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TIBET: THE FULCRUM OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC POLICY IN THE HIMALAYAS

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China is positioning Tibet as the fulcrum for its strategic policy in the sensitive Himalayan region thus directly and adversely impacting India. Beijing appears to have assessed that it has sufficiently calmed the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to feel adequately secure in opening Tibet up wider for interaction with foreign countries. China's foreign policy objectives are aimed at enveloping the Himalayan states in the region, which are on India's northern periphery, into a China-dominated grouping. While it will be wrapped in the garb of preserving the ecology and environment, the main objective will be to advance Beijing's strategic agenda. Two recent events in TAR and the TAR Party Secretary's trip to Nepal, Sri Lanka and Singapore earlier this month need to be viewed in this backdrop. China appears to be preparing to enhance military, economic and diplomatic pressure on India in the Himalayan region along India's northern frontiers.

2. Activity in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and particularly in its Nyingchi (Nyingtri) Prefecture, which borders Arunachal Pradesh, has visibly increased over the past year and bears careful watching. These point to China getting ready to mount considerable and sustained pressure on India in the Himalayan region. The importance of the Himalayan region cannot be overestimated, especially at a time when the Tibetan Buddhists – predominant in this region -- are entering a sensitive period with succession to the current XIVth Dalai Lama being the central issue. There have been a series of high level visits by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials to the TAR and Nyingchi Prefecture. Their speeches included references to strengthening defence of the border, increasing the number of 'model' border defence villages, and completing the strategic G-219 highway on time. In initiatives timed to pressure India and intended also to blunt international criticism about China's repression of Tibetans, Beijing held two important, though less noticed, events in the TAR. These were the '3rd China-Tibet "Rim of the Himalayas" International Cooperation Forum for International Cooperation' in Nyingchi, TAR, from October 4-5, 2023, and the '2023 Annual Conference of the China South Asia Society' which held a seminar on the "Intersection and Integration of Regional Country Studies and Frontier Studies" in Lhasa on November 4, 2023.

3. The Nyingchi Prefecture, measuring 116,175 km square kilometres on the eastern edge of TAR, has a long un-demarcated border with India. Official Chinese maps depict Nyingchi's official administrative boundary as including most of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which the Chinese refer to as "Southern Tibet". In the 2023 edition of the Standard Map of China published on August 28, 2023, China claimed parts of Ladakh, Aksai Chin and Arunachal

Pradesh as Chinese territories. The Yarlung Tsangpo, or Brahmaputra River, courses through the TAR for 2900 kilometres before it reaches the Great Bend in Nyingchi. The Great Bend, where the Brahmaputra turns south and flows into India and onwards through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal, is the site for China's proposed largest dam in the world. Construction of this mega dam will directly and adversely impact India and Bangladesh. An official announcement in December 2020 confirmed earlier reliable reports that China planned to erect a series of dams on the Brahmaputra and divert the river to irrigate its arable but water starved north. China claims that the proposed mega dam, which will be three times the size of the world's largest Three Gorges Dam, will supply adequate hydropower for China's entire southwest. Construction work related to the dam is already well under way and the Motuo road link, vital for the proposed mega dam on the Brahmaputra has been completed. Construction of the Dam also has military implications for India.

4. Military activity in TAR across the Line of Actual Control (LAC) including across Arunachal Pradesh has also increased in recent months. For example, the PLA's 71st Group Army -- though its operational jurisdiction covers the Jiangsu province region -- revealed an addition to its military capability earlier this November and used a tactical ballistic missile during a live-fire exercise in the Gobi Desert. Another report disclosed the presence of Red Arrow-12 missiles in the Xinjiang Military region. PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLA Strategic Support Force (PLA SSF) units are present in the PLA Western Theatre Command close to the LAC. Satellite imagery of mid-October shows that China is constructing new underground military facilities at Shannan in TAR. Multiple underground facilities already exist at Shannan. Confirming reports that the Chinese are building major defence infrastructure projects and roads in the region, Satellite images on October 31, showed PLA construction activities in Seti Chu and Chupda Chu valley's opposite Tulung La sector in Arunachal Pradesh. Separately, the Telegraph (October 31) quoting an Indian Home Ministry security official reported: "A close analysis of recent satellite imagery suggests a massive troop deployment by the Chinese in several depth areas, especially Yangtze in the Tawang sector along the LAC." Also in October, a Light Combined Arms Regiment (CAR) of the Xinjiang Military Region conducted combined training in the Pangong Lake area.

5. There has similarly been increased PLA Air Force activity in TAR. Satellite images between October 23 and 25, 2023, showed a fleet of KJ-500s. On October 31, satellite photographs indicated that Golmud Airport was holding a larger training exercise the previous week. CCTV programmes have also revealed the deployment of drones on the front line against India and said the PLA is currently building such bases on the Sino-Indian border, with the frontline outposts and drones as the first-line force. The report said that the progress of infrastructure construction and other system construction in the river valley has "actually increased our confidence in future border negotiations, and further blocked the Indians from using military adventurous means and taking desperate risks on the Sino-Indian border".

6. An indication of Nyingchi's elevated importance for Chinese President Xi Jinping is that he has visited Nyingchi a total of three times. Once as China's President in July 2021 earlier in 2011 as Vice President and once in 1998 as Party Secretary of Fujian. He has travelled to Nyingchi each time he visited the Tibet Autonomous Region. The visits indicate his interest in acquiring Arunachal Pradesh or, what the Chinese now refer to as 'southern Tibet'.

7. On October 4-5, 2023 China convened its '3rd China-Tibet "Rim of the Himalayas" International Cooperation Forum for International Cooperation' in Nyingchi, TAR. Its theme was: 'Ecological Civilisation and Environmental Protection'. Significant among the 280 representatives from over 40 countries, regions, and international organizations attending the conference were the: Pakistan Acting Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani; the Interim Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi; Vice Chairperson of the National Assembly of Nepal Urmila Ayal; Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Bhutan Karma Tshering; the Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia S. Amarsaikhan, and Sri Lanka's Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs Roshan Ranasinghe. While many of the others have companies working on mining and other projects in Tibet, the presence of representatives from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan indicates that Beijing intends to involve them in its policies for the Himalayan region. It will offer trade and connectivity. China has for some years been talking of a Trans-Regional Himalayan Corridor (THRC). The presence of Sri Lanka would be to draw another South Asian country that already has close ties with China even closer. Displaying Beijing's support for this foreign policy initiative, CCP CC Politburo member and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also attended and spoke. In fact the invitations to foreign government representatives were issued by China's Foreign Minister.

8. The speech by TAR Party Secretary Wang Junzheng outlined China's aims for this Forum. He welcomed the leaders of central and state agencies, ministries and commissions, political figures from various countries, experts and scholars who attended the China-Tibet Forum, and expressed his gratitude for their long-term support for the development of various economic and social undertakings in Tibet. Wang Junzheng said that cooperation and exchange are the only way for the prosperity and development of the Himalayan region. He said 'Tibet is an important node on the Southern Silk Road and an important channel for China to open up to South Asia'. It has obvious location advantages in strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries around the Himalayas. He hoped that 'all guests, leaders, experts and scholars will actively provide suggestions and deeply discuss the cooperation mechanism between China and neighbouring countries in the Himalayas, expand cooperation areas, create cooperation opportunities, and contribute wisdom and strength to better promote the development of the Himalayan region'.

9. Chinese Foreign Minister and Politburo member Wang Yi emphasized that the Himalayas 'represent a land brimming with vitality and hope' and stressed that China has engaged in 'extensive and profound cooperation with other countries in the Himalayan region, continually building consensus on cooperation, actively supporting green development, and enhancing capacity building'. He pointed out that 'the Asian century is on the horizon' and said the 'Himalayan countries are geographically connected, share cultural similarities, and are intertwined by destiny. They hold highly similar views on ecological protection and are partners in the modernization process'. Asserting that China is committed to amity, good neighbourliness, and neighbourhood diplomacy, he said China together with the regional countries, seeks to share historical development opportunities and 'jointly build a community with a shared future in the Himalayan vicinity'. Wang Yi added that this will contribute to the prosperity, stability, and green environmental protection of the region and the world at large. Two of the five suggestions he proposed envisage major connectivity projects, trade and cultural exchanges. He identified these as: strengthening connectivity, advancing regional

integration, and establishing a more convenient Himalayan interconnection network; and enhancing exchanges and mutual learning, revitalizing ancient civilizations, and creating a model area for cultural exchanges around the Himalayas.

10. A month later on November 4, 2023, the '2023 Annual Conference of the China South Asia Society and the "Intersection and Integration of Regional Country Studies and Frontier Studies" academic seminar' were held in Lhasa, capital of TAR. It held its first meeting in 2018 in Linzhi, TAR. The annual conference jointly discussed changes in the political and economic situation in South Asia and the construction of the Ring-Himalayan Economic Cooperation Belt among other issues. Its aim was to provide 'intellectual support for the high-quality development and high-level opening up of the Tibet Autonomous Region'. Attending the meeting Zhang Guanzi, Dean of the Institute of Information and Intelligence of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) described the annual meeting as an important channel for China to open up to South Asia, adding that the Tibet Autonomous Region has achieved results in communication and construction with South Asia in terms of policies, facilities, trade, and capital. Jiang Jingkui, Vice President of the Chinese Society for South Asia, said: "the political, economic, trade and cultural ties between China and South Asia have become increasingly close, and the importance of the unique location of the Tibet Autonomous Region has continued to rise".

11. Soon thereafter and seeming to operationalise these plans, TAR Party Secretary Wang Junzheng visited Nepal from November 8-12, 2023, before proceeding to Sri Lanka and Singapore. Unusual for China's Provincial Party Secretaries too, the TAR Party Secretary was accompanied by a cultural troupe which staged performances in Sri Lanka and Singapore. During his stay of five days in Nepal, Wang Junzheng met Nepal's President Ram Chandra Poudel, Prime Minister Prachanda, Vice President Yadav, Federal Council of Nepal Chairman Timirsina, and Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Narayan Kaji Shrestha. The two sides spoke on the need to make concerted efforts to implement the proceedings of Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019 and the joint statement between China and Nepal. They also discussed and promoted the exchange of views on mutually beneficial cooperation between the TAR and Nepal.

12. Wang Junzheng stated, inter alia, that "The Tibet Autonomous Region, linked to Nepal through culture and longstanding friendship, will leverage its geographical and humanistic advantages to deepen exchanges and cooperation, jointly constructing a cross-Himalayan three-dimensional interconnection network." He said the focus will be on high-quality joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, expanding cooperation in port construction, economy and trade, tourism, and aviation, and assisting northern Nepal in building "small and beautiful, benefiting people's livelihood" projects. Wang Junzheng said efforts will be made to strengthen exchanges with Nepalese universities, academic institutions, and think tanks, and promote friendly cities and relations between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal, fostering people-to-people communication and contributing to deepening practical cooperation between China and Nepal.

13. Nepal said it is eager to actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, further strengthen its relations with the Tibet Autonomous Region and promote pragmatic

cooperation in agriculture, economy and trade, tourism, port construction, and other fields for common prosperity and development.

14. Wang Junzheng also discussed the joint venture between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Nepal, particularly the operation of Himalayan Airlines and witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the TAR People's Government and the Ministry of Finance of Nepal, as well as the agreement on the establishment of a friendly city relationship between Shigatse and Bharatpur. Almost coinciding with his visit, a new land port linking Letse in Drongba county of Xizang (TAR) and Nechung in Mustang county of Nepal was officially opened on November 13. It is the fourth land port in the region.

15. While the invitation to Bhutan would be intended to entice Bhutan into accelerating progress in the China-Bhutan Boundary Talks. On the sidelines of the '3rd China-Tibet "Rim of the Himalayas" International Cooperation Forum for International Cooperation', Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Afghanistan's Acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi discussed (October 5) the opening of a strategic corridor to enhance trade ties between Beijing and Kabul. The two countries agreed to improve trade ties through the Wakhan Corridor, linking Afghanistan's Badakhshan province with Xinjiang in China.

16. The developments indicate that Beijing is intent on setting up a grouping of Himalayan states and drawing them into its economic, diplomatic and if possible cultural-religious sphere, and at the same time confront India. The construction of roads will facilitate Chinese exports and people to these countries, offer them alternate routes, and gradually overwhelm their economies. Though the plan will take some years to take shape, China will start focussing on growing its economic, political and military influence in these countries. The development implies, as indicated by the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia S. Amarsaikhan, that China will make strenuous efforts to ensure that its nominee succeeds the XIVth Dalai Lama.

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