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'XI JINPING'S VISIT TO TIBET IS IMPORTANT AND HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA'

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Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) at Nyingchi's Mainling Airport on July 21 at the start of a two-day (July 21-23) visit, without prior public notice. The visit, which comes shortly before the 70th anniversary of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet, is important. With this visit Chinese President Xi Jinping has given impetus to the initiatives on ethnic unity, promoting Mandarin as the primary language in ethnic schools in TAR, adapting Tibetan Buddhism to socialism with Chinese characteristics and combatting separatism, etc. The visit would encourage the People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployed on the borders with India and could be a response to the Prime Minister's wishes to the Dalai Lama for his 86th birthday. It could presage new initiatives by the PLA along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

2. Xi Jinping's visit was kept a tightly guarded secret till his arrival in Nyingchi in Tibet on July 21. This would have been to prevent any demonstrations or protests during the visit or embarrassment to China's President. There has been an increase in warnings by TAR leaders against separatist elements and "double-faced cadres" in recent months. Privately recorded video clips showed that plainclothes security personnel around Xi Jinping, as he walked down Barkhor street waving to the sizeable crowds, were visibly tense. The video-clips suggested that security personnel, Party members and vetted people would have formed a large part of the crowd. Much of the crowd in Lhasa appeared to comprise ethnic Hans while at Nyingchi there were many Tibetans or other ethnic minority nationalities. Barkhor street was closed to the public on July 22. Clues are now available to indicate that planning for Xi Jinping's visit had started weeks earlier. The Drepung monastery, one of the three largest monasteries of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, held a "special counseling session" for its monks and nuns on June 21. The Potala Palace announced on July 20, that it would be closed to the public on July 22 because it's walls and electrical wiring were being checked, but would reopen on July 23.

3. China's official news agency Xinhua on July 23 reported the visit. Underscoring the importance of the visit was the presence of three Politburo members among several high level officials who accompanied Xi Jinping as part of his entourage. The senior officials included Ding Xuexiang, Liu He, Yang Xiaodu, General Zhang Youxia, Chen Xi and He Lifeng. Their inclusion suggests the agenda for the visit.

4. It is significant for India that that Xi Jinping's visit to Tibet takes place in the midst of high military tension between India and China -- presently in the Ladakh region. Xi Jinping's decision to start his tour of TAR from the Nyingchi Prefecture opposite India's Arunachal

Pradesh is important. China's official maps depict the Nyingchi Prefecture's administrative boundaries as including most of India's state of Arunachal Pradesh within its boundaries. The visit follows the meeting between the Indian and Chinese Foreign Ministers on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting at Dushanbe on July 6, where Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reiterated that India is responsible for the current situation and that the PLA will not restore the status quo by withdrawing to its April 2020 positions. Chinese President Xi Jinping has, incidentally, not yet publicly commented on the state of India-China relations or the situation on the India-China border and neither have these been publicly reported as having figured on the agenda of meetings of the CCP Central Committee (CC)'s Politburo or Politburo Standing Committee.

5. Xi Jinping has visited TAR twice earlier. On each occasion he commenced his visit from Nyingchi, showing the importance that he personally attaches to this prefecture. Relevant in this context are Xi Jinping's insistent calls for the "great rejuvenation" of the Chinese nation and recovery of territories claimed to have been lost by the imposition of unequal treaties by hostile foreign powers. Xi Jinping's first visit to Tibet was in 1998 when as Party Secretary of Fujian he had gone to inspect and be briefed on 'Aid Tibet' projects assisted by Fujian. At that time his visit was confined to Nyingchi. The second time Xi Jinping travelled to TAR was as China's Vice President in July 2011 for the 60th anniversary of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet. Then too, he commenced his visit from Nyingchi and later visited Shigatse and Lhasa.

6. There are other factors that underscore the importance of the visit to Nyingchi. Nyingchi is of military importance and a number of PLA Units, militias, Border Defence Regiments and missile bases are sited there. There has recently been elevated Chinese military-related activity in the area. Nyingchi is also the gateway through which the strategic railway linking Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, with Lhasa, the capital of TAR, passes. Once the remaining section of the railway is completed, this will be the second railway connecting Lhasa and Shigatse to other provinces in the Mainland. It will reduce travel time between Chengdu and Lhasa to 10 hours from the present almost 30. The world's largest dam being built at the Great Bend on the Brahmaputra (Yarlung Tsangpo) is also in Nyingchi.

7. After arrival at Nyingchi, Xi Jinping drove to the Niyang River Bridge and received a briefing on the ecological environment protection efforts and the construction of nature reserves in the Yarlung Zangbo River and Niyang River Basin. The Niyang River is one of five tributaries flowing into the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) and the main water source for Nyingchi. Xi Jinping emphasised the importance of ecological environment protection, restoration of important river basins, and protection of lives, plants, and mountains. That afternoon he visited the Linzhi City Planning Museum for a briefing on the construction and development plans of Linzhi City. Later, Xi Jinping went to Gala Village, located in Linzhi Town, which is famous for its peach blossoms in spring. He walked to the village convenience service center, "green bank" exchange shops, health rooms, etc. and met the villagers. One villager, Dawa Jianshen said that last year his family's income exceeded 300,000 yuan and Xi Jinping responded that "the good life in Gala Village is a microcosm of the economic and social development achievements of Tibet since the peaceful liberation of Tibet over the past 70 years". Xi Jinping then visited Gongbu Park, located at the junction of the old and new towns of Nyingchi.

8. On the morning of July 22, Xi Jinping went to Linzhi Railway Station, an important hub station of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway which opened on June 25 this year, for a briefing on the overall plan of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway and the construction and operation of the Lhasa-Nyingchi section. He received a report on the progress of the construction of the Ya'an-Nyingchi section, and sat on a special train to observe Lalin. Xinhua stated that Xi Jinping attaches "great importance" to the construction of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway. He pointed out that the planning and construction of the Sichuan-Tibet Railway is a major measure to promote the development of Tibet and improve people's livelihood. Xi Jinping and his entourage then travelled by the FuXing (Bullet) train to Lhasa.

9. The same afternoon that he arrived in Lhasa, Xi Jinping visited Drepung Monastery in the western suburbs of Lhasa. He listened to a report on how Drepung Monastery strengthened innovative temple management, and affirmed Drepung Monastery's active contributions in "supporting the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), supporting the socialist system, and safeguarding the unity of the motherland over the years". Xi Jinping emphasised it is necessary to fully implement the party's basic policy on religious work, respect the religious beliefs of the masses, manage religious affairs in accordance with the law and actively guide Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to socialist society. After a short walk down Barkhor street, Xi Jinping came to the Potala Palace Square and asked about the protection and management of the Potala Palace. Xi Jinping pointed out that Tibet was developed jointly by all ethnic groups, and the history of Tibet was written jointly by all ethnic groups. He said the development of Tibet is "at a new historical starting point. As long as we follow the Communist Party of China and firmly follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and work together to strengthen national unity, we will definitely be able to achieve the second centenary goal as scheduled, and realize the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". That evening Xi Jinping watched a national cultural performance with cadres and the masses of all ethnic groups in the Tibetan People's Hall.

10. In an unmistakable gesture to Tibetans, Xi Jinping called on Phakpa Lha Gelek Namgyal, who was born in 1940 and joined the CCP in 1950! He is also a 'living Buddha'.

11. On July 23 morning, Xi Jinping listened to the work reports of the Tibet Autonomous Region Party Committee and Government, and appreciated their achievements. He hoped that the Party Committee and Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region would unite and lead the cadres and the masses, do a solid job of mass work, improve social governance, and ensure national security, social stability, and people's happiness. He said "we must persist in integrating the education of national unity" and propagate the "socialist core values, education, patriotism education, anti-separatism education" and comparison of old and new Tibet. Stressing the necessity of blending ethnic groups, Xi Jinping highlighted the importance of the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Communist Party of China, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. He called for deepening reform and opening up, accelerating the construction of railways, highways and other major infrastructures, and national clean energy bases. He said development and security must be coordinated. Xi Jinping stressed the importance of "building border infrastructure, and encouraging people of all ethnic groups to take root in the border, guard the country and build their hometowns". Xi Jinping emphasised the study of party history and need to maintain the 'red blood'.

12. Reform and economic implementation issues appear to have been high on the Chinese President's agenda. Liu He is Politburo member, Vice Premier and Director of the Office serving the CCP's Central Financial and Economic affairs Commission headed by Xi Jinping. He Lifeng is Minister of the important National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC). The two can be expected to have discussed and reviewed the projects earmarked for TAR in the '14th Five Year Plan and Long Range Objectives of the People's Republic of China'. These include defence infrastructure-related projects like the twenty 'general purpose' border airports and the upgradation and extension of two additional highways along the LAC, the numerous smaller dams along the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), and massive dam at the Great Bend on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra). Various other developmental projects would also have been reviewed. The likely impact of the influx into sparsely populated Tibet of large numbers of workers and technicians from the Mainland for these projects would have been an agenda item.

13. The inclusion of Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman General Zhang Youxia in Xi Jinping's entourage further confirmed the military content of Xi Jinping's trip. The recently appointed Commander of the Western Theatre Command (WTC) General Xu Qiling, its Political Commissar Wu Shenzhou as well as Lt. General Wang Qiang, promoted as Commander of the WTC Air Force in April 2020, and the officiating WTC Army (Ground Forces) commander are likely to have received Xi Jinping and General Zhang Youxia at Nyingchi and travelled to Lhasa with his delegation by train. General Xu Qiling and Political Commissar General Wu Shenzhou were seated next to Xi Jinping and Zhang Youxia at the meeting in Lhasa.

14. Xi Jinping met military officers, personnel and veterans at Lhasa. Xi Jinping separately addressed over at least one thousand military officers in Lhasa of whom more than 32 were above the rank of Major General and the rest were of the rank of Colonel and above. Greeting the officers and thanking them for their "large contribution to the nation in terms of security and unification along with ensuring peace and stability in Tibet", Xi Jinping said that "for all this, the Party and the people of China are thankful to them. He urged "the army to be committed to the Party and its ideology" and "have a strong military mind with a focus to become a formidable force. The officers have to become the source of military guidance to ensure their motto is kept alive. They need to follow the 'old Tibet spirit' which means they need to follow their ancestors and what they have done in Tibet in the past 70 years. They need to follow in their footsteps and take their work forward". He declared that "They have already passed the difficult challenge of Tibet's harsh climate and environment and protected the country and they have done a good job. However, they need to continue training hard and prepare for future wars".

15. The prevailing situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh and seeming current impasse would certainly have been discussed and approvals obtained for further action and future operations. Activation of the eastern segment of the border opposite Nyingchi and Shigatse could well have been discussed.

16. The presence of General Zhang Youxia indicates that he has not been adversely affected by the publicity earlier this month surrounding his nephew Zhang Tao's egregious assault on two distinguished elderly Chinese scientists and subsequent arrest by Beijing Police.

17. Politburo members Yang Xiaodu and Chen Xi's inclusion is interesting. It suggests that Party and disciplinary matters were discussed. Yang Xiaodu is a Politburo member and Director of the National Supervisory Commission. He has served in Tibet during his early political career. Chen Xi is head of the CCP CC's powerful Organisation Department, which decides on cadre promotions and transfers, deputation of cadres to the Central Party School etc.

18. There has been an increase in references over the course of last year to "double-faced" or "two-faced" cadres, referring to cadres who are employed by the authorities but owe loyalty to the Dalai Lama. Yang Xiaodu would have discussed this and the punishment of 'tainted' cadres with TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie and TAR Chairman Che Dalha. The future prospects of cadres considered as promising would also have discussed. It is possible that Wu Yingjie, who is now 65 years old and has completed a term as TAR Party Secretary, might be moved to Beijing. If so, his possible replacements would have been discussed. It has been noticed in recent months that among cadres in TAR, Che Dalha, Danke and Yan Jinhai have been receiving enhanced prominence. Che Dalha has been visiting border counties for "consolidating security" and accompanied TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie to Beijing last year and again this year to the National People's Congress (NPC) session. He also wrote an important article days after the NPC session ended on March 11, 2021 which was published by the People's Daily.

19. Xi Jinping's visit would have given a definite impetus to the policies now being implemented in TAR. Xi Jinping has advocated: consolidation and security of Tibet's borders; he referred to the 'xiaokang' (well off) border defence villages; adapting Tibetan Buddhism to socialism with Chinese characteristics; building ethnic unity; consolidating the Party and ensuring the loyalty of members; making Mandarin (Putonghua) the primary language in ethnic schools and highlighting Han culture; accelerating development of the transport network including railways and highways as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its westward push; and strengthening the PLA.

20. The visit is important and will give a major push to the changes already planned for TAR. It has implications for India too. India should anticipate increased military activity on the LAC and an acceleration in the construction of border defence infrastructure in Tibet. Most of these are planned to be completed by 2030.

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