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## DEVELOPMENTS IN TIBET WILL IMPACT INDIA-CHINA TIES

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An important, but less studied, aspect of China's military preparations are the activities in Tibet along the border with India. The nature of activities at different times obviously differ, but they do contain pointers to Beijing's apprehensions and position on border issues, its willingness to negotiate if at all, and the level of tension at any given time in India-China bilateral relations.

2. Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at the study session of the Politburo in Beijing on December 9, signalled that borders will henceforth be a higher priority and emphasised that border regions would receive even greater attention. That will include enhanced dual-use and development projects. Alluding to the importance of Xi Jinping's speech, The People's Daily (December 10) was quick to point out that it was the first time that the Party leadership has raised the idea of modernising the system and capacity for governance in border areas, since the need to modernize the country's system and capacity for governance was mentioned in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25).

3. After Li Guoqiang, Vice President of the Chinese Academy of History, briefed the Politburo study session, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for national security and social stability to be upheld in China's border regions and for Putonghua (Mandarin) to be spoken more widely in those areas. Xinhua quoted Xi Jinping as saying that maintaining security and stability was the "baseline requirement" for border governance. He said efforts should be made to improve social governance, infrastructure and "the overall ability to defend the country and safeguard the border" and that it was necessary to guide all ethnic groups in border regions to "continuously enhance their identification with the Chinese nation, Chinese culture and the Communist Party". He urged border areas to increase the momentum and vitality of development through reform and opening-up, and take advantage of their coastal and frontier locations to build themselves into pacesetters for opening-up. He stressed that use of the common Chinese language, Mandarin, and nationally unified textbooks should be promoted. Xi Jinping said "We should continue to deepen efforts on ethnic unity and progress, actively build an integrated social structure and community environment, and promote the unity of all ethnic groups – like pomegranate seeds tightly held together." Xi Jinping's remarks unmistakably herald more development projects in ethnic minority regions

and an increase in the number of programmes to integrate ethnic communities with China's Han mainstream.

4. The state-owned CCTV (December 10) elaborated that Xi Jinping had “delivered an important speech, comprehensively reviewing the historic achievements and historic changes in border governance since the 18th Party Congress”. It said he had “profoundly pointed out the important position of border ethnic regions in the overall work of the Party and the country, and emphasized the principles, key tasks, main lines of advancement, and bottom-line requirements for doing a good job in border governance in the new era, which pointed out the direction for high-quality development in border areas and provided a fundamental guideline”. Asserting that “peace and prosperity of border areas are of great significance for ensuring national security”, Xi Jinping said “To promote Chinese-style modernization, no border region can be left behind”. The Global Times (Chinese version, December 10) reproduced the article.

5. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Daily (December 11) underscored Xi Jinping's remark that 'To promote China's modernization, no border region should be left behind'. The People's Daily (December 11) quoted Xing Guangcheng, Director of the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as commenting that border areas play a crucial role in the joint building of the Belt and Road, adding that the high-quality development of these areas will further boost the connectivity between China and countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative. He added that such efforts will also benefit these areas.

6. One example of such activities is the decision in April 2020, of the authorities of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and its Rudog County to create and establish a tourist resort at what was described as the "international" Pangong Tso (Pangong Lake) near Chushul in Ladakh. Such a resort would coincidentally create a permanent establishment in the immediate proximity of our border and provide cover for any induction of additional PLA troops into the area. Later in July 2024, China constructed a 400 metres bridge across the Pangong Tso. Similar are the '3rd China Tibet "Rim of the Himalayas" International Cooperation Forum for International Cooperation' in Nyingchi, TAR, from October 4-5, 2023, and the '2023 Annual Conference of the China South Asia Society' which held a seminar on the "Intersection and Integration of Regional Country Studies and Frontier Studies" in Lhasa on November 4, 2023. These are clear indications that China is trying to consolidate its claim and occupation of the Himalayan region. Beijing publicly articulated its claim of sovereignty over the Ladakh region first through the Zhongguo Qingnian Bao in May 2013 soon after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) incursion in the Depsang Plains, then in April 2020 and again on the day of the violent, bloody clash at Galwan in July 2020. The activities of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)'s leadership are equally indicative. One indicator is the level and regularity of leaders visiting the TAR's border Prefectures or Counties.

7. Since the Chinese military incursions in April 2020, a number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) posts are noticed to have been established in TAR along the border. A map dated October 2024 depicted at least 64 PLA border posts near, or along, the India-Tibet border in TAR's Ngari (Ch. Ali) prefecture alone. The Ngari Prefecture includes the Hetien and Ali Military Sub-Districts (MSD), which have been 'active' since April 2013 and seen fairly intense military activity after April 2020. The Hetien MSD exercises operational jurisdiction over the area of the Depsang Plains while the Ali MSD includes the Galwan Valley. 18 posts are in the Depsang Plains area, 16 around Galwan and Gogra, 16 around the Pangong Tso and opposite India's Chushul region, and 14 in Demchok in Gar County of TAR. For the most part these are semi-permanent or permanent structures and a few are the 'xiaokang' model border defence villages. There are other posts along the length of the border. It is difficult to foresee China dismantling them and restoring the status quo to that which existed before April 2020.

8. The number of visits by TAR leaders to the border counties have also increased. The latter has been particularly noticeable in the Ngari (opposite Ladakh), Nyingchi (opposite Arunachal Pradesh) and Shigatse (opposite Doklam and the Siliguri corridor) Prefectures, each of whose borders with India is 'active'. There is a sizeable People's Liberation Army (PLA) presence in each of them. Over the past couple of years TAR leaders visiting the border counties and prefectures have nearly always visited the PLA or Border Defence Regiment/Militia posts. In their speeches to the cadres, the leaders emphasise the importance of border defence, of cadres 'putting down roots in the area', of the 'xiaokang' (model) border defence villages and leadership of the CCP. For instance, at the beginning of the year on January 26, Tempa Wangchuk, Deputy Secretary of the Ngari Prefectural Party Committee and Commissioner of the Ngari Administrative Office, inspected the border counties of Ruthok and Gar. He met the relocated people, village work teams and soldiers on duty and urged them to guard the borders and protect the borders of the "motherland". He also visited Demchok village. The then Chairman of the TAR People's Government Yan Jinhai inspected Tsada Dzong of Ngari (Ch:Ali) from September 26-27, 2024. Tsada Dzong borders India's Himachal Pradesh in the west, Uttarakhand in the south, and Ladakh to the northwest. His inspection focused on border village development, rural revitalization projects and industrial growth in border areas. During the inspection, he stressed the importance of "remembering the kindness of the Communist Party and protecting the sacred land of the motherland." Yan Jinhai stressed the significance of defending the border as a glorious mission and praised the patriotic spirit of the border military and civilians while also expressing confidence that "under the leadership of the Party, the border areas would become more beautiful, stable, prosperous, and strong."

9. Chinese rail, road and airport/heliport construction activities have seen an uptick since the Chinese intrusion in April 2020, confirming that Beijing has long-term plans and is consolidating its territorial claims over the Ladakh region. Once the proposed dam at the

Great Bend on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra River) in the Nyingchi Prefecture of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is completed, Beijing's stakes will have increased appreciably. Each time Chinese President Xi Jinping visits TAR, he goes to the Nyingchi Prefecture, whose official border incorporates the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh which is claimed by China, to emphasise Chinese territorial claims.

10. Another potential area of looming tension is that of the reincarnation of the XIVth Dalai Lama. The issue of the Dalai Lama has bedevilled Beijing since the XIVth Dalai Lama escaped in 1959 and China has invested a lot of effort and resources to forestall a situation of 'two Dalai Lamas like that of the two Panchen Lamas'. The international support for Tibet and the Dalai Lama has further complicated the issue for China. The XIVth Dalai Lama is 89 years old and in frail health. Calculating that he will not have much longer to live, the Chinese authorities and especially the CCP CC's United Front Work Department (UFW), which oversees affairs relating to China's ethnic minorities, have stepped up activities focussed on selection of the reincarnate XVth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan diaspora.

11. The Chinese authorities have begun sending Gyaltzen Norbu, the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama, to Tibet oftener and for longer durations. Last year he was there for 6 months -- the longest period thus far. This year he spent over 5 months in the high altitude Tibetan Plateau. Religious activities occupied a considerable length of his time during his stay in Tibet. He travelled extensively in TAR visiting Chamdo, Lhasa, Nyingchi, Nagchu and Shigatse and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries there, including the important Jokhang and Tashi Lhunpo monasteries in Lhasa and Shigatse respectively. He ordained monks and focused on promoting the adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism to Chinese socialism, enhancing the educational capabilities of monks and nuns, aligning religious practices with national policies, offering prayers for national prosperity, and reinforcing the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. The stepped up tempo of religious activity is aimed at getting the estimated 7 million Tibetan people in China to recognise Gyaltzen Norbu as the 'true' Panchen Lama. It is essential for Gyaltzen Norbu to gain their acceptance and have them recognise him as the 'true' Panchen Lama. This is crucial to legitimise him as the Tutor for the reincarnated XVth Dalai Lama.

12. Gyaltzen Norbu has also been meeting senior CCP cadres at regular intervals. On February 21, he met Politburo member and Head of the CCP CC UFW Shi Taifeng. Shi Taifeng affirmed Gyaltzen Norbu's "achievements" in the past year, adding that he hoped Gyaltzen Norbu would "earnestly study Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, deeply understand the significance of the "two establishments", further strengthen the "four consciousnesses", and strengthen the "four self-confidences", achieve the "two safeguards" and maintain a high degree of consistency with the CCP Central Committee with Xi Jinping at the core in terms of ideology, politics and actions". He urged Gyaltzen Norbu to adhere to the direction of Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism and make contributions to the adaptation of Tibetan Buddhism to socialism with Chinese characteristics. In May-June

2023, he met Tian Xiangli, Chairman of the Sichuan Province Political Consultative Conference, who expressed optimism about the Tibetan Buddhist community in Sichuan and hoped he would highlight the positive changes taking place in the region. She also urged more valuable inputs, particularly in ethnic and religious work, to ensure the long-term security and high-quality development of Tibetan counties. The Governor of Sichuan accompanied Gyaltzen Norbu on his tour.

13. The period that will be marked by the passing of the XIVth Dalai Lama, search for his reincarnation in case he chooses to reincarnate, and till the reincarnate reaches the age of at least 14-15 years and attains majority, will be marked by suspicion and tension within the Tibetan diaspora, and between India and China. Beijing will certainly try and pressure India into accepting its nominee for the reincarnate Dalai Lama. Given its track record, Beijing could well threaten the use of military force in an attempt to compel India into accepting Beijing's choice. While India is very unlikely to acquiesce to Chinese pressure, New Delhi will additionally be acutely conscious that any weakness or vacillation would be interpreted as capitulation and irreparably damage India's international standing.

14. These are important factors that need to be kept in view during negotiations with the Chinese. These will also be issues that the Chinese will pursue while striving to gain access to India's market. Access, if any, to the Indian market will have to be a graduated, incremental process dependent on appropriate concessions by China. The current situation is tactical and temporary at best. India cannot afford to let its guard down at the border and begin easing trade and travel restrictions. The latter are also linked to India's 'atmanirbharta' and long-term plans of finding a place in the "trusted" global supply chain where Chinese products are unlikely to find a place.

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