

**Climate Crisis in Tibet – Part I**

# **CCP's Tibet Takeover: Wither Global Climate Action**

**Webinar Report**

**December 18, 2024**



Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

## **ABOUT ISDP**

*The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.*

[www.isdp.eu](http://www.isdp.eu)

# LIST OF SPEAKERS



**Dr. Ute Wallenböck** is currently a Research Associate at the Department of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies at the University of Bonn. She has an academic background in Sinology and Tibetology, holding a PhD in Chinese Studies from the University of Vienna. Before Germany, she held previous academic positions in Austria (Vienna) as well in the Czech Republic (Olomouc and Brno). Her research centers on the Sinophone and Tibetophone borderlands, along with the Tibetan diaspora in Asia and Europe, exploring topics of identity, memory, and the significance of food in the context of cultural transmission.

---



**Dr. Jonathan Ping** is a political economist who specialises in the study of statecraft. His book *Middle Power Statecraft* established his hybridisation theory of the middle power concept. His work on statecraft has most recently been applied to great powers in articles such as *Countering Hegemonism in the Indo-Pacific* and books *Chinese International Relations Theory*, *China's Strategic Priorities* and *Chinese Engagements*. He is an Associate Professor at Bond University, Founder and a Director of the East Asia Security Centre and Editor of the *Journal of East Asian Security*.

---



**Mark S. Cogan** is an Associate Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies in the College of Foreign Studies at Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka, Japan and a Senior Associated Research Fellow with ISDP. His research interests include Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, as well as security studies, peacebuilding, counter-terrorism, and human rights. He is a former communications specialist with the United Nations, serving in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East.



**Dr. Tsering Topgyal** is a political scientist specialising in International Relations, Asian politics and security, Chinese politics, and Tibetan studies. He teaches courses such as Dilemmas in International Relations, International Politics of East Asia, Asia-Pacific Security, and Chinese Politics and Foreign Policy at the University of Birmingham. Dr. Topgyal's primary research interest is the political and security aspects of contemporary Tibet. He is the author of the book "China and Tibet: The Perils of Insecurity" published in 2016, and scholarly articles in journals such as Asian Security, Journal of Contemporary China, Pacific Affairs, China Report etc. He is currently writing a book on China's 'Nationalities Policy' with special attention to Tibet and Xinjiang. Dr. Topgyal volunteers on the Executive Council of the Universities China Council of London and previously served in the selection committee of the Dalai Lama Graduate Scholarship.

---

## Moderator



**Dr. Jagannath Panda** is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Sweden. Dr. Panda is also a Professor at the Department of Regional and Global Studies at the University of Warsaw; and a Senior Fellow at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies in the Netherlands. As a senior expert on China, East Asia, and Indo-Pacific affairs, Prof. Panda has testified to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission at the US Congress on 'China and South Asia'. He is the Series Editor for *Routledge Studies on Think Asia*.

---

# DISCUSSION

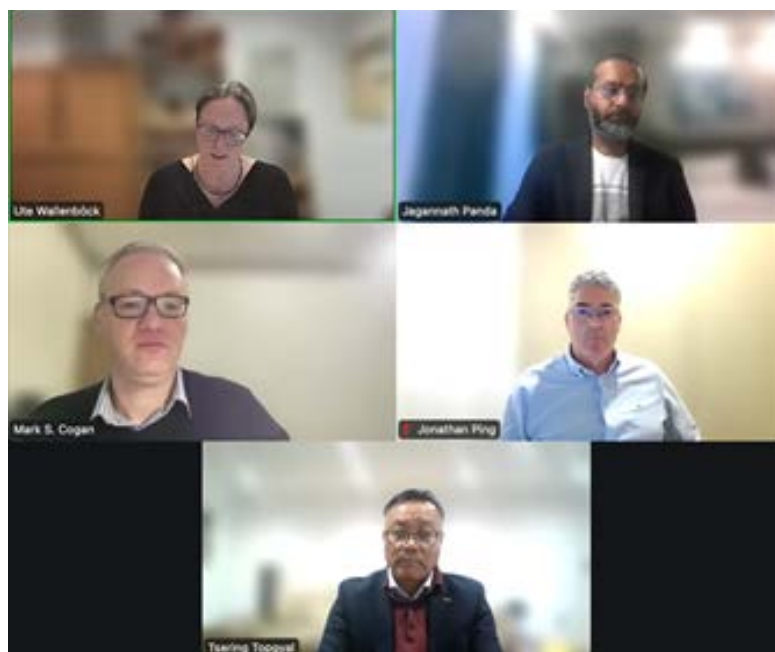
The webinar titled “Climate Crisis in Tibet”, organized by the SCSA-IPA at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), was held on December 18, 2024. This significant event brought together a distinguished panel of experts to explore the environmental and geopolitical impacts of China’s policies in Tibet.

The Tibetan ecosystem has been majorly impacted by the accelerating climate change, as well as China’s rapacious so-called “developmental” aims and repressive political measures, including cultural annihilation and Sinicization. In terms of Tibet’s climatic conditions, global warming has hastened extreme events such as permafrost thawing, glacial melting, earthquakes, water shortage, and floods. In particular, the increased rate of permafrost thawing in the plateau will have grave and even unknown repercussions, including but not limited to the release of greenhouse

gases into the atmosphere.

In this context, it is important to examine what strategies and policies China’s Xi Jinping-led ruling regime, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is pursuing in Tibet. This will help in gaining a truer perspective by weeding out benign- or even constructive-sounding rhetoric (e.g., exploring China’s true aims for developing a “system of nature reserves in Xizang”).

Notably, China’s white papers have provided useful insight into the CCP’s (Chinese Communist Party) approach toward Tibetans and the Tibetan region



in general. The repressive governance over Tibet, including assimilation, tortures, disappearances, and exploitation (infrastructure and resources), is veiled in the rhetoric of “liberation” and development. The CCP also exerts control through disinformation mechanisms that are focused on curbing any sentiments that encourage ideas of independence or meaningful autonomy.

The projection of the revered Dalai Lama as a “reactionary,” secessionist force is another aspect of the CCP’s vitriol against Tibet. At the same time, the CCP has not left any stone unturned to assume control of Tibetan Buddhism, including interference in the Dalai Lama’s succession (e.g., hosting Tibetan Buddhist monks for a training session on reincarnation for a living Buddha in the Tibet Autonomous Region).

Naturally, such religious and cultural repression cannot be separated from the environmental degradation that has been sped up by the CCP’s policy frameworks. China is looking at various tools to legitimize Chinese rule over Tibet. For instance, Beijing’s use of the term “Xizang” over “Tibet” in its last white paper seeks to completely destroy Tibet’s global identity.

Rightfully, Tibet and its resources – from water to minerals – have assumed a geopolitical focus with security implications for the broader Indo-Pacific region. Yet in international forums, research centers, and institutions such



***“While the Chinese government portrays its activities in Tibet as part of an “ecological progress” initiative, many of these actions have led to the degradation of fragile ecosystems.”***

***– Jagannath Panda***

as the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Nepal-based International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) Tibetan concerns are officially routed through China, even as Tibetan researchers and activists have participated in UN climate change conferences, for example.

**Dr. Jagannath Panda**, Head of the South Asia and Indo-Pacific Center at ISDP, opened the session with a discussion on Tibet’s critical importance as the “Third Pole” of the planet.

He emphasized that Tibet, often referred to as the “water tower” of Asia,

serves as the source of several major rivers that sustain billions across the continent. Dr. Panda pointed out that while the Chinese government portrays its activities in Tibet as part of an “ecological progress” initiative, many of these actions have led to the degradation of fragile ecosystems.

In terms of the environmental landscape, be it CCP’s relocation projects or the pillaging of traditional Tibetan villages, most policies that make way for “green” development aims such as national reserves are shrouded in doubt. Tibetan observers have often called out China’s lawfare measures such as the new “Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Ecological Protection Law” as a means to control Tibetan resources.

Framing the broader discussion, Dr. Panda posed critical questions about how the global community could hold Beijing accountable while respecting Tibet’s pivotal ecological and geopolitical role.

- What is the nature and scope of the environmental degradation in the Tibetan Plateau?
- What is the extent and ambit of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) policies for governing Tibet that particularly impact Tibet’s environment?
- What are the projected objectives of the CCP vis-à-vis Tibet (e.g., development aims to end poverty)?
- And what is the true nature of its policy frameworks, including disinformation campaigns (e.g., via influencer management firms) and China’s

persecution of Tibetan environmental activists?

- What has been the actual short-term and long-term impact on the Tibetan region and its people due to the CCP’s policies?
- How is China’s control of Tibetan territories, including religion and culture, impacting Tibet’s climatic conditions?
- Are the CCP’s actions, including militarization and laws, in Tibet that have repercussions on Tibet’s climate change irreversible?
- How can international multilateral forums, such as the IPCC, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and ICIMOD, include Tibetan voices and concerns proactively without fear of Chinese retaliation?

From the construction of large-scale infrastructure to resource extraction projects, Dr. Panda highlighted the dual challenge faced by the international community: combating the tangible environmental damage caused by China’s policies and navigating the lack of transparency inherent in the CCP governance model.

**Dr. Ute Wallenböck**, a scholar from the University of Bonn specializing in Sino-Tibetan studies, offered a detailed examination of the contradictions between China’s official narrative of “green development” and the realities on the ground. Dr. Wallenböck began by analyzing the CCP’s approach to environmental policies, which are primarily framed around national economic growth and industrial expansion rather than long-term sustainability. She explained that China’s initiatives, while officially labeled as environmental protection measures, are imposed in a highly centralized, top-down manner that disregards local ecological balance.

Delving deeper, Dr. Wallenböck highlighted the massive infrastructure projects underway in Tibet, including roads, airports, and high-speed railways. These projects, she explained, are often justified under the pretense of modernization but result in widespread environmental disruption and social displacement. She elaborated on the ongoing construction of 193 hydroelectric dams, projects that not only reshape Tibet’s natural landscape but also displace local communities, with an estimated 750,000 Tibetans forcibly relocated under the guise of “ecological migration.”

In addition to infrastructure development, Dr. Wallenböck focused on the rampant resource extraction in the region. Tibet, rich in lithium, copper, and gold, has become a focal point



***“The ongoing construction of 193 hydroelectric dam projects not only reshape Tibet’s natural landscape but also displace local communities, with an estimated 750,000 Tibetans forcibly relocated under the guise of “ecological migration.”***

**– Ute Wallenböck**

for China’s mining activities. While Chinese authorities claim to enforce strict environmental regulations, she noted that incidents of water contamination and ecological disasters are frequent and often ignored by central authorities.

Dr. Wallenböck concluded that China’s developmental approach, though framed in terms of ecological progress, is creating long-term environmental degradation and exacerbating climate challenges for the region and beyond.



Expanding on the governance context, **Dr. Jonathan Ping**, Associate Professor at Bond University in Australia, provided insights into how the CCP's political structure shapes its approach to environmental policy.

Dr. Ping argued that the party's centralized governance model, which prioritizes economic growth and political control, fundamentally obstructs effective international cooperation on climate change. He began by examining the CCP's ideological framework, which combines Marxist-Leninist principles with nationalism, resulting in a governance system that subordinates environmental sustainability to party objectives.

Dr. Ping emphasized the opacity of the CCP's decision-making processes, noting that non-governmental organizations and external actors are often excluded from meaningful dialogue. He connected this to the broader environmental impact of China's policies in Tibet, arguing that the plateau's strategic importance as a source of Asia's major rivers remains undervalued in global climate discussions. He pointed out that the environmental consequences of China's activities in Tibet extend far beyond its borders, impacting water resources and ecological stability in neighboring countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

Addressing the global implications, Dr. Ping drew attention to China's heavy reliance on coal-fired power stations, which are not only the primary source



***“The environmental consequences of China’s activities in Tibet extend far beyond its borders, impacting water resources and ecological stability in neighboring countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.”***

**– Jonathan Ping**

of domestic energy but also a major contributor to black carbon pollution. This pollution accelerates glacier melting in Tibet, further destabilizing ecosystems and water supplies across Asia. He also critiqued China's Belt and Road Initiative, which exports similar unsustainable development models to other regions.

Dr. Ping concluded by calling for a deeper understanding of the CCP's ideological and political priorities as a prerequisite for addressing these challenges on a global scale.

Building on these perspectives, **Mark S Cogan**, Associate Professor at Kansai Gaidai University in Japan, shifted the focus to the geopolitical and human rights dimensions of China's policies in Tibet. He began by critiquing the fragmented and siloed approach of international institutions, such as the United Nations, which he argued are poorly equipped to address the interconnected challenges of climate change, human rights, and development.

Prof Cogan highlighted the lack of a unified global framework for managing transboundary environmental issues, particularly those arising from shared water resources originating in Tibet.

He went on to discuss China's strategic investments in international organizations, which, he argued, enable Beijing to control narratives and delay collective action on pressing environmental and human rights concerns. By promoting initiatives such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China has successfully advanced its geopolitical interests while sidelining discussions about its environmental practices in Tibet.

Prof Cogan also explored the implications of China's environmental policies for regional stability. He pointed out that China's management of water resources, including the construction of dams on transboundary rivers, has



***“China’s strategic investments in international organizations enable Beijing to control narratives and delay collective action on pressing environmental and human rights concerns.”***

**– Mark S Cogan**

created tensions with downstream countries. Additionally, he argued that the militarization of the Tibetan Plateau, with its extensive infrastructure and troop deployments, not only disrupts local ecosystems but also exacerbates geopolitical rivalries in South Asia.

Prof Cogan concluded by calling for a reimagining of global governance structures to address these complex challenges, emphasizing the need for coordinated international action.

**Dr. Tsering Topgyal**, a political scientist from the University of Birmingham and a specialist in Tibetan studies, provided a deeply personal perspective on the crisis.

Drawing on his Tibetan heritage, Dr. Topgyal described the profound cultural and existential stakes of China's policies for the Tibetan people. He began by emphasizing that the Tibetan Plateau is not only an ecological treasure but also a cultural and spiritual homeland for Tibetans, whose way of life is intricately tied to the environment.

Dr. Topgyal detailed the various ways in which China's developmental policies undermine Tibetan identity. He highlighted the forced resettlement of nomadic communities, who are often moved into urban areas under the pretext of modernization, as well as the destruction of cultural and religious sites in the name of development.

He also discussed the environmental and social impacts of militarization, noting that the presence of Chinese troops and military infrastructure has led to increased pollution and ecological disruption across the plateau.

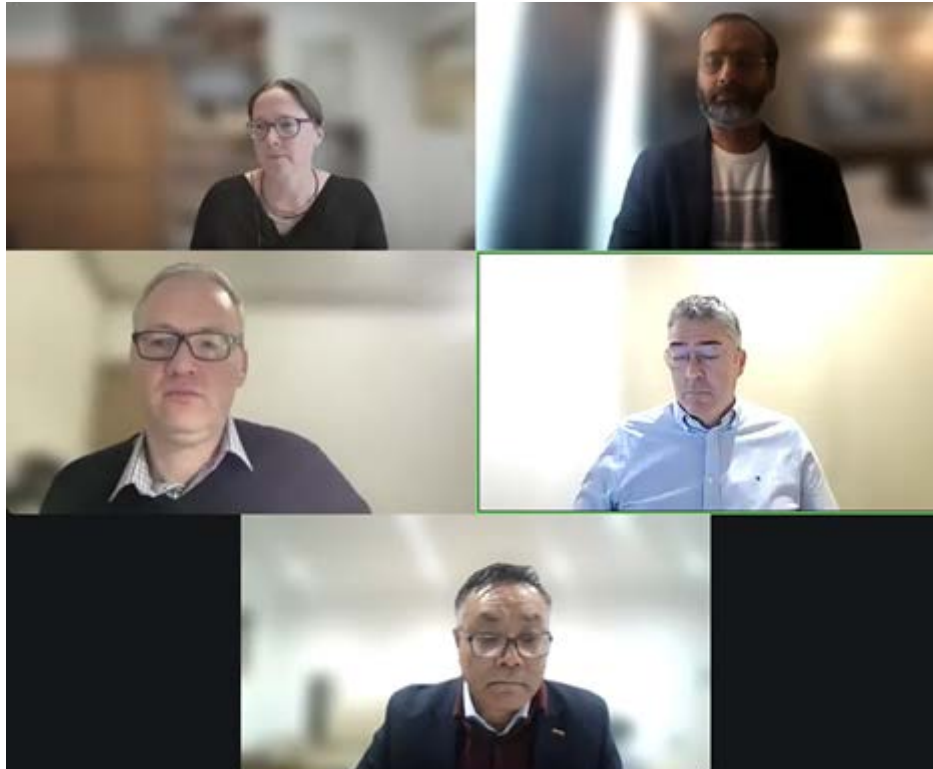
Addressing the broader climate crisis, Dr. Topgyal pointed out that the Tibetan Plateau is warming at a rate three times faster than the global average, resulting in accelerated glacier melt and ecosystem degradation.



***“The Tibetan Plateau is not only an ecological treasure but also a cultural and spiritual homeland for Tibetans, whose way of life is intricately tied to the environment.”***

***– Tsering Topgyal***

For Tibetans, he explained, these changes represent not only an environmental challenge but also a threat to their cultural survival. He concluded by calling for greater recognition of Tibetan environmental activism, which combines traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific approaches, and urged the international community to amplify Tibetan voices in global climate discussions.



## Q&A

Following the initial presentations, the webinar moved into an engaging question-and-answer session moderated by **Dr. Jagannath Panda**. This segment allowed participants and panelists to dive deeper into the issues raised, encouraging a dynamic exchange of ideas.

**Dr. Panda** began by posing a question to **Dr. Ute Wallenböck** regarding the environmental impact of China's large-scale infrastructure projects in Tibet, particularly hydroelectric dams and resource extraction activities. Responding to this, **Dr. Wallenböck** reiterated the substantial ecological risks posed by these initiatives, such as habitat destruction, increased water contamination, and the displacement of local populations. She emphasized that these projects, presented

by China as symbols of modernization, often exacerbate existing environmental vulnerabilities in the region. **Dr. Wallenböck** highlighted how the sheer scale of these projects, including the construction of over 190 dams, disrupts the natural water flow and intensifies the ecological strain on downstream countries.

Replying to this point, **Dr. Jonathan Ping** expanded on the broader geopolitical implications. He noted that China's infrastructural expansion in Tibet is deeply intertwined with its broader political strategy, including its ambition to control water resources across Asia. **Dr. Ping** argued that the CCP's opaque governance model makes it challenging for the international community to evaluate or mitigate these impacts effectively.

He underscored the need for greater international scrutiny and cooperation to address these transboundary issues, framing them not just as environmental concerns but as geopolitical risks.

**Dr. Panda** then directed a question to **Prof Mark S. Cogan**, asking how international organizations, particularly the United Nations, could better respond to the challenges posed by China's policies in Tibet. **Prof Cogan** critiqued the lack of a unified approach among global institutions, attributing this to the fragmented nature of existing governance structures. He argued that no single organization currently has the mandate or capacity to address the multifaceted crises in Tibet, which encompass environmental degradation, human rights violations, and geopolitical instability. **Prof Cogan** suggested that the UN and other multilateral bodies need to adopt a more integrated approach, emphasizing collaboration between environmental, human rights, and development agencies to tackle these interconnected challenges.

Replying to a question from the audience regarding Tibetan activism, **Dr. Tsering Topgyal** provided a heartfelt account of grassroots efforts to protect Tibet's environment. He noted that Tibetan communities have long been stewards of their natural surroundings, drawing on both traditional ecological knowledge and modern scientific methods. However, he stressed that these efforts are increasingly undermined by China's aggressive

policies, including forced resettlement and the militarization of the plateau. **Dr. Topgyal** called for international support to amplify Tibetan voices, arguing that their first hand experiences and insights are invaluable in shaping effective responses to the climate crisis in Tibet.


A participant asked about the role of militarization in accelerating environmental degradation on the Tibetan Plateau. **Dr. Topgyal** explained that the heavy military presence, combined with large-scale infrastructure development to support troop movements, significantly disrupts local ecosystems. He added that pollution from military activities, including the emission of black carbon, further compounds the ecological damage. Building on this, **Dr. Wallenböck** highlighted that militarization also has a profound social impact, as it contributes to the marginalization and displacement of Tibetan communities.

Finally, addressing a question about China's global influence, **Dr. Ping** argued that Beijing's strategic investments in international organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, have allowed it to control narratives and delay global action on climate and human rights issues in Tibet. **Prof Cogan** agreed, emphasizing the need for democratic nations to counterbalance China's influence by fostering stronger multilateral alliances and prioritizing transparency in global governance.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Large-scale infrastructure initiatives, including the construction of dams and resource extraction activities, are causing severe ecological disruption in Tibet, with transboundary consequences for water resources and ecosystems across Asia.
- The centralized and opaque governance model of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) limits international access and transparency, making it difficult to evaluate or mitigate environmental damage in Tibet.
- China's control over Tibet's water resources has far-reaching geopolitical consequences, affecting regional stability and relations with neighboring countries, including India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.
- Existing global governance structures, such as the United Nations, lack the mandate and coordination to address the interconnected challenges of environmental degradation, human rights, and development in Tibet.
- Tibetan communities remain active in environmental preservation despite increasing repression. Their traditional knowledge and activism offer valuable insights for combating the climate crisis, but they require stronger international support.
- The militarization of the Tibetan Plateau exacerbates environmental degradation through pollution and infrastructure development while further marginalizing local communities.
- Panelists emphasized the need for a more integrated and collaborative approach to global governance, involving environmental, human rights, and development organizations, to address the crises in Tibet effectively.
- The international community must prioritize platforms that elevate Tibetan perspectives, ensuring their inclusion in global climate and human rights discussions.
- Democratic nations should work together to challenge China's control over international organizations and narratives, promoting transparency and accountability in global governance.





Institute for Security and Development Policy  
Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Nacka, Sweden  
[www.isdp.eu](http://www.isdp.eu) | [info@isdp.eu](mailto:info@isdp.eu)