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CHINA PREPARING FOR TROUBLE IN TIBET

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Apparently apprehensive about the possibility of sudden untoward developments in Tibet, the Chinese authorities have accelerated measures to ensure stability and consolidate China's occupation and claims over Aksai Chin, Ladakh etc.. China is also attempting to forge a 'Himalaya initiative' to expand its economic and diplomatic influence in the wider region. The XIVth Dalai Lama's advancing age, decline in Chinese influence in Nepal and the rise of US influence among the Nepalese people and the growing links between the US and Nepal's think-tanks, are important contributory factors. The outreach to the Dalai Lama in mid-2024, albeit at a lower level, is one effort.

Throughout the last year the leadership of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) has focussed attention on the borders and Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. The latter are considered responsible for stirring trouble among Tibetans. These efforts received impetus with Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech at a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on December 9, 2024, where he asserted that maintaining security and stability was the "baseline requirement" for border governance and all ethnic groups in border regions should "continuously enhance their identification with the Chinese nation, Chinese culture and the Communist Party". He emphasised too that "no border region can be left behind". The use by China's official media of the term "Xizang" instead of Tibet is an immediate consequence.

Construction of the 'xiaokang', or model border defence villages, that seek to protect and insulate Tibet has progressed without interruption with an estimated 628 already, or nearly, built. TAR authorities have also been sending officials to border counties and villages, and visits by teams from the United Front Work Department (UFWD) and Security Department (PSB) have been frequent. The Heads of the TAR UFWD and PSB have also travelled to the border counties at least a few times in the year. During these visits the officials brief villagers and cadres about the extent of China's borders and need for stability. They also impress upon them the need to act as China's border security outposts, guard the borders and "remember the kindness of the Communist Party".

Separately, the Shigatse Intermediate People's Court and the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s Lhasa Military Court announced last month that they had recently collaborated to conduct a "significant" legal education campaign along "the 4,500 km of the Tibet Autonomous Region's border military camps" to enhance legal awareness and ensure the proper execution of duties in accordance with the law. Key objectives of the campaign included safeguarding the legitimate rights of the army and fostering stability and harmony in the border areas.

Attention is also being paid to improving the living conditions of inhabitants in Tibet and its border areas. There has been a focus on border defence infrastructure with Tibet claiming significant progress in transportation, energy, and communications infrastructure. All major towns in TAR are now officially stated to have been connected to the central power grid, and broadband and 4G signal coverage extended to all villages by 2024. Living conditions of troops in Tibet have also been improved.

In 2024, Tibet made significant progress in transportation, energy, and communications infrastructure. Key transportation projects, such as the Tibet section of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, the G219 National Highway (Shiquanhe Town to Kunsha Airport), and the G559 (Medog to Dzayul: Nyingtri) section, saw accelerated construction. Work has also been underway on 10 new general -- obviously dual use --- airports and 47 temporary landing and take-off points. The "TAR General Aviation Development Plan (2021-2035)" had planned construction of 14 airports between 2021-2025. Construction of ten of them are reported to be in an advanced stage. The 14 airports are: i) Sernye (Ch: Seni) in Nagchu; ii) Kharo (Ch: Karuo) in Chamdo; iii) Dzayul (Ch: Zayu) in Nyintri; iv) Tsamda (Ch: Zhada) in Ngari ; v) Gyertse in Ngari; vi) Domozong (Ch: Yadong) in Shigatse; vii) Tsona (Ch: Cuona) in Lhoka (Ch: Shannan); viii) Sakya (Ch: Saga) in Shigatse; ix) Shentsa (Ch: Xianza) in Nagchu; x) Ruthog (Ch: Ritu) in Ngari; xi) Pomey (Ch: Bomi) in Nyintri; xii) Markham (Ch: Mangkam) in Chamdo; xiii) Sog in Nagchu and xiv) Kyirong in Shigatse. Additionally, work on 47 temporary landing and take-off points is reported to be fairly well advanced.

Satellite photographs reveal that construction work is underway at the Yutian and Yarkant airports in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. Construction work includes new aprons and structures and possible military support infrastructure. The two airports are at a distance of 400-500 kilometres from Pangong Tso (Pangong Lake). Once completed, they would relieve operational pressure on Hotan Airbase and enhance Chinese military presence and capability in the area. The Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region on December 27, announced the creation of two new counties: He'an County and Hekang County, both under the jurisdiction of Hotan Prefecture. It is probable that both the counties will in due course be directly placed under the direct administration of Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Creation of the two new counties will accelerate and facilitate development of infrastructure in these counties.

China's official media claimed there has also been an effort to develop tourism. The Tibet Daily (January 9) stated that the Ngari (Ali) Regional Culture and Tourism Bureau has achieved "remarkable" progress in cultural and tourism development and has strengthened its cultural tourism infrastructure, significantly contributing to economic growth and community development. It revealed that the "Kailash-Mapanyongco (Kailash Manasarovar) successfully passed the assessment to become a 5A-level tourist attraction, a designation that signifies exceptional quality and international appeal. Concurrently, efforts are progressing steadily to develop 4A-level scenic spots at Pangong Lake, Zhari Namtso, and Gugedu City Ruins, along with a 3A-level site at Xiayigou". The Pangong Lake, was designated an international tourist attraction in 2020. Development projects are also going on at Demchok and Shiquanhe opposite Ladakh.

The UFWD has been especially busy. In addition to the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama extending the duration of his stays in the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Chinese authorities have been engaging regularly with foreign Buddhist communities. The TAR authorities have additionally stepped up inspections and visits to Tibetan Buddhist monasteries to exhort the monks and nuns to 'sinicise' Tibetan Buddhism, adapt Tibetan Buddhism to "socialism with Chinese characteristics", build a sense of Chinese community and resist separatist forces. This has been accompanied by efforts to promote the Chinese (Putonghua) language to the exclusion of Tibetan. The TAR UFWD has formed teams of CCP cadres in 2024, to go to villages and stay and interact with villagers. Instances of resistance by Tibetans have attracted tough punitive measures. Despite these efforts the XIVth Dalai Lama continues to wield considerable influence in Tibet and instances of resistance continue to be reported.

The TAR implicitly acknowledged this last month with the admission in an official report that its public security organs had "controlled" over 3,000 "untrustworthy" persons, implying that they owed loyalty to the Dalai Lama. References in the official media to "double-faced" and "disloyal" cadres further substantiate this. Pointing to this being a persistent problem, a recent article by Ma Dazheng of the

China Frontier Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of History under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and published on January 10, in a journal of Yanbai University in Jilin province, argued for the posting of ideologically sound individuals in border counties and villages. He asserted that "two-faced" individuals who undermine national unity should be identified and removed.

The direct contact, albeit low level, between China and the Tibetans in exile that took place in Kathmandu in July 2024, after a hiatus of 14 years, points to an attempt by Beijing to try and engage the Tibetans and especially the XIVth Dalai Lama. The latter is essential to avoid differences over the troublesome issue of the XIVth Dalai Lama's reincarnation and uncertainties about which policies his reincarnation would adopt. Though indirect back channel talks have been going on intermittently, the direct exploratory contact in July could be an indication that the Chinese have got more serious. The issue has the real potential to cause domestic security problems for China. The Tibetans in exile, Tibet Support Groups and possible support from foreign governments could also make the issue problematic for Beijing in an adverse international environment. The US Resolve Bill that categorically states the US will side with the choice of the Tibetan people would be a factor. Beijing, however, will be reluctant to give up its stance that the talks are only to address the XIVth Dalai Lama's personal requests.

One aim of the "Rim of the Himalayas" International Cooperation Forums" being organised by Beijing would be to diffuse objections to the mega dam on the 'Great Bend' of the Brahmaputra by the adversely impacted lower riparian nations, including India. China's focus on transportation and the economy will facilitate expanded economic engagement with Central Asia and neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, Beijing's efforts enhance Chinese military presence in Tibet, which will hamper attempts to restore any degree of normalcy in the fragile China-India bilateral relations. This will make peace along the borders tenuous.

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