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COMMENTARIES

Importance of Tibet's rivers for Asian water security

China's 'Great Wall of Concrete' damming rivers sourced on the Tibetan Plateau threatens downstream countries

By Tenzin Tsultrim, December 30, 2020 (Asia Times)



China has launched an array of dam projects along the Tibetan section of the Brahmaputra River. Photo: Xinhua

With the recent signing of the Tibet Policy and Support Act by the president of the United States, which also addresses the strategic importance of the Tibetan Plateau, whose rivers remain one of the major sources of water to more than a billion people living in the downstream Asia countries, the importance of Tibet's rivers once again comes into focus. Last month, news about Beijing's planned construction of a major dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo (in Tibetan, tsangpo means "river") in Tibet has created a heated debate among scholars, policy analysts and strategists. Most of

the debate has circled around the implications of this project for India. However, one must not forget that the Tibetan Plateau is popularly known as the water tower of Asia, because 90% of the runoff from Tibetan rivers flows into China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, providing a steady supply of fresh water, food and energy. The status of the Plateau of Tibet is unique, as it plays a triple role: It is Asia's main freshwater repository, its largest water supplier, and its principal rainmaker. Hence it is not only about India, the water security of all of the eastern part of Asia depends on Tibet's rivers.

The most dammed nation in the world

Since its takeover of Tibet, China has invested heavily in the constructions of major highways, connecting every part of Tibet to the major cities of China. For the past few decades, Beijing has also invested heavily in the construction of dams, one after another, in Tibet. Michael Buckley, an award-winning Canadian journalist, is author of the 2014 book *Meltdown in Tibet*, which exposes that China is now on a mission to exploit Tibet's natural resources leading to the ongoing destruction of Tibet's environment, calling it "ecocide." Buckley writes, "At the tail end of those same rivers lie the world's largest deltas. One way or another, close to 2 billion people rely on Tibet's waters for drinking, for agriculture, for fishing, for industry." These rivers are still providing similar ecosystem services to the downstream Asian countries that they provided for centuries before the onset of man-made interruption. Now with China's construction of dams one after another, everything is changing year after year. Currently China is one of the most dammed countries in the world. Centuries ago, one of the reasons for China's construction of the Great Wall was for its security from the militant nomads from Mongolia; now it is building a "Great Wall of Concrete" for its "water security," but in the process endangering the security and livelihood of downstream Asian countries.

Dechen Palmo, a research fellow at the Tibet Policy Institute (TPI), a think-tank of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) based in Dharamshala, India, specializes in Tibet's transboundary rivers and the impacts of China's damming on China-Occupied Tibet. Dechen writes: "Over the last seven decades, the People's Republic of China has constructed more than 87,000 dams. Collectively they generate 352.26 [gigawatts] of power, more than the capacities of Brazil, the United States, and Canada combined. On the other hand, these projects have led to the displacement of over 23 million people." Not only this, since the 1950s the Chinese have built some 22,000 dams that are more than 15 meters tall, roughly half the world's current total. (The World Commission on Dams defines a "large dam" as one being "at least 15 meters in wall height from the base up.") Imagine the irreversible damage these dams could do to the Asian populations who for centuries enjoyed the free flow of fresh water from free and independent Tibet.

International Rivers, a California-based non-governmental organization, and Michael Buckley have highlighted the impacts of dams in the following way: The high wall of dams itself blocks the migration of fish and other aquatic species and nutrient-rich sediments, leading to the disappearance of birds in floodplains, huge losses of forest, wetlands and farmland, erosion of coastal deltas, and many other impacts. The blocking of water will also severely impact the irrigation-oriented Asian countries. A great amount of water is utilized in Asia for irrigation of rice, cotton and rubber. Half of the rice in the world is produced and consumed by India and China, while rice is also a staple in Myanmar, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia.

A solution to Asian water insecurity

According to a United Nations report titled "World Population Prospects 2019," the global population is expected to increase by 2 billion in the next 30 years, from 7.7 billion currently to 9.7 billion in 2050. As rice is one of the most widely consumed grains in the world and particularly in Asia, naturally more rice will be needed by 2050. Rice is a water-intensive crop. Without the free flow of rivers from the Plateau of Tibet to the downstream Asian countries, which coincidentally include the top eight countries producing the highest volumes of milled rice in the world, a shortage of water will severely impact rice production. A research paper titled "Projections of Water Stress Based on an Ensemble of Socioeconomic Growth and Climate Change Scenarios: A Case Study in Asia," published on March 30, 2016, by a team of research scientists from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found: "Economic and population growth on top of climate change could lead to serious water shortages across a broad swath of Asia by the year 2050."

The MIT researchers also found that by 2050 in Asia, these factors would lead to about a billion more people becoming "water-stressed." Hence the scarcity of water might change the course of relations among Asian countries and provoke conflict – something that has already happened in the past. The Pacific Institute, a policy research think-tank founded in 1987 and currently based out of Oakland, California, has chronicled the small and large-scale conflicts fought throughout the centuries over water. According to its research, the causes of water conflicts have been categorized into three sections: 1. Trigger: water as a root cause of conflict, where there is a dispute over the control of water or waterways. 2. Weapon: where water resources are used as a tool or weapon in a violent conflict. 3. Casualty: water resources as a casualty of conflict, where water resources are intentional targets of violence. Through this categorization, the institute chronicled around 926 conflicts fought over water since as early as 3000 BC. From the above developments in the past and China's chaotic construction of thousands of dams, which is still an ongoing issue, one cannot deny that water resources are soon going to be very contentious, which is the subject of what

renowned Indian strategist Brahma Chellaney's book *Water: Asia's New Battleground*. If China's current erratic, unscientific and inhumane dam-construction program continues unchecked, soon there will be transnational environmental movement across the Asian countries against China's monopolistic control over Tibet's rivers. Asia is not only about the China Dream, the advancement of China's strategic or national or party interests while undermining the interests of neighboring countries, including strategic interests. Rather, it is the combined dreams of Asian countries to bring forth the Asian Century. In short, securing Tibet is not only about the Tibetan people, and Tibetan culture; it is more about securing permanent water security for India and Asia at large.



Tibetan Buddhism: A Source and Strength of India's Soft Power Diplomacy

By Tenzin Tsultrim, December 8, 2020 (Vivekananda International Foundation)

The relations between Tibet, India and China are best illustrated in the words of Claude Arpi, a noted historian and journalist who has written a series of important books on Tibet, India and China, including, *The Fate of Tibet: When the Big Insects Eats Small Insects*. Arpi writes:

“It is interesting to note that in the history of the three nations, Tibet and China always had a relation based on force and power, while Tibet and India had more of a cultural and religious relationship based on shared spiritual values.” With the above Claude Arpi's words as a background perhaps it is viable to say that the commonality between India and Tibet is far greater than any other neighbouring countries in the world. India's greatest gifts to Tibet are Buddhism and Tibetan script. Both Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan script owe their origins and developments to the immense contributions from the eminent Indian gurus and scholars. And Tibet's greatest gift to India is the preservation and development of Buddhism based on the Nalanda tradition. According to the Dalai Lama, the best interpretation of Buddhist tradition based on Nalanda masters is available only in the Tibetan language. Thus, it shows the bond and enduring connectivity between these two nations in the past.

Indian scholars and masters have contributed immensely to the development of Buddhism in Tibet. Hence it is no wonder that the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet at Samye known as Samye Mingyur Lhungyi Drupe Tsuklakhang which was modelled on Odantapuri Tsuklakhang in Bihar was officially patronised by the Tibetan Emperor Trisong Detsen (755-798 AD) and constructed under the guidance of Shantarakshita, the abbot of Nalanda, and the Master Padmasambhava, for the study of Buddhism and training of monks. During the same period, there was a great debate between Pandita Kamalasila, a student of Shantarakshita and a monk named Hoshang Mahayana from China. The main topic of their debate centred around the correct path to attain enlightenment. It is said that the debate lasted for two years (792-794). Finally, Pandita Kamalasila was declared a winner and he was presented a garland of flowers by Hoshang Mahayana. Later, the Emperor decreed that the doctrine articulated by the Indian Buddhist scholars must be studied and followed in Tibet. Emperor Trisong Detsen's edict declared Buddhism as a state religion. Since then Tibetans followed Indian monasticism as developed and practised in Nalanda, the great Buddhist monastic university in northern India. This event validated the profound contributions made by the Indian scholars and masters in the development of Tibetan Buddhism as well as their flair and great erudition in the religious debate.

Soon under the guidance of Indian scholars and masters, the Tibetans translators were able to translate a tremendous number of Buddhist texts on tantra and dialectics into the Tibetan language. The translation work of the Tibetan translators was so rich and voluminous, that the great Bengali scholar and also the abbot of Vikramshila University, Atisha, when visiting Samye Monastery found many Indian manuscripts, and he also noticed many manuscripts which were not to be found in India. Highly impressed and pleased with the rich repository of collection, the great Indian Master Atisha had this to say: “It seems the doctrine had first spread in Tibet, even more than in India”

Tibetan Buddhism and its Significance to India's Soft Power

Currently there are around 281 Tibetan monasteries and nunneries in India, which also serves as institutions of higher Buddhist learning. Because of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, every year millions of people from all over the world visit India. For instance, in the state of Bihar, as early as 2005, the total number of foreign tourists' visit to Bihar was 64,114. Out of this, the total number of foreign tourists' visit to Buddhist destinations was 45,149 and the total number of foreign tourists' visit to non-Buddhist destinations was 18,965. In short, foreign tourists accounted for almost 7% of the traffic at Buddhist destinations and less than 1% at non-Buddhist destinations. In 2017- 2018, the total number of foreign tourists' visit to Bihar was 1087971. Out of 36 states and union territories, Bihar is ranked at number 9, beating the popular tourist destination like Goa. Coincidentally, in January 2017 Kalachakra initiation was held in Bodh Gaya by the Dalai Lama. According to an official website of Private Office of the Dalai Lama, the Kalachakra garnered around 200,000 people, which includes both domestic and foreign visitors. According to Bihar tourism department data, the month of January had 75,250 foreign tourists to Bodh Gaya, which was the highest number of foreign tourists' visit in the months of 2017. On the other hand, from 8-28 January 2018, for around 18 days teachings were given by the Dalai Lama in Bodh Gaya. In December 2018 the Dalai Lama gave ten days teachings. Accordingly, the month of January 2018 had 57,928 foreign tourists' visits to Bodh Gaya, which again was the highest number of foreign tourists' visit in the months of 2018. In December 2018, the number of foreign tourists' visits to Bodh Gaya was 29,328, earning the fourth highest foreign tourists' arrivals in the 2018. In short, in 2018 alone, the total number of foreign tourists' visit in Bodhgaya was 270,787, and the total number of foreign tourists' visit in the month of January and December was 87,256. Scholar Daya Kishan Thussu and researcher Shantanu Kishwar talk about a reinvigoration of Buddhist sites and India's image in the global Buddhist community because of the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people. Hence Tibetan Buddhism has attracted enough foreign tourists within the span of two months. This writer believes that this trend could be followed effectively all over the Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India. Because as the technology gets more sophisticated, there is a need for humans to find solace in someone they could find spiritual refuge. Buddhism has the potential to fill this spiritual vacuum in the future.

A Battle of the Narrative: Soft Power versus Hard Power

Greg Bruno in his book, “Blessings from Beijing: Inside China's Soft Power War on Tibet”, published in 2018 revealed that, with 13.1 million followers, the Dalai Lama was more popular on Twitter than the Presidents of Turkey, France and Israel combined. Currently, the Dalai Lama has 19.3 million followers on his Twitter handle (@DalaiLama). This writer found that the Dalai Lama has more followers than the combined Twitter handles' followers of extended propaganda departments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): The Global Times, China Daily, the People's Daily (China), spokesperson Hua Chunying, spokesman Lijian Zhao, Chinese ambassadors and embassy official accounts of the UK, USA, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Egypt, and

Austria. This development shows that the Dalai Lama of Tibet is excelling in its battle against the CCP in the realm of soft power diplomacy. Thubten Samphel, a former director of the Tibetan Policy Institute, CTA, Dharamshala, and also a prolific commentator on issues relating to Tibet and China in his monograph, "The Art of Non-violence", writes: "On the overall fate of Tibet, China might be winning the war but in this specific battle Tibet's soft power is making huge strikes in convincing increasing numbers of Chinese scholars and writers to tell the Tibet story to a Chinese audience." He further added that, "Tibetan ability to tell their story convincingly to the Chinese might determine the outcome of the story itself." Hence the victory of Tibet's soft power is also a victory of India's soft power as well. In order to make soft power roll effectively, one needs to lay the groundwork for the future. A few things the Government of India (GOI) could do to strengthen its base for its soft power diplomacy is to provide encouragement and scholarships to the Indian students interested in studying Tibetan language. Because almost all the rich essence of Buddhist tradition based on Nalanda is available only in the Tibetan language.

For this to be effective, encouragement should be given to the interested Indian students to learn Tibetan language as early as possible. Without an understanding of the Tibetan language, it is difficult to understand the concept of Tibetan Buddhism. And without the comprehensive knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, it is difficult to comprehend Buddhist tradition of Nalanda and to evoke India's soft power diplomacy. This writer thinks now loyal Chela (disciple) is in a position to repay his guru-dakshina (It roughly refers to the tradition of repaying one's teacher) in the form of preaching and teaching of Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language. For a beginner, GOI could employ the resources of Tibetan language teachers on a pilot basis in each state. And particularly more so, they could be employed in Buddhist religious sites.

For an advanced level, currently there are few Tibetan Institutes teaching the Tibetan language, Tibetan literature and Buddhist philosophy. They are Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Varanasi, College for Higher Tibetan Studies (Sarah), Dharamshala, the Dalai Lama Institute for Higher Education, Bangalore, Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamshala (is a research-based centre currently managed single-handedly by renowned Tibetan Tibetologist, historian, Tashi Tsering), and Songtsen Library (also called Center for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies) in Dehradun, north India. Another thing the GOI could do is to lay the foundation and establishment of world biggest dedicated Buddhist Library, which may do wonder in attracting Buddhist scholars, teachers and millions of followers of Buddhism all around the world. In this part both the Bihar and Central governments are its stakeholders. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) is already doing immense services and attracting thousands of scholars and students all around the world. LTWA and Songtsen Library could be the role models for the establishment of future Buddhist library (ies) in India.

Tibetan Buddhism in the Age of the Belt and Road Initiative

The CCP's current legitimacy in China is largely based on performance based-legitimacy. Hence, in order to have a steady inflow and outflow of the resources and services to sustain their goliath economy, CCP under Xi Jinping has introduced a massive project in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The CCP-led government also spends millions of dollars in South and Southeast Asian countries to link their Buddhist heritage to the soft landing of BRI. The CCP is working through different projects such as the US \$ 3 Billion Lumbini project in Nepal, and the recent US \$ 1.1 billion loan to the island nation of Sri-Lanka to build a motorway, to soften its erratic image and woo countries having a significant amount of Buddhist population in their BRI

projects. Nepal, Sri-Lanka, Mongolia, Bhutan, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam, are countries where there is significant amount of Buddhist population. In order to use Buddhism in the promotion of BRI, China is trying to legitimise and appropriate their asserted spiritual ownership of Buddhism in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. In 2018, a two-day symposium was organised in Tsongon (Qinghai) region of Tibet to discuss how Tibetan Buddhism could better serve China's Belt and Road Initiative and resist separatism. Qin Yongzhang, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) is quoted in the Global Times saying that, "Tibet Buddhism can serve as a bridge between Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries to better communicate with each other, since the religious and cultural beliefs are similar in Central and South Asia." He further added that, "One immediate challenge of promoting BRI through Tibetan Buddhism comes from India, which has been holding back for geopolitical reasons..."

In the recent Seventh Tibet Work Forum held in Beijing on August 29-30, 2020, where Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the CCP, emphasised that, "Tibetan Buddhism be guided in adapting to the socialist society and should be developed in the Chinese context." Hence, all the above developments indicate that the CCP is planning to promote BRI intensively through Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike China, India has not only a younger population, but one already equipped with the English language. This means they are in a better position to express India's soft power in a positive way. In the struggle for Buddhist soft power diplomacy, China will not only be struggling to learn both the Tibetan and English languages and also because of their past history and treatments toward religions in China and in their occupied territories: Tibet, East Turkestan and Southern Mongolia, it will be difficult for the CCP-controlled China to win the hearts and minds of Buddhist believers in other parts of Asia. In short, for this soft power diplomacy to succeed, India needs to take smart choices and hard steps.



China's 'super dam' a threat to India's security

Tempa Gyaltzen Zamlha, December 8, 2020 (The Tribune)

Every infrastructure development along the Indo-Tibet border would bring a new degree of threat to India's border security. But the construction of a 'super dam' in Metok means the threat expands all the way to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The close proximity of the location to India's border means any sudden release of water from the dam could quickly reach India with very little time for evacuation. Yarlung Tsangpo is one of the most important rivers in south-western Tibet, supporting life along its fertile shore as the river runs through Kongpo (Nyingtri Prefecture) valleys in southern Tibet. The river is fondly called Brahmaputra as it enters India and Bangladesh, where it supports millions of people for their daily livelihood. This mighty river faces a huge threat from a 'super dam'.



According to a Global Times report on November 29, 2020, the Chinese government plans to construct a ‘super hydropower dam’ on the Yarlung Tsangpo in its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25). The report claimed that the hydropower dam would be “meaningful for the environment, national security, living standards and international cooperation.” In reality, the ongoing excessive damming on the Yarlung Tsangpo is neither eco-friendly nor is it beneficial for the local community. It is part of a state-engineered, long-term preparation for a mass influx of Chinese migrants into the Kongpo region for permanent settlement. Such an eventuality could cause irreversible damage to the local ecology, diminish local Tibetan identity and greatly destabilise the hydrological balance across northeastern India. Unlike in the 1960s, the large hydropower dams are no longer considered eco-friendly and sustainable. According to a BBC report (November 5, 2018), more than 90 per cent of the dams which have been built since the 1930s around the world were “more expensive than anticipated”, and that these dams have “damaged river ecology, displaced millions of people.” The demolition of Yacla de Yeltes Dam (Nature, April 2018) in Spain was hailed by ecologists as a milestone for river-restoration efforts in Europe, and that the United States removed (American Rivers, February 6, 2020) 90 dams in 2019 alone for river restoration efforts.

But in Tibet, the Chinese government is on a dam-building spree along the 1,600-km stretch of Yarlung Tsangpo in Lhokha and Nyingtri. Nyingtri, traditionally known as Kongpo, is home to one of the world’s oldest forests and a safe habitat for primitive species. In fact, a group of Chinese scientists in 2015 discovered an extremely rare and primitive macaque monkey in the forest of Metok in Kongpo, a county where the ‘super dam’ is proposed to be built. One of the Chinese scientists even described Kongpo as “an ancient museum of nature”. China has long planned 11 hydel dams on the river with Zangmu and Gyatsa already completed, Dagu and Jeixu under construction, Lengda recently receiving permission and more to begin soon as part of the 14th Five-Year Plan. Large dams inevitably inundate vast area of land around it for water storage, leading to massive loss of vegetation and wildlife habitat. Dams also induce seismic activity, landslides, sudden change in the local ecosystem, and emit greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

The dam construction is only one part of a state-engineered, infrastructure development plan in the Kongpo region of Southern Tibet to facilitate eventual mass migration from China to this scarcely populated region of Tibet. The region has seen rapid upgrading of the 5,476-km-long National Highway-318, which connects Chinese cities as far as Shanghai and Chengdu to Nyingtri city. The much-reported Chengdu-Nyingtri-Lhasa railway line (1,629 km), once completed, would be a direct passage for mass migration into the region. The lack of trees and a harsh climate were the primary reasons for the Chinese migrants’ inability to permanently settle in some parts of the interior Tibet despite Beijing’s generous incentives. This makes Kongpo (Nyingtri Prefecture) in Tibet an ideal spot for mass migration as the region has pleasant mild weather with extensive forest and vegetation cover. So for Tibetans in the region, the ongoing excessive infrastructure development is a colonial trap to marginalise the Tibetans in their own land.

Every infrastructure development along the Indo-Tibet border would bring a new degree of threat to India’s border security. But the construction of a ‘super dam’ in Metok means the threat expands all the way to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. The close proximity of the location to India’s border means any sudden release of water from the dam could quickly and forcefully reach India with very little time for evacuation. India would inevitably face a twin disaster in the future — water shortage in the winter as the ‘super dam’ could swallow much of the flow during dry season, and flash floods in the summer as excess water from the dam would be released during the monsoon season.

As highlighted by this author in 2018, infrastructure development in the region is a means to bring more Chinese migrants into the region for permanent settlement to counter the Indian border challenges. The objective is becoming clearer by the unusual importance the Chinese leadership has given to the region in recent years by making successive visits and fast-tracking infrastructure development works.

Dams are known to alter the natural characteristics of a river system and also disrupt the lives of millions of people living along the river basin. The ‘super dam’ planned on the Great-Bend of Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) Grand Canyon in Metok, if it gets the go-ahead from Beijing, would have a catastrophic impact on the lives of millions in India and Bangladesh. Therefore, the huge investment on a massive infrastructure development drive in the region is part of a state-engineered, long-term plan to facilitate mass migration of Chinese into the Kongpo (Nyingtri Prefecture) region, which shares a long border with India. Such a strategic plan is aimed at countering both domestic Tibetan resistance as well as border challenges from India. A Chinese-dominated population in the region could give the People’s Liberation Army stationed in the region much-needed popular support from the local community, which it obviously lacks.



From Public Space To Cyberspace: The CCP’s Increasing Oppression Of Tibet

Tenzin Dalha, December 3, 2020 (Taiwan Times, Hindustan Times, ANI News, Indiablooms, Livemint)

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made great strides in its overall economic development, but it continues to be an authoritarian party-state resolute in asserting its complete dominance to curb freedom of expression, right to information, association and religion. The CCP censors the internet and maintains intensive surveillance apparatus in the form of facial recognition technology and Global Positioning System (GPS) coordination in its occupied territories including Tibet, East Turkistan (Ch. Xinjiang), and Southern Mongolian (Inner Mongolia). With China’s state-sponsored media lacking plurality and regular disseminations of one-sided narrative on incidents that may tarnish the CCP’s image, Chinese leadership in the past and present perceives electronic and print media to be the mouthpiece of the party to be used aggressively for propaganda.

An army of bot accounts linked to the Chinese government-backed propaganda campaign is spreading disinformation on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, etc. They have been used to promote content attacking critics of the Chinese government and to spread conspiracy theories blaming the U.S. for waging a biological war against China.

The CCP’s Great Firewall VS Freedom of Expression

Over the last few decades of marriage with the internet, dramatic changes took place in China with the rise of social media. Social media allows a democratic spread of information that has never previously been a phenomenon in China. The two major Chinese social media players are Sina Weibo and WeChat mobile messaging applications. In less than a decade, both Weibo and WeChat have grown exponentially. By the middle of 2020, WeChat has over one billion monthly active users and is declared as the fifth most used social media app in the world.

Recently, the Government of India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology banned 118 apps including WeChat for its espionage activities and thereby threatening India's national security. China is considered as having one of the most pervasive online censorship system in the world, the country's infamous "Great Firewall" blocks access and censors numerous websites.

The government continues to block websites run by human rights groups, foreign news outlets, the Google search engine, and social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. This is done in order to gain total control over the digital ecosystem. The rise of Chinese domestic social media has created a new platform for citizens to express their opinions challenging official narratives despite intense scrutiny and CCP's censorship. No matter how many attempts China made to curtail the freedom of cyberspace, Chinese and Tibetan people often managed to slip through the cracks.

For instance, series of images and videos of 156 Self Immolators inside Tibet were sent through social media. In China during the COVID-19 pandemic, information sharing includes personal accounts of life under lockdown. And also intensive discussions with images and videos exposing high ranking officials of their mismanagement, lack of transparency and accountability. There is also veiled criticism of the Chinese government and CCP. This necessitated regular publication of rumor-busting pieces, opinions and write ups in government-affiliated media such as Xinhua (English) and Global Times. They even mobilized the "50cent army" (Wumao) to counter online criticism.

Tibetan resistance against China's Sinicizing policy

Inside Tibet, because of CCP's onslaught on Tibetan language, identity and culture, many Tibetans are actively voicing their concerns on social media. However, sharing of materials which CCP perceives as 'politically sensitive information' in the form of text, photo and video over social media platforms is construed as "state subversion" and leaking state secrets". This could lead to arbitrary detention, arrest, and imprisonment of many Tibetans.

This year, Chinese authorities arrested 10 Tibetans in Lhasa for spreading 'rumors' about the coronavirus outbreak on 12 March on WeChat. According to Free Tibet website, in July two Tibetan lyricists, Khado Tsetan and singer Tsegao, were sentenced to seven years and three years in prison respectively by a Chinese court in North-Eastern Tibet without a trial after they composed, sang and circulated a song praising Tibetan spiritual leader, H.H. the Dalai Lama. They have been charged for alleged involvement in "subversion of state law and leaking information to the outside world, which is considered as a "state security crime." Along with them, an unidentified girl from the same region was also arrested for sharing the song on social media.

In Chinese prison, detainees face inadequate medical care, insufficient food supply and arduous physical labor. This is commonly practiced in CCP's gulags across Tibet and East Turkistan (Xinjiang). If complaints were made and voices raised, they are liable to face further punishments. After release from prison, political prisoners are put under strict surveillance where every move is constantly watched. Their movements are also curtailed. All political prisoners are denied access to subsidies, government jobs and restrictions are further extended to the members of their family. They are kept in a category of 'black list' by the local government. Tibetan political prisoners are rarely provided with a fair judicial hearing.

Tibetan language rights advocate Mr. Tashi Wangchuk, was sentenced to five years for “inciting separatism” in a closed-door trial by Yushu Intermediate People’s Court for voicing concerns in his interview with the New York Times. Despite widespread international outcry, a Chinese court rejected his appeal and he was also denied access to his lawyer. Human Rights Watch’s China director, Sophie Richardson said: “Tashi Wangchuk’s only ‘crime’ was to peacefully call for the right of minority peoples to use their own language”. In the seventh Tibet Work Forum held for two days in Beijing from 28th to 29th August, President Xi Jinping urged and emphasized to intensify and Sinicize Tibetans and their culture through the “patriotic reeducation”. He also emphasized against “anti-Dalai Lama Campaigns in Tibet” with the expansion of mass education to promote “socialism with Chinese Characteristics.” Hence, those who refused to renounce Buddhism could face severe consequences. China’s well-known critic Young Hu said in 2011: “When official lies outpace popular rumors the government and its information control mechanism constitutes the greatest obstruction of the truth”. Securitizing the Tibetan Plateau with advanced electronic surveillance, censorship and artificial intelligence will further isolate China from the rest of the world.

The CCP with the intent to create a network of misinformation and propaganda, suppression of freedom of expression, restriction to the movement of the people, and censorship of information is not a way forward for a country trying to step into prominence in the global limelight and to portray itself as a world leader.



CCP’s Troll Soldiers Attempt to Hijack Virtual Geneva Forum 2020

Tenzin Dalha, December 2, 2020 (Phayul)

The Chinese government has one of the most comprehensive propaganda networks in the world, aggressively working to disseminate misinformation and influence how it is viewed from outside and within its borders. The state sponsored troll machinery, notoriously known as the ‘50 cent army,’ worked overtime earlier this month to disrupt the, the Central Tibetan Administration organized Geneva Forum 2020. The annual Geneva Forum this year was held virtually from 9 to 13th November 2020 with live streaming on social media network. The Forum deliberated on this year’s central theme “China’s Policy on Freedom of Religion: Global Impact” with sessions on declining freedom of religion in regions under China leading to persecution of various religious groups including Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners.

Throughout the five days forum, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rigorously pushed its propaganda and incessantly disseminated misinformation and aimed at distracting the organisers trying to collect questions from viewer in the comments section of the live stream. The government-employed troll army proficient in multiple languages, reportedly numbering from five hundred thousand to two million, works to post comments on the internet, praising the image and integrity of the CCP and attack its critics with the intention of fabricating facts as well as removing content deemed as unfavourable. They are specifically employed across multiple government propaganda departments, private co-operations, and news outlets and according to the Washing Post, these government employees have been generating about 448 million comments annually since 2012.



Fig. 1 Revealed: Chhina's digital army make thousands of Facebook comments to disrupt the online live streaming of Geneva Forum 2020

During the pandemic lockdown and subsequent increase in online and virtual activities all over the world, it has been rumoured that the 50 Cent Army has been given a pay raise to 70 cent per word that they write or delete. Their primary purpose supposedly being to cover up any posts that run counter to the state narrative and bolster Xi Jinping's image as the saviour of the country. These paid commentators actively engage with global social media forums like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook by mobilizing disinformation and countering online criticisms against CCP within China and abroad. Thinlay Chukki, Special Appointee for Human Rights at the Tibet Bureau in Geneva and the organiser of the Forum said, "The Geneva Forum has been an important international platform to deliberate and report on human rights violations being carried out by the Chinese Communist Party regime. It is building up a strong network and a common converging space for human rights advocates, activists, diplomats, academicians, politicians and so on."

Speaking about incessant trolling during the Forum, she noted, "the 50 Cent Army's attack on the Facebook live broadcast of the event is a recognition of this fact and we take it as an appreciation for the important work we are doing through this forum. We hope to come back stronger and bring together a much diverse group in future."

During the Geneva Forum live broadcast on Facebook, paid CCP commentators wrote offensive comments about the Forum, the participants, and human right activists. They plotted to create a false narrative on CCP's development in Tibet and East Turkestan regions and tried to distract the attention of the organiser and viewers. During the course of the Forum, thousands of comments were posted pushing CCP's propaganda and official narrative. The screenshot photo (See fig

no: 1) shows unambiguous first-hand evidence about the existence of the 50 Cent Army, predominantly commenting in three different languages – Tibetan, English and Mandarin. For instance, the Facebook profile by the name ‘AK Gazi’ actively participated during the entire Geneva Forum and posted assertions about the CCP’s alleged development in Tibet and East Turkistan in multiple languages.

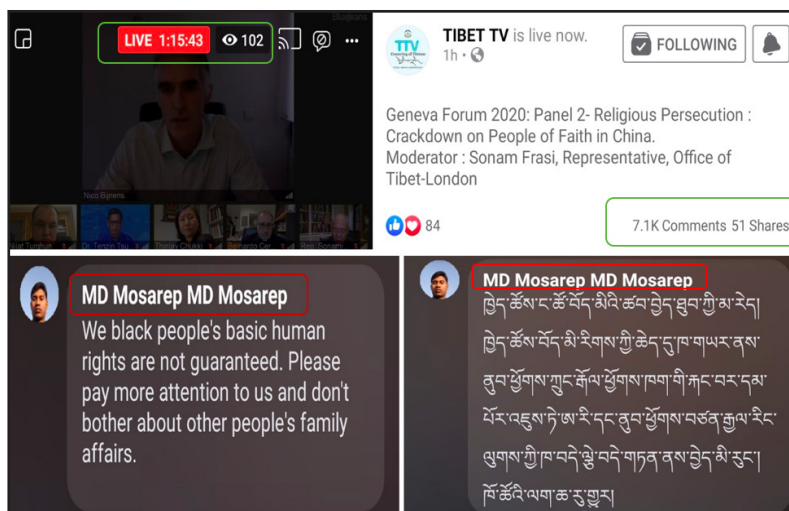


Fig. 2 Fake facebook ID users, engaging to disrupt the session

Similarly, another (see fig no: 2) fake Facebook ID user, ‘MD Mosarep’ commented both in English and Tibetan languages during the Forum. While commenting in English, the user identified himself as a person of colour and tried to divert the discussions to black rights movement. On the other hand, while posting in Tibetan language comment, the same Facebook ID identified himself as a Tibetan and tried to spin the narrative to capitalism vs communism. Analysing the flow of comments during the Forum, it is evident that the trolls typically avoid arguments or direct discussions, which is indicative of their lack of knowledge and information on the issues being discussed. Instead they focus on posting CCP’s deceptive narratives in multiple languages filled with propaganda or baseless allegations. Studying the usage of Tibetan language in the comments, it could be assumed that the troll army also employs Tibetans from Tibet or Chinese netizens well versed in Tibetan language. Dr Tenzin Tsultrim, Visiting Research Fellow at the Tibet Policy Institute, and one of the panellists while reacting to the orchestrated online activities noted, “From the barrage of comments during Geneva Tibet Forum 2020 Facebook live streaming, one may conclude with certainty about the CCP’s increasing prowess in disrupting anything going against their state-sponsored narrative even beyond their territorial regime. This incident also highlights CCP’s insecurities about their alleged legitimacy beyond its geographical territory.” Online trolling and posting of divisive comments using fake IDs by the 50 Cent Army is not a new phenomenon within the Tibetan community. The President of the Central Tibetan Administration, Dr Lobsang Sangay has urged Tibetans to be cautious about the increasing number of fake IDs, and expressed concerns over their involvement in spreading misinformation especially in light of the upcoming Tibetan general elections.

Based on China’s troll army’s nefarious online activities during the Geneva Forum and the ongoing Covid-19 information war, it can be safely concluded that the CCP has invested heavily in its cyberspace propaganda machinery to make it more subtle and sophisticated than before. The large deployment and rumoured pay raise of its 50 Cent Army is a clear sign of CCP’s growing insecurities over its failed policies inside Tibet and the violation of basic human rights of its people. The world must realise that CCP’s propaganda machinery and troll army spewing lies, misinformation, and censorship are clear threats to the era of digital revolution and weakens the core foundations of free and fair information.

China takes railway route to tighten grip on Tibet

Palden Sonam, November 24, 2020 (The Tribune)

From a realistic perspective, strategic infrastructure as a tool for consolidating supremacy in the disputed territories implies both an offensive posture as well as a defence mechanism. Offensive because in the event of a border war with India, the new railway will fundamentally boost the manoeuvring capability of Chinese troops and weapons to be moved within a short time on a larger scale than before.

Qinghai-Tibet Train: Building the railway is a major part of China's strategy-oriented infrastructural development spree in Tibet. Since its occupation of Tibet in 1950, all major infrastructure development in this region has been driven by China's strategic calculations and security needs for consolidating its control over Tibet and secure its position on the long Himalayan borders with India, Nepal and Bhutan. From the construction of highways and bridges in the early years of its entry to Tibet, to bringing railway connections to the major cities of Tibet, including capital Lhasa, in 2006, Beijing's emphasis on building strategic infrastructure has been consistent and consequential. In addition to cementing its grip over Tibet, the long disputes over the border with India and to some extent with Bhutan add the extra strategic impetus in spurring a strategy-oriented infrastructural spree in Tibet.

It is in this context that the recent statement of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping on the Ya'an-Nyingtri section of Sichuan-Tibet Railway is made —and, in fact, is to be analysed and understood. Xi made three key points on why the new railway matters in governing Tibet as a means for “safeguarding national unity, promoting ethnic solidarity and consolidating stability in the border.” An attempt is made here to decode Xi's statement and analyse it in the broader political and strategic context of China's colonial project in Tibet as well as its contestation with India. First, Xi's euphemism of ‘safeguarding national unity’ means to further the integration of Tibet into the Chinese system and big infrastructures, like the railway lines, are often seen as powerful tools to project power to far periphery regions and govern them from the metropolis. From Beijing's perspective, the railway lines in Tibet not only strengthen the scale and speed of force deployment and movement of military assets in the case of a major political and security contingency in Tibet, but also its ability to exploit Tibet's vast natural resources, such as lithium and chromite, which are abundant in the region where the new railway line crosses. Second, to strip its political coat, ‘promoting ethnic solidarity’ implies the assimilationist role of the railways in mingling and melting Tibetans into the Chinese way of life and culture, like language and values, which has increasingly been aggressive under Xi Jinping's power. This is because unlike the inconvenient road or expensive airway, the railway has the advantage of freighting a large number of people or goods to long distances at cheaper and faster rates. In the context of China's assimilationist policy, the new railway connection is to play a greater role in bringing more Chinese, from miners and migrant workers to businessmen, to work and settle in Tibet — preferably in the border areas like Nyingtri.

Xi's statement also indicates that China wants the Tibetans not only to see the railway lines as a positive development that they should welcome, but also feel it as an expression of solidarity from a supposedly advanced big Chinese brother. Here, the railway being the gift of development, and therefore, the obligational need of Tibetans to feel and appreciate the ‘Chinese generosity’. What is missing is the agency of Tibetans in choosing whether they really need a railway line and where they need it. The issue is that they not only have to accept it, but they also have to be indebted

for it. Third, the idea that the railway as an instrument to ‘consolidate stability’ at the disputed border with India does not mean maintaining stability as peace with the status quo. In fact, the expression is contradicting itself in that, if one party attempts to alter the status quo at the border, then the other will challenge it which will lead to more instabilities not only at the border per se, but also within the bilateral relationships as well as at the multilateral levels. This has indeed been the case with Doklam in 2017 and even more so with Ladakh today. The term ‘stability’ has to be understood as stable due to domination at the border rather than stability as peace agreed upon by the two nations.

Therefore, from a realistic perspective, strategic infrastructure like the railway as a tool for consolidating supremacy in the disputed territories implies both an offensive posture as well as a defence mechanism. Offensive because in the event of a border war with India, the new railway will fundamentally boost the manoeuvring capability of Chinese troops and weapons to be moved within a short time on a larger scale than it was possible before. Strategic development and strategic connections to frontier areas are meant to enhance China’s strategic advantage vis-a-vis India in order to score a long-term edge over the latter as a resolution to the boundary dispute appears to be more challenging, with leaders from both sides vowing to defend every inch of what they perceived to be their respective territories. The defensive role comes with the huge capacity of the railway in transferring more Chinese people to work and settle in towns and villages at the border. China is constructing new towns and enlarging old ones to increase the population size at the border by forcibly relocating Tibetan nomads and farmers to Lhoka and Ngari, which are respectively adjacent to Arunachal in the east and Ladakh in the west. With the development of more economic opportunities like tourism, mining and constructions in the border areas, it also encourages Chinese settlers to put their root there to defend the motherland. In the long term, the growth of Chinese settlements at the border regions can be used as a civilian bulwark to fortify Beijing’s position on what its military can annex/control territories at the border. In a nutshell, regardless of some of the positive side-effects of the new railway for the local Tibetans, the fundamental logic of the Chinese state, as Xi Jinping pointed out, is to integrate Tibet, assimilate its people and secure a dominant position in the boundary disputes with India.



CCP’s Fifth Plenary Session: Issues and Prospects for Xi Jinping

Tenzin Lhadon, November 19, 2020 (Tibetpolicy.net))

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on October 29 wrapped up the fifth plenary session of the 19th Central Committee in Beijing. The gathering of the top Chinese leaders in one of the most important event in the CCP’s political calendar laid out the five-year plan for the year 2021 to 2025. Although a summary communique was issued at the end of the meeting, the main agenda with the full text of the five-year plan will not unveiled until the next session of the National People’s Congress in March. However, the meeting provided crucial insights into the status of Xi Jinping’s leadership, the socio-economic status of China during and after the pandemic, the current hostile international environment under the rising trade dispute with the U.S. and most importantly, a foray into the prospects of China’s plan for the future.

The session not only assessed the previous 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), it also adopted the

Central Committee's proposals for the formulation of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives Through the Year 2035. The session was attended by 198 regular members and 166 alternate members of the CPC Central Committee, the members of the Standing Committee, senior officials and 19th CPC National Congress's delegates. The plenum declared that China has reached its goal in becoming a "moderately prosperous society" in 2020 by lifting more than 55 million people out of poverty, created 60 million new jobs in five years and expected to surpass the 100 trillion yuan (\$14.9 trillion) mark in 2020. Amidst its achievements, Beijing also admitted the growing inequality between rural and urban residents which it intends to address along with many other issues in the next five years. The socio-economic status of China, which envisages a growing economy, and political stability of the country is a necessity for Xi Jinping to strengthen his political base and assert his influence. He presided over the fifth plenary session and was hailed as the "core navigator" of the present leadership. Observers believe that such kind of invocation has not appeared since the death of Mao, which therefore evidently affirms that Xi Jinping's power has reached new heights and that his leadership will effectively remain unchallenged in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, the plenary session discussed the long-range objectives for China to achieve "socialist modernization" by 2035. In fact, the 14th Five year plan emphasized that the country will focus on improving quality and raising productivity and further increase innovation capacity, thereby building a high-standard market system to improve its socialist market economy. China's distinct emphasis on strengthening domestic market and shifting economic reliance from labor-intensive industry and tourism to technological advancement and industrial upgrade are indispensable in achieving the goals set for the future. Amidst such plans for comprehensive economic restructuring, Beijing also places environmental issues on its agenda claiming that China's quality growth include green and low-carbon development. In order to tackle global climate change, China sets its target to reach CO2 emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060. These measures are considered important by Beijing in order for the world to consider China as a 'leading country' in terms of global green economy and a popular stakeholder.

It is also important to note that the CCP plenary session was held amidst global outcry against the spread of Corona virus. The pandemic brought China's belligerence into the limelight with its political tensions with India, territorial dispute in the South China Sea, rising trade war with the U.S. and uncertain international environment resulting in a challenging situation for Xi Jinping and his leadership. Moreover, the domestic issues in China from passing of the controversial National Security Law while suppressing the protests in Hong Kong and increasing human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet received heavy international criticism and concerns from various global bodies. The internal criticism from a CCP member, a business tycoon, Ren Zhiqiang who was later put behind bar for corruption and embezzlement case indicates that Xi Jinping's leadership is faced with both internal and external challenges. Observers believe that the fifth plenary session was held under urgency for Xi to reinstate his authority, demonstrate his resilience and enhance his legitimacy.

It remains to be seen whether Xi Jinping will continue to pursue an increasingly aggressive approach externally and repressive administration internally. China's belligerence towards strengthening Xi's political base can either result in adverse effects for his long term rule over China or it may further strengthen his political control as he moves towards occupying a position in the Party once held by Mao Zedong and perhaps surpassing it altogether.

Beijing's motives for crushing Tibetan language

By Karma Tenzin and Tenzin Tsultrim, October 16, 2020, (Asia Times)

Like empires of the past, the Communist Party of China is using language policy to ensure its hegemony

Transportation has played several different roles in the rise of civilizations and also in national defense. For instance, the efficient utilization of roads helped the Roman Empire rule the ancient world. The good network of roads served two purposes for the Romans: During wars with neighboring kingdoms, it served for quick deployment of soldiers. On the other hand, the well-connected roads helped them send quick reinforcements and to crush rebellions in their conquered colonies. Like the Romans, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has given utmost priority to infrastructure development. Almost immediately after the conquest of Tibet in 1951, the CPC began constructing highways that would link Tibet with China for the first time in history. Thus, with this step, all roads from Tibet led to Beijing. The Chamdo-Lhasa Highway (called by the Chinese the Sichuan-Tibet Highway) and Tsongon-Lhasa Highway (Qinghai-Tibet Highway) constructed from 1954–1955 were two major routes connecting Tibet with rest of China, which later became the CPC's modes of transportation and exploitation of everything for its own interests and not those of Tibet, the Tibetan people and neighboring countries.

By 1975 China had completed 91 highways totaling 15,800 kilometers, with 300 permanent bridges in Outer Tibet alone, by which 97% of the region's counties were connected by road.

Claude Arpi, a historian, journalist and prolific commentator on India-Tibet-China affairs, says the infrastructure development by the CPC in Tibet has served a dual purpose. It helps the CPC to control Tibet effectively and also facilitates the People's Liberation Army's militarization of Tibet's borders. But beyond that, these roads and railways were also engineered for the mass migration of Chinese people in search of work and pleasure in Tibet.

In an interview to the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) based in Dharamshala, India, Tsering Dorjee, a native of the Qomolangma basin who fled from Tibet and settled abroad, spent an entire year in Tibet from 2005-06. He said the number of Chinese settlers had mushroomed dramatically since he left. Already the usage of written Tibetan language had become insignificant, and with the continuation of current trends, very soon spoken Tibetan might face the same demise as Tibetan script. For instance, the Tsongon-Lhasa Railway (Qinghai-Tibet Railway) brought around 1.5 million passengers into Tibet during its first year of operation, ending on June 30, 2007. In its 13 years of operation, much has changed in the socio-economic and the cultural landscapes of Tibet. The peaceful uprisings of 2008 were direct results of continuous undermining of economic, social and cultural rights and religious sentiments of the Tibetan people. Hence, also in the veiled garb of development, the CPC is committing what Rinzin Dorjee, a research fellow at the Tibet Policy Institute based in Dharamshala, calls "urbancide." By this he means the extinguishing of Tibetan culture and identity through an influx of millions of Chinese migrants to Tibet. This process is still being implemented.

Because of the increasing Chinese population in Tibet, most of the services and facilities now cater to them. For instance, Jampa Xiangbalacuo (aka Jampa Latso), in a paper titled "Empowering Women Health Workers in Rural Tibet" (2017) submitted to the SIT (School for International Training) Graduate Institute in the US state of Vermont, highlighted the language barriers faced by female Tibetan patients at a government hospital in Garze (Ganzi), in Tibet's Kham region.

She writes, “The county towns are far, inconvenient and expensive, and women face language barriers in communicating with Chinese male doctors.” Recently too, during the Covid-19 pandemic, such indifference toward Tibetan people became even more apparent.

According to a tweet on February 10 from @Lhatseri, the Twitter handle of Tibetan historian and professor Tsering Shakya, about the paucity of interpreters for Tibetan patients in hospitals, “Many Tibetans are refusing to go to hospitals because there are no interpreters, [despite] a new campaign telling people that interpreters will be provided.” Such institutional biases are extensive throughout Tibet. One stark example is the introduction of bilingual education in Tibet. In reality, this policy was implemented to suppress further the learning and teaching of the Tibetan language.

In East Turkistan too, the CPC has politicized language policy. Because of frequent changes of official script, different generations of Uighurs and other Turkic students were exposed to different written forms of their language. The deliberate discontinuity of the traditional Arabic script has resulted in severe interruptions to the culture, heritage, traditions, and identity of the Uighur and other Turkic populations in East Turkistan. Like East Turkistan, Tibet faced a similar language dilemma created by the CPC. Because of continual hostile language policies, ordinary Tibetans have expressed widespread concern about the increasing loss of fluency in Tibetan among the younger generations. For decades, scholars, rights groups and researchers around the world have expressed concerns over the deteriorating status of Tibetan language in Tibet. Despite numerous protests and petitions, the onslaught on the Tibetan language has now reached an extreme level under the current authoritarian party-state headed by General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Why is Tibetan language is still repressed?

Rita Mae Brown, an American novelist, poet and activist, has lucidly captured the importance of language in two sentences. She writes, “Language is the roadmap of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.” Hence language is like a soul of the body; without it, the body is lifeless. It appears that the CPC wants Tibetan people to forget their own history and also wants Tibetan identity to disappear and go nowhere. In short, through the systematic onslaught on the Tibetan language, the ruling party wants to erase the identity of the Tibetan people.

Tsering Shakya, in his book *Dragon in the Land of Snows: The History of Tibet Since 1948*, clearly captured the situation during the Cultural Revolution. He writes, “On the surface it seemed that Chinese had succeeded in assimilating the Tibetans: All expressions of Tibetan identity and culture was forbidden with the exception of the language, now the only marker of Tibet’s separateness from China.”

Hence there is no doubt that whatever the CPC has been doing in Tibet is not an accidental or unintentional but is systematically planned and premeditated. Countries sharing borders with Tibet and China must have realized that by now. The Soviet empire to a large extent influenced the policies implemented by the CPC in Tibet. In order to consolidate and maintain his power and to keep the empire together, Nikita Khrushchev had to adopt more restrictive language policies than his two predecessors, Lenin and Josef Stalin. Soviet linguists and ethnographers insisted that changing a person’s language was a requirement for any change in ethnic identity. Hence Khrushchev focused on language policy as the best hope of countering rising nationalism and ethnic uprisings that threatened the economic unity of the USSR.

Taking a leaf out of Stalin’s and Khrushchev’s playbooks, Mao Zedong understood the importance

of destroying an identity lies in destroying its language. During Mao's authoritarian rule, the Cultural Revolution took an enormous toll on Tibetan culture. And now the CPC under Xi is pursuing a similar policy. Another reason for replacing the Tibetan language with Chinese language as the medium of instruction could be the significant development during the brief period of liberation when Tibetan students were instructed in their own language. Many scientific studies have proved the advantage of having one's mother tongue as the medium of instruction in students' learning abilities in the later stage of academic development. Among Tibetan students in exile as well, there is remarkable growth of overall academic achievement after the introduction of Tibetan as the medium of instruction in most of the Tibetan schools in India.

And the CPC would have many reasons not to be interested in academic development of Tibetan students in Tibet. In short, after completely connecting Tibet with China and entrenching its authoritarian rule under the garb of the infrastructure development in Tibet, the CPC started unleashing plans of exploitation and extraction of Tibet's major natural resources. And most important, the roads and railways became the modes of acceleration of the influx of Chinese people to Tibet. Hence, along with infrastructure development, the CPC also invited enforced cultural assimilation, economic marginalization and environmental destruction on the Tibetan Plateau. In fact, the list is endless.

The CPC's latest onslaught is also on the Tibetan language as well. Researcher Adrian Zenz, in a report titled "Xinjiang's System of Militarized Vocational Training Comes to Tibet" published by the Jamestown Foundation on September 22, writes, "In the context of Beijing's increasingly assimilatory ethnic-minority policy, it is likely that these policies will promote a long-term loss of linguistic, cultural and spiritual heritage." Currently, the CPC is trying to revive stalled projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. To date, more than 60 countries – accounting for two-thirds of the world population – have signed on to projects or indicated an interest in doing so. Now it is imperative to consider what happened to Tibet and the Tibetan people. What happened in Tibet could happen again anywhere, and now because of the blessings of the BRI, it has become faster, cheaper and easier.



An Appointment to mark the future: Tibet and its Geostrategic Importance in U.S Foreign Policies

Tenzin Lhadon, October 16, 2020 (Tibetpolicy.net)

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday announced the concurrent designation of Assistant Secretary Robert A. Destro of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor to serve as the United States Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. The appointment of Mr. Destro gains significance in light of the upcoming November U.S. Presidential elections, with the country's foreign policy with regards to rising tensions with China on multiple issues being a key talking point for the American electoral constituencies. "We are grateful for the appointment but let's not forget that the position has been kept vacant for almost 4 years", said Richen Namgyal, an activist based in New York.

The position of Special Coordinator has been vacant since January 20, 2017, when Sarah Sewall, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, concurrently served as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. Lawmakers as well as the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) had urged the Trump administration to fill the position, which did not materialize for the past four years until now – a position that has been established by and mandated by the U.S.’s Tibetan Policy Act (2002). President Trump broke away from a precedent that was maintained by his predecessors since President Bill Clinton by not meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. While the sudden appointment of Mr. Destro is a positive turn of event, it does fall short of symbolizing a concrete show of reassurance from the current administration since the appointee will in all probability change if the Democrats win the White House. The first Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues within the State Department in November 1997 was created under the authority of the Secretary of State. The position was codified by Congress in the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 with Gregory Craig as the first Special Coordinator for Tibet. The Tibetan Policy Act and the appointment of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues were hailed as a milestone in the history of U.S.-Tibet relations. For the first time, a U.S. government official was appointed solely for the responsibility of coordinating Tibet policy and for the first time the Congress directed State Department policy on Tibet through the mission of the Special Coordinator.

The U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibet was legally assigned to promote substantive dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama or his representatives. The coordinator was responsible for addressing human rights issue inside Tibet, but in addition they would also address the humanitarian needs of Tibetan refugees. Such responsibilities fell in tune with U.S. efforts to protect the unique religious, cultural, and linguistic identity of Tibetans. “Special Coordinator Destro will engage Tibetan leaders and international partners and experts to address these issues”, as noted in the statement from Mike Pompeo. He further mentioned that the United States will continue to support Tibet’s global diaspora and their advocacy for the freedom of religion and belief through the good office of the Special Coordinator.

The United States involvement in the Tibet question has been largely based on human rights and humanitarian issue. However, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke’s forceful advocacy has helped add a new dimension in introducing Tibet as an issue of geopolitical significance. This has been reflected in the U.S. State Department’s new visa restrictions against Chinese officials, and by describing the Tibetan region as increasingly vital to regional stability and so elevating the issue from the realm of human rights to geostrategic importance. Similarly, when the position for the Special Coordinator was first created, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), made an effort to ensure that this position was not incorporated under the Asia-Pacific Bureau or the Human Rights Bureau in the Department of State. Such an endeavor led to a greater role of Tibet issue in the U.S. foreign policy directions, which would have far-reaching implications. With such special responsibility delegated to this position, the appointees in the past have had an extensive background on issues such as refugee rights and migration, etc.

China has firmly opposed the United States’ Appointment of a special coordinator for Tibetan issues, deeming it as interference in China’s internal affairs and a move to destabilize Tibet. However, the deterioration of the relations between the two powers in recent months has brought back the fundamental differences between the two, leading to verbal salvos at Beijing’s governance, state-led economic system, espionage activities and handling of the pandemic. The ramifications of this

appointment as well as the impact the Mr. Destro may have is up for debate yet it cannot be denied that Tibet can no longer be shelved along the lines of human rights and environment, but instead has increasingly juxtaposed itself within the geostrategic interests of China and U.S foreign policies.



Tibetan female religious practitioners under China's sinicization campaign in Tibet

Tashi Choedon, October 14, 2020 (The Quint)

After China's occupation of Tibet, religion in Tibet has gone through many transitions. The newly-established People's Republic of China (1949) colonized Tibet and condemned Tibetan Buddhist practices and values. With the intensive indoctrination and increasing scrutinisation of Tibetan Buddhists, this article looks into how Tibetan female practitioners in particular suffer under the increasing state 'sinicization'. And how the voices of Tibetan female practitioners are increasingly being blurred within the representations of the Chinese colonial discourse of Tibetan women's emancipation.

China's Religious policies in Tibet

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) under Mao had a colossal upturn of Tibetan Buddhism resulting in massive destruction of Tibetan Buddhism. In the years following the cultural revolution, the state maneuvered policies in a way that did not completely reject religion per se. However, it curtailed the religious practices amongst the Tibetan community and Tibetan monastic spaces that would likely draw attention to their Tibetan national identity. The overarching state's religious policy in Tibet today includes the incorporation of Tibetan Buddhism into a greater degree of state's socialist discourse. Over the years, the state's intensive supervision of Tibetan monastic system in the monasteries and nunneries has completely undermined the traditional management system of Tibetan Buddhism.

Jiang Zemin's "accommodation policy" stated that religions must "accommodate" to the needs of the state, which effectively undermined the religious ethics and conduct to prioritize the national interest of the state. These systematic appropriation of Tibetan Buddhism into a larger state's rhetoric of socialism has become increasingly dominant in the Xi Jinping era.

The opposing narrative about Tibetan women's status

In contrast to the propagandistic and skewed projection of Tibetan women as "empowered" and "uplifted" under the Chinese colonial rule through the state media, the larger question of Tibetan women religious practitioners' challenges under Xi Jinping's sinicization is to be questioned. The state's mandate policy of how religion should function impedes the way how Tibetan nuns practice and uphold their religious ethics and values. One of the recently introduced policies in Tibet is called the "Four Standards", the implementation of which has been carried out in Shugsep nunnery in Tibet in October 2019. The "Four Standards" entails monks and nuns to be politically reliable entities in maintaining the "national stability." More recently, the state has implemented the religious policy by conferring awards on monks and nuns who are regarded as "model monks and nuns". Hence, it shows that there is a state-endorsed and colonial discourse of "empowered" Tibetan women while on the contrary, state's religious policy and increasing infiltration into Tibetan monastic spaces have completely negated the Tibetan Buddhist identity of nuns.

The Case of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar

Serta Larung Gar and Yachen Gar are two of the most important Buddhist academy, located in Kham province of Tibet, that has gained prominence under the great visions of their founders. The founders of these institutions, Khenpo Jigme Phunstok and Achuk Rinpoche, are important Tibetan Buddhist masters. The establishment of these two institutions is considered a landmark for the revival of Tibetan Buddhism after the massive damage caused during the Cultural Revolution. With the establishment of these two institutions, an increasing number of nuns from different parts of Tibetan regions come to pursue and advance their religious studies. A monumental change in these institutions is the initiation of conferment of Khenmo Degree (degree equivalent to PhD) on Tibetan nuns in the 1990s, envisioned and implemented by the founding Tibetan masters. Thus, these two religious institutions are not only crucial space to pursue Tibetan religious studies in general but are also an important intersectional space of female empowerment and religious empowerment for the Tibetan nuns. Since Khenmo Degree is a great feat in the history of the Tibetan Buddhist community and due to the great reputation of the institutions, many numbers of nuns from various parts of Tibetan regions have joined the institutions. However, the state's intensive intrusion into their spaces has caused great distress for nuns, in terms of how they uphold and practice their religious vows and advance their studies.

Moreover, there have been waves of eviction of nuns and demolition of nuns' quarters in Larung Gar and Yachen Gar in 2001 and the Xi Jinping administration. The evicted nuns were held by the state and not allowed to go back to their academy to study. According to Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) annual report of 2016, the evicted nuns of Yachen Gar and Larung Gar have been subjected to political "re-education" by the state. Nuns who were allowed to stay have been forced to attend "legal education" from July to October at Larung Gar in 2016. The demolition of Larung Gar began after the decisions were made by the state authorities during the Sixth Work Forum Conference and the second national work conference in 2016. In 2019, Yachen Gar nuns have been yet again met with the same fate of demolition and evictions. According to various media portals, thousands of monks and nuns have also been evicted and detained in Yachen Gar in 2019.

There is a greater drive to "sinicize" Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet today, as evidenced from the Xi Jinping's statements at the Seventh Tibet Work Forum held in August this year. Most Tibetan monasteries, nunneries and institutions are becoming the center of state's manipulation to realize "Chinese national dream." China's erasure of Tibetan nuns' identity by detaining, evicting, and subjecting them to "re-education programs" while turning Tibetan Buddhist locations into Chinese spaces of domination is a step towards nuns' disempowerment. It is equivalent to depriving Tibetan nuns of their cultural and religious roots for whom Buddhist ethics and values have been a source of empowerment for many centuries. However, it remains difficult for Tibetans in general to resist in any form without the risk of being labeled a "separatist" by the state.



The Chinese State's Religious Paranoia

Tenzin Lhadon, October 1, 2020 (News Vibes of India)

According to PB Potter, the relationship between religion and state power in China has long been contested because religion was a significant source of resistance against authorities in the Imperial period and perceived as a potential source of threat to the present regime in China. The foreseeable threat that the Chinese leadership anticipates is not only because most of the 'ethnic minorities' in China are deeply devoted to their religions, but more importantly because their devotion and loyalty towards their religion unites and define them. The CCP has issues with minorities and their religion because they do not prioritize their loyalty towards the Party over their faith in their religion. As a result, with Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, measures to control religious practices of Tibetan Buddhists and policies adopted to intervene in spiritual communities have massively increased as new measures of repression and control over the practice of Tibetan Buddhism have intensified.

Besides harsher punishments, cancelation of celebrations of Buddhist festivals and increasing surveillance in Tibetan monasteries, the Party has introduced new ways to influence and interfere in the selection of monks and nuns, a process and a practice that is a core religious tenet for many believers. There are state sponsored events to highlight the importance of upholding party's national religious policies. For instance, on June 18, officials attended the opening ceremony of an Exhibition on Tibetan Buddhism from the United Front Work, Propaganda Department, Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee and research institutes. The purpose behind the exhibition as explained by Feng Zhi, Deputy Director and researcher of the Institute of History, China Tibetology Research Center, was to enable people to understand the reincarnation system of Tibetan Buddhism in a more "comprehensive, three-dimensional, and true way".

A similar exhibition was launched in Shannan city (Lhoka) on May 8. Evidently, the official head of the United Front Work Department sought to explain the rationale behind celebrating the opening of the exhibition. He stated that it was aimed to promote the party's national religious policy such as the Religious Affairs Regulations and Tibet Buddhist Living Buddha Reincarnation Management Measures. He also mentioned that the exhibitions' purpose was to enhance and adapt Tibetan Buddhism with socialism and cultivate patriotism, constantly strengthen the ideological importance and contribute to long-term peace and stability. The Seventh Tibet Work Forum, which for convened in Beijing from August 28 to 29 by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), called for the action under national unity and securing China's borders.

These measures are designed by the government to govern Tibet under the Xi Jinping era who issued a similar guideline in 2018 which demanded religious personnel in Tibet to uphold the "Four Standards" to make them patriotic, party loving, law-abiding and influential. The 'Four Standards' policy was introduced in TAR in 2018 where Tibetan monks and nuns are required to act as propagandists for the government and Communist Party. From Deng Xiaoping to the present leadership under Xi Jinping, religion in China has been treated as part of a nationalist path that should contribute to the Party's policy and China's economic growth rather than treating religious freedom as an individual freedom of choice. In fact, Tibet is among the heaviest guarded region in China where people are deeply religious and devotees of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is a spiritual leader, revered by Tibetans inside Tibet and outside who have been often deemed separatist by the Chinese government.

According to Tibet Daily, a new regulation was passed by the Tibet People's Congress in February 2020, requiring all levels of government, companies, community organisations, villages, schools, military groups and religious activity centres be responsible for work on ethnic unity, similar to the law introduced in Xinjiang four years earlier. The Global Times stated that it was the common responsibility for the people of all ethnic groups to safeguard national reunification, strengthen ethnic unity and take a clear-cut stand against separatism. The Chinese government's obsession over national unity and social stability especially in the ethnic minority areas is quite evident in this new regulation.

In a recent turn of events, Tibetan students are barred from participating in any form of religious activity during their winter break. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) noted that a December 31, 2019 directive sent by Lhasa Chengguan Haicheng Elementary School contained guidelines on winter break school tasks and projects, healthcare and forbidden behavior, including religious activities. This is clearly a violation against the principle of religious freedom stipulated in the constitution of PRC. However the constitution also states that the religious freedom stipulated in the constitution entails certain obligations and prohibit acts such as engaging in activities endangering national security, disturbing public order and any kind of crimes in the name of religion. The constitution, the new initiatives and the policies are directed towards the regulation of religion, which are enforced through law, and administrative regulations. The Politburo Standing Committee member, the Politburo member in charge of propaganda, the Party's United Front Work Department (UFD), the State's Council's Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security departments have all been distributed with responsibility to enforce regulations controlling religious activities or supervise over religious ceremonies.

Under the policies for Sinicizing religion, the Chinese government have compelled the monks and nuns to demonstrate "political reliability", moral integrity capable of impressing the public", and willingness to play an active role at critical moments" apart from demonstrating competence in Buddhist studies. It was also reported that in recent years, the Tibet Autonomous Region had adopted a policy of benefiting monks and nuns. The monks and nuns in the region enjoyed medical insurance, old-age insurance, personal accident insurance, minimum living guarantee and free medical examination, provided they supported the Party Central Committee, shared the same ideology and followed the directives of the Party. The ultimate purpose behind these measures remains the maintenance of what the Party deems as "national unity, and to actively guide religion to adapt to 'Chinese Socialist Society'.

Human Rights Watch states that all of these measures are an attempt to forestall or stop any protest against the state policy. Intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, routine reeducation campaigns, limits on travel and communications, and regulations discouraging religiosity among government employees and university students affect most monastics and many lay believers. The Chinese Communist Party uses these policies under the guise of public safety and interest to increase religious repression and control.

