



7 September 2020

'China's Seventh Tibet Work Forum (August 29-30, 2020)'

by JAYADEVA RANADE

The Seventh Tibet Work Forum was held in Beijing on August 29-30, 2020. The Forum heralds a tougher regime for Tibetans in China, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will penetrate into each village and hamlet in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). There will be renewed emphasis on adapting Tibetan Buddhism to 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and countering 'separatism' and the 'Dalai clique'.

2. The entire Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) including Li Zhanshu, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji and Han Zheng attended the Forum. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang presided over the Forum. CPPCC Chairman and PBSC member Wang Yang summed up the proceedings. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang described Xi Jinping's speech at the Forum as "a guiding document on Tibet-related work in a new era".

3. Though held at irregular intervals, the Tibet Work Forums are important meetings where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s top leadership reviews past plans, the performance of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) Party and government, and sets out and approves long-term development and security plans for TAR. Tibet Work Forums have been held in 1980; 1984; 1994; 2001; 2010; 2015 and 2020. This is the second Tibet Work Forum in Xi Jinping's term.

4. Around 300 persons normally attend the Tibet Work Forums. Official Chinese media reports said that among those attending the Seventh Tibet Work Conference "were TAR Party and government officials, the 'principal comrades' in charge of the Party and government of various cities and provinces, officials in charge of the Party and government of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces and principal officials of the Party and governments of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures". Also attending would have been members of the CPPCC, responsible officers of relevant military units, financial institutions, State-owned Enterprises and retired officials with experience of Tibetan affairs. Former Chinese President Hu Jintao, who has served as TAR Party Secretary, might have been invited.

5. Curious this time, though, is that the official Chinese media did not specifically mention Wu Yingjie's presence at the Tibet Work Forum, although reports reveal that he, along with TAR Chairman Che Dalha (Qizhala), was in Beijing from August 28-30. On August 29 afternoon, Wu Yingjie signed an agreement at the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security for the establishment of a Technicians Centre in Lhasa.

6. During the Forum, the Xlth Panchen Lama Gyaltzen Norbu was in Medog County from August 29 to 31. State-owned CCTV, CGTN and Xizang TV's coverage of the Tibet Work Forum did not show the presence of Tibetan monks or persons in traditional Tibetan dress.

7. Speaking at the 2-day seventh central Tibet Work Forum, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered an "important" speech where he called for efforts to build a new modern socialist Tibet. He underlined the need to fully implement the CCP's policies on governing Tibet for a new era and called for "efforts to ensure national security and enduring peace and stability, steadily improve people's lives, maintain a good environment, solidify border defense and ensure frontier security". He said "Efforts must be made to build a new modern socialist Tibet that is united, prosperous, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful". Xi Jinping recounted that since the Sixth Forum in 2015, Tibet has made comprehensive progress and "historic" achievements in its various undertakings. It had achieved sustained stability and rapid development in Tibet making a major contribution to the overall work of the Party and the state. He said since the 18th Party Congress in 2012, policies on governing Tibet for a new era have taken shape. He stressed that the CCP leadership, the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and the system of regional ethnic autonomy must be upheld to carry out work related to Tibet.

8. Xi Jinping asserted that work related to Tibet must focus on safeguarding national unity and strengthening ethnic solidarity. More education and guidance should be provided for the public to mobilise their participation in combating separatist activities, thus forging an "ironclad shield" to safeguard stability. Xi Jinping stressed that patriotism should be incorporated into the whole process of education in all schools and called for "continuous efforts to enhance recognition of the great motherland, the Chinese nation, the Chinese culture, the CCP and socialism with Chinese characteristics by people of all ethnic groups". He said "Tibetan Buddhism should be guided in adapting to the socialist society and should be developed in the Chinese context".

9. Xi Jinping stressed the need for more work and said measures and support are needed to consolidate the achievements made in poverty alleviation. He said a number of major infrastructure projects and public service facilities will be completed, including the Sichuan-Tibet Railway. Touching on the importance of the environment, Xi Jinping stressed the importance of further scientific research on the Tibetan Plateau. He described conserving the ecology of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau as the greatest contribution to the survival and development of the Chinese nation.

10. Commenting on building the Party in Tibet, Xi Jinping instructed that there is need to strengthen the building of leadership teams at all levels, cadre teams and primary-level Party organizations in order to "improve the capacity to respond to major struggles and prevent major risks". Cadres and workers in Tibet should be cared for and support policies regarding their income, housing, medical care and retirement, as well as education for their children, should be further improved and well implemented. He emphasised long-term commitment to the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s policy to ensure Tibet has support from the central authorities and assistance from the whole country, adding that continued and increasing support will be offered to Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Qinghai provinces in their Tibet-related work.

11. A day prior to start of the Forum (August 28), the CCP mouthpiece People's Daily front-paged an article under the caption: 'The Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core is concerned about the work in Tibet'. It summarised Tibet-related work done by Xi Jinping and the CCP CC since the 18th Party Congress. Noting that work concerning Tibet has been a major focus of the party leadership since its "liberation" nearly 70 years ago, it also said that "since the 18th Party Congress, the Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core has focused on achieving a moderately prosperous society and modernizing Tibet together with the whole country and thrown a great amount of [their] heart's blood into developing snow-covered plateaus for a new era." The article primarily focused on the CCP CC's contributions such as "Xi's Important Discourse on Governing the Frontier, Stabilizing Tibet." The front-page article listed instances showing Xi Jinping's concern for the welfare of the people of Tibet and observed that he had visited Tibet as early as June 1998, for investigation of the work of the counterpart assistance mission in Fujian and in July 2011, had attended the celebration of the 60th anniversary of Tibet's peaceful liberation as head of the central delegation. It concluded that "the people who live on this ancient and magical land believe firmly: tomorrow certainly will be even finer!"

12. The article cited examples of how economic prosperity in Tibet's villages had increased as had schools and the standards of education. It asserted that "as an important frontier ethnic region in China, Tibet is located in the border areas. Due to the high cold and lack of oxygen the task of fighting against separatism is arduous". It said "Tibet has entered a critical stage of making every effort to build a well-off society in an all-round way and long-term stability. Maintaining Tibet's harmony and stability and realizing Tibet's prosperity and progress are the ardent expectations of the cadres and the masses of all ethnic groups in Tibet, as well as the common wish of the entire party and people of all ethnic groups in the country. General Secretary Xi Jinping has profound thoughts on how to govern Tibet in the new era, to further promote Tibet's long-term development and long-term stability, and to realize the yearning of the people of all ethnic groups in Tibet for a better life". It emphasised "To govern the country, we must govern the border, and we must first stabilize the Tibet."

13. Focussing on Party-building the People's Daily article stated "It is necessary to fully and correctly implement the party's ethnic and religious policies, strengthen national unity, and continuously increase the recognition of the people of all ethnic groups with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Communist Party of China, and socialism with Chinese characteristics". It stated too: "The central government's concern and national support must be closely integrated with the hard work of the cadres and masses of all ethnic groups in Tibet, and the work in Tibet must be done well in the overall planning of domestic and international issues; and it is necessary to strengthen the building of party organizations and cadres at all levels to consolidate the party's foundation for governance in Tibet".

14. The state-owned CCTV in its 8 pm 'Focus' programme on August 31, said that at the Seventh Tibet Work Forum Xi Jinping had evaluated there had been "all-round progress, historic achievement" in Tibet since the sixth Tibet Work Forum. He said that under the strong leadership of the Party Central Committee and with the strong support of the people of the

whole country, the cadres and masses of all ethnic groups in Tibet have united and worked hard, and solved many long-term problems that they wanted to solve but failed to solve. CCTV said the “five years since the Sixth Central Tibet Work Forum have been an extraordinary five years in the history of Tibet's development” adding that this was because the Party Central Committee has always attached great importance to work in Tibet. It said that since the 18th Party Congress, after summing up the successful experience of the party leading the people in governing, stabilizing, and rejuvenating Tibet, the party's strategy for governing Tibet has been formed in the new era.

15. It highlighted that at the Seventh Tibet Work Symposium, Xi Jinping had explained the Party's strategy for ‘governing Tibet in the new era’ with the 10 “Musts”: (i) Must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and the system of regional ethnic autonomy; (ii) We must adhere to the strategic thinking of governing the country and governing the border, and stabilizing Tibet first; (iii) Maintaining the unification of the motherland and strengthening national unity must be the focus and focus of Tibet's work; (iv) We must adhere to the important principles of governing Tibet according to law, enriching the people and rejuvenating Tibet, building Tibet for a long time, uniting people's hearts, and laying a solid foundation; (v) The overall domestic and international situation must be coordinated; (vi) Improving people's livelihood and uniting people's hearts must be taken as the starting point and goal of economic and social development; (vii) We must promote the exchanges and integration of all ethnic groups; (viii) We must adhere to the direction of the sinicization of religion in China and manage religious affairs in accordance with the law; (ix) We must insist on ecological protection first; and (x) We must strengthen party building, especially political building.

16. Xi Jinping had expounded the party's strategy for governing Tibet at the Sixth Central Tibet Work Symposium in August 2015, and put forward the "six musts". China's official media described the progression from "six musts" to the "ten musts" as indicating a “more comprehensive and profound” exposition of the Tibet strategy.

17. Within days of the conclusion of the Seventh Tibet Work Forum on September 4, retired PLA Major General Cheng Xizhong, who as Senior Colonel was posted as Defence Attache to India and later in 2014 to Nepal and is now Distinguished Professor of Southwest University of Political Science and Law, wrote an article on the Tibet Work Forum in the China Tibetology Research Centre's magazine China-Tibet Net. Describing Xi Jinping's speech at the Forum as “important”, he highlighted that the “Ten Musts” summarise the party's strategy for governing Tibet in the new era. Mentioning that he had worked in South Asia, including India and Nepal for 20 years, he said while in Nepal “I deeply felt that Tibet's stability and development are of great significance to the security and stability of our surrounding areas and to the long-term stability of our country”.

18. Major General Cheng Xizhong noted that by December 2019, all 74 poverty-stricken counties (districts) in Tibet had achieved remarkable results in poverty alleviation. Citing Milin County, Nyingchi City as an example, he said currently 67 villages had achieved 100% coverage of electricity, roads, communications, and networks. The Tibetan Buddhist community had “shown a strong sense of social responsibility and mission” and worked with other sections of society in prevention and control of the epidemic thus

embodying “patriotism, protection of the country, obedience to the overall situation, and mutual assistance”. He said this reflected the current social status, ethnic unity and religious harmony in Tibet.

19. Observing that Xi Jinping had emphasised the necessity of promoting the construction of a number of major infrastructure and public service facilities, he referred to the 1,742.39 kilometres-long Sichuan-Tibet railway presently under construction with an investment of more than 300 billion yuan. Describing it as an “unprecedented project of the century”, he said once completed railway travel time from Chengdu to Lhasa will be reduced from 36 to about 12 hours. This is the second railway to Tibet after the Qinghai-Tibet Railway and meets not only the expectation of the Tibetan people, but also the aspiration of the people of the whole country. He noted that it is of great significance for the development and construction of the frontier and ecological protection and especially for the stability of the frontier region and the maintenance of national security. Tibet, he said, is gradually improving the construction of a “two vertical and two horizontal” railway network.

20. He sought to publicise the benefits of Chinese assistance to Nepal, calling it “a huge centripetal force for neighboring countries and the vast number of overseas Chinese”. He recounted that a number of Nepal Army officers visiting China in recent years had remarked that Kathmandu and Lhasa had witnessed transformational changes in the past ten years! In a transparent reference to Tibetans abroad, he added that while he was working in India and Nepal, many “friendly overseas Chinese” had appealed: “We were tricked out of the country when we were young and wandered abroad for so many years. Now that we grow up, we especially miss our parents and brothers and sisters. We want to go home.”

21. Another article by Lian Xiangmin, Deputy Director General and Researcher of the China Tibetology Research Center, was also published by China-Tibet Net on September 4. Saying that Xi Jinping’s “important” speech was of “a strong political, ideological, and theoretical nature”, he called it “a programmatic document that guides Tibet work in the new era”. Recounting the evolution of the Tibet Work Forums, Lian Xiangmin said they are of “great significance as a link between the past and the next” and have integrated “the guiding ideology and governance strategy.” He said the Forums have generated a number of innovative results and greatly improved theory. He said many things never change, like “maintaining the unification of the motherland and strengthening ethnic unity” and “upholding the party’s leadership”.

22. Lian Xiangmin emphasised that to promote the rapid development and long-term stability of Tibet and realize the aspirations of people of all ethnic groups in Tibet for a better life, the most essential feature is the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and the greatest advantage of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China. He asserted “Our party plays the role of the decision-making core and command center for various undertakings ... and all policies related to the overall development of the party and the country are under the overall planning of the Party Central Committee” He urged party organizations at all levels, localities and departments to fully implement the party’s strategy for governing Tibet in the new era.

23. Within days of the Tibet Work Forum, the TAR authorities began disseminating the “spirit” of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping’s “important” speech and the message of the Forum. The TAR’S National Security Council (NSC), for example, held a meeting to implement the “spirit” of the Tibet Work Forum. Separately, the TAR Party Committee convened a meeting on September 4, where TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie said the Tibet Work Forum demonstrated the “strategic importance of Tibet” and that it had approved a “blueprint for a new socialist modernisation of Tibet”. More such meetings are expected to be held across TAR.

24. Xi Jinping’s speech indicates a tougher new regime will be imposed in TAR. The emphasis will be on Party building and inducting more Tibetans in the CCP to expand its reach. A pronounced uptick in efforts to ‘educate’ monks and nuns to become ‘patriotic’ and adapt Tibetan Buddhism to ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ can be anticipated. ‘Patriotic education’ in schools and campaigns against ‘separatism’ and countering the influence of the Dalai Lama will intensify. Dual-use infrastructure connectivity projects will be accelerated.

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