

The Dragon's Shadow: Understanding China's Impact on India's Approach to Tibet

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Abstract

Exploring the complex relationship between China's stance on Tibet and India's strategic decisions in the area, 'Unveiling China's Influence: Analysing its Impact on India's Tibet Policy', investigates the nuanced dynamics at play. This abstract elucidates how China's assertive stance on Tibet reverberates within India's corridors of power, shaping its diplomatic manoeuvring and security considerations. As China consolidates its influence over Tibet through infrastructure development, military presence, and cultural assimilation efforts, India is compelled to reassess its approach towards its Himalayan neighbour. Through a critical analysis of China's impact on India's Tibet policy, this abstract argues that Beijing's actions not only challenge India's territorial integrity but also influence its broader regional and global aspirations.

Introduction

In the geopolitical arena of South Asia, the shadow cast by China's assertive policies extends far beyond its borders, profoundly influencing India's approach to the sensitive issue of Tibet. This article aims to dissect the intricate interplay between China's actions regarding Tibet and India's strategic calculus in the region. By delving into the multifaceted dimensions of this relationship, we seek to unravel the complexities that underpin Sino-Indian dynamics and their implications for regional stability.

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China's Assertive Policies

China's approach towards Tibet reflects a multifaceted strategy encompassing political, economic, and cultural dimensions aimed at solidifying its control over the region. The integration of Tibetan culture into the rapidly advancing Chinese economy and the implementation of the Great Western Development (GWD) policy aim to encourage greater migration from inner China to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Since the 1950s, the historical relationship between Tibet and China, evolving into the current TAR within the People's Republic of China (PRC), has led to the formulation of specific administrative policies by the central government. With the adoption of a new national strategy in 2000 for the development of its western regions, China envisions a transformative makeover for these areas, particularly the TAR. The effects of the GWD policy, known as *Xibu da kaifa*, are expected to be profound in the TAR, given its inclusion in this initiative. While the central government acknowledges the TAR as one among several provincial-level components of this strategy, it has also recalibrated its Tibet policy in alignment with the national project, recognising the unique characteristics and challenges of the TAR. Unlike other autonomous regions included in the GWD, the TAR stands out for its cultural and ethnic homogeneity, with a dominant non-Han culture and nationality shaping the region's identity. Before the influx of Han Chinese settlers in Tibet beginning in 1950, Tibetan culture encapsulated the essence of the region, characterised by its ethnic and cultural diversity.¹ China's policies actively promote the migration of Han Chinese settlers into Tibet, altering the demographic composition of the region and diluting Tibetan cultural identity. This demographic engineering, coupled with measures to suppress Tibetan cultural expressions and religious practices, presents a significant challenge to India's longstanding support for Tibetan autonomy and the preservation of Tibetan heritage.² These efforts underscore China's determined bid to consolidate its control over Tibet while simultaneously eroding India's influence in the region. Additionally, Mandarin Chinese is increasingly emphasised in education, while Tibetan language instruction is marginalised.

China's ambitious infrastructural plan aims to construct 4,000 kms of railway lines by 2025 and establish 59 new airports and 300 helipads by 2035 across the TAR.³ An exemplary illustration

of China's endeavors is the extensive infrastructure development initiatives, notably highlighted by the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. This railway stands as a vital lifeline connecting Tibet with mainland China.⁴ This plan, reported by the Tibet Right Collective, serves a dual purpose: facilitating rapid military deployment and advancing Beijing's strategy of cultural assimilation in Tibet. The swift development of infrastructure in Tibet aligns with the PRC broader goals, as noted by the Tibet Policy Institute. China intends for this strategy to quash dissent and weaken Tibetan resistance, both within and outside Tibet. Urban centers like Lhasa are witnessing increased intermarriage between Tibetans and Chinese due to the influx of migrant workers and rapid urbanisation. The Chinese government, citing unprecedented investment since the 1990s, emphasises infrastructure development in Tibet, including connectivity, hydropower, urbanisation, and mining, among others. However, these investments primarily serve as a means for China to reinforce its control over the unlawfully occupied region.⁵

China maintains a tight grip on political dissent in Tibet through strict censorship, surveillance, and the suppression of any form of opposition to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule. Tibetan activists, monks, and intellectuals who advocate for Tibetan autonomy or criticise Chinese policies often face harassment, imprisonment, or enforced disappearance. According to the 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the United States (US) Department of State, in the section covering China, including Hong Kong, Macau, and Tibet, there was documentation regarding the disappearance of Tibetan monk and writer Rongwo Gangkar. Reports suggest that Rongwo Gangkar went missing in 2021 after he allegedly spoke about the Dalai Lama during an informal gathering in Qinghai. These claims were brought forward by the non-governmental organisation Free Tibet in Jan of the same year.⁶

In recent years, China has significantly intensified its exploitation of Tibet's natural resources, leaving Tibetans powerless to protect their land while witnessing economic gains diverted away from their nation. This expansion of mining and extraction, supported by Chinese government funding, poses dual threats to both people and the environment. Historically devoid of industrialisation, pre-Chinese occupation, Tibet now faces displacement of millions of Tibetan nomads to urban areas,

facilitating resource extraction and abandonment of traditional agricultural practices, crucial for environmental preservation.⁷ China's status as the leading global energy consumer drives the relocation of mining to Tibet, exacerbating environmental crises such as water scarcity, agricultural encroachment, and nature reserve disruptions.⁸ Additionally, Tibet holds significant copper reserves vital for industries in central Chinese cities, yet mining activities like those in Shetongmon risk contaminating vital rivers. Illicit gold mining further plagues Tibet, disregarding environmental concerns and provoking Tibetan protests met with police force.

Moreover, the issue of water resource management in Tibet is a significant geopolitical and environmental concern. The use or misuse of Tibet's water resources remains a critical issue with significant geopolitical and environmental implications. Tibet, often referred to as the 'Water Tower of Asia', is the source of several major rivers that flow into neighboring countries, including India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. China's extensive dam-building and water diversion projects in Tibet have raised concerns among downstream nations about reduced water flow and ecological impact, such as the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet), which flows into India and Bangladesh.⁹ These projects have raised fears about potential water shortages, reduced river flow, and environmental degradation downstream. For instance, the construction of the Zangmu Dam on the Brahmaputra has been a point of contention between China and India.¹⁰ A recent development highlighting these concerns is China's reported initiative to transport fresh water from Tibet to the Maldives. This initiative, aimed at addressing the freshwater scarcity in the Maldives, has sparked controversy as it appears to prioritise external needs over the local Tibetan population's water security.¹¹ Critics argue that such projects could exacerbate water shortages in Tibetan regions already facing environmental stress. The extraction and diversion of water from Tibetan rivers can lead to significant ecological and social consequences for local communities. Reduced water availability can affect agriculture, drinking water supply, and the overall sustainability of the region. Moreover, the environmental stress caused by large-scale water projects can lead to long-term ecological imbalances, affecting biodiversity and natural habitats.

Along with this, the allegation that China is developing a 'River in the sky' or *Tianhe* to divert moisture from monsoon clouds to Tibet, thereby, affecting India, is a topic of significant debate. While there are claims about China's weather modification programs, such as cloud seeding to enhance rainfall, concrete evidence supporting this specific allegation remains scarce. China has a long history of using cloud seeding technology to influence weather patterns, particularly for agricultural benefits and events like the 2008 Beijing Olympics.¹² In recent years (Dec 2020), China announced an ambitious plan to expand its weather modification program to cover 5.5 million sq kms by 2025, including parts of Tibet.¹³ These developments have raised concerns among neighboring countries, including India, about potential impacts on regional weather patterns and water resources.

However, the notion of creating a river in the sky to systematically steal monsoon moisture and significantly alter its natural flow into India lacks substantiated scientific evidence. The monsoon system is a complex climatic phenomenon influenced by various global and regional factors, making it improbable for any single intervention to have such a drastic impact.¹⁴ Additionally, such large-scale weather manipulation would require an unprecedented level of technological advancement and coordination, which currently seems beyond the reach of existing capabilities. Therefore, while China's weather modification efforts are real and expanding, the specific allegation of diverting monsoon moisture to Tibet remains unverified and speculative. Further scientific investigation and international transparency are necessary to assess the true extent and implications of such activities.

Tibetans predominantly practice Tibetan Buddhism, which holds significant cultural and spiritual importance. However, China enforces stringent regulations on religious activities, including the appointment of pro-China officials within monasteries, restrictions on religious gatherings, and campaigns to promote loyalty to the Chinese state over religious allegiances. The Chinese government's interference in the selection of Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, is particularly contentious. The CCP has initiated the implementation of 'Order No.19', known as the 'Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues', effective from 01 Sep 2023. This move aims to tighten control over religious institutions in China and occupied regions like Tibet,

East Turkestan (Xinjiang), and Southern Mongolia (Inner Mongolia). The implementation of Order No.19 tightens control over religious institutions in Tibet, aligning with China's broader efforts to suppress religious freedom.¹⁵ This poses implications for India as it underscores China's assertive policies in Tibet, affecting regional stability and relations.

These assertive policies underscore China's determination to maintain political control and Sinicize the Tibetan society, despite ongoing resistance and international criticism.

India's Strategic Calculus

India's response to China's actions in Tibet involves a delicate diplomatic dance, striving to uphold its territorial integrity while mitigating the risk of direct confrontation. The unresolved border dispute between India and China, particularly in regions like Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh, continues to be a focal point of contention.¹⁶ Arunachal Pradesh, also known as South Tibet, is a key flashpoint in the India-China border dispute. China claims the entire state as its own territory, despite it being administered by India. This territorial claim is rooted in China's historical assertions of suzerainty over Tibet, with Arunachal Pradesh forming part of what China perceives as its traditional sphere of influence.¹⁷ In a recent development, China reiterated its claim over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting it as part of its territory, despite India's dismissal of such claims as 'Absurd' and 'Ludicrous'. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian restated China's position on 25 Mar, in response to remarks made by Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. He, addressing the issue during a lecture at the Institute of South Asian Studies of the National University of Singapore, labelled China's claims on Arunachal Pradesh as ludicrous and affirmed the region as an integral part of India.¹⁸ Despite these incidents, India is trying to enhance infrastructure development in Arunachal Pradesh, which is aimed at strengthening its defensive capabilities and asserting its sovereignty. These initiatives demonstrate India's determination to protect its territorial integrity and deter any aggressive moves by China.¹⁹

The Line of Actual Control (LAC), the *de-facto* border between India and China, is another contentious area where Tibet plays a significant role. The LAC is not precisely demarcated, leading to frequent incursions and disputes over territorial control. China's

infrastructure development projects in Tibet, such as roads and military installations, have raised concerns in India about China's strategic intentions and its ability to project power along the border.²⁰ Recent clashes along the LAC, notably the Galwan Valley incident in Jun 2020, have heightened tensions and underscored the potential for escalation.²¹ The clash, which resulted in casualties on both sides, occurred in the context of heightened tensions and military build-up in the region. While the immediate trigger for the incident was a dispute over the construction of infrastructure by both sides near the LAC, underlying territorial and strategic considerations, including China's claims over Tibet, contributed to the escalation.²² These incidents serve as stark reminders of the complex dynamics shaping India-China relations, with Tibet often at the heart of territorial disputes and geopolitical manoeuvring.

Moreover, India's decision to host the 14th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile presents a complex diplomatic challenge with significant strategic implications in the region. The Dalai Lama, revered as the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a symbol of Tibetan autonomy, fled to India in 1959 following a failed uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet. Since then, India has provided sanctuary to the Tibetan spiritual leader and his government-in-exile, granting them political asylum and allowing them to operate from Dharamshala in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh.²³ India's support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile is grounded in its commitment to humanitarian values and the preservation of Tibetan culture. By providing refuge to the Tibetan diaspora, India upholds principles of religious freedom and cultural diversity, aligning with its democratic ethos and tradition of sheltering persecuted communities.²⁴ Also, India's hosting of the Dalai Lama serves as a symbolic gesture of defiance against China's claims of sovereignty over Tibet. China considers Tibet an integral part of its territory and views any support for Tibetan autonomy or the Dalai Lama as interference in its internal affairs. India's refusal to adhere to Beijing's demands to restrict the activities of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile reflects its commitment to upholding the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs.²⁵ During a significant event marking the 35th birth anniversary of Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Tibetan government-in-exile urged India and other democratic nations to

exert pressure on Beijing regarding the disappearance of the Panchen Lama nearly 29 years ago. The call includes demands for Beijing to disclose the whereabouts of Choekyi Nyima and to permit an independent fact-finding commission to investigate his disappearance. The Panchen Lama disappeared merely three days after being recognised by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnated Panchen Lama.²⁶ However, India's support for the Tibetan cause also carries strategic risks and complications in its relationship with China. Beijing perceives India's hosting of the Dalai Lama as a provocative act and a challenge to its authority, leading to periodic diplomatic tensions and pressure on India to limit its engagement with the Tibetan leadership.²⁷ This gesture has irked Beijing and contributed to the simmering tensions between the two countries, with China viewing India's support for the Tibetan cause as interference in its internal affairs.²⁸

Furthermore, India should prioritise bolstering its diplomatic outreach to garner international support against China's assertive policies in Tibet. Engaging with key global players such as the US, the European Union, and Japan to form a unified front can help counterbalance China's influence.²⁹ Additionally, enhancing economic and infrastructural ties with neighbouring countries can create a more resilient regional bloc. For instance, the 'Act East' policy should be leveraged to strengthen ties with Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, thus, diluting China's dominance in the region.³⁰

India's approach to Tibet is intricately tied to broader geopolitical considerations, particularly its strategic partnership with the US and its efforts to counter China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The growing strategic alignment between India and the US, as evidenced by their deepening defence cooperation and shared concerns about China's assertive behaviour, has shaped India's approach to regional dynamics.³¹ The 2021 Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) Leaders' Summit, which brought together the leaders of the US, India, Japan, and Australia, underscored their commitment to promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific and addressing common security challenges. This partnership has implications for India's approach to Tibet, as it seeks to balance its relationship with China while aligning with like-minded countries to maintain regional stability.³²

India's participation in various QUAD meetings and exercises, such as the Malabar Naval Exercise, reflects its commitment to countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region. These engagements serve as platforms for enhancing cooperation on security issues and promoting a rules-based order in the region.³³ India views China's increasing presence in South Asia, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with skepticism and seeks to balance Beijing's influence by strengthening partnerships with like-minded countries, including Japan, Australia, and the US along with their neighbours South Asian countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.³⁴ India perceives the BRI as a means for China to extend its influence in the Indian Ocean region and encircle India with strategic assets and infrastructure projects.³⁵ Moreover, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of the BRI, passes through territory claimed by India, further exacerbating India's security concerns and prompting it to adopt a cautious approach to China's regional initiatives.³⁶ India's response has included strengthening ties with other regional powers, enhancing defence cooperation, and bolstering infrastructure development in its border regions. This proactive stance is driven by concerns about China's growing assertiveness and its implications for India's security and regional stability. India's challenge lies in safeguarding its strategic interests while navigating the complexities of its relationship with Tibet. On one hand, India seeks to preserve its historical and cultural ties with Tibet, support Tibetan autonomy, and uphold humanitarian values. On the other hand, it must manage its delicate relationship with China and avoid actions that could escalate tensions or jeopardise broader geopolitical objectives.³⁷ This intricate web of diplomatic manoeuvring underscores the nuanced nature of India's response to China's actions in Tibet and its broader implications for regional stability and security.

To make India's strategic calculus, more engaging and actionable, incorporating a set of strategic recommendations for India and the international community is crucial. On the domestic front, India must accelerate its infrastructure development along the Himalayan border to improve military readiness and local resilience.³⁸ Projects akin to the Border Roads Organisation's initiatives are vital for maintaining strategic advantages. Globally,

it is imperative to advocate for human rights and cultural preservation in Tibet through international forums such as the United Nations (UN). Collaborating with global NGOs and leveraging platforms like the UN Human Rights Council can amplify the issue of Tibet on the world stage, drawing attention to China's policies of cultural assimilation and repression.³⁹ Finally, India should foster stronger cultural and educational exchanges with the Tibetan diaspora, ensuring their voices and cultural heritage are preserved and promoted. Such efforts can help maintain the cultural fabric of Tibet, while also positioning India as a champion of human rights and cultural preservation. By implementing these recommendations, India can not only safeguard its national interests but also contribute to a more balanced and equitable global order.

Implications for Regional Stability

The evolving dynamics between China and India regarding Tibet have significant implications for regional stability and security, extending far beyond their borders. Tensions along the LAC have escalated in recent years, leading to military standoffs such as those in Doklam in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020. These incidents highlight the precarious nature of the bilateral relationship between India and China, with unresolved border disputes exacerbating mistrust and heightening the risk of armed conflict.⁴⁰ The Indo-China border disputes, particularly in regions like Arunachal Pradesh and along the LAC, serve as potential flashpoints for conflict, posing a threat to regional stability. The lack of clear demarcation and differing interpretations of the border by both sides increase the likelihood of misunderstandings, miscalculations, and inadvertent escalation.⁴¹ Moreover, the militarisation of the border areas, coupled with the deployment of troops and advanced weaponry by both India and China, raises concerns about the potential for a military confrontation with broader implications for regional security.⁴² The strategic importance of the Himalayan region, as well as its proximity to other South Asian countries, further underscores the need for peaceful resolution of border disputes to prevent destabilisation of the region.⁴³ Furthermore, the evolving dynamics between China and India have implications for other countries in the region, as well as for global powers with strategic interests in Asia. The deepening rivalry between India and China, fueled by territorial disputes and geopolitical competition, has the potential to draw neighbouring

countries into the fray and disrupt the delicate balance of power in the region.⁴⁴

The implications of China's BRI for regional stability are multifaceted, particularly in areas bordering Tibet, and have significant ramifications for India's security interests. The BRI, as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, aims to enhance connectivity and promote economic development across Asia and beyond. However, in the context of South Asia, the BRI has raised concerns about China's expanding influence and its potential impact on regional stability.⁴⁵ One of the key components of the BRI is the CPEC, a flagship infrastructure project that involves the construction of roads, railways, and energy pipelines linking China's western province of Xinjiang to the Pakistani port of Gwadar. The CPEC passes through territory claimed by India, including parts of the disputed region of Kashmir, thereby, exacerbating tensions between India and Pakistan and adding another layer of complexity to the Indo-China relationship.⁴⁶ Moreover, China's infrastructure projects and economic investments in South Asia, including in areas bordering Tibet, have raised concerns about the potential for Beijing to wield economic influence to advance its strategic interests. China's growing presence in regions like Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh through projects under the BRI has led to debates about the implications for regional stability and the balance of power in South Asia.⁴⁷ For India, the BRI poses both opportunities and challenges. While India recognises the potential benefits of improved connectivity and economic cooperation, it remains wary of China's strategic intentions and the implications for its security interests. The CPEC is viewed by India as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, further complicating efforts to resolve longstanding disputes with China.⁴⁸

As a result, India finds itself navigating a delicate balancing act, striving to safeguard its interests while managing the complexities of its relationship with Tibet. The strategic significance of Tibet as a buffer zone between India and China, coupled with its cultural and historical ties to India, adds layers of complexity to the equation. India's response to China's actions in Tibet will not only shape the trajectory of bilateral relations but also influence broader regional dynamics and the balance of power in South Asia.

Conclusion

The multifaceted dimensions of China's policies towards Tibet cast a profound shadow over India's approach to the region. From aggressive infrastructure development projects to stringent control measures over religious institutions, China's actions in Tibet resonate far beyond its borders, shaping India's strategic calculus and regional dynamics. The intricate interplay between China's assertive policies and India's response underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of China's impact on India's approach to Tibet. As China continues to assert its dominance in the region, India faces the challenge of safeguarding its interests while navigating complex geopolitical realities. Therefore, comprehending 'The Dragon's Shadow' is imperative for India to formulate informed policies and strategies concerning Tibet, ensuring regional stability and safeguarding its own interests in the face of China's expanding influence.

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