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TIBET IS RECEIVING HIGHER PRIORITY IN RECENT MONTHS **by JAYADEVA RANADE**

1. High level cadres of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) do not often travel outside Beijing unless it is to 'Red Revolutionary' historical sites or because of a natural calamity or an important event or meeting. The visits, therefore, in the short span of a month by the second and fourth ranking members of the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) – two among the seven who 'rule' the People's Republic of China – are unusual and significant. At the least it suggests that the top echelon of the CCP is according new, enhanced priority to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited TAR in July while Wang Yang, PBSC member and Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) which China's minority nationalities affairs and religious activities, travelled there a month later in August 2018.

2. The visits come in the backdrop of a sustained campaign of "patriotic education" for Tibetan Buddhist monks in TAR, further tightening of controls intended to eliminate the Dalai Lama's influence in the region and, acceleration since June 2017 in the overall strengthening of the military-security infrastructure. The visit by China's Premier points to sanctions for large financial investments in Tibet, while that by the CPPCC Chairman underscores the elevated priority being given to 'social stability' and reinforcing controls over monks and monasteries and religious activities in TAR. The China-appointed Panchen Lama's unusually lengthy sojourn in TAR in July substantiates this. There has been elevated activity by the United Front Work Department (UFWD) since Chinese President Xi Jinping took over as Chairman of its Central Small Leading Group.

3. In anticipation of the new revised 'Regulations on Disciplinary Actions of the Communist Party of China' issued by the CCP Central Committee (CC) on August 26, 2018, the official Global Times reported (July 24) that TAR authorities banned students in Tibet from religious activities during the summer holidays. TAR Party cadres are also confiscating photographs of the Dalai Lama found in residences and, on August 6, a traveler was apprehended at Lhasa's Gonggar airport for possessing the Dalai Lama's photograph. The authorities have begun enforcing the 'Regulations on Disciplinary Actions of the Communist Party of China', which include the stipulation that Party members who believe in religion should leave the Party if thought education does not change their beliefs.

4. Poverty alleviation is an initiative personally steered by Chinese President Xi Jinping. It has been blended in the case of Tibet with the overall objective of reinforcing the military-security infrastructure. The guidelines issued jointly by the CCP CC Politburo and China's State Council on June 1, unveiled an ambitious plan "to lift a further 300 million people out of poverty in the next three years". The CCP CC's United Front Work Department (UFWD), which is responsible for China's ethnic minorities and supervision of religion, posted a lengthy report of China's authoritative official news agency Xinhua (June 1) on its official website which said the Politburo convened a meeting to deliberate the "Guidelines for Rural Revitalization Strategic Planning (2018-2022)" and "Guiding Opinions on Three-Year Action on Winning Poverty Alleviation Strategies". CCP CC General Secretary Xi Jinping presided over the meeting. Among other points, the meeting demanded that Party committees and governments at each level must increase their understanding of Party ideology and genuinely implement the countryside revitalization strategy as a main priority. It ordered that all locales and all departments must integrate the countryside with the city. The Politburo clarified that different methods must be applied to different locales in order to comply with the sentiments of villagers.

5. Interesting and partially explaining the high-level visits to the TAR, was the frank admission at a press conference convened by the State Council in Beijing on August 20, 2018 that because of the high incidence of illness and poverty, achieving the goal of poverty alleviation in the remaining three years 'is very arduous'. Particularly identified were southern Xinjiang, Tibet and Tibetan areas in the Liangshan Prefecture of Sichuan, Nujiang Prefecture in Yunnan and the Linxia Prefecture of Gansu province. It was stated that in addition to the high incidence of poverty the areas lacked "basic conditions", were seriously backward in development and had insufficient public services.

6. During his visit to TAR from July 25-27, 2018, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang arrived in Lhasa and travelled to Nyingchi and Lhoka (Shannan). He was accompanied on his travels in Tibet by TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie and Chairman of the TAR People's Government Choedak (Qi Zala). Pointedly, Li Keqiang travelled to two of the three locations where it was announced on June 8, 2018, after the stand-off at Doklam, that new airports will be constructed in 2019. There is already a recently built airport at Gargunsa-Ali while the earlier one at Shigatse was upgraded with the addition of a new runway in July/August 2017. The airport near Yume village in Lhoka will be additional to that already existing in Nyingchi. Yume village is, incidentally, being developed under the poverty alleviation programme as one of a string of 'well-off border defence villages' along the borders with India and Bhutan -- a programme initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. Choedak (Qi Zala) had visited Yume village in Lhunze County of Lhoka earlier from May 19 - 20, 2018. Li Keqiang also inspected the construction site of the Sichuan-Lhasa Railway at Nyingchi. Instructions had been issued in the latter half of last year

for accelerated completion of this “important” dual-use railway. Li Keqiang’s visit focussed on infrastructure development and the economy, but considerable time was also spent on ethnic minority issues and emphasising ethnic unity between Tibetans and the country’s Han majority. During this visit he would certainly have approved large financial investments for poverty alleviation and especially military and dual-use infrastructure projects, including the airports and ‘well-off border defence villages’ in TAR.

7. There was strong focus on ethnic minorities, religious issues and “opposing splittism” during PBSC member and CPPCC Chairman Wang Yang’s visit (August 24 – 26, 2018) to TAR. He emphasized ‘Xi Jinping’s Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era’ and exhorted all TAR officials to conscientiously implement the General Secretary and the Party’s strategy of managing Tibet and Tibet affairs, “closely focus on safeguarding the ‘Motherland’s reunification’, “oppose splittism and separatism” and strengthen national unity. He emphasised the importance of alleviating poverty and building a well-off society, “deepening anti-separatist movements” and creating innovative but effective Temple Management systems and fostering long-term stability. While visiting Sera monastery, he impressed on Monastery cadres the importance of religion and religious activities to social and long-term stability in Tibet. He asked monks to be prepared for “menace” and “rain”, uphold and follow the ‘guiding principles’ of the Party’s religious works and promote efforts to adapt Tibetan Buddhism to socialist society. He also sat in a ‘Young Tulku’s’ Class in the monastery. It is pertinent that Wang Yang did not once directly criticise the Dalai Lama by name or refer to the “Dalai clique”. Wang Yang was accompanied on his tour by TAR Party Secretary Wu Yingjie, Chairman of TAR People’s Government Choedak (Qi Zala), Executive Vice Minister of the United Front Work Department (UFWD) Zhang Yijiong and the Vice President of the Chinese Buddhist Association, Drukhang Khedrup Rinpoche.

8. There were at least three other interesting events in TAR during this period which would have been intended to reinforce Wang Yang’s message. The first was the visit by the China-appointed Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu who, after quite a long interval, spent an unusually long time in Tibet from July 19 till July 31, 2018. In speeches during his stay, he spoke in support of Party policy. He emphasised the importance of loyalty to Xi Jinping and the Party’s religious policies and said “Tibetans must love the Party and the nation, uphold ethnic unity, and promote social harmony and stability. If someone does not contribute to the harmony and stability of the society, he is not qualified to enjoy the fruits of stable development.” He stressed “the leadership of the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core”. The China-appointed Panchen Lama also paid a visit to Lhamo Lhatso, the sacred ‘oracle’ lake of Tibetans and gave religious ‘teachings’ including a ‘kalachakra’ and visited the Jokhang and Tashilhunpo monasteries. The ‘kalachakra’ ceremony and visits to the monasteries indicates that the Party is continuing its long-

term strategy of legitimising Gyaltzen Norbu as the Panchen Lama. At the same time, his extended stay in Tibet suggests a growing acceptance by the Tibetan people.

9. The other was the visit of the former 10th Panchen Lama's daughter Rigzin Wangmo along with her children and husband to the Jokhang and Tashilhunpo monasteries on June 20. The visit was reported by the state-owned CCTV. Rigzin Wangmo, according to some reports, enjoys a close rapport with the UFWD. The Panchen Lama and Rigzin Wangmo's visits would be a signal to the Tibetans that the CCP acknowledges Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders and keeps a line of communication open to them.

10. Equally interesting, and possibly presaging a new propaganda campaign to favourably portray developments in Tibet, is the meeting of Chinese diplomats organised in Lhasa on August 21 and addressed by senior TAR cadres and Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Hanhui. Zhang Hanhui's portfolio of responsibilities includes external security affairs and foreign affairs management.

11. The visits to TAR by the two senior central leaders as well as the Panchen Lama, bring into focus the fresh emphasis being given by the leadership to calm Tibet, emphasise ethnic unity and 'social stability' and eliminate the Dalai Lama's influence. It also highlighted the push for completion of major infrastructure projects like new airports, the 'well-off border defence villages' and the strategic Sichuan-Tibet Railway. Implicit is that the UFWD would have similar lines of communication open to the Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders in exile

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