

REPURPOSING THE UNITED NATIONS TO ADDRESS THE CLIMATE CRISIS ON THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

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The futures of people along China's western frontier changed dramatically with the annexation of Xinjiang in 1949 and Tibet in 1950. When Communist China emerged from decades of isolation in the late 1970s and reasserted itself internationally through a strategy of rejuvenation under Xi Jinping, the native cultures that call the Tibetan Plateau home began a long period of subjugation and repression. As wider Central Asia is now threatened by climate change, strategies must be developed to respond to China's growing influence internationally, regionally, and locally, as regional ecosystems, water storage and reserves, and local livelihoods are increasingly fragile.

The ability of the United Nations to adapt to changing humanitarian, security, human rights, and development conditions at all levels remains a critical challenge, as China has also asserted itself with the bureaucracies of UN agencies, organs, and among member-states around the globe. To respond to climate-related challenges on the Tibetan Plateau, attainable, realistic reforms and strategies must be implemented to repurpose the UN. This policy brief, designed for general practitioners, academics, and civil society organizations, makes three

interrelated and interconnected recommendations.

- In the same fashion in which gender equality has been mainstreamed into development programming and human rights, **UN agencies must move beyond organizational designs and strategies that involve "siloed" or one-dimensional thinking.** Rather, climate change must become part and parcel of the development process from initial inputs to final outcomes.
- As Tibet lacks *de jure* international legal recognition, **climate diplomacy and policy must be led and directed from Central Asian countries.** As the region lacks both the capacity and prerequisite climate "champions", the UN must orient itself to empower regional states that are both vulnerable to climate change and that are undergoing carbon-related economic transitions.

To avoid the further securitization of climate policy and nationalist rhetoric surrounding the Tibetan Plateau, **civil society organizations require greater capacities to analyze, interpret, and disseminate climate-change related impacts** and effectively counter Chinese disinformation.

Introduction

The late former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan once remarked that there can be no peace without development, no development without peace, and no peace and development without human rights. While his successors have often repeated those words on occasion, the modern truth is that the normative work of the UN—which encompasses all three—can never be achieved unless climate change is addressed thoroughly and urgently by all 193 UN member-states. A recent study, for example, found that in China, an additional 1°C rise in temperature reduced GDP by 0.78 percentage points, or approximately \$241 billion.¹ While security has state-centered and human dimensions, both are equally threatened. Water resource challenges have strained relations between India and Pakistan,² while resource exploitation has exacerbated human insecurities among peoples living within proximity of the Tibetan Plateau,³ which contains the headwaters of drainage basins for some of Asia's most important, life-giving rivers.

The significance of its unique geography cannot be understated, as it is the largest source of freshwater for billions of people. Climate change threatens the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau (hereafter Tibetan Plateau) in complex ways, including the reduction of solid-water resources over the Amu Darya and Indus basins. A reduction in the upstream supply capacity caused by water storage losses could be as much as 119 percent and 79 percent of the downstream water-demand baselines, respectively.⁴ In other words, the demand for freshwater will remain extremely high, while the availability of freshwater will be much lower, arguably exacerbating resource conflicts between local populations and between neighboring states that share the two river basins, such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

Caught in the middle are the Tibetan people, who as a result of annexation by China in 1950, are heavily constrained and strictly governed by China.

As a result, this policy brief focuses exclusively on realistic structural forms and agency strategies within the UN system which do not require the approval or the diplomatic backing of Beijing. This means, as a rule, putting aside conventional wisdom regarding China's growing regional influence in foreign policy, infrastructure, economic development, and trade—the bulk of which are under the purview of the state. Trade turnover between China and the five Central Asian states crossed more than \$70 billion in 2022,⁵ while China's \$65 billion investment in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a 3,000-kilometer-long infrastructure project that links China's western frontier to deep water ports in Pakistan is both a harbinger of needed industrialization, catastrophic debt burden,⁶ and additional climate risk. Instead, this policy brief presents three interrelated structural reforms to the UN system that are aimed to address climate related challenges on the Tibetan Plateau that are independent of the aforementioned factors. First, it requires a shared understanding of not only the limitations of the UN system, but how China functions and often thrives within it, beginning at the national level.

Climate Change Challenges for Tibet within the UN System at the National Level

With an emphasis on the political and cultural unity of China's many minority groups, the notion of any form of Tibetan sovereignty has become securitized and is highly contentious to China. Tibet has been formally called the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) shortly after the 1959 uprising. Political activists have long advocated for a degree of separatism which has resulted in a continuing crackdown on political freedoms.⁷ External sovereignty, or the formal recognition of Tibet by other sovereign states, is also unlikely as China's strong strategic security cooperation with its Central Asian neighbors precludes an alternative arrangement as realistic.⁸ The lack of *de jure*

recognition therefore places all matters concerning the Tibetan Plateau squarely under the authority of the Central People's Government. That authority, as well as Article 2(7) of the United Nations Charter preventing the UN from intervening "in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state" provide structural limitations to resolving collective action problems, as it impacts facets of the UN system, from UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) at UN Country Team (UNCT) level, recommendations made by other UN member-states under UN Treaty Bodies and the Universal Periodic Review, and major international organs such as the General Assembly and the Security Council.

For example, the 2021-2025 UNSDCF for China⁹ is an agreement that is in line with China's 14th Five Year Plan,¹⁰ but unlike other national plans developed by other countries, it is not confined to national development priorities, but contains political, defense, social, cultural, environmental, and other policy objectives in keeping with its "national rejuvenation" strategy. Second, the term "climate change" is not explicitly used. While there are repeated mentions of "green" transformations, such as in finance, technology, energy, services, and the broader economy, stated outcomes, such as "improving the ecological security barrier system" are made much more challenging as a result of climate change.¹¹ For example, China aims to further the "construction of ecological barriers such as the [Tibetan] Plateau ecological barrier zone,"¹² but recent research supported by the Chinese Academy of Sciences shows that climate change heavily influenced ecosystem services.¹³ With a limited focus on improving China's cooperation with international bodies other than transboundary management or engagement with multilateral agreements to which it already is a state party, development cooperation on climate change at the UNCT level is limited compared to other countries in the region.

Recommendation No. 1: UN Agencies Must Move Beyond 'Siloed' Thinking

At the agency level, the United Nations also impedes climate action through 'siloed' thinking. A trend for decades, the term is reflective of a limited vision, where UN agencies are often path dependent and extremely narrow in focus, akin to one's vision if viewed from the bottom of a nuclear missile silo. While the approach has worked in some areas of development practice such as the resource efficiency created by the UN Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) unique implementation methods and its ability to deliver directly to displaced populations and UNFPA's focus on gender-based violence (GBV) and reproductive health, other specialized agencies such as UNAIDS may require revisioning. The advocacy that gave vital public attention to the issue of HIV/AIDS necessitated its creation but advancements in treatment and life expectancy suggests changes in structure could be soon on the horizon. UNAIDS is an apt example, as regardless of tremendous progress, such the 2023 milestone where the fewest number of people acquired HIV than at any point since the late 1980s, the lack of political will in "ending" AIDS requires the international response to "become a sustainable, integrated pillar of health and social services with communities and human rights at the centre."¹⁴

Therein lies a more effective, more strategic way of integrating climate change into the normative messaging and development work of the UN, where there has been some success in the inclusion of mainstreaming gender equality into many aspects of development, including UNDP's flagship Human Development reports. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also now include a "Gender Snapshot" to track the integration of gender into all 17 Goals.¹⁵ And while there has been significant progress in the inclusion of climate-related concerns into a wide range of development program and projects, it has yet to become integral to the functioning of the UN system as a whole. Unfortunately, a similar approach was attempted

in December 2013 in the context of human rights by then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's "Human Rights Up Front" (HRuF) Initiative, where the aim was to foster a culture change within the UN system where all UN entities were empowered to take a firmer stance on human rights as it cut across the other pillars of development. It failed. HRuF quickly evaporated under António Guterres¹⁶ amid external and internal accusations of ignoring the issue in favor of a more quiet diplomatic approach with Beijing. Remnants of the original philosophy now lie in pieces amid an assortment of broken links on the UN website.¹⁷

The pairing and/or the integration of climate change as a cross-cutting issue system wide could accelerate action system wide, and in the context of Tibet, the merger of climate change with human rights could have a multiplying effect, part of which is further illustrated in Recommendation No. 3. The integration of different elements can be seen in earlier adaptations made by UN agencies and departments. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) have maintained a Joint Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention since 2004, and in 2024 aimed to deploy Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) in changing conflict environments, including regional peace and security threats, human rights issues, disinformation, economic shocks, technological disruption and climate change.¹⁸ This Joint Programme underscores the need for cross-cutting expertise, as well as a change in strategic focus to prepare the UN to better fit modern purposes, just as conflict prevention strategies underwent substantive changes after the Rwandan genocide in 1994.¹⁹ In addition to a redefinition of the scope of climate-related linkages to other thematic areas of work, the urgency of the need for climate action requires faster integration of these cross-cutting issues. The slow speed at which gender equality has been mainstreamed into development programming cannot be allowed to occur with

climate change. UN human rights mechanisms are prime examples. At China's Fourth Cycle Universal Periodic Review (UPR) held in January 2024, only small island states like Samoa, the Bahamas, and the Maldives made climate-specific references²⁰ while "climate" was referred to just once under the required compilation report filed by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).²¹ Further, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) used arguably diluted language to refer to climate risks to populations dependent on natural and ecosystem resources provided by the Tibetan Plateau, noting that "unsustainable practices had had an adverse impact on climate change beyond its borders."²² The integration of climate change into cross-cutting aspects of development must be both normalized and accelerated.

Recommendation No. 2: Tibet Must Be Addressed Through a Regional Approach

Building national capacities to adapt and mitigate climate change impacts in countries that share water resources from the Tibetan Plateau cannot be understated. Concentrating adaptation and expertise in Central Asian countries could add impetus for high-level talks with China around issues of mutual concern, even where Beijing is a strategic economic and regional security partner. For example, Pakistan, according to the Global Climate Risk Index²³ is ranked as the fifth most vulnerable country to climate change, with losses from the 2022 floods estimated at \$14.9 billion.²⁴ Due to Islamabad's vulnerability, the Ministry of Climate Change has not only sought to increase its national capacity, but to integrate climate change and socio-economic development as "inseparable objectives", a distinct contrast to China.²⁵ Pakistan's vulnerability can be seen in how it responded to energy policy and emissions targets at COP26 in Glasgow, where it set a 50 percent reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030, in part subject to international grant finance.²⁶ At COP29 in Baku,

Azerbaijan, Pakistan advocated for “internationally determined contributions” from wealthy countries to align more evenly with the resource deficiencies and existing climate plans of the most vulnerable countries or least developed countries, placing more of the emphasis on developed countries than national contributions.²⁷

At first, a focus on Pakistan might seem a considerable distance from Tibet, but the effectiveness of UN normative work and development coordination through Islamabad is critical to the replication of its climate leadership elsewhere in Central Asia. UN agencies operating at the national level with environmental portfolios not only need to build the capacities of local, provincial and national governments, but to facilitate dialogue with the private sector on the promotion of renewable energy sources, while decreasing Pakistan’s reliance on fossil fuels, of which two-thirds are currently a part of its energy infrastructure.²⁸ This also requires that senior UN leadership also begin to nurture Pakistan’s emerging leadership on the global stage, evidenced at COP 29 and in a recent effort to back a fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty, led entirely by countries from the Global South.²⁹

However, that cannot be limited to mere climate advocacy, which can be perceived as self-serving or in the name of status or “soft power” pursuits. Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are equally vulnerable to climate related disruptions to water storage as a result of increased regional temperatures, while Tashkent’s arid and grassland areas present additional vulnerabilities to desertification and resultant reduced agricultural output.³⁰ The development of regional climate “champions” in Central Asia are critically important, as each share common development aims and challenges regarding national climate adaptation plans (NAPs), with funding almost completely reliant on foreign sources.³¹ Capacity building is particularly important as the development of adaptation and mitigation plans remains dependent on international expertise, as

was evident from the World Bank in the context of Pakistan.³² A November 2024 UNDP report on climate finance in Kyrgyzstan not only found the state of climate finance to be a major challenge, as the capacity of Bishkek to finance adaptation and mitigation projects and the number of international organizations and donors involved in the development of climate finance tools is low.³³ Further, of the 40 countries to submit NAPs as a part of commitments to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) only Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh are represented among countries facing Tibetan Plateau-related climate challenges.³⁴ Central Asian countries, which are disproportionately burdened by both climate impacts and a zero-carbon economic transition could benefit from so-called “South-South” best practices in order to best position themselves to formally engage with China within the UN system and in other multilateral fora.

Recommendation No. 3: Building Civil Society Capacity to Address Cross-Cutting Issues

An unfortunate byproduct of the securitization of human rights in Tibet has been the rhetorical and political framing of related issues around China-centered forms of nationalism. Common under a securitization framework is the placement of otherwise peripheral issues under the umbrella of national security.³⁵ Whereas the Tibetan population’s historical grievances are tied to its formal annexation and a continual erosion of political, socio-economic, and human rights under the authority of the Chinese central government, China has sought to reframe related issues, including climate change under a governance and human rights framework, each with Chinese characteristics.³⁶ Despite restrictions on Tibetan civil society, it remains highly empowered and motivated, both within and outside of Tibet’s territorial boundaries. Further, the international community, including the U.S. Department of State have sought to build the capacities of civil society organizations in the areas of strengthening human

rights and fundamental political freedoms, including the areas of combatting CCP disinformation and general rights advocacy.

However, the capacity of Tibetan civil society to speak adequately and include climate-related effects into regularly submitted international reports remains low. The summary of stakeholder information report to China's Fourth Cycle UPR contained just one reference to climate change, while references to the environment were linked to environmental pollution, mining, and the cross-cutting issue of business and human rights.³⁷ The lack of climate-specific inputs to the UPR and other UN Treaty Bodies amplify China's ability to manipulate and reshape the UN system to suit its own national interests. For example, its China's National Report reiterated that it accepted "284 of the 346 recommendations put forward by various countries" during its Third Cycle UPR in November 2018³⁸ and retained language relatively unchallenged, where China claims that it "implemented the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights."³⁹

China's economic and infrastructure-oriented approach to UN Sustainable Development Goals is also worrisome. First, China prioritizes SDGs that enable it to increase its influence over developing economies, particularly in countries that are overburdened by Chinese debt obligations⁴⁰ as well as through its continued bureaucratic control over UN entities such as the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).⁴¹ Pushing back on Beijing's influence inside the UN system requires an advanced, data-driven approach from civil society, where organizations and staff develop the capacity to share vital information in a space dominated by a tendency toward data securitization and a lack of transparency. By building the capacity of civil society organizations in Central Asia to 1) analyze, interpret, and communicate climate-related reports and assessments; 2) receive and/

or process the latest prescient information; and, 3) disseminate climate-responsive reports to international organizations like the UN, national parliamentary bodies, and academics, China is less able to frame NGO and international reports in the context of nationalism or securitization. Only a coordinated, data-driven civil society across the region can respond effectively to Chinese narratives and increase pressure on the CCP to properly adapt and/or mitigate the effects of climate change on the Tibetan Plateau.

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