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'China's Xiaokang (well-off) Border Defence Villages in Tibet Autonomous Region'

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Since the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping has signalled that extra attention would be paid by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership to building a more comprehensive security structure in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The new architecture strengthens the present security apparatus already in place and combines it with Chinese President Xi Jinping's new initiative of 'model 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages'. It is part of his nationwide push for poverty alleviation spelt out at the 19th Party Congress. The 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages' are also intended to create a buffer inhabited by people loyal to the CCP and the nation. They will act as watch posts along the border, help prevent infiltration by "pro-Dalai Lama elements" and "hostile forces", facilitate the China-appointed Panchen Lama's acceptance among Tibetans and position him for the traditional role of 'tutor' to the reincarnate Dalai Lama. The pace of these activities along with China's efforts to detect and weed out "double-faced" officials in TAR i.e. those professing loyalty to the Party and China while being secretly loyal to the Dalai Lama, has accelerated in the past couple of years.

2. Xi Jinping's personal letter written on the eve of the 19th Party Congress to the two sisters resident in Yumei village in TAR's Nyingchi prefecture, whose administrative boundaries in official Chinese maps include the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, initiated a new and important security programme centering on the borders. Since then vast sums have been allotted for the development of so-called 'model 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages' from the budgets of TAR's departments of public security, border defence, poverty alleviation and civil affairs. A total of 628 'model well-off border defence villages' are under construction in 21 border counties along the TAR's frontiers stretching from Ngari (Ali) district, across the Indian Union Territory of Ladakh, to Nyingchi (Linzhi) opposite India's eastern province of Arunachal Pradesh. They are to be constructed within 3 years or by 2021.

3. Zhuangyan, Deputy Party Secretary, TAR Executive Chairman and Chief Commander of the Construction Work Headquarters of Xiaokang Villages, said in March 2018 that the aim of building the border villages is to ensure consolidation of

border areas and border security. It is to 'align a high sense of political responsibility and historical mission with the masses of the border region' and the Party Committee. An article in China's 'Agriculture Economics' on December 18, 2017 gave details of the 'model well-off border defence villages'. Describing Tibet as the "forefront of the national security barrier and the Tibet border as the most impoverished area in China", it said a total of 628 'model well-off border defence villages' are to be constructed in 21 border counties along the TAR's frontiers stretching from Ngari (Ali) district across the Indian Union Territory of Ladakh to Nyingchi (Linzhi) opposite India's eastern province of Arunachal Pradesh within 3 years. It disclosed that the original plan provided funds of 30.1 billion yuan for the "Border Well-Off Village" and that the plans call for raising an additional tens of billions of yuan to invest in construction of infrastructure such as road network, power grid and Internet to ensure the economic growth rate and per capita disposable income in the border areas. It disclosed too that the status and salaries of these village-level cadres will be higher than the average level of those in other villages of TAR. A villager in a model 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence village' was quoted by Tibet Daily as saying he receives a border subsidy of 5,000 Yuan per year in addition to an annual ecological subsidy of 8871 Yuan annually and that, together with all other subsidies, receives 30,000 Yuan each year! The article said Tibet's well-off border defence villages will involve 62160 households with a total of 240,000 people. They will be provided with ten amenities namely, water, electricity, road, communication, network (broadcasting network, postal network and financial service network), teaching, science, literature, health and insurance (social security, housing security). All well-off border villages will be accessed by metalled roads.

4. The Tibet Autonomous Region Border Work Conference held on December 8, 2017 resolved that by promoting poverty alleviation of the border people and closely 'integrating guarding the border with a strong border' by 2020, the rate of solving hardships of border towns and administrative villages in Tibet will reach 95% and 55% respectively. It resolved too that by 2020, the per capita disposable income of the border people would be doubled from the current level and general farmers and herdsmen would have higher per capita incomes than others in TAR.

5. These 'model well off border defence villages' appear to have been selected for their remote location, very sparse population, potential location for facilitating trans-border movement, and poor conditions. An important role of the residents in these villages is to keep an eye on the movements of populations and activities across the border. Populations in the 'well-off border defence villages' where local villagers presently number 1 or 2 households, will be mixed, with the original number of households being augmented by 15-20 additional households relocated from Tibetan villages from other administrative districts of TAR. The new 'model well-off border defence villages' being established are planned to finally comprise approximately 20-30 households each with consequently enlarged village land areas and attached grazing grounds. Each border defence village will have at least a Party member, if not Party cadre, positioned in the village.

6. In addition to the passive security role assigned to them, official Chinese media reports disclose that these 'well-off border defence villages' have other roles as well. They are outposts for keeping a look-out for "secessionist" elements and countering infiltration attempts by "pro-Dalai Lama sympathisers and elements". The official media has indicated a psywar role suggesting that the well-constructed houses, paved roads, electricity, TV and internet in these villages would be attractive to people living on the "other side" of the border. Party officials posted in these villages would be able to do "political work" in the neighbouring area where people share customs, traditions and often ethnicity with the Tibetan villagers. Related to this are the references since 2018 in China's military literature to the expanded role of political commissars of PLA units suggesting their tasking includes work across the border in areas of likely operations of PLA formations. It has been noticed, for example, that Party cadres and researchers have been doing extensive work on the various tribes in Arunachal Pradesh.

7. Analysis of the Chinese media indicates that a total of 358 border defence villages have so far been constructed in 4 border areas in Nyingchi, Ngari, Shigatse and Tsona. The following illustrate the nature of locations of some of the completed 'xiaokang' border defence villages:

Nyingchi: Dekyi Dongsar village, Lilong Town, Minling County; Bamdrong village, Minling County; and a village in Buji Town, Drakyab (Bayi) County.

Lhokha (Shannan): 96 'xiaokang' border defence villages have been built according to the Lhokha Municipality Development and Reform Commission. Preparatory work on 40 has commenced and 9 new projects have been begun with an investment of 656 million Yuan. Work on construction of 8 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages (including Gongzu and Sangyul villages) with an investment of 89 million Yuan has begun in Lhodrak County. Lhokha has allotted 1.32 billion Yuan for construction of the 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages.

Tsona: Lhuntse County has rebuilt one village and started construction of 4 new 'xiaokang' (well-off) border defence villages, including Zhongna and Samba Star villages, with an investment of 120 million Yuan. 197 members of 56 families will move to their new houses on the National Day on October 1, 2019, in Yulmai village. In Langkazi County construction is underway on 6 villages with an investment of 107 million Yuan. In Tsona County construction of 2 villages has resumed and work on 3 new villages (Quna, Khatak and Yama Rong) has started at a total cost of 340 million Yuan. Ma Ma Monpa Nationality Township in Tsona, referred to as "southern Tibet" in the Chinese media, appears to be getting special attention. The Director of the Lhokha Propaganda Department said the Ma Ma Nationality Township is being given 88.58 million Yuan in funds by 'aid Tibet', Lhokha and Tsona County for the 'xiaokang' well-off border defence village. 40 households will be relocated to 62 new houses and 15 houses will be reconstructed. A hotel is also being built and estimated to yield 40,000 Yuan annually in tourist income.

Shigatse: model 'xiaokang' (well off) border defence villages are being built in Yadong (Dromo), Zhongba, Saga and 9 other counties.

Ngari (Ali): a total of 37 'xiaokang' (well off) border defence villages are underway in the counties of Muir, Puland, Rito and Zanda in addition to construction in 32 'front-line' villages and 5 'second-line' villages. The total investment is 2.14 billion Yuan and 21,353 people will be settled.

The sites of some of the border defence villages are illustrative. The village of Men Chu Ma, for example, in Lhakang Township, Lhodrak County, Shannan (Lhoka) district of TAR is in a disputed area between China and Bhutan on the border with Bhutan. In Bhutan it is under the Kurtoe Lhuntse District. In the past two years the Men Chu Ma border defence village has expanded from 2 households to almost 20 households with the village head asserting that they can now use their "traditional" grazing grounds which they have till now been unable to and are said to lie in Bhutan! Similarly, there is little doubt that gradually taking advantage of the thinning population in the border areas and villages on the Indian side, these newly settled villages on the Chinese side could 'nibble' and occupy Indian territories with minimal chances of detection.

8. Construction of these 'xiaokang border defence villages', which will augment the security measures already in place in the TAR, has probably been accelerated since the beginning of this year. It was in January 2019 that Chinese President Xi Jinping warned cadres that "hostile foreign powers" are trying to provoke a "colour revolution" in China. The ongoing trouble in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) will be seen as confirmation of the apprehensions of China's senior leadership. The Chinese authorities will consequently pay attention to Tibet's border with Nepal where, on the Nepalese side, people of Tibetan origin reside.

(The author is a former Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)

‘Illustrative List of Border Well-Off Villages In Tibet Autonomous Region’

A) Lhokha City 山南市

— Tsona County 错那县

- 1) Quna Village, 错那县曲拿村
- 2) Yama Rong Village, 错那县亚玛荣村
- 3) Khatak Village, 错那县卡达村

— Lhodrak County 洛扎县

- 1) Lhakhang Township, 洛扎县拉康镇
- 2) Gongzu Village, 洛扎县贡祖村
- 3) Sangyul Village, 洛扎县桑玉村
- 4) Lagyab Township, 洛扎县, 拉郊乡, 拉郊村

— Lhuntse County 隆子县

- 1) Zhongna Village, 隆子县仲那村
- 2) Yulmai Border Well-off Village 隆子县玉麦小康示范乡
- 3) Dakri Township 隆子县扎日乡
- 4) Douyu Lopa Township 隆子县斗玉珞巴民族乡
- 5) Sanlin Township 隆子县三林镇

B) Shigatse City 日喀则市

— **Dromo County (Yadong)**

- 1) Guru Village, 亚东县古如村

— **Gampa County**

- 1) Jiru Village, 岗巴县吉汝村

Ngari Prefecture 阿里地区

- 1) Jagang Village, Risom Township, Ruthok County, 阿里地区日土县日松乡甲岗村

Nyingchi City 林芝市

— **Metok County**

- 1) Dhamo Village, Lopa Ethnic Township, 墨脱县达木珞巴民族乡达木村
- 2) Guthang Township, 墨脱县格当乡

— **Minling County** 米林县

- 1) Dekyi New Village, Lilong Township 米林县里龙乡德吉新村