoral states like India and offshore balancers like the U.S. in countering the hegemonic ambitions of continental superpowers. This is known as Spykman's Rimland theory.<sup>2</sup> What these geopoliticians told us years ago is simple but profound: Eurasia, the "supercontinent" that comprises Europe, the Middle East, as well as South and East Asia holds an outsized importance in global distributions of

power because it has the largest populations, resources, economies, and political power. Should a Eurasian hegemon emerge in Eurasia's Himalayan mountains and adjacent Heartland, that state could successfully contest for global supremacy. In our day and age, China is intent on gaining just that, and the heart of its strategy is Beijing's control of the Himalayas.

Beijing does this via multiple vectors. The most prominent are its mega infrastructure projects such as dams, roads, and ports, which masquerade under the guise of development assistance but in reality are used to better push its appetite for control and, with India, Beijing's territorial claims that span from Arunachal Pradesh to Aksai Chin particularly along the disputed 3,440 km India-China border, known as the Line-of-Control (LAC).<sup>3</sup> Beijing has also pushed to strengthen its ties with Pakistan, Bhutan, and Nepal, and constructed significant civilian and military infrastructure near the border.<sup>4</sup> According to one report, China's military has "maintained continuous force presence and continued infrastructure buildup along the LAC."<sup>5</sup> China's relentless push is not just about gaining the higher ground,

but about reshaping the balance of power in Eurasia, isolating India, and achieving Eurasian hegemony à la Mackinder's theory. But a form of continental balancing is already underway—akin to Spykman's Rimland theory—that may hold the key to pushing back against China and ultimately countering its attempts at continental and global domination.

### Control and Conflict in the Himalaya

China's plan to dominate the Himalayas seeks to leverage economic initiatives to its push political claims, and, if these fail, Beijing can prosecute military actions so as to eventually secure control of the high ground. A key tool in China's hands is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast infrastructure and economic project aimed at enhancing its connectivity with the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the BRI is perhaps better viewed as a Trojan horse that, once inside a country, is used to enhance Chinese influence and power. In the western Himalayas spreading over Kashmir and northern Pakistan as well as adjacent ranges such as the Hindu Kush and Karakoram, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a BRI-linked mega infrastructure project—seeks to link China's western Xinjiang province with Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea via a network of highways, railways, and pipelines.<sup>7</sup> Strategically, these pass across Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan in the disputed Kashmir region of the Himalayas. CPEC will not only provide China with a direct route to the Arabian Sea that bypasses strategic chokepoints in the South China Sea and Strait of Malacca, but also strengthen its ties with Pakistan, Beijing's crucial ally in South Asia and India's arch-rival.

Beyond CPEC, China's investment in port infrastructure in the Indian Ocean basin has seen Chinese companies—many of them state-owned and funded—build, refurbish, and/or expand ports in Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar).<sup>8</sup> These nodes, while passed off by Beijing as building connectivity and expanding trade, do much to underscore China's bold aim to encircle India and establish a significant maritime presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond ports and dual-use critical infrastructure such as roads and rail, China has stepped up its efforts to develop a Sino-centric trans-Himalayan ecosystem of power plants and dams. For instance, it plans to build a large hydropower plant on the Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet.<sup>10</sup> This threatens immense ecological devastation and human displacement, and downstream countries like India and Bangladesh are understandably wary of what they see as China's growing "hydro-hegemony."<sup>11</sup> China's lack of transparency in sharing information about its trans-boundary river activities, in turn, exacerbates these concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, China's military incursions, infrastructure building, and saber-rattling about its territorial claims in the Himalayas reveal Beijing's highly aggressive face when it comes to its regional rivalry with India. The 2017 standoff in Doklam, the violent clash in Galwan Valley in 2020, and the persistent claims over Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin speak to Beijing's attempts to assert control through force, if necessary, over these disputed territories.<sup>13</sup> This aggression not only puts paid to the hollowness of China's "peaceful rise" narrative, but also

has global implications.<sup>14</sup> If China is successful in the Himalayas, it could have the effect of undermining India's strategic depth as well as Delhi's growing regional and global influence and truly tip the scales in China's favor.

### Indo-Pacific Pushback

India's growing alignment with Japan, the European Union (EU), and the U.S., among others, highlights the profundity of China's Himalayan grab to India's national security and sovereignty. It also demonstrates the fact that states along the crescent of the Indo-Pacific "Rimland" are cognizant of the dangers of a Eurasian hegemon emerging. Indeed, the concept and related strategies of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" are telling not so much for what they do today, but the shape and contours they have rapidly taken in the past five years and, most presciently, what they may become. This vision, first promulgated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, sees a confluence of not just two oceans – the Indian and Pacific – but two worlds, one that is anchored in the shape of a diamond by India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S., but is also anchored by like-minded states around the globe. This includes Europe, at Eurasia's western edge, and Southeast Asian states, among others. States and entities – the EU, ASEAN, Germany, France, South Korea, the Netherlands, the UK, and Canada – have all, to varying degrees, adopted Indo-Pacific strategies and policies such as de-risking and decoupling from China.

These "free and open" strategies and policies are nothing less than a vivid manifestation of both Mackinder and Spykman's geopolitical thought. In 2024, as the world becomes increasingly

polarized, the broad contours of the Rimland alignment theorized by Spykman along with the outer crescent of states theorized by Mackinder is what we are seeing as India, Japan, the US, and major states in Europe align to balance against China. The broad collaboration and consensus about China between states stretching from western Europe to South Asia to northeast Asia, the Antipodes, and North America reflects a shared interest in maintaining stability and balance in Eurasia. These Rimland states increasingly perceive China as a predatory, expansionist state. By aligning under the hold-all concept of the free and open Indo-Pacific, these states are inexorably moving, it seems, to create a formidable counterbalance to Chinese efforts at gaining hegemony in Eurasia and beyond.

India's strengthening ties with Rimland partners, in particular, underscore its strategic role in countering China's hegemonic ambitions in Eurasia and across the maritime Indo-Pacific. India's relationships with Japan and South Korea, for example, are critical. India and Japan share strong ties that are reflected in their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. Joint initiatives in defense, technology, and infrastructure development have strengthened their collective stance against Chinese expansionism.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, India's growing ties with South Korea enhance regional security dynamics, further solidifying the Indo-Pacific framework.<sup>16</sup>

India's burgeoning relationship with the EU and some of its most powerful member-states also plays a vital role in this Rimland equation. This reflects both India and Europe's growing discontent with China.<sup>17</sup> The EU now sees China as a "systemic rival" and challenge to

and for NATO, as do other NATO members like Canada, the UK, and the U.S.<sup>18</sup> As noted, Brussels embraced an Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021, which added impetus and opened new avenues for India-EU as well as Japan-EU and South Korea-EU cooperation to address China-induced concerns not only in the Himalayas but across the Indo-Pacific.<sup>19</sup>

Of equal importance and possibly more weight geopolitically is India's enhanced political, defense and technological cooperation with the U.S.<sup>20</sup> The U.S. views China as a significant threat with the power to reshape the liberal international order and sees India – along with bilateral treaty allies like Japan – as a powerful partner in counteracting China's expansionism in and around Eurasia. Most crucially, India, Japan, Australia, and the U.S. are part of the Quad or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. This informal security club, for many, has become the foremost counterbalance to China in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>21</sup> The fact that these four states are working together so closely about a common threat even before the advent of hostilities speaks volumes about its members' threat perception of China and Beijing's attempts to control the Himalayas and hence Eurasia.

## Conclusion

As perceptions of threat in the high Himalaya from China grow, India has moved to align itself

with other Eurasian Rimland states. Strikingly, India – a traditionally non-aligned giant and potential leader of the emerging Global South – is an integral member of the Quad along with the U.S. India, both in terms of geography and national power, also anchors the Indo-Pacific concept and strategic geography. Indeed, without India there would be no Indo-Pacific to speak of.

As this complex network of Rimland balancers against China emerges, we see clear echoes of the century-old geopolitical theories which anticipated these actions and reactions in Eurasia. Both Mackinder and Spykman foresaw that a powerful state would attempt to gain control of Eurasia's Heartland via dominance of the high ground of the Himalayas and its downward paths into India, Central Asia and beyond into the Middle East and Europe. But they also theorized that key states along Eurasia's Rimland or crescent, in concert with outer crescent states like the UK, Australia, Japan, Canada, and the U.S. held the key to thwarting Heartland control. Indeed, Mackinder theorized that these states would not only attempt to balance against such a would-be hegemon but would likely do so together. The concerted efforts of India and its aligned partners may yet serve to stave off China's bold attempts at Heartland control, and thus preserve an equitable balance of Eurasian and, therefore, global power.

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