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DEVELOPMENTS IN TAR's NYINGCHI PREFECTURE, THE METOK MEGA DAM AND IMPLICATIONS

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For the first time since China occupied Tibet in 1950, the Nyingchi Prefecture, which lies opposite India's Arunachal Pradesh, will be witness to massive changes with far-reaching implications for the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and India's security. The changes are being driven by the "Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Nyingtri City", issued by Nyingtri Municipal Development and Reform Commission on June 8, 2026; and "Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Station: The Strategic Value and Comprehensive Analysis of a Project of the Century" published on August 25, 2025. Involvement of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) in the proposed projects has been identified and the number of PLA, Border Defence Regiments (BDR) and PAP units in Nyingchi can be expected to increase as the projects near completion. There are indications, as in the case of the Three Gorges Dam in Hebei province, that missiles and SAM Regiments will be deployed to defend the hydropower project.

2. The Yarlung Tsangpo hydro-project comprises multiple dams and river diversions, 17 tunnels with turbines, some so far underground that temperatures are around 60 degrees -- hotter than humans can survive -- plus multiple risks. Construction will take around a decade to complete. Although all the heavy equipment has not yet moved in, displacement of the people settled in the Metokpa area has begun well in advance of infrastructure construction and they are being compulsorily resettled in new prefabricated frontier villages. There are at least 141 'Xiaokang' border defence villages in the Nyingchi Prefecture. The pace of resettlement has picked up since 2024. The population is being moved in trucks draped with big character slogans announcing: "grateful for relocation, embracing new life" and "move early, benefit early." Official plans for the lower Yarlung Tsangpo project go well beyond tunnels and dams. The official media has claimed that: "The Yarlung Tsangpo Hydropower Project has commenced construction, the hydro integrated power, wind, and solar power base in south-eastern Tibet is progressing smoothly, and the installed capacity of clean energy continues to increase. 'Nyingtri, a Pure Land on Earth' are continuously expanding, and the slogan 'Nyingtri, a Paradise on Earth' are gaining popularity". Experts assess that Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Mt Kailash and its "sacred land scapes" in neighbouring Nepal and Uttarakhand, Golok Nyenpo Yutse "geopark", Amdo national parks are all likely to be impacted as Chinese tourism landscapes.

3. The Nyingtri Five-Year Plan decrees: "Carefully carry out resettlement work for relocated residents, and steadily advance land acquisition, demolition, and relocation". It urged the participation of local residents in construction, justifying that this will promote employment and income growth for the masses, and "continuously enhance the sense of gain, happiness,

and security of relocated residents”. An August 2026 official media article on training Metok villagers in basic labour-intensive concreting construction skills was captioned: “Work-for-Relief Projects Pave the Way to Prosperity Endogenous Motivation Activates New Rural Development Endogenous Motivation Activates New Rural Development.” It advocated “cultivation of villagers’ skills, transforming their mindset, optimising their income structure, and improving the village’s appearance through practical work. It said traditional farming and animal husbandry were susceptible to extreme weather and disease, and the income from forest resources was subject to climate conditions and market fluctuations”. Seeking to spell out the advantages of these projects, it said the villagers’ reliance on the weather for their livelihood was significant, leading to considerable income uncertainty. Natural disasters, epidemics, and market downturns could also severely impact household finances. The article claimed that income from migrant work has now become a new and stable source of income for the entire village freeing them from being entirely dependent on nature and the market and attendant anxieties.

4. The Nyingtri Five-Year Plan calls for: “Promoting a fundamental shift in the integration of culture and tourism from simple superimposition to deep integration, and strengthen the value enhancement of cultural resources for the tourism industry”. It forecast that “by 2030, the cumulative number of domestic tourism and international tourists will reach over 22 million, with total expenditure exceeding 20 billion yuan”. Stating that project construction is expected to drive the formation of “three major industrial clusters” in south-eastern Tibet”, the Plan envisages:

- i) the 'Nyingtri-Metog' highway (346 km long) will be upgraded and expanded, transforming the original gravel road into a Class II highway, reducing travel time from 12 hours to 4 hours;
- ii) a new 'Pai Town-Beibeng' tourist highway (85 km long) will be built, connecting the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon scenic area;
- iii) the 'Sichuan-Tibet Railway Branch Line – Nyingtri-Metog Railway' (180 km long) is planned and once constructed, expected to open to traffic in 2030. At that time, Medog County will end its history of being 'without railway access' and freight transportation costs will be reduced by 60%.
- iv) Tourism industrial clusters are simultaneously being developed. Tourism resources such as the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon and the Metog Secret Realm will be upgraded with the help of improved transportation.
- v) The plan includes the construction of a 'Hydropower-themed tourist area' (including a hydropower station viewing platform, a science museum, and experiential rafting), which is expected to increase the annual number of tourists visiting south-eastern Tibet from 8 million in 2024 to 30 million by 2035, with tourism revenue exceeding 20 billion yuan.”

5. The Plan encourages development of new sources of energy. To promote development of ‘green industrial bases’ the Plan called for developing AI and computing clusters, supporting industries for new energy sources such as wind and solar power, and cultivating supporting industries for key components such as wind and solar power cables and transformers. It stated this would include development of hydrogen and oxygen production, green computing power industries, and the promotion of hydrogen-powered heavy-duty trucks. Labelling the future of the Prefecture as ‘Digital Nyingtri’, it urged actively cultivating the data element

market, promoting the empowerment of various industries by Artificial Intelligence, and promoting the deep integration of the real economy and the digital economy.

6. The Plan is quite candid about the military aspect of the 15th Five-Year Plan. An entire chapter is devoted to “Building a Community of Shared Future for the Chinese Nation and Fortifying the National Security Barrier”. Among the fourteen other Chapters, one independent Chapter deals with the ‘Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism’ and the other with ‘Promoting and strengthening Party Leadership’.

7. Development of military and dual-use projects are mentioned in the Plan. It proposed constructing test bases for aircraft and drones in plateau and mountainous areas, enhanced flight support capabilities, improved take-off and landing points and communication facilities, building production, training, and testing platforms adapted to plateau conditions, conduct of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) tests, and ensuring the transportation of war preparedness materials and disaster prevention and mitigation materials to border areas. Indication of the latter is the identification of the Tibet Bomi military unit as the ‘project owner’ of work on the G318 near Tongmai. This means any upgrade, widening, or maintenance work on the G318, even if publicly advertised as a civilian tourism or commercial package, is being designed to meet heavy military specifications. Also, the location of this specific project at Tongmai is highly strategic. Tongmai has historically been the most dangerous bottleneck on the G318 due to severe landslides and fragile terrain. Handing its maintenance to a military unit ensures the PLA has direct oversight to keep this vital artery open during a crisis. Fortifying this specific bottleneck eliminates China’s biggest logistical vulnerability in the sector, enabling uninterrupted military movement toward the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

8. Among the dual-use projects, it called on the TAR and Nyingchi authorities to strive for pilot projects for the planning and management reform of low-altitude airspace visual corridors, expanding low-altitude application scenarios, encouraging multi-scenario applications such as “general aviation+”, “low-altitude+”, and “UAV+”, exploring the development of public welfare application scenarios such as emergency rescue, disaster prevention and mitigation, power line inspection, forest patrol, environmental monitoring, and map surveying, and planning the development of business models such as low-altitude logistics and low-altitude tourism. It also asked them to expand the service scope and improve service levels, and promote the entry of general aviation and UAVs into scenic areas, construction areas, and agricultural and pastoral areas. Meteorological service support for the low-altitude economy will be strengthened.

9. There is a focus on strengthening the transport infrastructure in the Prefecture. In addition to improving Nyingchi City's internal and external transportation network, plans have called for accelerating the construction of a comprehensive three-dimensional transportation network with railways, high-grade highways, and airports as the backbone, national and provincial trunk roads as the main body, and rural roads as a supplement. Discussing construction of railway networks such as the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, it mentions speeding up construction of the Linzhi section of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, building a new branch line from Bomi to Ranwu, expanding and upgrading the Lhasa-Nyingchi Railway, and carrying out preliminary feasibility studies of the Ranwu-Shangri-La Railway, the Milin and Zhongshaba railway transfer stations, and dedicated railway lines for factory areas and industrial parks.

10. In the section on urban highway upgrading and renovation projects, it mentions construction of the G4218 (Ya'an to Linzhi section) expressway and preliminary feasibility studies for the Linzhi Mainling Airport to Langxian section expressway. The following highway projects were identified for accelerated construction work: Gangpai Highway (Luxia Bridge to Pai Town); X408 (Luxia Bridge to Bayi Town); Mailanggou to Pai Town Temporary Bridge to Tunbai Village; Dexing Bridge to Naerdong to Yigongbai; and Beibeng Township (Xinbaden to Laobaden); connection of the G219 Chamo and Mimo sections; constructing the G318 to G219 connecting line; and upgrading and renovating the G318 and G560 highways. It also mentioned construction of bridges such as the Juemu Bridge in Bayi District, the Niyang River Bridge, and the Yarlung Tsangpo River Bridge in Medog.

11. An illustrative list of projects for the PLA/PAP or their involvement along with that of the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC) revealed plans for accelerating the construction, expansion and renovation of airports at Medog (Motuo) and Bomi (Pome), and hastening feasibility studies for the proposed airports in Chayu and Langxian. This is in addition to the 5 airports under construction in Nyingchi at Medog (Motuo); Bomi (Pome); Chayu (Zayul); Bayi; and in Nang (Lang) County. The PLA involvement is in at least 24 projects, of the PAP in 3, and the CRCC in 3.

12. Plans also call for improving the ecological sightseeing infrastructure and reception capacity of the Namcha Barwa Peak ecological corridor and the G318 highway and G219 corridors by developing high-quality tourism routes based on high-quality 'red', ecological, and cultural resources. It envisages transforming and upgrading Nyingtri from a single sightseeing destination to a comprehensive and in-depth tourism destination with improved levels of urbanization in counties, promoting the clustering of advantageous projects and enterprises in key industrial parks, and development of county power sources and advantageous industries. A high-speed rail line branching from the Shanghai-Chengdu-Nyingtri-Lhasa high speed line is due for completion in 2030.

13. In conclusion, official plans for development of the lower Yarlung Tsangpo project go well beyond tunnels and dams. There will be a major change in the demography of Tibet. The focus on tourism suggests plans for accommodating very large numbers of domestic tourists from outside the TAR, which will alter the demography of Tibet. Interesting in official Chinese media reports is the reference to the Tibetans and Monpa as now having "a new spiritual asset". The projects planned to be constructed make clear that there will be a sizeable increase in the presence of PLA, BDR and PAP personnel and points to the presence of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF). Many of these projects are due for completion by 2030.

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