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'China has just raised the level of threat for India'

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Capitals around the world have undoubtedly carefully monitored the recently concluded plenary sessions (March 4 - 11, 2021) of China's National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), popularly referred to as the 'Lianghui', or 'Big Two'. For India, among the documents approved by the NPC Plenary session, one merits especially close attention. Particularly significant is the 142-page, 70,000-character "14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) and the Long Range Objectives through the Year 2035 for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China" which sets out China's national strategic intent. This document identifies core areas of national security and development, strategic scientific programmes and projects, and a number of major strategic national science and technology projects in frontier areas such as artificial intelligence, quantum information, integrated circuits, life and health, brain science, biological breeding, air and space science and technology, and deep earth and deep sea.

2. The English translation of the "14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) and the Long Range Objectives through the Year 2035 for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China" has not yet been released. Approval of some projects mentioned in the document means they have now shifted from the realm of speculation, or potential concern, to imminent threats. These will put India under additional pressure, including military, from China.

3. Approval of these projects assume greater significance in the backdrop of China's continuing and unprovoked military aggression in Ladakh and its massive military deployment -- unprecedented for decades -- along the entire 4057-kms Line of Actual Control (LAC). There is no sign yet of Beijing thinning its troop-deployment or pulling back to its earlier positions. A relevant backdrop are the observations by Hu Shisheng, Director of South Asian Affairs of the Chinese Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), one of China's most prominent think-tanks and directly subordinate to the Ministry of State Security (MoSS). He candidly stated that China-India relations were doomed to clash from the very start. He anticipated tense relations ahead with occasional military clashes. Separately, during a talk on February 27, 2021, Major General Jin Yinan, Professor in China's National Defence University (NDU), highlighted five flashpoints for China, namely Taiwan, Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, South China Sea, Korean Peninsula and the Sino-Indian border. He identified India as "the threat from the west".

4. Shedding China's earlier obfuscation on plans to build a major dam on the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo), the 14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives -2035 confirmed that

“building hydropower bases in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River will be a priority”. It added that “major projects” such as “the development of hydropower downstream of the Yarlung Tsangpo River will be implemented” and that a major dam on the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) will be built.

5. Reports had confirmed, just prior to the NPC session, that China will build the world’s largest dam -- larger than the Three Gorges Dam in Sichuan province -- on the Great Bend on the Brahmaputra River. During the NPC session, Che Dalha, Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), said (March 6) that authorities of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) should “strive to begin construction [of the dams] this year” and that “comprehensive planning and environmental impact assessments for the project should be approved as soon as possible”. China's popular guancha.com quoted hydropower industry insiders describing the decision to develop hydropower on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo River as a rare "historical opportunity". They disclosed that the project is planned to generate nearly 60 million kilowatts, which is equivalent to “building three Three Gorges” and it will ensure national security in many areas and benefit the country and the people.

6. The massive dam on the Brahmaputra, and the estimated seventeen other dams along its lower reaches, will adversely impact approximately 1 billion people in the lower riparian countries who are dependent on the river and the tributaries feeding it. The huge influx of people and the large-scale construction activities in Tibet, including building border airports and 200 border defence villages, will certainly result in warming of temperatures. In turn, this will accelerate the retreat of glaciers and drastically reduce the flow of water in the glacier-fed rivers that irrigate the Indo-Gangetic plain where the majority of India’s population reside. There will be attendant non-conventional security issues.

7. To give apparent impetus to the massive project, 58-year old Li Guoying was appointed China’s new Minister of Water Resources in February 2021. A hydropower engineer who has served mostly in the Ministry of Water Resources, Li Guoying has political heft as a former Alternate member of the 18th CCP Central Committee (CC) and member of the current 19th CCP CC. He is also a Deputy to the 13th NPC.

8. The 14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives -2035 outline the activities envisaged for completion in Tibet and Xinjiang by 2025 and 2035. The document confirmed plans for improving the “comprehensive transport corridors” and strengthening the “construction of strategic main corridors of leaving Xinjiang and entering Tibet, in the central and western regions, along the rivers, along the coast and along the borders”. Plans that “orderly promote the upgrading and expansion of capacity-constrained corridors, and strengthen interconnection with neighbouring countries” were approved. The range of projects to be undertaken in the two Autonomous Regions can be expected to see a massive influx and deployment of labour, technical personnel and induction of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) engineers.

9. Immediately prior to the NPC Plenary session, Nikkei Asia reported (March 4) that China has begun construction of a 319.8 billion yuan (US\$ 49.4 billion)-rail line that would greatly improve access to Tibet. The 1,800 km railway will directly connect Lhasa to Chengdu and travel at speeds between 120 and 200 kph reducing travel time to a little more than 10 hours.

Service is scheduled to start around 2030. Of strategic importance, this will be the second railway connecting TAR to the Chinese mainland.

10. Che Dalha, Chairman of TAR, had referred to the rail project at the TAR People's Congress held in January 2021. He laid out a medium- to long-term plan commencing 2021 that called for accelerating the building of infrastructure with the objectives of ensuring national security and raising the quality of life of the people. At the ground-breaking ceremony of the rail project in November, Xi Jinping had said "The railway project has great significance to maintaining national unity, promoting ethnic unity and consolidating stability in border areas." He also said that exploration of natural gas in northern Tibet should be one of the focus areas of national energy development goals over the next five years.

11. Earlier this year on February 24, Xinhua disclosed that the CCP CC and State Council had issued the "National Comprehensive Three-dimensional Transportation Network Planning Outline". The Outline planned to connect all county-level and above administrative regions, border ports, defense facilities, and major scenic spots across the country. It aims to build a national comprehensive three-dimensional transportation network with "railways as the backbone, roads as the foundation, and the comparative advantages of water transportation and civil aviation". Xinhua said that by 2035, the national comprehensive three-dimensional transportation network will total about 700,000 kilometers (excluding the overseas section of the international land corridor, air and sea routes, and postal routes). This would include about 200,000 kilometers of railways, about 460,000 kilometers of roads, and about 25,000 kilometers of high-grade waterways. There are 27 major coastal ports, 36 major inland river ports, about 400 civil transportation airports, and about 80 postal express hubs. It said the focus will be on building 7 international land transportation channels including the New Asia-Europe Land Bridge, China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China Pakistan, China, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar. It referred to strengthening the 4 maritime international transportation channels. These include (i) the Pacific Ocean to the Americas via Japan and South Korea; (ii) Southeast Asia to Oceania; (iii) Southeast Asia and South Asia across the Indian Ocean to Europe and Africa; and (iv) the Ice Silk Road across the Arctic Ocean "to protect crude oil, iron ore, grain, liquefied natural gas and other national key materials". The report makes clear that China will continue to press ahead with plans for the CPEC, BCIM and the Trans-Himalayan Regional Corridor (THRC), which according to the Chinese plan will cut through the Himalayas to link China with India through Nepal.

12. Projects centering on Tibet are mentioned in the 14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives -2035 document. It asserts that "to serve major national strategies", major projects such as "the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, the New Western Land and Sea Corridor, the national water network, the development of hydropower downstream of the Yarlung Tsangpo River" will be implemented. Specific mention was made of "The construction of the Ya'an-Linzhi section of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway" and the "advance work on the railways from Rikaze (Shigatse) to Jilong (Guizhou province) and Hotan (Xinjiang) to Rikaze, the opening of the G219 and G331 lines along the border road, and the upgrading of the G318 line of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway". There was a suggestion that the G219 and G331 national highways would be extended to run along China's southwestern border. The document

stressed the importance of “Tibet in building an important channel for opening up to South Asia”.

13. It is significant that work, or requisite preparatory arrangements, on some of the projects began within days of the end of the ‘Lianghui’. In addition to the massive dam on the Brahmaputra, directly relevant for India is the approval by the 14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives -2035 of plans for constructing airports in Tashkurgan and Longzi among others. Tashkurgan is the westernmost town in China’s Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region and the first stop on the Karakoram Highway and falls within the PLA’s South Xinjiang Military District. Longzi county is in the Shannan District of TAR. The airports are likely to be completed by 2025. The document mentioned that plans have also been approved for the “construction of about 20 general-purpose airports on the border” in addition to the relocation and construction of some others. These will obviously be dual-purpose airports.

14. The linking of Shigatse (Rikaze) in TAR with provinces in Mainland China would appear intended to make Shigatse a hub connecting Tibet with South Asia. It will additionally augment the PLA’s capacity to rapidly transport troops, military cargo and hardware into Tibet thereby sharpening the threat to the LAC’s middle sector especially Sikkim and Yadong. Upgrading the G219 and G318 highways will further strengthen China’s defence border infrastructure.

15. The projects listed in the preceding paragraphs are only a few of the strategic infrastructure and other development projects mentioned in the “14th Five Year Plan (2021-2025) and the Long Range Objectives through the Year 2035 for National Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China”. Projects in TAR, incidentally, are invariably planned in consultation with the PLA. The railway, road and airports in TAR have definite military implications and work on many of them has begun within days of their being approved. By the time the projects are completed Tibet will have been militarised. These projects will further raise the level of threat to India from China within five years.

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