

Singh, Antara Ghosal

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Düsternbrooker Weg 120

24105 Kiel (Germany)

E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)

<https://www.zbw.eu/>

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In China's Own Words: An Analysis of Chinese Strategic Discourse on Tibet

Antara Ghosal Singh

Abstract

The predominant view not only within India but globally, is that China sees Tibet solely through the prism of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Analysing sources that illuminate China's internal debates and discussions about its stakes in Tibet, this paper finds that unlike in the past, China no longer views Tibet as a national security barrier. Rather, Tibet is China's main gateway into the economic hinterland of South Asia. With the emergence of the Belt and Road Initiative in recent years, Tibet's role has further evolved as a key frontier for China's land-sea integration strategy. The paper is thus an exposition of China's desire to lift the iron curtain surrounding Tibet.

Introduction

Even as India and China remain locked in a protracted military stalemate at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Chinese activities in Tibet have visibly picked up pace. Of particular significance is the new trend of China's construction of elaborate settlements along the disputed borders in Tibet, even as it continues with its older activities that include forward patrolling, building up critical border infrastructure,¹ and issuing Chinese names to places within India.² Since 2021, Indian media have been reporting occasionally³ about China's fast-paced⁴ construction of border villages and the resettlement of populations in territories claimed by countries like India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

The construction drive is supposed to be part of a programme initiated by President Xi Jinping in 2017 to "fortify" the Tibetan borderlands.⁵ Under the programme, hundreds of "model well-off border defence villages" are to come up in 21 border counties of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). President Xi himself has been urging herding families in Tibet "to put down roots in the border area like galsang flowers and become guardians of Chinese territory."⁶ In his maiden visit to TAR in July 2021, Xi inspected one such Tibetan border town close to Arunachal Pradesh at Nyingchi. During the visit, he also inspected the Lhasa-Nyingchi bullet train which entered into service in late June 2021 and reportedly terminates just a few kilometres away from the Indian border.⁷ Some months later, in October of the same year, China adopted a first-of-its-kind land border law. Taking effect on 1 January 2022, the law provides a legal basis to China's ambitious border project in Tibet.⁸

China's border campaign in Tibet, particularly its construction of what is understood to be "dual-use border villages",^a has been a cause of concern in India.⁹ The strategic community in India, and in other interested countries as well,¹⁰ are of the opinion that settling militias, loyalists,^b or plainclothes security teams along the disputed border is China's way of solidifying its territorial claims¹¹ and enhancing its

a Integrated civil-military facilities for both offensive and defensive purposes (See Subir Bhaumik, "Dual-use villages part of China's new management strategy on LAC", *News9*, <https://www.news9live.com/india/dual-use-villages-part-of-chinas-new-management-strategy-on-lac-134943?infinitemscroll=1>)

b Like ex-soldiers, local militia and loyal Tibetan of mixed parentage who can assist in the work of PLA (See Subir Bhaumik, "Dual-use villages part of China's new management strategy on LAC")

actual control capabilities in the border areas. They argue that China is seeking to create a buffer along the border,¹² alter the facts on the ground,¹³ and present a *fait accompli* situation¹⁴ to India and thereby effectively settle the border dispute unilaterally. The discourse in New Delhi,¹⁵ which is seconded by other scholars,¹⁶ is that in the face of repeated clashes between Chinese and Indian troops at the LAC, it has become more important for China to secure Tibet. Under the pretext of economic development in the border areas, China is bolstering its existing security apparatus along the Sino-Indian border and augmenting Tibet's role as China's national security barrier.

Meanwhile, certain Tibet-watchers have expressed doubt whether China's paranoia over Tibet's security, and consequently its building a "great wall of villages" not just against India but also against Bhutan and Nepal, is at all tenable. After all, it is China, not India, that has claims beyond the McMahon Line.¹⁷ Moreover, there are Tibetans seeking to flee China-controlled Tibet to neighbouring India, Nepal, and Bhutan—and not the other way around.¹⁸ Analysts therefore suspect that this could be yet another Chinese ploy to "militarily, politically browbeat India for larger geopolitical reasons"¹⁹ and "display the power of the Chinese state."²⁰

On the question of how India should respond to Chinese assertiveness in the name of securing Tibet, India's strategic community is divided. Some Indian strategists argue that from Nehru to Vajpayee to Modi,²¹ India's Tibet policy throughout history has been lackadaisical and erratic. India's attempt to occasionally placate Beijing by aligning its stance on Tibet with that of China, has not made China sensitive towards issues of India's concern, and instead has emboldened its designs against India. Therefore, these analysts argue, it is time for India to recalibrate its Tibet policy,²² treat the Dalai Lama as a "strategic asset",²³ and use the 'Tibet card' more consistently and creatively as a deterrent against China's hostility.

The other view is that India does not really have a 'Tibet card',²⁴ nor does it have the wherewithal²⁵ to use it against a far more powerful China. For example, Amb. (Prof.) P. Stobdan argues that "the Dalai

Lama and the Tibet card are really only Cold War relics” with little use and no sustainability,²⁶ simply prolonging mutual suspicion and hostility between China and India. According to these strategists, it is in India’s best interest to reassure China that it does not threaten Tibet’s security, nor does it support separatism within China. India, they argue, must desist from further agitating China on the Tibet issue, which is considered a “core issue” in China.²⁷

Indeed, the Tibet issue generates strong emotions and polarised debates within India’s strategic community. However, one shortcoming in India’s current discourse on Tibet is that it fails to adequately consider the Chinese strategic thinking on Tibet, nor internal debates and discussions on the issue beyond the government’s official statements and propaganda handouts. This could be attributed to the language barrier, or else the lack of access to sources. Through in-depth examination and first-hand analysis of China’s internal debates and discussions on Tibet since the beginning of this century, this paper seeks to fill this gap. It studies Chinese-language media, academic journals, and related theses and dissertations produced by various Chinese universities to accurately gauge China’s vision and mission for Tibet and what it means for India.

“India’s strategic community is divided on the question of how India should respond to Chinese assertiveness in the name of securing Tibet.”

Re-reading China's Tibet Policy

A careful analysis of Chinese literature on Tibet reveals that contrary to the broad understanding in India^c and in other interested countries, China no longer sees Tibet solely through the prism of internal security, Tibetan independence/autonomy issues. Unlike in the 1950s or '60s, China's vision for Tibet is no longer limited to an inward-looking, defensive role of safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, with Tibet acting as a national security barrier.²⁸ Rather, what China wants, particularly since the early 2000s, is for Tibet to play a bigger, outward-looking, enterprising role,²⁹ where its closed and semi-closed borders are opened up for foreign economic, trade, and cultural exchanges.

In China's strategic calculations in the new century, Tibet is the main gateway/portal (中国对南亚开放门户)³⁰ for its entry into the economic hinterland of South Asia, which is essentially India. And, through India, accessing the strategically significant Indian Ocean region, and beyond. Of the three border provinces through which China wants to break into South Asia (i.e., Xinjiang, Yunnan, and Tibet), Tibet is understood to be the most strategically located and having the most economic potential. It is argued that if the existing challenges are handled well, Tibet can evolve as the anchor for China's three proposed land corridors criss-crossing the Indian sub-continent—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor³¹—and link them to the maritime corridor, thereby forming the trans-Himalayan Economic Belt that will ensure China's sustained economic rise.³²

c Existing research in India on the economic aspects of China's South Asia outreach, focuses less on its economic/strategic drivers and more on Indian inadequacies in the northeast, its inability to compete with China in South Asia, and thus the need for India to accept the Chinese challenge on a more positive note. See: Kishan S. Rana and Patricia Uberoi, "India's north east states, the BCIM forum and regional integration", *ICS Monograph*, December 2012; Jabin T. Jacob, "The Qinghai-Tibet Railway and Nathu La—Challenge and Opportunity for India", *China Report*, vol. 43, 1: pp. 83-87, January 1, 2007; Jabin T. Jacob, "Chinese Provinces and Nepal: The Case of Tibet Autonomous Region", *ICS Delhi Blog*, April 29, 2016.

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Certain Chinese analysts³³ note that as early as the beginning of economic reforms in China, Tibet's opening up to the outside world has been on the agenda of the Chinese government. Tibet's opening up has two broad meanings for China: i) connecting Tibet to other provinces and municipalities within China; and ii) connecting Tibet to neighbouring countries such as India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. Since India is at the core of South Asia and it shares the longest border with Tibet, Tibet's opening of South Asia is all about it being able to access and benefit from the vast markets of India.³⁴

In fact, the three Central Tibet Work Symposiums^d—held in 1980, 1984, and 1994—prioritised the development of Tibet's economy through reforms, including participating in foreign trade. However, as Tibet experienced social turbulence after the mid-1980s—as seen in a spate of protests over Tibet's sovereignty status—the plan to open up Tibet to its neighbourhood had to be put on hold.³⁵ In November 1999, when the Central Economic Work Conference in China embarked on the implementation of the strategy of large-scale development of China's western region, the idea of Tibet's opening up received a push from Beijing. In 2001, China formally joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Fourth Tibet Work Forum, held in the same year, called attention to hastening the reforms in Tibet.

The government of the TAR included the construction of the South Asia Land Trade Corridor into the Tibet Autonomous Region's National Economic and Social Development Plan during the Eleventh Five-Year Plan Period.³⁶ It was also reflected in the Master Plan for Ports of the Tibet Autonomous Region issued in 2009, and various other plans for development of border ports, markets, and border tourism in Tibet.³⁷ In January 2010, the Fifth Tibet Work Forum of the Central Committee formally defined TAR's goal of expediting the construction of the South Asian Land Trade Channel as part of China's

d Key high-level forum for reviewing and formulating Tibet-related policies. Seven symposiums have been held so far (1980, 1984, 1994, 2001, 2010, 2015 and 2020). The first and the second Central Symposium for Tibet Work were convened by the Secretariat of the Central Committee. Since the third, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party has been convening the Central Symposium on Tibet Work. See: “40年7次中央西藏工作座谈会,都谈了什么?” (Seven Tibet Work Forums in 40 years, what did they discuss?, *Shanghai Observer*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.shobserver.com/news/detail?id=284725>)

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national strategy.³⁸ The idea of Tibet opening a South Asia channel then became a common theme in China's regional and national economic and social development plans, as well as government work reports in the Twelfth (2011-2015) and Thirteenth five-year (2016 to 2020) Plan periods.³⁹

In March 2015, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Commerce released the 'Vision and Action for Promoting the Joint Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', which mentioned Tibet's role in promoting "border trade and tourism and cultural cooperation with neighbouring countries such as Nepal."⁴⁰ Some months later, at the Sixth Tibet Work Forum in August 2015, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed the idea of "building Tibet into an important channel for China's opening to South Asia."⁴¹ It was at the time that the term 'South Asia land trade channel' was replaced by 'South Asia channel', implying China's positioning of Tibet as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The focus would no longer be on land trade, but on Tibet as a frontier for China's land-sea integration strategy that aims to connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans, with China as the hub.^e

Although the China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor (through Tibet) did not figure as one of the six proposed corridors in China's national plan, the mention of Tibet as one of the 18 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities within the strategic scope of the BRI,⁴² stirred interest among the Chinese strategic community.

Particularly in TAR, there were both enthusiasm for the province's participation in the BRI⁴³, and concerns over how Tibet, as a border region with relatively backward economic and social development,

e Some Chinese scholars believe that this is China's effort to counter the dominant geopolitical trend in Asia of maritime border politics, with land-border politics, which it believes, will open up space for China to break through the maritime blockade formed by the US and its allies [Tu Deng Ke Zhu, "The Belt and Road Initiative Path Selection in Building South Asia Channel", *Journal of Xizang Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*. 2017(01) Page:11-14] as well as implement a "greater frontier strategy", with Pakistan, Nepal, and Myanmar forming a three-point and one-line external frontier belt for China. [see: Chen Pu, "带一路"背景下西藏推动环喜马拉雅经济带建设的 SWOT 分析 (SWOT analysis of Tibet's promotion of the construction of the Himalayan Economic Belt under the background of "One Belt One Road,")], *The Theoretical Platform of Tibetan Development*. 2015(06) Page:53-58

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and beset by ethnic problems would handle the relationship between opening up, economic development and maintaining social stability, while participating in the construction of the BRI. This led to an intense debate within Tibetan policy circles on the process of Tibet's opening up under the BRI. One view was that it would be a rare opportunity for Tibet to be a key node of "internal and external connection, and bring unprecedented development opportunities."⁴⁴ The other view was that Tibet must first strengthen its ties with the mainland, and accelerate the construction of the Sichuan-Tibet corridor, form the Sichuan-Tibet Economic Zone instead of eagerly opening up to the neighbouring countries. A section within Tibet's strategic community believed that the unknown risks of opening up could trigger new factors of instability; neither was there guarantee that Tibet can emerge as a key node in the network and not just a transit point. Of the two views, the former dominated the mainstream in Tibet. Most government staff, experts and scholars believed that although faced with challenges and uncertainties, Tibet must seize the opportunity brought by the BRI and take the lead in constructing a South Asia Grand Corridor, because the ideal circumstances for Tibet's opening up might never come up.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, as China's new round of opening up to the west under the BRI gradually took shape with Inner Mongolia serving as an important bridgehead for its opening to the north; Xinjiang to the west; Guangxi to ASEAN; and Yunnan to the south-west, Tibet stood out as the only province along China's entire border region that has yet to open up. Given the relative success of adjacent provinces, Tibet feared being left behind once again in the country's new drive for development. Hence, the strong support from Tibetan policymakers for the province's participation in the BRI, constructing the Grand Channel to South Asia and forming the Trans-Himalayan Economic belt.⁴⁶ However, they agreed that given Tibet's ground realities, instead of aggressively opening up to South Asia, Tibet must expand its opening up in a limited, selective, and strategic manner, at a gradual yet steady pace.⁴⁷

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Testament to the interest on BRI is the opening up of various institutes for South Asian studies in TAR's national universities to provide academic and talent support to the central government's policies and conduct academic research or produce propaganda that would facilitate Tibet's inclusion in the BRI. Several high-level consultative meetings, academic symposiums, conferences, and expos were organised to deliberate on the scale, scope, and speed of Tibet's participation in the BRI.⁴⁸ These events involved leaders of party committees and government departments, officials from Tibet departments, and scholars from Tibetan universities and research institutions as well as foreign dignitaries from South Asian countries such as Nepal.

Meanwhile, actions on-ground included the Department of Commerce of the TAR, the Tibet Branch of the China Development Bank, and the Comprehensive Transportation Research Institute of the National Development and Reform Commission, jointly signing the 'Construction Plan for the South Asia Great Corridor of the Tibet Autonomous Region' in November 2015, thereby initiating a "government + financial institution + think tank" model for Tibet's opening up. In the following years, Tibet geared up for realising its goal of opening a South Asia Channel by constructing or improving ports such as Zhangmu, Pulan, Geelong, and Korala. It focused on developing a comprehensive transportation system in and out of Tibet, particularly a domestic three-dimensional transportation network combining highway, railway and air transportation, expanding the number, grade and customs clearance efficiency of ports, and building cross-border economic cooperation zones, border trade zones and industrial parks, as a part of its strategy of "prospering borders and enriching the people (兴边富民行动)."^f

^f 'Prospering borders and enriching the people (兴边富民行动)' is a border construction project initiated by China's State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Finance and other departments in 1999. The programme includes infrastructure construction, industrial restructuring, regional economic co-operation, and sustainable economic development.

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The 2020 border conflict between China and India, therefore, proved a dampener for China's Tibet-watchers. While regretting the negative development, they recommended that China maintain its strategic resolve and double-down on its efforts to carry forward Tibet's South Asia mission.⁴⁹ Accordingly, the Seventh Tibet Work Symposium in August 2020, held in the shadow of the Galwan clash, was silent over both Tibet's construction of the South Asia Corridor and its participation in the BRI, while emphasising the general continuity in the direction of Tibet's development work.⁵⁰ In March 2021, China's Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development (2021-2025) and the Long-Term Goals for 2035, reaffirmed that "the Tibet Autonomous Region will be supported (by the Chinese government) to build an important passageway opening to South Asia."⁵¹ This confirmed the Chinese government's long-term commitment to its policy of entering South Asia through Tibet, despite the ebbs and flows in China-India ties.

“Tibet's opening up means two things for China: connecting Tibet to other provinces and municipalities within China; and connecting Tibet to neighbouring countries such as India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar.”

China's Tibet Policy Vs. Chinese propaganda on Tibet

To be sure, such a crucial and consistent policy agenda of the Chinese government to position Tibet as a bridgehead between China and India, and the enthusiasm of Tibetan and Chinese officials over the project, rarely find mention in China's official communications, white papers, and media reports. Instead, the Chinese propaganda machinery regularly churns out targeted misinformation to keep the external audience guessing about China's Tibet policy. For instance, according to the Chinese narrative, its Tibet policy is driven by concern over the serious national security threat that it faces in the direction of Tibet. Chinese state media often project that anti-China forces are colluding to threaten China's sovereignty and territorial integrity in Tibet.^{g,52} To fight these anti-China forces and prevent their infiltration in Tibet,⁵³ China has prioritised border-area consolidation as the primary task of Tibet's development work. It is relocating civilians to the border areas and rejuvenating the border villages to give a boost to the country's national security⁵⁴ and forge "an ironclad shield to safeguard Tibet's stability."⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the PLA forces in Tibet are getting battle-ready, undertaking large-scale military exercises and drills to showcase to adversaries their combat capabilities and determination in safeguarding China's border and the stability of Tibet.⁵⁶

This securitised narrative is, however, conspicuous in its absence in China's internal debates and discussions on Tibet, those by Chinese academics, party functionaries, and Chinese-language media. A careful tracking of Chinese research on Tibet since the early 2000s, as carried on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), a comprehensive database for Chinese-language knowledge resources, makes it apparent that China sees Tibet more as an opportunity for expanding the scope of its reform and opening up agenda through the BRI or other similar initiatives (e.g. Western Development Strategy), and less as an immediate threat to its sovereignty or

^g These comprise India, pursuing its forward policy and advancing towards the LAC, along with the Tibetan separatist forces under the leadership of the 14th Dalai Lama, with support from the US and other Western nations attempting to contain China.

China's Tibet Policy Vs. Chinese propaganda on Tibet

territorial integrity. Regarding Tibet, the Chinese emphasis in the past two decades or so, has clearly been on issues like Tibet's transformed role in Chinese geostrategic calculations in the new era (i.e. following China's WTO-accession and integration into the global economy).⁵⁷ It has also been concerned about TAR's historical mandate of paving the path for China's South Asia trade channel,⁵⁸ its prospects for border trade⁵⁹ and border tourism,⁶⁰ its role as a frontier for China's land-sea integration strategy⁶¹, and its position in perpetuating China's economic rise under the BRI framework.

Meanwhile, domestically, Chinese leaders' frequent references to prioritising national security, consolidating border defence in Tibet, and maintaining ethnic unity through the Sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism, are understood rather differently.⁶² They are interpreted primarily from the background of China advancing Tibet's opening up, reconnecting with South Asia, integrating the area within the South Asian economic circuit, constructing cross-border economic zones, encouraging free movement or exchange between peoples in the region, and the possible risks to Tibet's stability/security that might be emanating from such Chinese actions.⁶³

“The Chinese propaganda machinery chooses to keep the external audience guessing about the country's Tibet policy.”

China's Rationale for Opening Up Tibet

Tibet's strategic importance for China cannot be overstated. China's strategic community agrees that Tibet is the cornerstone for the country to move toward the global geographic centre. Through Tibet, China can easily reach the Strait of Hormuz, going west from Pakistan; to the south, it can go to the Bay of Bengal and the heart of the Indian Ocean through Sikkim; southeast via Myanmar, it can reach the Andaman Islands to control the Strait of Malacca; and to the northwest, it can access Central Asia and the centre of Eurasia.⁶⁴ Without Tibet, it is dreaded, China's western frontier will shrink thousands of kilometres to the hinterland, containing China to remote East Asia. Given Tibet's strategic value but complicated equation with the Chinese mainland, China has always been deeply insecure and highly protective about Tibet. Of particular concern for China has been Tibet's deep historical, cultural, religious linkages with India.

Che Minghuai, former head of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, articulated China's concern vis-a-vis Tibet thus: if China loses its grip over Tibet, given its historical ties with India, Tibet will likely ally with India. This will put India in a position to control Tibet, move in thousands of kilometres inside the plateau without firing a single shot, and its military forces will be directly targeting the Chinese hinterland.⁶⁵ At present the distance between the China-India boundary line to New Delhi is only a little more than 400 kilometres, while the distance from the disputed border to Beijing is more than 4,000 kilometres—Che Minghuai warned that this strategic advantage for China can be completely reversed if China makes a mistake in Tibet.⁶⁶

Indeed, since the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1950, the Chinese party state has made an all-out effort to legitimise its claims over Tibet, historically, economically, and culturally. It has systematically played down the history of traditional cultural connections and economic interdependencies between the people of the plateau and India's densely populated eastern Gangetic Plains (salt for grain exchange traditions). It has worked hard to transform Tibet's identity, from what it called "Indianised-Tibet" (印藏) to "Han-Tibet" (汉藏)⁶⁷, actively purging any visible Indian cultural influence from Tibet⁶⁸ and thereby ensuring China's cultural security.

China's Rationale for Opening Up Tibet

Simultaneously, it kept accusing India of “still coveting Tibet and nibbling at its territory”,⁶⁹ “of seeking to inherit British colonial privileges in Tibet,”⁷⁰ and “implicitly or explicitly supporting the Tibetan independence cause.”⁷¹ Given this backdrop, the question that arises is why China now seeks to lift the iron curtain surrounding Tibet and taking the initiative itself to reconnect Tibet with India.

China's propaganda machinery would like the world to believe that with the effective governance of Tibet and the significant improvement of China's power and position in the world, “separatists and antagonistic forces no longer stand a chance in destabilizing Tibet.”⁷² Therefore, China is “confident” to open up Tibet, to explore new economic possibilities between China and India through Tibet, even as the Tibetan Government in exile, along with thousands of Tibetans who have fled the CPC rule in Tibet including the 14th Dalai Lama remain stationed in various parts of India.

However, the growing confidence and enterprising spirit of a rising superpower might not be the only reason driving China's Tibet policy. A closer look at Chinese literature on Tibet reveals other compulsions that are forcing China to fast-track Tibet's opening up and integrating it into the nearby well-performing Indian economic circle.

Tibet's Development Challenges

In the last seven decades, China has carefully crafted a propaganda narrative around Tibet, which many in India and South Asia, and beyond, have bought into. According to this narrative, Tibet is an epitome of development, the land of abundance and plenty, a “different planet”⁷³ when compared to the rest of South Asia that thrives with vitality, more jobs, and riches for its future generations.⁷⁴ For instance, in his 2021 book, *All Roads Lead North: Nepal's Turn to China*, Nepali scholar Amish Mulmi aptly captures his country's longing for the “gift of development” like in neighbouring Tibet.⁷⁵

China's Rationale for Opening Up Tibet

However, research by Chinese scholars on Tibet provide very different insights on the ground-realities of Tibet, often highlighting the serious developmental challenges still plaguing the region, even after 70 years of Chinese rule and despite various high-level interventions made by the Chinese leaders. There is palpable concern⁷⁶ in the Chinese writings over the fact that Tibet continues to be the least developed region in China. Its per capita GDP and local fiscal revenue are lagging behind those of all other provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities in the country.⁷⁷ Indeed, some Chinese scholars argue that of the nine land-based border provinces in China, Tibet continues to face the greatest development challenges.⁷⁸

Chinese scholars largely blame this on Tibet's inherent "location disadvantage"⁷⁹ – it has a long, disputed border, extremely high altitude and harsh natural climate conditions, and fragile ecological environment; it is sparsely populated; and it is far away from the large domestic urban agglomerations and growth poles in China.⁸⁰ For instance: Tianjin Port, the traditional port of Tibet's foreign trade and economic cooperation, is more than 4,300 km away from Lhasa, of which there is around 1,200 km of road transport, automatically increasing the cost of exporting goods from Tibet and making them uncompetitive.⁸¹ Meanwhile, there is also a tacit acceptance among Chinese strategists that flawed government policies and a skewed development model pursued over these many years have further worsened Tibet's prospects for development.⁸²

i. Impact of Chinese development policies on Tibet

In the early 1980s, at Deng Xiaoping's direction, China embarked on a journey of modernisation under the policy of "Two overall situations" (两个大局),⁸³ which prioritised the development of the coastal economy and its population of 200 million. It was decided that when China's development reaches a certain point, focus will be shifted from the coastal areas to the inland regions; the country will then eventually achieve so-called "common prosperity". Soon, however, Chinese policymakers realised that the original idea of "沿海

China's Rationale for Opening Up Tibet

开放、内地发动、东西联动 (opening coastal areas, launching inland reforms, and linking east and west) was difficult to implement and that the intended “opening up” could not be conducted in parallel with “development”.⁸⁴

Despite strong government policy support, private capital, technology, and labour did not flow back westward as expected.⁸⁵ The west faced stiff resistance in attracting the lower-level industries from the east that still generated large profit margins. On the contrary, the export-oriented and advanced-products of the coastal industries outcompeted the traditional industries from China's inland areas, including Tibet, in capturing China's domestic markets. This “commodity counter-current” triggered frequent market frictions, resulting in loss of development space for most western provinces including Tibet.⁸⁶

Furthermore, most of the industrial cooperation between China's east and west brought about by the coastal opening policy have been a one-way relationship—i.e., the west serving the backward resource demands of eastern coastal industries in a one-way flow of resources, notes Liu Tongde, Deputy Secretary General of Qinghai Provincial People's Congress.⁸⁷ It failed to expand the relationship between China's advanced east and the lagging western regions, particularly Tibet, nor did it create a horizontal division of labour between the two.⁸⁸ Tibet's indigenous industrial structure suffered the fallout of this one-way association, and it failed to improve its position in China's national cycle of division of labour.⁸⁹

In other words, the economic opportunities from China's reform and opening up policy, as reaped by the eastern coastal provinces, never really reached the interior western regions. This was most true for Tibet, located on the other end, farthest from China's coastline. Instead, China's prioritisation of its coastal development strategy, and its policy of “为注大出、两头在外” (wei zhu da chu, liangtou zaiwai - meaning, keeping both ends of the production and operation, namely, the source of raw materials and the product sales

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market, abroad, which has been the key mantra for China's coastal development), weakened the inherent economic vitality of inland provinces like Tibet. It broke the industrial chain between China's developed east and underdeveloped interior.⁹⁰ Over time, the ability of the Chinese government to coordinate the inter-regional activities also greatly weakened. As a result, the economic gap between Tibet and the Chinese mainland kept growing, with the development of a distinct disconnect or imbalance, and sometimes even a sharp conflict in their respective economic interests.⁹¹

Table 1:
Ranking of Per-Capita Disposable
Incomes in 2020, by Region
(in CNY)

Ranking	Region	Per-capita disposable income	Ranking	Region	Per-capita disposable income
1	Shanghai	72,232	17	Hebei	27,136
2	Beijing	69,434	18	Sichuan	26,522
3	Zhejiang	52,397	19	Shaanxi	26,226
4	Tianjin	43,854	20	Jilin	25,751
5	Jiangsu	43,390	21	Ningxia	25,735
6	Guangdong	41,029	22	Shanxi	25,214
7	Fujian	37,202	23	Heilongjiang	24,902
8	Shandong	32,886	24	Henan	24,810
9	Liaoning	32,738	25	Guangxi	24,562
10	Inner Mongolia	31,497	26	Qinghai	24,037
11	Chongqing	30,824	27	Xinjiang	23,845
12	Hunan	29,380	28	Yunnan	23,295
13	Anhui	28,103	29	Guizhou	21,795
14	Jiangxi	28,017	30	Xizang (Tibet)	21,744
15	Hainan	27,904	31	Gansu	20,335
16	Hubei	27,881	National per-capita		32,189

Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1690484519264725217&wfr=spider&for=pc>

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Figures from China's National Bureau of Statistics for the year 2020 (see Table 1) confirmed that Tibet continued to be among the bottom three provinces in terms of per-capita disposable incomes. Even as the national average per capita disposable income was pegged at 32,738 yuan, the figure stood at 72,232 yuan in Shanghai, while it was far lower at 21,744 yuan in Tibet.

Table 1 shows that all the bottom six provinces in the list (Qinghai, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guizhou, Tibet, and Gansu) where per capita income of residents have been below the 25,555-yuan mark, are in Western China. Overall, Chinese analysts are of the view that the gap between China's eastern and western regions has changed little in the past five years.

Table 2:
Regional Differences in Per-Capita Disposable Incomes

	Town		Village		Urban-Rural	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
East-Central Difference	1.4	1.4	1.3	1.3	1.4	1.4
East-West Difference	1.4	1.4	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.4
East-Northeast Difference	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.4

Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/443311960_120415830

Whether in 2014 or 2019, the per capita disposable income in the eastern part has been about 1.4 times that in the other three regions (northeast, central, and western); the most obvious gap is between the rural areas of the eastern and western parts.⁹² This shows that the western region continues to face development challenges and is unable to narrow its gaps with the east, as envisaged by the Chinese government.⁹³

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ii) Tibet and the Dependency Factor

There is no denying that TAR has experienced progress from being an economy dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry, to becoming the Chinese province with the most dramatic changes in its industrial structure. In the 1950s, 97.67 percent of the industrial structure of Tibet comprised the primary industry. Between 2004 and 2014, the share of Tibet's primary industry first dropped to 20.11 percent, and then further to below 10 percent. In 2017, proportionate layout of Tibet's industrial structure in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary industries was 9.4:39.3:51.4, which seemed to be similar to China's national industrial structure of 7.9:40.5:51.6.⁹⁴

Although TAR's economic development looks impressive in numbers, the devil lies in the details, as pointed out by Li Qing, researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.⁹⁵ A closer look at Tibet's economy reveals peculiarities that reflect the persistent weakness of Tibet's industrial structure and the characteristics of its high external dependence. For instance, although Tibet's agriculture and animal husbandry sectors account for less than 10 percent of GDP, the production and operation methods are still traditional.⁹⁶ In fact, the output of agricultural and livestock products remains insufficient, where the self-sufficiency rate of vegetables in the off-season remains lower than 60 percent.⁹⁷

On the other hand, although the proportion of the secondary industry in TAR has increased over the years, it continues to be dominated by the construction industry, while other industries remain "small, scattered and weak."^{98,99} As observed by Li Qing, in 2017, the construction industry accounted for 80 percent of the TAR's secondary industry. He further noted that as TAR's economy achieved double-digit growth from 1993 to 2017, 11 of those years witnessed the construction industry growing at over 20 percent, far higher than the average growth rate of the region's GDP. This can be attributed to sustained, large-scale supplementary investment in the construction of infrastructure and public service facilities, mainly through transfer of payment from the central government.¹⁰⁰ In other

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words, the construction industry, which has been the engine of TAR's economic growth so far, is actually driven by the central resources.¹⁰¹ This makes TAR a classic case of a typical investment-driven economy with obvious characteristics of 'extensive growth'.^{h,102}

Meanwhile, although the tertiary industry has accounted for more than 50 percent of Tibet's GDP since 2001, its internal composition is rather odd.¹⁰³ Non-operating sectors occupy a relatively high proportion;ⁱ the operating tertiary industries, such as transportation, wholesale and retail, accommodation and catering industries come second.¹⁰⁴ However, new formats of the tertiary industry are lagging behind and facing greater challenges.¹⁰⁵ The tertiary sector is unable to provide strong support and quality services for the development of the primary and secondary industries in the region.

Given this skewed economic model, Tibet remains highly dependent on the Chinese market for supply of agricultural and animal husbandry products and manufactured goods.¹⁰⁶ Its foreign trade remains particularly low and concentrated on a single market (i.e., Nepal).^{j,107} Chinese officials, scholars and strategists have since long flagged the issue of how Tibet's problematic economic model has turned it into an unsustainable low-efficiency economy, rather a "dependency economy".¹⁰⁸ They call attention to Tibet's entrapment in a circle where "the state invests in development, and development requires more investment."¹⁰⁹

This way, they warned, Tibet can only be controlled by the east and it is impossible to hope for a reduction in the income gap between Tibet

h In economics, 'extensive growth' means growth in economic output based on the expansion of the quantity of inputs like labour and capital. This type of growth drains resources, has diminishing returns and hence not desirable in the long-run. This is in contrast to 'intensive growth' where inputs are used more productively through improvements in technology and organisation. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extensive_growth, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/economic-growth-extensive>

i These comprise non-profit initiatives that aim to achieve social and environmental goals and provide products or services for the public, such as science, culture and health, water conservancy, environmental initiatives, social security, and social welfare.

j From 1990 to 2020, Tibet's domestic trade dependency has been mostly above 40 percent and its foreign trade dependency below 10 percent, except for some fluctuations in certain years. (See Zeng Jian, "着力创建高原经济高质量发展先行区初探"(A Preliminary Study on Creating a Pilot Zone for High-quality Development of Plateau Economy), March 29, 2022. In 2019, the total import and export trade volume of Tibet accounted for only 2.87 percent of GDP (Ma Junli, "Tibet in the Past 20 years of Large-scale Development of China's Western Region: Achievements, Problems and Future Tibet Development Forum. 2020(04) Page:13-16)

and China's eastern coastal provinces.¹¹⁰ If this economic development model is not reversed, its location disadvantage not overcome, they cautioned, Tibet, with its small economic aggregate, low economic contribution to the country, and comparatively poor social service, will always run the risk of being marginalised, with low social stability.¹¹¹ In more recent years, as Tibet's economic growth dwindled^k and the limitations of its investment/infrastructure-led economic development became more prominent,^l the agenda of opening up Tibet has once again become urgent for China.

iii. Tibet's Worsening Urban-Rural Divide

**Table 3:
Ranking of Urban-Rural Income Ratios (2020)**

Ranking	Region	Urban-rural income ratio	Difference with per-capita disposable income	Ranking	Region	Urban-rural income ratio	Difference in ranking with per-capita disposable income
1	Gansu	3.2697	+30	17	Anhui	2.3732	-4
2	Guizhou	3.1005	+27	18	Shandong	2.3317	-10
3	Yunnan	2.9201	+25	19	Liaoning	2.3138	-10
4	Qinghai	2.8768	+22	20	Hainan	2.2788	-5
5	Shaanxi	2.8438	+14	21	Jiangxi	2.2705	-7
6	Xizang (Tibet)	2.8193	+24	22	Hebei	2.2643	-5
7	Ningxia	2.5718	+14	23	Fujian	2.2586	-16
8	Hunan	2.5142	+4	24	Hubei	2.2511	-8
9	Beijing	2.5095	-7	25	Jiangsu	2.1945	-20
10	Shanxi	2.5071	+12	26	Shanghai	2.1895	-25
11	Inner Mongolia	2.4961	-1	27	Henan	2.1573	-3
12	Guangdong	2.495	-6	28	Jilin	2.0785	-8
13	Xinjiang	2.4785	+14	29	Zhejiang	1.9636	-26
14	Chongqing	2.4452	-3	30	Heilongjiang	1.9245	-7
15	Guangxi	2.4205	+10	31	Tianjin	1.8551	-27
16	Xichuan	2.4015	+2	National Average		2.56	

Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1690484519264725217>

- ^k China boasts that Tibet's double-digit economic growth is the biggest evidence of the success of its model of economic development. However, it was last in 2017 that the region's GDP increased by 10% year-on-year, maintaining the trajectory of double-digit growth for 25 consecutive years. In 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 Tibet's GDP grew by 9.1%, 8.1%, 7.8% (see <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1711838813306711489&wfr=spider&or=pc>), 6.7% (<http://news.10jqka.com.cn/20220207/c636491428.shtml>) respectively.
- ^l In 1991, the ratio of investment in fixed assets in Tibet to the region's GDP was at 0.35; in 2001, it stood at 0.62; In 2012, the ratio exceeded 100% for the first time, reaching 1.01 and in 2017, it was 1.56 – indicating the trend of decreasing overall marginal return on investment year by year.

The problem of unbalanced and insufficient development in China is not only inter-regional but also intra-regional. The urban-rural gap in West China is among the largest in the whole of China. Most of the western provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Yunnan, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Tibet, and Ningxia) have an urban-rural income ratio higher than the national average of 2.5. Tibet is sixth, with a ratio of 2.8 (see Table 3).

Table 4:
Ranking of Per-Capita Disposable Incomes of Urban Residents (2020, Incomes in CNY)

Ranking	Region	Per-capita disposable income	Difference in ranking with per capita disposable incomes	Ranking	Region	Per-capita disposable income	Difference in ranking with per capita disposable incomes
1	Shanghai	76,437	0	17	Shaanxi	37,868	+2
2	Beijing	75,602	0	18	Yunnan	37,500	+10
3	Zhejiang	62,699	0	19	Hebei	37,286	-2
4	Jiangsu	53,102	+1	20	Hainan	37,097	-2
5	Guangdong	50,257	+1	21	Hubei	36,706	-5
6	Tianjin	47,659	-2	22	Guizhou	36,096	+7
7	Fujian	47,160	0	23	Guangxi	35,859	+2
8	Shandong	43,726	0	24	Ningxia	35,720	-3
9	Hunan	41,698	+3	25	Qinghai	35,506	+1
10	Inner Mongolia	41,353	0	26	Xinjiang	34,838	+1
11	Xizang (Tibet)	41,156	+19	27	Shanxi	34,793	-5
12	Liaoning	40,376	-3	28	Henan	34,750	-4
13	Chongqing	40,006	-2	29	Gansu	33,822	+2
14	Anhui	39,442	-1	30	Jilin	33,396	-10
15	Jiangxi	38,556	-1	31	Heilongjiang	31,115	-8
16	Sichuan	38,253	+2	National Average		43,834	

Source: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1690484519264725217>

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Tibet ranks 30th in terms of per capita disposable income of residents, at 21,744 yuan (Table 1). In terms of per capita disposable income of urban residents (Table 4), Tibet ranks 11th at 41,156 yuan. Therefore, the rank difference for Tibet is as high as 19 in the income gap between urban and non-urban residents somewhere around 19,412 yuan.

Chinese analysts note that the government's push for rapid urbanisation and modernisation has resulted in the gradual decline of its rural areas, with the border villages in Tibet being worst hit. Field studies conducted by Chinese scholars between 2019 and 2020 at various border villages in Tibet^m found that the youth are uprooting themselves from these areas in notable proportions, leaving behind an ageing population.¹¹² After completing their elementary or middle school, these young people are moving en-masse to nearby towns or cities, either for employment and better living standards or for marriage. In other words, these border villages are facing worsening trends of an "empty nest" crisisⁿ as well as overall population loss problem and local administrators are unable to reverse the trend despite heavy government subsidies.

The central government's poverty-alleviation initiatives, including the frontier relocation project or the building of *xiaokang* model villages, have generated rather lukewarm response. The local population often resent such top-down initiatives and view them as unwarranted pressure from the central government.¹¹³ In a case study on Yumai village, located in the northeast of Longzi County, bordering India, authors Wen Tao and Li Ke from Tibet University, note how the arrival of relocated households has divided the pie of tourism economy in the village and has led to a general decrease in residents' income, leading to large-scale discontent among original residents of the village.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, the population relocated from

m For example, Kejia Village in Burang County (科迦村, 普兰县), Chongse Village, Jifu Village in Jilong County (吉隆县的冲色村, 和吉甫村), Jianggang Village in Nyalam County (聂拉木县的江岗村), Riwu Village, Xue Village, Deji Village in Dingjie County (定结县的雪村德吉村日屋村), and Qiema Village in Yadong County (及亚东的切玛村).

n China.org.cn defines "Empty nesters" as senior citizens in a family without children around, including both the married and the widowed. See: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/MATERIAL/76806.htm#:~:text=%22Empty%20nesters%22%20refers%20to%20senior,from%20their%20children%20in%201997>

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various provinces in China mostly live like “migratory birds”¹¹⁵ in the newly constructed border villages. They come to make money during the peak tourist seasons, and then return to the inland to rest or engage in other jobs. Some feel that it is better to live in their place of origin rather than getting relocated to such remote places with little economic opportunities.¹¹⁶

The above study further notes that the income of residents in townships like Yumai mainly depends on four sources: animal husbandry, tourism, handicraft production and selling, and government subsidy. Apart from these, there are also some auto-repair and transportation-related jobs but mostly small-scale, seasonal, and unstable.¹¹⁷ Overall, there are very few means of income generation in the region. Indeed, completion of government-run construction projects like national highways or model villages often becomes a cause of concern for local administrators. For them, these projects lead to loss of important sources of revenue which will in turn result in a drop in residents’ incomes. There have been plans from the local governments to introduce the idea of cooperative economy to bolster income-generation among villagers but the idea is yet to take off due to lack of public support.¹¹⁸

Given the economic challenges in these regions, the grassroots party cadres are under tremendous pressure, as their performance is judged on stringent economic indicators. The cadres often dread working in the border-townships/villages, some resorting to unfair means to dodge deployment.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, once a cadre shows satisfactory performance in these townships, he is held back by all means by the higher authorities regardless of his/her strong desire for promotion, transfer and personal development—a trend unknown to the rest of China. These border villages/townships thus face an acute shortage of grassroots cadres and there is large-scale discontent among the existing ones.¹²⁰

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To be sure, certain poverty-stricken areas in Tibet have eliminated absolute poverty in the recent years through targeted poverty alleviation work carried out by the central government. However, Chinese scholars have serious doubts if these areas can move towards sustainable development or 'constant prosperity' (恒产兴盛) or will slip back into poverty once the government support is reduced or withdrawn altogether.¹²¹

Overall, there is a consensus within Chinese strategic circles that for any real structural adjustment and system transformation of Tibet's economy, one must invest a large amount of capital, technology, and talent. This problem is unlikely to be resolved by the Chinese government with its various subsidies or fiscal transfer schemes, and rather would need to be addressed through market forces. Tibet's opening to the neighbourhood is therefore deemed a historical necessity, as its development in a closed, introverted, isolated state is no longer feasible.

Tibet's Development is China's Development

Tibet's development challenge is not a localised problem threatening only China's ethnic unity; it also has a direct bearing on China's national development. As noted in earlier sections of this paper, the problem of uneven and insufficient development, though most severe in the case of Tibet, plagues the whole of western China in varying degrees. The entire region suffers from skewed economic structure, weak self-development capacity, underdeveloped infrastructure, fragile ecology, and lack of basic public services.¹²² This enduring, severe imbalance in China's development has impeded the country's ambition of unleashing the full potential of its domestic market. China has long aimed to shift to an economy driven by the coordinated development of consumption, investments, and exports, thereby reducing its reliance on foreign markets and ensuring guarantees against external shocks.¹²³

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It was during the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s when China first recognised the importance of domestic demand, marking a shift in its development orientation.¹²⁴ Even today in 2022, however, China remains fixated on the need to stimulate domestic demand which could complement external demand as a part of its “dual circulation” strategy, indicating that the intended economic adjustment has not reached a satisfactory pace.¹²⁵

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on China's domestic demand.¹²⁶ In 2021 the growth rate of total social consumption and retail sales at 3.8 percent was less than half that of the previous year.¹²⁷ Chinese economists¹²⁸ acknowledge that the country's growth in 2021 is largely due to the increase in external demand. Its export growth rate in the first 11 months of 2021 was at 22 percent, due to decline in foreign production capacity amidst the pandemic.¹²⁹ However, they expect external demand to slow down in the coming years due to production capacity improving in various countries, and austerity policies being implemented by the United States and Europe, designed to tackle soaring inflation. They are therefore concerned about a demand contraction for China. Overall, working under the triple pressures of demand contraction, supply shock,^o and weakening expectations,^p Chinese policymakers are once again prioritising common prosperity, regionally coordinated development, and aiming to expand the middle-class group as a sustainable growth point for future consumption.¹³⁰

From the perspective of expanding domestic demand and stimulating consumption, Chinese policymakers recognise the imperative of tapping the market share and development potential of China's vast western provinces. The region has a population of nearly 400 million and an area of over 70 percent of the country and is also endowed with abundant resources.¹³¹ In China's assessment, the region has the potential for developing consumption, undertaking industry-transfer from eastern China, and for opening up to the outside world through

o These include the power supply shock, as well as shocks caused by the US sanctions on Chinese high-technology commodities.

p Due to rising unemployment, unsatisfactory employment and dampened public sentiment due to prolonged epidemic situation and stringent pandemic control measures. In April 2022, the unemployment rate among 16-24-year-olds in China climbed to a record 18.2%. See: “China Youth Unemployment Crisis Leaves Tens of Millions Jobless,” Bloomberg, June 01, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-31/china-unemployment-rate-for-young-people-hits-record-highs?leadSource=verify%20wall>

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inland channels and thereby attracting investments and technology on its own.¹³² At present, however, the current industrial structure in the western region is unfavourable, and industrial process is relatively lagging with very low proportion of modern high-tech service industries. In 2017, western China, which makes up 27.5 percent of the country's population,¹³³ accounted for only 12 percent of the national consumption.¹³⁴

Given the broken industrial chain between China's East and West,¹³⁵ and the western provinces' failure to absorb capital, technology, industry from the East, the emphasis in the last few decades has been on "opening up the inland regions of western China". This means integrating these provinces more closely with the neighbouring economic circuits and cultivating new growth poles for consumption, investments, and foreign trade in the western region.¹³⁶ Thus in addition to exporting from coastal areas, China has been particularly keen on expanding border trade and other economic engagements through its inland Western provinces.¹³⁷ These inland economic activities are not only expected to expand China's overall export demand but will also strengthen the economy of the western provinces, help them develop their characteristic industries, increase employment opportunities, and enrich the people in the region. These, in turn, are expected to increase the effective demand not only in the western region but across the country.¹³⁸

China has estimated that by the middle of the 21st century,¹³⁹ the western region will be able to embark on this new road to industrialisation and contribute effectively to a sustained, balanced and rapid economic development for China. However, with the deterioration of China-US relations, its traditional export bases gradually drying up, its economic centres in the eastern coast reeling under rising military threats from various directions, China appears to be accelerating its western advancement.

India as a Solution to China's Challenges

The Chinese strategic community sees Tibet, out of the 12 western provinces, as the fulcrum for the country's western advancement. In a 180-degree turn from their earlier stance, Chinese policy circles now view Tibet's geographical proximity to India and the Indian Ocean, and the traditional economic, religious, cultural connections between the two, as Tibet's advantages over other regions like Yunnan and Xinjiang in advancing China's South Asia Strategy.¹⁴⁰

The idea of constructing an economic corridor connecting Tibet to the densely populated and bustling markets of northern India, is often seen as a breakthrough¹⁴¹ in Tibet's development strategy as well as China's Western Development Strategy. Chinese scholars believe that it could just prove to be the most effective and viable way to allow the market to allocate resources and transform the economy of Tibet, enabling it to become a pivot for the entire western region in China.

There is a consensus¹⁴² in Chinese strategic circles that it is only when Tibet penetrates the economic hinterland of India that it can overcome its development challenges, strengthen its own economy, enhance its competitiveness, and attract a large amount of capital, talent, and material resources.¹⁴³ It can then transform itself from an isolated borderland to an international channel; from a dead-end to a transportation hub; from witnessing one-way (west to east) movement of people, money, and materials to two-way exchanges and interactions; from being China's closed, backward rear to an open frontier, a hub linking East and South Asia, backed by the vast hinterland of China in the west and facing the massive Indian market in the east.¹⁴⁴ Beyond securing Tibet's development, many expect that the corridor economy through India can become the backbone of the Northwest China's regional economy, integrating the entire region more firmly into the global economy.¹⁴⁵

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In this regard, the Chinese blueprint is as follows: Tibet takes border trade (between Tibet-India, Tibet-Nepal, Tibet-Bhutan) as a starting point. It makes appropriate use of the existing open borders arrangements, free trade arrangements, commerce and transshipment agreements between India and some of the smaller South Asian countries to carry out its own trade with India.¹⁴⁶ Gradually, it upgrades border trade markets and enhances the scope of economic engagement through construction of free trade zones, cross-border economic cooperation zones, bonded zones, and cross-border joint ventures. The idea is to enable Tibet in developing its own pillar industries like tourism,¹⁴⁷ energy trade, and cross-border e-commerce,¹⁴⁸ maintaining India as the primary market. In the words of Yang Minghong of Sichuan University, Tibet must make full use of India's rich resources and vast markets to continuously create new opportunities for its own development.¹⁴⁹ That it should take a lead in transporting the products and services of the Chinese mainland to the length and breadth of South Asia and transform itself into a new hub for international transit, distribution, procurement, entrepot trade^q and export processing businesses,¹⁵⁰ where there is relentless flow of people, logistics and information.

Tibet, it is argued, must also try to convince Nepal,¹⁵¹ Bhutan, and other South Asian nations of their individual benefits in helping China set up this “re-export¹⁵² ecosystem” in South Asia and encourage them to actively participate. China has made some progress in this domain. For instance, since 2006, Nepal has become Tibet's largest trading partner: exports to Nepal accounted for 98.15 percent of Tibet's total export trade in 2016.^{r,153} Research by Chinese scholars finds a considerable part of the traded goods from Tibet entering the Indian market through Nepal, and helping expand Tibet's border trade with South Asia.¹⁵⁴ This is the model that China wants to pursue and upgrade in the future, particularly by entering into free trade agreements (FTAs) in the next phase with various South Asian countries.

q ‘Entrepot trade’ is a commercial activity whereby goods are imported into a country and re-exported without distribution within the importing country. See: <https://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Entrepot+Trade>

r In 2018, the total value of imports and exports for frontier trade in TAR was around 364 million USD, of which about 360 million USD were exports. The total value of imports and exports for frontier trade in TAR reached record levels in 2012, 2013, 2014, at 1.68 billion USD (1.67 billion USD export), 1.92 billion USD (1.91 billion USD export), and 1.98 billion USD (1.96 billion USD exports). But the figure dropped hard in 2015 to 485 million USD (480 million USD exports) and has been declining since. Source: Tibet statistical yearbook 2020

The ‘Asian Century’ at Gunpoint

There is no dearth in examples from different parts of the world of countries that have benefitted from regionalism, transforming political borderlands from being barriers to channels of economic exchange and thereby forming land-based, internal unified markets. The European Union (EU) could be a useful example. In Asia, Chinese and Indian leaders, too, have long recognised the benefits of closer economic ties between China and India—the two largest markets of the world. They are aware that stronger economic ties between these two countries could mark the beginning of a so-called “Asian Century” that would benefit not just them, but the region and beyond. But what makes China’s proposition for an “Asian century”^s problematic is that China is reluctant to find a mutual resolution to the enduring political-security issues between the two countries and creating an amicable atmosphere for robust economic cooperation. Its strategy is to prioritise seeking absolute “military advantage over India,”¹⁵⁵ and then compelling it (India) to adjust its China policy. In other words, China seeks to use Tibet also as a key supply-centre and security-guarantor for China’s access to Indian markets and interests in the Indian Ocean.¹⁵⁶

Writings by various Chinese scholars and strategists attest that for China, the issue of its construction of economic corridors criss-crossing South Asia is not purely an economic one. Rather, these channels, the networked development of highways, railways, and air transportation,¹⁵⁷ have a direct defence and national security function. In the words of Chen Jidong, deputy director of the South Asian Institute of Sichuan University: “These are China’s economic lifeline during peacetime and security lifeline during wartime.”¹⁵⁸

Similarly, Tibet’s energy and power facilities are not designed only to promote economic development and meet the needs of the people, but also to maintain fuel supply and act as safe-shelters during military mobilisations. The construction of communication facilities, including

^s Integration of Chinese and Indian economies through Tibet or other western Chinese provinces.

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cross-border internet optical cable channels, are not only meant to upgrade Tibet’s foreign trade through international e-commerce, but also serve to establish backup communication hubs and form a national information highway, aiding the PLA during military operations. Even Tibet’s focus on ecology is not only to ensure sustainable economic development but also aimed at greening of military facilities, traffic lines, pre-set positions and important strategic targets, to form green “camouflage umbrella” during wartime.¹⁵⁹

In the same vein, China’s drive for border-town constructions, border industrialisation/urbanisations, are aimed as much at promoting border economic development and poverty alleviation as they are at providing logistical support^t for the Chinese forces.¹⁶⁰ After all, promoting frontier economic development, preventing the hollowing out of border villages, stabilising local supply, improving logistics management, greater efficiency in managing Tibet’s defence economy have originally been a long-standing demand of Chinese troops stationed in Tibet. Chinese researches highlight how the PLA troops in Tibet have long faced challenges such as acute shortage of grains, vegetables and other staples, and massive loss of funds and materials under poor reserve conditions. They also suffered serious overrun in transportation costs, maintenance and repair charges, as well as fuel costs, due to Tibet’s harsh climate, inhospitable terrain, and economic backwardness.¹⁶¹

As a result, China since the Hu Jintao¹⁶² years has prioritised “coordinated development of economic construction and national defence construction”. Explaining China’s approach to the concept, Kong Xiangfu of Renmin University, argues that economic construction and national defence construction are mutually reinforcing and together comprise the comprehensive national strength of a nation. For China, as long as the western region’s market demand remains sluggish and consumption insufficient, the national defence economy in the western region will seek to increase consumption and stimulate

t The idea is that a prosperous border area will attract and gather a large number of people to produce and live in those areas, which in turn will strengthen the mass base for maintaining border security.

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economic growth. On the other hand, as and when the economy picks up, the conditions will be greatly improved for further bolstering national defence. Therefore, the development of western China is not only the country’s blueprint for sustained economic rise, but also a grand strategy for national defence.¹⁶³

Since the Sixth Central Tibet Work Forum in 2015, China has further prioritised the policy of simultaneous garrisoning of troops and appeasing the people and attaching equal importance to securing and revitalising borders (屯兵和安民并、固边和兴边并重), particularly through deep military-civilian fusion.¹⁶⁴ Chinese strategists are of the opinion that the more Tibet is opened up and integrated with the Indian economic circuit, the more vigorously will China strive to develop its border control and border security capabilities, mainly to hedge against the uncertainties and instabilities in China-India ties.¹⁶⁵

In this regard, it is important to understand China’s dialectical approach to international relations, particularly in the case of its relations with India. Many Chinese strategists believe that Mao Zedong’s strategy remains relevant for China’s diplomacy towards India: “以斗争求团结，则团结者存。以妥协求团结，则团结者亡”¹⁶⁶ (loosely translated to mean that if unity/cooperation/peace is achieved through struggle, it will survive, but if through concession, it will perish) or 斗而不破¹⁶⁷ (loosely translated as fight without breaking).¹⁶⁸

Moreover, looking back at China’s own historical experience, Chinese strategists often argue that concession cannot win peace, and that it is only active offence that can have a deterring effect and a profound impact on the opponent’s decision-making.¹⁶⁹ For example, they say, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union pinned its hope of peace on reaching an agreement with the United States, wishing to turn its enemy into a friend through exchanges of compromises. However, that turned out to be mere wishful thinking.¹⁷⁰ On the contrary, even as China fought the Americans from North Korea to Vietnam, not only did a world war not break out, but then US President Richard Nixon himself came to China to seek friendship.¹⁷¹ Therefore, the mainstream Chinese view is that only by maintaining its strength and psychological advantage over India, by correctly handling the dialectical relationship between cooperation and struggle, can harmony and stability be maintained between the two neighbours.¹⁷²

Seventy years after China's takeover of Tibet, there are lingering regrets within Indian policy circles about how India had "failed to read the tea leaves"¹⁷³ on China's Tibet plans. For history not to repeat itself, India must carefully study the Chinese discourse on Tibet and have a clear grasp of its evolving interest in the region, all while sidestepping propaganda and misinformation campaigns.

To begin with, it is important to understand that there exists "two sets of contradictions" in Tibet, as expounded by the Fifth Central Tibet Work Symposium.¹⁷⁴ The "main or primary contradiction", as summarised by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the report of the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, is "the contradiction between the people's growing need for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development in Tibet." Meanwhile, the religious, ethnic tension within TAR and the issue of the Dalai Lama is Tibet's "special or particular contradiction".

The intricate relationship between Tibet's two contradictions is a matter of intense debate within China. However, there is a broad consensus that Tibet's development space should no longer be compromised by over-emphasising stability and that it must be integrated deeply into China's BRI plans and play a key role in opening up India's market. However, given its special contradiction, Tibet's exposure could be made "limited, selective, strategic", with adequate precautions and preparedness in place, to mitigate any potential risks and challenges. The Chinese government is therefore engaged in a balancing act between Tibet's two contradictions: addressing Tibet's development challenges by advancing towards South Asia (particularly India), while consolidating of border defence and border security to ensure China's 'safe/secure/ guaranteed' entry into South Asia, without being sabotaged by "hostile" forces inside and outside Tibet.

This complete picture of Tibet is mostly kept under wraps. China's sophisticated propaganda machinery strategically over-emphasises Tibet's special contradiction and plays down its main contradiction of unbalanced and insufficient development, thereby presenting a distorted discourse on Tibet and creating confusion and mystery around China's Tibet policy.

Second, it is important to understand how China's Tibet policy continues to evolve. In the years following the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese leaders prioritised the political and security function of the Tibet border in ensuring sovereign ownership and creating a national identity. In today's geopolitical context, the economic utility of the Tibetan borders has become far more important for China. Advancing border trade between Tibet and India directly or through intermediaries, forming sub-regional economic cooperation, and promoting the BRI in South Asia, appear to have become China's priorities.

In the new era, Tibet has three key responsibilities: 1) achieving "leapfrog development" for itself and helping China achieve the second centenary goal of becoming a great modern socialist country in all respects; 2) expanding the scope of China's reform and opening up from the coastal areas to the interiors under BRI or any other name, stimulating domestic demand and thereby providing a broader space for the sustained rise of China; and 3) acting as a security guarantor for Chinese access to Indian markets and the Indian Ocean region, thereby addressing its Malacca Dilemma and strengthening its economic and energy security in the face of the severe maritime blockade in its southeast.

For India, the lesson is that its Tibet discourse needs to stop dwelling in the past or get dictated by Chinese propaganda. It needs to reflect the new realities about Tibet and work to be on the same page with China. Only then can India hope to use Tibet as an effective deterrent against China. [ORF](#)

Antara Ghosal Singh is a Fellow with ORF's Strategic Studies Programme.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org