

CLIMATE MELTDOWN IN TIBET: GLOBAL RECOGNITION STILL MISSING

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The Tibetan Plateau covers approximately 2 percent of the planet, the size of Western Europe, with more than half of the area over 4000 m above sea level. It is the highest and most extensive highland in the world, with as many as 46,000 glaciers, making it the third largest ice mass in the world. This issue brief aims to identify the importance of the Himalayan glaciers and the potential threat to the fragile mountain ecosystem in the Tibetan region. This would include the natural and anthropogenic factors responsible for its degradation in contemporary times. Furthermore, it delves into the geopolitics of ecology that is ingrained within it and explores the critical role that international climate forums can play in voicing the Tibetan Plateau's importance in preserving the global climate system.

Introduction

The Tibetan Plateau is often called the Third Pole, outside the Arctic and Antarctica polar regions. It exerts profound thermal and dynamical influences on regional and global climate.¹ The Himalayan glaciers on the Tibetan Plateau are an architectonic element for the ecological balance in the region. It provides fresh water for over two billion people across Asia.² Nine river basins are fed by the glaciers, which include the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Salween, and Yangtze, supporting thousands of

communities, villages, and cities across the South Asian and Southeast Asian region. The Tibet region is, thus, a critical resource to the world's ten most densely populated nations surrounding the plateau. The riparian states include Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, China, and the countries of the erstwhile Indo-China region that includes Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. However, the turn of the century has witnessed massive loss to the cryosphere across the region

and the entire mountain ecology. This is in the form of glacier retreat, snow melt, and permafrost degradation to an unprecedented level, leading to a water crisis across the region.

Glaciers are one of the slow-responding parts of the climate system, and the crisis-like situation on the Tibetan Plateau has been evolving for decades, with significant warming occurring since the 1950s.³ The overall warming rate has ranged from 0.16 to 0.67°C since the 1950s during different periods.⁴ Temperature has significantly increased, especially since the 1980s. While there is not a uniform warming trend across the globe, the most significant warming has occurred in the northern hemisphere.⁵ Precipitation has increased, and the spatial pattern of changes in precipitation is variable in terms of frequency and intensity. As a result, some subregions are becoming wetter while others are drier.⁶ However, annual precipitation is

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Anthropogenic factors have singlehandedly speeded up the process of degradation and destruction. They interact with natural factors, creating a disastrous combination. Added to this framework are geopolitical factors, including political opportunism for some actors. The ripple effect has been water supply challenges faced by millions of people, creating climate refugees (90 percent of the world's refugees originate from countries that are already impacted by the climate emergency),⁹ an increasing likelihood of outburst floods, decreasing water runoff during the dry season with smaller glaciers, warmer temperatures, erratic climatic patterns, jetstream, monsoon dynamics, a threat to the water cycle of the entire northern hemisphere, threat to life and property, and rising sea levels, leading to an existential threat to the coastal communities. Furthermore, this has the potential to exacerbate existing border disputes between countries in the region that are conflicting due to food insecurity, unchecked urbanization, and competition over scarce resources.¹⁰ This has impacted the regions beyond the transborder as well: the worsening heatwaves in Europe and north-east Asia are potentially linked to thinner snow cover on the Tibetan Plateau. This highlights the plateau's key role in global weather systems and the recent report by scientists at China's Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology affirms the same.¹¹

The China Stranglehold

The role of China in the Tibet climate crisis can be termed as the greatest water grab in history; however, it is almost unnoticed by the world. In fact, 50 percent of the meltdown of Himalayan

glaciers is caused by CO2 emissions, with China responsible for around 30 percent of the total global emissions of this deadly greenhouse gas.¹² Powerful state-owned Chinese consortiums are responsible for building multiple dams (overdamming) on all the major rivers running off the Tibetan Plateau for electricity generation in Chinese cities far from the plateau. These dams are being built on high gradients at the meeting point of three of the world's youngest and most unstable mountain ranges. This also includes water diversion schemes across some of the restive areas of Tibet to transfer water to the parched Northern China. Building concrete walls across the mountain rivers, tunneling through mountains, and flooding one of the richest wetland areas would potentially disbalance the world's most seismically active regions. Furthermore, large-scale mining in copper, gold, silver, chromium, and lithium (including rare-earth) has integrated the Tibetan region (Drangyer Tsaga, Salt Lake, Kham, Tsaidam Basin, Chumarleb, Chulong) into the Chinese industrial economy. Lithium, in particular, is currently in unstoppable demand and risks being a threat to Tibet's ecology as it is one of the richest lithium sources and China holds the title of being one of the largest processors and manufacturers of this mineral resource worldwide (67 percent). It is a profitable prospect for the Chinese to extract the mineral at an unprecedented level. However, this has resulted in human rights violations, environmental degradation, disrespect to cultural norms, land/original settler displacement, economic disparity, and ignoring social inclusion in Tibet.¹³

Additionally, in 2015, the Chinese authorities announced a dramatic expansion of the bottled water industry in Tibet despite shrinking glaciers and the already apparent impact of the rush to exploit Tibet's rivers. The target was to build 5 million cubic meters of bottled water production capacity by 2020. In 2014, Tibet produced 153,000 cubic meters of water signifying a huge jump. This was primarily because water was available in abundance and was cheaper in Tibet than in other parts of China. Also, the water bottled upstream among snow-capped

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peaks is perceived as pure, commanding a premium. This led to a huge influx of companies to cash in on the region's water resources.¹⁴ The Qinghai-Tibet plateau became a hotspot for the bottled water industry. By 2014, the government had approved licenses for 28 companies to produce bottled water in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR).¹⁵ This is having a devastating impact, leading to record water pollution levels. Adding to the concern is the lack of basic rudimentary environmental impact assessments in the region. Hence, China's land use policies and new business ventures would not only impact regional stability but is a matter of concern for downstream countries as well.

One critical aspect of the Chinese government policies in Tibet is a massive social engineering campaign that entails the displacement of nomadic pastoralists from the vast Tibetan grasslands. Indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the rangelands and help mitigate climate change, but the Chinese action

threatens to eviscerate a sustainable way of life uniquely adapted to the harsh landscape of the high plateau. This is being done keeping in view the Chinese idea of being an ecological civilization that seeks to preserve the environment amidst economic development in the region. China also remains cautious of its international image and therefore, the Chinese leadership is seeking to gain endorsement from international institutions and governments (dominated by Chinese presence) for creating infrastructure such as national parks on the plateau contingent upon the removal of nomads from their pastures.¹⁶ In 2021, China established its first batch of national parks, which included the Sanjiangyuan National Park, the Giant Panda National Park, the NCTLNP, Hainan Tropical Rainforest National Park and Wuyishan National Park. The total protected land area is around 230,000 square km. China strives to establish the world's largest national park system by 2035 and in order to achieve this goal, it has designated 49 candidate areas, covering around 1.1 million square km, as national park space. The Tibetan Plateau has 13 candidate areas that cover an area of about 770,000 square km and account for 70 percent of the total area of national park candidate areas.¹⁷

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The Chinese government has also introduced the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Ecological Conservation Law policy. The new law was formulated by the Standing Committee of the Fourteenth National People's Congress in Beijing on April 26, 2023 and comes into effect from September 1, 2023. The policy talks about protecting Tibet's environment and water resources, and the local government has been entrusted with implementing these policies and protections. Though this provides the local government with the right to conduct mining activities, these policies are not translated into Tibetan language but framed for the Tibetan areas. This is another way of imposition and uniformization of Chinese actions in Tibet. Additionally, it gives Beijing expanded legal grounds for designating Tibetan areas as nature reserves and removing Tibetan nomads from their land by policies of resettlement, land confiscation, limiting herd sizes, and fencing of pastoral areas in the name of conservation.¹⁸

The Himalayan belt is a sensitive and fragile ecosystem. The ecosystem shift in Tibet, caused by urbanization, infrastructural construction, building roads, railways, border villages, intensified militarization, and warming temperatures, has caused irreversible environmental damage. It is predicted that by 2050, there will be a large-scale disappearance of grasslands, alpine meadows, wetlands, and permafrost on the Tibetan plateau.¹⁹

Can Global Climate Forums Work In Unison?

Tibet is a land where people's livelihoods mostly depend on farming, rearing animals, and a nomadic lifestyle, which is part of their identity and culture. Since the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the climate situation has worsened due to infrastructural development and economic development policies pursued that entail resource over-extraction, mining, and numerous dams and hydro projects on the complicated terrain of the Tibetan Plateau.²⁰ Under Chinese rule, Tibetan voices have been

brutally suppressed. Its occupation of Tibet prevents Tibetans from being part of the global climate change conversation. Two factors highlight the complications and the inadequacy of holding vital meetings regarding Tibet. One is the absence of core Himalayan issues in the main agenda, governed not just by financial intricacies and inconveniences but by the very worst of political opportunism.²¹ Two, the general declining trust in multilateral climate conferences amid low political will is apparent. The COP 29 held in November 2024 at Azerbaijan, Baku, reflects this very well with the lack of attendance of the heads of state of major powers and some of the biggest carbon emitters, including Brazilian President Lula da Silva, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and the outgoing US President Joe Biden.²² In addition, the election of Donald Trump—a well-known climate change skeptic who withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Accord²³—as the next U.S. President has undone any hope of securing international climate solidarity.²⁴

However, to be part of the solution, it is essential to have a unison echo from all corners of the world. This would also mean an immediate halt to all extractive and deleterious land uses that threaten the Tibetan Plateau's fragile and unique ecosystem and ecosystem services, especially water resources.²⁵ Unfortunately, international climate platforms have become the playground of the Chinese government, which officially represents Tibet as well. China, as an integral part of the COP meetings at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and a member of the UN Security Council, holds critical ground on any climate talk at international forums. Consequently, in the global climate change discussion, Tibetans are not included. Tibetans within Tibet are not allowed to come out and speak about what is happening and Tibetans who are in exile do not have official recognition or an official seat at the UN climate summit. This highlights that countries with clout, including China that continued to “elevate its

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position” at UN bodies, have dominated the global climate forums.²⁶ Furthermore, geopolitics is deeply embedded in Tibet's climate crisis. The geopolitics of resource mobilization necessitates that the downstream nations have political relations with China and depend on economic and trade relations with China. This may be the reason why the downstream nations do not raise their voices or hold China accountable.²⁷ There is also a lack of a network between Tibetans and the downstream nations to share direct information. Neither does the Chinese side share scientific data on hydrological and climatic aspects.

In this scenario, global forums could take center stage by bridging the gap between the lack of information in the downstream nations on the situation in Tibet and, in some way, pressure the Chinese government to ensure accountability, transparency, and information sharing, including allowing independent researchers to visit Tibet to do research on scientific and social aspects.

Tibet is currently warming three times as fast as the rest of the world,²⁸ and this necessitates global climate institutions and forums to recognize the global ecological significance of the Tibetan Plateau. It would provide centrality to Tibet and the Himalayan region in any discussion on global climate change. Furthermore, it would urge the global community to recognize that Tibetans, especially the over two million nomads have a fundamental human right to choose life and livelihood on the grasslands. This way, due importance and respect can be given to all the local and regional stakeholders in Tibet and downstream who work as full partners in the creation of transparent, inclusive, and durable local and transboundary governance institutions and processes to guide the mitigation of and adaptation to the effects of the climate change across the Tibetan Plateau.

Global forums bring together over 190 countries to discuss different issues having global ramifications. Against this international setting, it is essential that Tibetans join this critical conversation in finding

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solutions and motions for the long-term restoration, management, and conservation of the Tibetan Plateau. International forums can be the agents of change by putting forth politically and ecologically sensitive regions like the Tibetan Plateau on the main negotiating table. Regional cooperation ventures in the Himalayas need collaboration with the international community, including decision-makers and the private and public sectors. This would ensure accountability, transparency, and responsibility for the sake of global good.²⁹

High Time for Global Recognition of Tibet

The Tibetan Plateau faces natural and anthropogenically induced problems accentuated by Chinese developmental activities. But the priority accorded to the region is very low, and too often dominated by the Chinese version of the story. During the past two decades, extensive research has been conducted to investigate climate change on the plateau, but in any discussion around climate change, Tibet's impact on the global climate system has often been sidelined, and they fall short of catching the global eye.³⁰ It very often suffers from a parochial view, where not many environmentalists or climate experts have spoken in depth about this crisis, viewing it as an Asian problem and not one that has an impact beyond territorial borders. Furthermore, other climate challenges, such as carbon emissions, green transitions, and the potentiality of renewables, have overshadowed the Tibetan plateau. Hence, the focus on Tibet should be widened with a panoramic view that ranges from mitigating the impacts of glacier melt across the region to preserving Tibetan traditional knowledge, way of life, culture, religion, and environment.

The importance of the Third Pole has been overlooked in deliberations, discussions, global initiatives, and funding at international forums such as the UNFCCC. This can be attributed to Chinese dominance at most of the global forums on climate, which does not allow the Tibetans or

the Tibetans in exile to represent themselves. The voices of activists, protesters, and environmental groups working for the Tibetan cause are repressed and often dealt harsh punishments, including jail terms. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate in 2019. It was produced by 104 scientists from 36 countries over three years, highlighting the alarming decline of glaciers and its potential global impact. The latest IPCC report published in 2023 pointed at a similar trend in the Lahaul-Spiti region of the western Himalaya, losing mass since the beginning of the 21st century. It is predicted that the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) glaciers would decline by two-thirds by 2100.³¹ Political will for policy formulation and effective implementation is missing from the global agenda.³²

Some international efforts have been initiated, which include the first annual Tibet Environmental Forum organized by the U.S. Department of State in Washington in 2011. It emphasized the importance of the Tibetan Plateau and how the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs attempted to mitigate the impacts of glacier melt across the region. Similarly, in 2019, the Earth's Third Pole campaign was launched by the Central Tibetan Administration ahead of the COP25 UN Climate Summit held in Spain, urging world leaders to recognize the global ecological importance of the Tibetan Plateau and make Tibet a central part of any discussion on global climate change. A Five Point Call to Action was released subsequently.³³ Other initiatives have been sourced from regional organizations dealing on Tibet such as the Australia Tibet Council, Greenpeace, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the Tibetan Policy Institute, the International Campaign for Tibet, the Tibet Environment Forum under the US Department of State, the American Meteorological Society, Himalayan Future Forum, Third Pole Environment, and reports and papers from different universities and think tanks. However, these efforts need to be integrated into a common direction.

Is Having Multilateral Solidarity Enough? What Lies Ahead?

The climate crisis simmering in Tibet has often been dealt with a silo-based approach with individualistic efforts from different stakeholders and organizations. Added to this is the lack of coordination among international climate advocacy forums, lack of financial support, data sharing, and the fear of Chinese repression, among others. Tibet needs to be brought to the negotiating table of mainstream dialogue instead of being an issue of sideline discussion with the formulation of a global action plan.

Recently, at the Fourth Quad Leaders' Summit, 2024, a Climate Working Group was launched recognizing the existential threat climate change poses to the world, the Indo-Pacific, and, in particular, island nations in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region.³⁴ Consequently, the Wilmington Declaration was signed which includes \$175 million in combined funding across the Indo-Pacific from Australia, India, and Japan and commitments from the U.S. It intends to leverage the Development Finance Corporation to continue seeking opportunities to mobilize private capital for climate projects. Similarly, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) collaborates with member-states and a range of partners in the Asia-Pacific region to combat the climate crisis. It aims at providing technical guidance to governments at the national and sub-national levels in developing policies and strategies that aim to reduce emissions while protecting people and economies. This network can be leveraged to support Tibet and help countries in preparing and implementing their national climate mitigation and adaptation plans submitted under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement.

In 2010, the Asia-Pacific Climate Change Adaptation Forum (Asia Pacific Adaptation Network Forum) was established under the APAN Secretariat. It is the primary regional platform for adaptation

practitioners to meet, share their learning and experiences, and work together toward the pertinent outcomes and practical solutions needed to address the challenges of climate change. Furthermore, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) could play a critical role as an intergovernmental organization by including the Himalayan region within its fold, leading to a domino effect on recognition and response to the Tibet issue.³⁵ Transboundary cooperation with governments across different regions would improve water management systems, including establishing an earth observation monitoring and visualization system, early warning systems for glacier collapse and Glacier Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) for the Himalayas. Additionally, a regional institutional mechanism for intensive in-situ monitoring systems for atmospheric and water pollution can also be proposed to ensure water supply and facilitate efforts to adapt and mitigate climate change.³⁶

The UNFCCC needs to recognize the global ecological importance of the Tibetan plateau and promote research on it, which includes taking Tibetans' expertise in tackling climate change. A united voice and closer collaboration with World Meteorological Organisation (WMO), United Nation Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), are needed to monitor regional climate change. This would enhance the uptake of scientific evidence for improving regional policies focusing on mountain environments and livelihoods.

Conclusion

Tibet is a critical ecosystem that sits on the largest permafrost area outside the Arctic and Antarctic regions. Its vast swathes of grassland are highly effective carbon sinks, but ice thawing could release large amounts of methane, a greenhouse gas 30 times more potent than CO₂. Chinese construction activities have led to encroaching deserts taking over grasslands. The climate crisis in Tibet is much

more than an Asian problem. It will have a global ramification, and there is no longer the luxury of procrastination. The meltdown at the Third Pole needs inclusion and urgent action in climate talks, agendas and actions. Unfortunately, China has never participated in mass demonstrations targeting the climate crisis, such as those sweeping Europe via school strikes for global action and Extinction Rebellion. The international community is a critical stakeholder in all discussions on climate change. Therefore, the best time to act is now, which may include declaring a 'Climate Emergency' in Tibet. The Tibetan Plateau needs protection, not just for Tibetans but for the environmental health and sustainability of the entire world.

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