

GEO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE: TIBET

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INTRODUCTION

A region in the far reaches of the Himalayas, Tibet looms large in the popular imagination. It is the original home of the Dalai Lama, one of the great spiritual leaders of our time. Tibetan Buddhism inspires millions worldwide with the twin values of wisdom and compassion. The Chinese takeover of the country six decades ago also shows another side of Tibet – that of a passionate symbol of freedom in the face of political oppression. International sympathy has kept the Dalai Lama's appeals for autonomy on the world's political agenda, but in the light of China's political and economic gains, there is fear that Tibet is in danger of being forgotten by the world. As the Dalai Lama grows older and China threatens to intervene in the selection of Tibet's next spiritual leader, many wonder whether there is any hope for the cause of Tibet or will it become a casualty of globalisation.¹

GEOGRAPHY OF TIBET

The geography of Tibet consists of the high mountains, lakes and rivers lying between Central, East and South Asia. Traditionally, Western (European and American) sources have regarded Tibet as being in Central Asia, though today's maps show a trend toward considering all of modern China, including Tibet, to be part of East Asia. Tibet is often called "the roof

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1. Diane Wolff, *Tibet Unconquered: An Epic Struggle for Freedom* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-5.

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of the world," comprising tablelands averaging over 4,950 m above the sea, with peaks at 6,000 to 7,500 m, including Mount Everest, on the border with Nepal.

It is bounded on the north and east by the Central China Plain, on the west by the Kashmir region of India and on the south by Nepal, India and Bhutan. Most of Tibet sits atop a geological structure known as the Tibetan plateau which includes the Himalayas and many of the highest mountain peaks in the world. High mountain peaks include the Changtse, Gurla Mandhata, Jomolhari, Gyachung Kang, Gyala Peri, Mount Kailash, Kawagebo, Khumbutse, Melungtse, Mount Nyainqentanglha Namcha Barwa, Mount Nyainqentanglha, Shishapangma and Yangra . Mountain passes include Cherko la, and North Col. Smaller mountains include Mount Gephel and Gurla Mandhata.²

Physically, Tibet may be divided into two parts: the "lake region" in the west and northwest, and the "river region", which spreads out on three sides of the former on the east, south and west. The regional names are useful in contrasting their hydrological structures, and also in contrasting their different cultural uses which is nomadic in the "lake region" and agricultural in the "river region". Despite its large size and mountainous nature, variation of climate across the Tibetan plateau is more steady than abrupt. The "river region" has a sub-tropical highland climate, with moderate summer rainfall averaging around 500 millimetres (20 in) per year, and day-time temperatures ranging from around 7 °C (45 °F) in winter to 24 °C (75 °F) in summer — though the nights are as much as 15°C (25°F) cooler. Rainfall decreases steadily to the west, reaching only 110 millimetres (4.3 in) at Leh on the edge of this region, whilst temperatures in the winter become steadily colder. In the south, the "river region" is bounded by

2. Tsepon Shakabpa, Victor C. Falkenheim and Turrell V. Wylie. "Tibet". *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*. Retrieved March 25, 2013, pp. 5-6.

the Himalayas, and on the north by a broad mountain system. The system at no point narrows to a single range; generally, there are three or four across its breadth. As a whole, the system forms the watershed between rivers flowing to the Indian Ocean – the Indus, Brahmaputra and Salween and their tributaries – and the streams flowing into the undrained salt lakes to the north.³

The “river region” is characterised by fertile mountain valleys and includes the Yarlung Tsangpo river (the upper courses of the Brahmaputra) and its major tributary, the Nyang river, the Salween, the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Yellow river. The Yarlung Tsangpo Canyon, formed by a horseshoe bend in the river where it flows around Namcha Barwa, is the deepest, and possibly longest, canyon in the world. Among the mountains, there are many narrow valleys. The valleys of Lhasa, Shigatse, Gyantse and of the Brahmaputra are free from permafrost, covered with good soil and groves of trees, well irrigated, and richly cultivated. The South Tibet Valley is formed by the Yarlung Zangbo river during its middle reaches, where it travels from west to east. The valley is approximately 1,200 km long and 300 km wide. The valley descends from 4,500 m above sea level to 2,800 m. The mountains on either side of the valley are usually around 5,000 m high. The lakes here include Lake Paiku and Lake Puma Yumco.⁴

The “lake region” extends from the Pangong Tso Lake in Ladakh, Rakshastal Lake, Yamdrok Lake and Mansarovar Lake near the source of the Indus river, to the sources of the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze. Other lakes include Dagze Co, Nam Co, and Pagsum Co. The lake region is an arid and wind-swept desert. This region is called the Chang Tang (Byang sang) or ‘Northern Plateau’ by the people of Tibet. It is some 1,100 km (700 mi) broad, and covers an area about equal to that of France. Due to the extremely high mountain barriers, it has a very arid alpine climate with annual precipitation of around 100 millimetres (4 in) and it possesses no river outlet. The mountain ranges are spread out, rounded, disconnected, and separated by

3. Yang Qinye and Zheng Du, *Tibetan Geography* (China Intercontinental Press), pp. 30–31.

4. Zheng Du, Zhang Qingsong, Wu Shaohong, *Mountain Geoecology and Sustainable Development of the Tibetan Plateau* (Kluwer, 2000), p. 312.

With the disappearance of independent Tibet and its annexation by China, the strategic setting for India has changed, with far-reaching security implications.

flat valleys of relatively little depth. The country is dotted over with large and small lakes, generally salt or alkaline, and intersected by streams. Due to the presence of discontinuous permafrost over the Chang Tang, the soil is boggy and covered with tussocks of grass, thus, resembling the Siberian tundra. Salt and fresh water lakes are intermingled. The lakes are generally without an outlet, or have only a small effluent. The deposits consist of soda, potash, borax and common salt.

The lake region is noted for a vast number of hot springs, which are widely distributed between the Himalayas and 34° N but are most numerous to the west of Tengri Nor (northwest of Lhasa). So intense is the cold in this part of Tibet that these springs are sometimes represented by columns of ice, the nearly boiling water having frozen in the act of ejection.⁵

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF TIBET

The existence of independent Tibet on India's northern borders provided a buffer between the two Asian giants, India and China. With the disappearance of independent Tibet and its annexation by China, the strategic setting for India has changed, with far-reaching security implications. The frontiers which, by and large, were settled with Tibet, were declared disputed all along the 3,440 km by China. Not only India, even Nepal and Bhutan now have borders with China instead of Tibet. China is in possession of 36,846 sq km of Indian territory in Aksai Chin and claims another approximately 93,000 sq km in the central and eastern sectors. India now has to guard two fronts instead of one. The repercussions are an addition to the defence budget and border guarding responsibility. India's defence budget as a consequence has increased by approximately 30 per cent.

5. J. M. Dortch et al, "Catastrophic Partial Drainage of Pangong Tso, Northern India and Tibet", *Geomorphology*, 2010, pp. 3-4.

Around 500,000 Chinese troops and a quarter of China's nuclear arsenal are located in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and adjoining Tibet's ethnic areas. According to sources, China has constructed missile bases at Kongpo, Nyitri, Powo Tramo, Rudok, Golmud and Nagchuka. Nagchuka seems to have become one of the most important nuclear bases in China. It is reported that there are 7-8 Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), 60-70 Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) and 15-20 Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) located in Tibet.

Tibet provides the ideal site for multiple targeting. There are nearly 15 radar stations and 14 military airfields in the TAR and the adjoining Tibetan ethnic areas. The airfields are kept in a perpetual state of readiness for all types of military and civil aircraft. China has already completed the Golmo-Lhasa railway. The strategic roads have already been upgraded. The rail-road-air infrastructure development, just to support a population of two-three million on the plateau, indicates the objective of creating military capabilities.⁶

China has already gained access to the Indian Ocean with the construction of the Karakoram Highway and projected development of a road from Yunnan through Myanmar. Its access to the Indian Ocean has further improved with the occupation of Tibet. This occupation of Tibet by China has increased China's reach into South Asia with conventional as well as nuclear-tipped missiles. With the missiles deployed in Tibet, all strategic locations in South Asia can be engaged with devastating effects. The airfields in Tibet facilitate mid-air refuelling to mount air attacks on crucial points in South Asia. Engagement of South Asia (particularly India) by China along India's northern borders is a strategic imperative if China is to grow into a regional or global power. China has improved its strategic capability of colluding with Pakistan or with any of India's neighbours against the interests of India. Pakistan's ceding of territory of the Northern Areas (Pakistan Occupied) to China in 1963 is a prominent example in this regard.⁷

6. V.P. Malhotra, *Tibetan Conundrum* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2006), pp. 85-88.

7. Ibid., pp. 89-93.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Tibet is rich in mineral resources, particularly strategic materials like uranium, gold, iron, oil, coal and in forests and hydro potential. A scientific investigation has discovered extensive gold fields in the district of Sankora. There are deposits of radium, iron and titanium on the eastern shores of Mansarovar and nearby Rakas Tal, lead near Gebuk on the Manchuan Ho; arsenic and serpentine (a dark green mineral composed of hydrated magnesium silicate taking a high polish and used as decorative material) near Kungri-bingri Pass; and large deposits of borax on the shore of Tseti Tsho (Lake Tseti). The reserves in Tibet and Tibetan ethnic areas are:

- Forty per cent of China's reserves of chromite is in Tibet. Chromite mines are located in Nagchu and Lhoka.
- Tibet contains 14.4 per cent of China's copper reserves. Two of China's copper projects are located at Chamdo and Amdo.
- Tibet has abundant gold reserves, particularly in Amdo (Ngachu, Wulan County, Golok, Markham in Kham and Kandze). Over 1,000 kg of gold is known to have been extracted so far. Ngachu has over 10 tons of alluvial gold and is likely to produce 386 kg of gold annually.
- According to many geologists, Tibet is perhaps the last and the largest oil belt in the continent. The stratum is similar to the oil fields in the Persian Gulf and Karakoram. Tsaidam Basin has oil reserves of 42 billion tons and natural gas reserves of 1,500 billion cubic metres. Natural gas reserves in Tibet and Tibetan ethnic areas alone can sustain China's requirements for seven years. Two hundred million tons of oil has also been found in Chang Tang, in Lhunpula Basin.
- Tibet has large deposits of uranium around the eastern mountainous shores of Koko Nor. Known mines of uranium include Tsaidam Basin, Thewo in Amdo, Yamdrok Tso and Damshung near Lhasa.
- Eighteen million tons of strontium has been discovered in Tsaidam. Strontium is used for nuclear missile cladding.
- Discovery of plutonium in Tsaidam has also been reported.
- Cesium is a rare metal used in military and hi-tech applications, particularly in atomic clocks and as high energy solid fuel. Cesium

deposits worth around \$ 6.5 billion have been reported in TAR.

- The most valuable woodland is the Khams district (different from the Khams region), though extensive forest-clad mountains are also found in the Sutlej Valley in the southwest and in the Chumbi Valley in the south. In the late 1950s, some 30 kinds of trees, including those of economic value such as varnish trees, spruce and fir were discovered. The estimated total of forest timber resources in the Khams area alone was placed at more than 100,000,000 cubic metres.

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Tibet's stupendous mineral resources were one of the China's primary strategic compulsions to invade and occupy it. Several mining projects were launched in China's Eighth and Ninth Five-Year Plans. Many of the major schemes in the "43 Development Projects" and "62 Development Projects" are directly related to mining in Tibet. These revelations were made by Yi Fatang, the Chinese First Secretary in Tibet in the 1980s. Thereafter, China has not confirmed or refuted the data. It is worthwhile to mention here that the Chinese call Tibet Xizang, meaning Western Treasure House.⁸

WATER RESOURCES

The status of the plateau of Tibet is unique: no other area in the world is a water repository of such size, serving as a lifeline for large parts of a continent. Indeed, the plateau plays a triple role: it is Asia's main fresh water repository, largest water supplier and principal rain maker. But Tibet is rich in more than just water. It also holds other resources of immense strategic value. As elaborated in the preceding paragraphs, it is a treasure trove of minerals, including precious metals and the so-called rare earth elements. With its galloping style of economic growth, China has depleted its own natural resources and is now avariciously draining resources from

8. S.K. Sharma, *History and Geography of Tibet* (Anmol Publications), pp. 98-102.

the Tibetan plateau.⁹

Stretching 2,400 km from east to west and 1,448 km from north to south, this unique water bank is the world's largest plateau. It is also the world's highest plateau, with the average elevation in Tibet so high, more than 4,000 m above the sea level, rightfully earning the sobriquet "The Roof of the World." It is one of the most bio-diverse regions of the world with the rarest medicinal plants, the highest number of living primates on the earth and scores of bird, mammal, amphibian, reptile, fish and plant species not found anywhere else. As a land that includes ecological zones from the Arctic to the sub-tropical, this plateau has a range of landscapes, extending from tundra to tropical jungles, besides boasting of the world's steepest and longest canyons as well as its tallest peak, Mount Everest. It is such a matchless ecological region that a Chinese study has highlighted a "total of 26 altitudinal belts, 12,000 species of vascular plants, 5,000 species of epiphytes, 210 species of mammals and 532 species of birds."¹⁰

Lowlanders take days to get acclimatised to Tibet's rarefied air, which contains about 40 percent less oxygen than is available at sea level. Environmental hypoxia causes the blood to thicken as the body churns out more red blood cells to offset the low oxygen level, leading to chronic altitude sickness, a condition that in some cases can develop into life-threatening lung, heart or brain complications. By contrast, ethnic Tibetans, with low blood haemoglobin levels, have distinctive genetic features that allow them to breathe easily at very high altitudes. Scientists have identified two genes associated with haemoglobin that play a role in hypoxia adaptation and explain the Tibetans' ability to thrive in such a harsh environment.¹¹ These genetic differences set the Tibetans apart from their present-day rulers, the Han Chinese.

With its height, the Tibetan plateau literally towers over the rest of Asia. It actually rises up to the middle of the troposphere—the lowest and the

9. Brahma Chellaney, "Water: Asia's New Battleground", Amazon.com, pp. 95-96.

10. Zhang Bai-ping, Chen Xiao-dong, Li Bao-lin and Yao Yong-hui, "Biodiversity and Conservation in the Tibetan Plateau," *Journal of Geographical Science*, 12, no. 2, April 2002, p. 135.

11. Ruiqiang Li, Songgang Li, Lars Bolund, Huanming Yang, Rasmus Nielsen, Jun Wang and Jian Wang, "Sequencing of 50 Human Exomes Reveals, Adaptation to High Altitudes," *Science* 329, no.5987, July 2, 2010, pp. 75-78.

most dense layer of the atmosphere—and helps deflect wind outward in winter and inwards in summer. It influences the Asian climatic, weather and monsoonal patterns, as well as the Northern Hemisphere's atmospheric general circulation, the system of winds that helps transport warm air from the equator, where solar heating is greatest, toward the higher latitudes, giving rise to different climate zones.¹² Due to Tibet's high topography, the jet stream – a torrent of fast flowing air 8 to 11 km above sea level—curves around the mighty Himalayas and the adjacent Karakoram, Kunlun, Hindu-Kush, Pamir and Tian Shan ranges. The plateau's unique features and role, fragile ecosystems and endangered endemic species make it more vulnerable to the effects of global warming than any other region in the world.¹³

Although more than half the world's mountain regions play “an essential or supportive role” for the adjacent lowlands by serving as their “freshwater towers”, Tibet is a life giver and water supplier for much of the world's biggest continent, Asia, especially its most heavily populated regions¹⁴. The abundance of runoff in the mountain areas, principally because of much greater precipitation, makes these regions critical for supplying the earth's land surface with blue water in the form of river runoff, with mountains actually serving as the main source of fresh water in arid zones.¹⁵ However, in comparison with the European Alps—the water tower of Europe—the sources of fresh water originating in the Tibetan plateau support a several times larger population in the lowlands of Asia. Tibetan rivers, indeed, are the lifeblood of the world's two most populous nations—China and India—and the other countries that stretch from Afghanistan to Vietnam

12. Xuefeng Cui, Hans-F. Graf, Baerbel Langmann, Wen Chen and Ronghui Huang, “Hydrological Impacts of Deforestation on the Southeast Tibetan Plateau,” *Earth Interactions*, 11, no.15, September 2007, pp. 1-18.

13. Hong Xie, Jiansheng Ye, Xiuming Liu and Chongyi E., “Warming and Drying Trends on the Tibetan Plateau,” *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, September 2009, pp. 45-46.

14. Daniel Viviroli, Hans H. Durr, Bruno Messerli, Michel Meybeck and Rolf Weingartner, “Mountains of the World, Water Towers for Humanity: Typology, mapping and Global Significance,” *Water Resources Research* 43, no.W07447, July 28, 2007, pp. 74-75.

15. Rolf Weingartner, Daniel Viviroli and Greg Greenwood, “Mountain Waters in a Changing World,” in Proceedings of the COST Strategic Workshop, *Alpine Space- Man & Environment*, Volume 7, edited by R. Jandl, A. Borsdorf, H. van Miegooet, R. Lackner and R. Psenner (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2009).

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in a contiguous arc. They include Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan and Thailand. Together, these countries make up 46.3 percent of the global population and contain four-fifths of the people in the larger Asia that extends up to the Bosphorus.¹⁶ Fed by thousands of Himalayan glaciers and mountain springs, the great river systems of Asia flowing down from the Tibetan highland constitute an ecological marvel.

The Tibetan plateau is called the "Third Pole" because it has the largest perennial ice mass on the planet after the Arctic and Antarctica. With its snowfields and glaciers feeding virtually every major river system of Asia—from the Indus (Sengye Khabab to the Tibetans) in the west to the Yellow river (known in Chinese as Huang He) in the east—the plateau holds more fresh water than any place on the earth other than the North and South Poles.

Tibet is endowed with one of the greatest river systems in the world. Its rivers supply fresh water to 65 per cent of Asia's population and approximately 30 per cent of the world's population. Asia is governed by the monsoon patterns of rainfall, bringing rain for only a few months of the year and the perennial flow of its rivers relies upon the constant flux of glaciers on the Tibetan plateau. More than 42,000 sq km of Tibet is covered by permanent snow or ice. The Indian subcontinent is nourished by the perennial flow of major rivers originating from different directions of the Kailash range in western Tibet:

- From the east, the Brahmaputra (Yarlun Tsangpo) flows into India and joins the Ganges in Bangladesh before draining into the Bay of Bengal.
- From the west, flows the Sutlej, passing through Himachal Pradesh and Punjab in India, and joining the Indus river in Pakistan.
- From the north, flows the Sindhu/Indus, passing through Jammu and

16. Based on 2010 estimates of the United Nations' Population Information Network or on the figures in United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision (New York: United Nations Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009).

Kashmir in India and entering Pakistan before joining the Arabian Sea.

- From the south, flows the Macha Khabab, entering western Nepal as the Karnali before becoming the Gaghara in India to join the holy Ganges.
- Other mighty rivers flowing from Tibet such as the Drichu (Yangze), Machu (Yellow), Gyalmo Ngulchu (Salween) and Zacha (Mekong) sustain the lives of millions in China, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Brahmaputra or Yarlung Tsangpo, is the largest river on the Tibetan plateau. It runs 2,057 km in Tibet and then makes a U-turn (Great Bend) to enter India in Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, flows through India and Bangladesh and drains into the Bay of Bengal; 33 percent of its water is collected in catchment areas in Tibet. Its valleys in India and Bangladesh are fertile farmlands with thick forest coverage and crops of tea, rice, jute and rare flora and fauna. The river is crucial to the economy of the entire region. It is reported that China intends to build the world's largest dam with a capacity of 40,000 MW of power. It also plans to pump the water northwards to the arid regions of Xinjiang and Gansu. Since the plan will influence the lives of millions of people in Tibet, India and Bangladesh, a detailed study should be carried out by the lower riparian countries so that the project proceeds according to established international norms. A similar approach should be adopted by the lower riparian countries with regards to other Tibetan rivers, namely, the Karnali, Mekong and Salween flowing into Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Mekong has 14 dams with ramifications for the lower riparian countries. Tibet is a water powerhouse which can alter the lives of millions in Tibet, South Asia and Southeast Asia.¹⁷

TIBET AND CHINA: TWO DISTINCT VIEWS

The Chinese Version: Tibet has been part of China since the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). Centuries ago, Mongol and Manchu Emperors ruled large parts of Asia. During the Tang period (618-907), the Tibetan King Songsten

17. Chellaney, n. 9, pp. 56-57.

Gampo, married Princess Wen Chung. The Princess had a lot of influence in Tibet. During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), Tibet was part of the Mongol Empire which was under Yuan rule. At this time, the Yuan government implemented residence registration, levied taxes, and imposed duties in Tibet. China's "White Paper" claims that the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) replaced the Yuan dynasty in China and inherited the right to rule Tibet. During the Manchu rule (1644-1911), the Qing Army entered Tibet on a number of occasions to protect it. Finally, in 1951, China and the Tibetan Local Government signed a 17-point agreement concerning the peaceful liberation of Tibet. During this time, the 14th Dalai Lama supported the liberation and acknowledged that Tibet was a part of China.

The Tibetan Version: Tibet has a recorded history of statehood extending back to 127 BC. From the 7th to the 9th centuries, the Tibetans often dominated the Tang dynasty in battles. Additionally, during the time of this dynasty, the marriage of Princess Wen Chung and King Gampo should be viewed as a strategic move to achieve cooperation and peace between Tibet and China. In 821, after centuries of periodic fighting, China and Tibet signed a treaty wherein boundaries were confirmed and each country promised respect for the other's territorial sovereignty. During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the Mongol leader Genghis Khan conquered most of Eurasia, including China. Thus, instead of China claiming a right to Tibet, Mongolia could assert claims to both China and Tibet. There is no historic evidence to support the assumption that the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) ruled Tibet. In fact, the Qing Emperor, in 1652, not only accepted the fifth Dalai Lama as a leader of an independent state, the Emperor also treated him as Divinity on Earth. During this period, Tibet was known in Chinese as Wu-si Zang or Wu-si Guo (*Guo* means country). During the Manchu rule (1644-1911), the Qing Army was asked by the Tibetans to settle disputes. But this does not support China's right to Tibet. If it did, then the USA should claim Kuwait and Haiti since it assisted these countries. In fact, on a number of occasions, Tibet exercised power over China, suggesting that perhaps Tibet should claim China! At the time of China's invasion in 1949, Tibet possessed

all the attributes of an independent country recognised by international law, including a defined territory, a government, tax system, unique currency, unique postal system and stamps, an army and the ability to carry out international relations. Two years later, the 17-point agreement [Appendix A] was imposed on the Tibetan government by the threat of arms after 40,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops had already seized Tibet's eastern provincial capital Chamdo. The Tibetan delegates were threatened. The seal of the Tibetan government was forged by Beijing. In Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama could not freely express his disapproval. However, soon after arriving in India, he repudiated this agreement, stating that it was thrust upon the Tibetan government and people by the threat of arms. If Tibet had always been a part of India, why was a 17-point agreement needed? Finally, the Atlas of Chinese History Maps (published by the Chinese Social Science Institute in Beijing depicts Tibet as an independent country that was never part of China.¹⁸

The claims and arguments of the Chinese and Tibetans are totally in contrast to each other. The Chinese maintain that Tibet has always been a part of China, and due to imperialistic influence and feudal exploitation, had become a living hell where the false notion of independence prevailed. According to China, after Tibet was 'liberated' and merged with the Chinese motherland, it has been ushered into an era of harmony and growth.¹¹ At the same time, for the Tibetans, before the Chinese invasion, Tibet was a peaceful and religious country, with people living in peace and contentment. However, after the Chinese occupation, the fundamental rights of freedom and independence were snatched away and the Tibetans were turned into prisoners in their own motherland. The Chinese definition of Tibet is very different from that of the Tibetans. For China, only the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) comprises Tibet, but for the Tibetans, 1/4th of the area of China is Tibet.¹⁹

18. "Tibet and China: Two Distinct Views", <http://www.rangzent.com/history/views.html> accessed on March 28, 2013.

19. Sana Hashmi, "Between the Dragon and the Elephant: The Geostrategic Importance of Tibet", *Defence and Security Alert*, vol 3, issue 6, April 2012, pp. 69-71.

For thousands of years, Tibet was the buffer that kept India and China geographically apart and, therefore, at peace.

TIBET IN INDO-CHINA RELATIONS

Tibet is a key factor in India-China relations. It was only after the 1950 Chinese occupation of Tibet that India and China came to share the now disputed common border. In recent years, China's military build-up and infrastructure development in Tibet, as well as reported plans to divert or dam rivers that rise in Tibet and flow into India, have raised India's anxieties. Conversely, China's insecurity about Tibet is an important driver of its approach toward India. India has been unable to assuage China's fears about its possible use of the presence of the Dalai Lama in India and its large Tibetan refugee population of about 120,000 to create trouble for China in Tibet. The presence of the Dalai Lama and a large community of Tibetan refugees in India has kept the "Tibetan question" alive. Given India's open democratic system and long tradition of giving refuge to persecuted peoples, India will find it politically impossible to meet China's expectations on the Tibet question without a significant *quid pro quo*. The breakdown of talks between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama does not augur well for the future, and a post-Dalai Lama situation could become much more complicated. Of late, China's aggressive territorial claims on India, the deepening of the China-Pakistan alliance and a shift in China's position on Kashmir has led to a hardening of India's position on Tibet. India is now seeking satisfaction on what it considers to be the core issues relating to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India-China relations are unlikely to be on an even keel until this tangled knot is unravelled.²⁰

For thousands of years, Tibet was the buffer that kept India and China geographically apart and, therefore, at peace. It has only been for the last six decades or so, after China invaded and occupied Tibet in 1950, that India and China have come to share a common border, and with it, the inherent issues of border security, such as the delineation and demarcation of the

20. Sana Hashmi, "China's Tibet Policy: Implications for India", *AIR POWER* Journal, vol. 7, no. 3, MONSOON 2012 (July-September), p. 2.

border and the movement of people and flow of trade across it. However, in the absence of any extensive historical experience of relations with each other, each country has a poor understanding of the psyche and system of the other. This was a critical lacuna when the two countries began to interact after India's independence in 1947 and the Communist Revolution in China in 1949. Both were then governed by proud nationalist leaders who were imbued with an exalted sense of the greatness, destiny and mission of their respective nations, but who also had deeply ingrained grievances arising out of the humiliations they had suffered under colonial rule. Given the vanities, egos and different ways of thinking of the leaders of India and China, the likelihood of misperceptions and misunderstandings was built into the situation.²¹

The independence of India was welcome, but China, as the recognised great power in Asia after World War II, expected India to know its place.

Before the mid-20th century, India-China relations were minimal. There was some overland and seaborne trade, as well as occasional exchanges of pilgrims and scholars. The experience of the Indians and the Chinese of the outside world was completely different. India did not—indeed, could not—keep out foreign influences and ideas. Macedonians, Turks, Afghans, Persians, Mongols and assorted tribes from the Eurasian heartland who invaded India over the centuries made a profound and lasting impact on the country. The old order was not swept away. Rather, a new composite culture and society emerged as, over time, the invaders settled down in the hospitable climes of the plains of India. Here they lived in peace and prospered, eventually becoming indistinguishable from, indeed a part of, the local population. That was not the experience of the Chinese, who remained self-assured that they comprised the “Middle Kingdom” and all others were barbarians. This patronising approach persisted when India and China became independent in the mid-20th century. China's attitude toward India was one of an elder brother or uncle who was well established

21. Rajiv Sikri, “The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations”, *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 64, no. 2, Summer 2011, pp. 3-5.

in the world, giving advice to a younger relative struggling to make his way. The independence of India was welcome, but China, as the recognised great power in Asia after World War II, expected India to know its place.²²

However, the Chinese also had a complex about India. Instinctively, many Chinese people, including the Communist leaders, understood that India was a very advanced civilisation from which China had borrowed much, including Buddhism. India's spiritual and philosophical traditions were admired. Mao Zedong himself admitted to the Indian Ambassador that, in China, there was "an old belief that if a man lived a good life, he would be reborn in India." Former Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai also acknowledged that China had learned much from India. Yet, the Chinese people were quite ignorant about mid-20th century India, an ideological perspective that led the Chinese Communists to view India with wariness and suspicion as a capitalist and reactionary country whose leaders were too much under British influence. Even the Indian leaders understood that the Chinese regarded them as "tools or stooges of Anglo-American diplomacy or strategy" and that China did not regard India as a friend.²³

The thinking of independent India's leaders about China was somewhat different. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister who almost single-handedly guided India's foreign policy both before and after India's independence, harboured a generally benign view of China and its intentions in Tibet, despite being aware of the inimical attitude of China's Communist leaders toward India and toward him personally. As a well-educated, widely travelled politician and intellectual, Nehru had great understanding, sympathy and admiration for China. He harboured romantic, idealistic and somewhat naive notions of India and China as two great Asian civilisations that, as independent nations, would learn from each other's experience, forging a common destiny and promoting world peace in the 20th century. However, during the Chinese civil war, the liberal-minded Nehru's sympathies were clearly with the Nationalists led by

22. L.L. Mehrotra, "India's Tibet Policy: An Appraisal and Options", *Journal of Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre*, 2000, pp. 13-14.

23. P.M. Kamath, *India-China Relations: An Agenda for the Asian Century* (Gyan Publishing House, 2011), pp. 66-67.

Chiang Kai-shek rather than with the Communists, something that would have hardly endeared him to China's new Communist leaders. There was mutual admiration, as well as close contacts and correspondence between the two men. Although Chiang Kai-shek, during his visit to India in 1942, could not get the leaders of the Indian Congress Party to support the Allied war effort, the position changed as soon as Britain decided to give India its independence. In July 1947, just six weeks before India gained independence, the United States and India signed an agreement that permitted the United States to continue, even expand, its aerial missions in Tibet in support of Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) forces against Mao's Red Army.²⁴

CHINESE INCURSION AND AFTERMATH

A platoon strength (50 personnel) contingent of China's Army came 19 km inside the Indian territory in Burthe in Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) sector, which is at an altitude of about 17,000 ft in the Depsang Valley, on the night of April 15, 2013, and established a tented post there.

The Indian side got its first indication of the gradual Chinese build-up in the stand-off area when the troops noticed three vehicles moving between the Chinese tents and their nearest back-up location 25 km away, suggesting replenishment of supplies.

Troops from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) also established a camp approximately 300 m opposite the location. The Ladakh Scouts, an infantry regiment of the Indian Army and specialising in mountain warfare was also moved towards the area where the situation was described as tense. Although small incursions are common across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the de facto border that runs some 4,000 km across the Himalayas, it is rare for either country to set up camp so deep within disputed territory.²⁵

Differing perceptions about the disputed boundary, which is yet to be demarcated, was said to be the root cause of the problem and it was expected to be resolved amicably.

24. Amardeep Athwal, *China-India Relations: Contemporary Dynamics* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 133-134.

25. Maj Gen R.K. Arora (Retd), "The 21-Day Faceoff", *Indian Military Review*, May 2013, pp. 4-5.

Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), located in northernmost Ladakh, is a historic camp site, located on an ancient trade route connecting Ladakh to Yarkand in Xinjiang, China. It lies at the easternmost point of the Karakoram range in a cold desert region in the far north of India, just 8 km south of the Chinese border and 9 km northwest of the Aksai Chin LAC between China and India. A landing strip was established at DBO during the 1962 War. At 5,100 m, the strip is one of the world's highest.

Though the stand-off was resolved 21 days later with both the Chinese and Indian sides returning to their original positions behind the LAC, the exact motive of the Chinese incursion remains intriguing to many.

The Chinese grand strategy resembles their national game, Wei qi, which is different from the US and Western premise of grand strategy based on the game of chess. In chess, there are 16 identified pieces of known capabilities, with each side on a playing board with 64 squares. The contest is for total victory, through checkmate. Translated into military strategy, chess identifies the adversary's centre of gravity and seeks a decisive point to eliminate the opponent through a series of head-on clashes. Both the intent and capabilities of each side are on the table.

Wei qi, on the other hand, has an expansive playing board with 361 squares. Each player is given a total of 180 stones of equal capabilities. Unlike chess, where a game starts with all the pieces fully displayed on the board, Wei qi starts with an empty board. The players take turns placing stones at a point on the board, building up positions of strength while working to encircle and capture the opponent's stones. Multiple contests take place simultaneously in different portions of the board. At the end of the game, the board is filled with interlocked areas of strength. The margin of advantage at each point is small; only a Wei qi expert can assess victory through a multitude of contests.

In military terms, Wei qi is about strategic encirclement and demands enormous patience and single-mindedness of purpose through strategic flexibility to achieve objectives.

This strategic thinking is in consonance with Sun Tzu's famous treatise on *The Art of War*, where premium on victory is through psychological

advantage and by avoidance of direct conflict.²⁶

"Deception is an integral element of the Chinese strategic culture". At the same time, the importance of being more conversant with the Chinese thought process for improving Indo-China relations cannot be undermined. The relevance and urgency of taking a holistic view needs no further emphasis, especially in the light of the recent friction between India and China over differences in interpretation of the border, resulting, recently, in a 19-km incursion in the Daulat Beg Oldi sector of the Depsang Valley in Ladakh.

The sense of *déjà vu* should not be lost given that there have been over 550 instances of Chinese transgressions into the Indian territory since January 2010 alone, including one in July 2012 in the same Chumar area of Ladakh. This had ensued in a similar face-off, after Chinese helicopters destroyed Indian bunkers and tents, but it did not escalate.

Before the oft-asked question about 'how to deal with China' can be answered, it must be noted that there is a discernible and recurring pattern in the manner in which China conducts its foreign relations with India and other small neighbours.²⁷

CHINESE GAMBIT

Factoring in the element of 'deception' — not exactly a vice in statecraft — could help us put into perspective some of China's actions. For one, it could explain why Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie, during his visit to India in September 2012, insisted that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had "never deployed a single soldier" in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), even as India's military intelligence had picked up credible reports of about 735 Chinese nationals working at the site of the Neelum-Jhelum

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26. Pravin Sawhney and Ghazala Wahab, "China's Age of Wei Qi", *Force*, May 2013, pp. 4-6.

27. "China Needles India in Eastern Ladakh", *The Times of India* (New Delhi), September 19, 2012.

China had consistently conducted a series of live ground and air drills in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 2012.

hydroelectric project, near the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the presence of Chinese soldiers in PoK to provide security to development projects.

Another pet Chinese ploy is to constrict their 'win-set' or range of acceptable solutions, so that the other party has to walk the extra mile in order to accommodate the former's inflated demands. By doing so, the first party gives the illusion of 'having compromised' but has conceded very little. A case in point would be the recent Chinese incursions in the disputed²⁸ western sector of the border where they demanded a *quid pro quo* pulling down of structures from the Indian side.

Yet another art that the scions of Sun Tzu know only too well is "masking offence as defence". The Chinese advanced their indignation at the increase in India's infrastructure outlay along the border as a reason for the recent setting up of tents in the western sector of the Indo-China border. However, before India gets apologetic about it, it should recount the numerous instances of China's own infrastructure programmes along the border, including the repaving of the Xinjiang-Tibetan highway in July 2012, which runs through the disputed Aksai Chin area. Besides, China had consistently conducted a series of live ground and air drills in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 2012, as a response to which India merely registered "its concern". China also announced an 11.2 per cent hike in its defence budget in March 2012 and recently omitted a reference to its no-first-use strategic nuclear weapons doctrine in the latest government White Paper released in April 2013.²⁹

China has, in the past, also antagonised India on a number of occasions by issuing stapled visas for people from Arunachal Pradesh, which it

28. Vinay Kumar, "Chinese Providing Security to PoK Projects: Army Chief", *The Hindu* (New Delhi), September 20, 2012.

29. Jane Perlez, "Continuing Buildup, China Boosts Military Spending More Than 11 Percent", *The New York Times*, March 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/05/world/asia/china-boosts-military-spend>, accessed on May 13, 2013.

incidentally terms as “South Tibet”; condemning official state visits to the same; and depicting disputed areas as part of Chinese territory. India may have put up a strong front in the light of the latest border incursions but has probably not given out the right messages in terms of signalling its resolve and intent in dealing with issues of ‘concern’ to it.³⁰

China, on the other hand, in tandem with its diplomatic ‘doublespeak’, makes extremely effective use of ‘speech acts’, including a combination of coercion and sometimes reassurance, as part of its diplomatic manoeuvres. China articulates in very strong terms any perceived or actual infringement of its territory. For instance, in April 2012, China objected vociferously to India’s OVL collaborating with Vietnam for exploration of oil in a sector of the South China Sea which China claimed as part of its territory. Not only did China send a strongly-worded message that it “will not stand any joint cooperation in [its] claimed maritime areas” but also chided India for pointing out that the South China Sea was the “property of the world”. India eventually moved out of the oil block in the South China Sea in April 2012.³¹

Asked why China was objecting to India’s exploration projects in the South China Sea when China was similarly involved in carrying out infrastructure projects in PoK, the top Chinese official in-charge of India affairs said both issues are “totally different” and further professed that Chinese involvement in PoK projects and development of the Gwadar port was “without prejudice” to any dispute between India and Pakistan.³² Not only this, but when China, a few months after crying foul at Vietnam, put up the very same disputed oil block of the South China Sea for global bidding, India went ahead and accepted the invitation, much to Vietnam’s consternation. Apparently, this was to ‘prove’ that Indian presence in the

30. Arvind Gupta, “China’s Defence White Paper 2013: Lessons for India”, *IDSA Comment*, April 25, 2013, <http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/ChinasDefenceWhitePaper2013LessonsforInd>, accessed on May 13, 2013.

31. Ananth Krishnan, “Krishna’s Comments on South China Sea a Mistake: Chinese Paper”, *The Hindu*, April 7, 2012.

32. Ananth Krishnan, “China’s PoK Rail Link Plan Gains Traction”, *The Hindu* (New Delhi), September 1, 2012.

South China Sea was “purely an economic activity”,³³ which brings back the question of why India is in a constant bid to refrain from ‘offending’ China.

FUTURE: THE ROAD AHEAD

Tibet is not of much strategic importance as far as the world at large is concerned. It is a high altitude, landlocked region and is not comparable with a strategic powerhouse like the Middle East or the Central Asian Republics. The USA and European countries will not take any initiative which may ruffle China. The issue of Hong Kong stands resolved and Tibet can, in no way be equated with the geo-political importance of Taiwan, the island off the South China Sea and a US facilitator to keep China engaged, as also to enhance its interests in the Asia-Pacific region. It also does not fall under the family of “One China, Two Systems.” China is under no compulsion to compromise in this case. Tibet, however, is of paramount strategic significance to China and South Asia, India in particular.³⁴

History cannot be undone. The Dalai Lamas carried out their temporal authority with foreign support and there was ‘off and on’ Chinese influence in Tibet which was exploited by China. The invasion of Tibet in 1950 was justified based on historical trivia like the tribute paid by the Tibet to the Chinese Emperor, ignoring concrete evidence of Tibet’s historical independence. The four requirements of statehood in international law are population, territory, a government exercising effective control over that population and territory, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states independently. Tibet met all the parameters of being a nation-state.³⁵

Tibet is a theocratic Buddhist state with non-violence and compassion as its core value system. The Dalai Lama epitomises non-violence the world over and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. On the other hand, China occupied Tibet by employing military power and concluded the 17-point agreement under threat of further military action. China is a

33. Ananth Krishnan, “Protest Over China’s China Sea Oil Tender”, *The Hindu* (New Delhi), June 28, 2012.

34. David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 22-23.

35. Dawa Norbu, “Chinese Strategic Thinking on Tibet and Himlayan Region”, *Strategic Analysis (IDSA Journal)*, July 1988, pp. 371- 372.

powerful country and cannot be evicted from Tibet militarily unless there are serious internal disturbances in China itself.³⁶

The Dalai Lama's course of action is severely restricted by his being the spiritual head of the Buddhist Tibet, with non-violence and compassion as its core value system. The Dalai Lama is the most precious jewel of the Tibetan people. It appears prudent for him to escape and serve the Tibetan people rather than be abducted and leave Tibet without a leader. On the other hand, in his absence, the Chinese have changed the face of Tibet from one which was conservative, religious, traditionalist, ritualistic and non-materialistic to one with declining religious values and traditions and increasingly materialistic.³⁷

The demographic ratio between the Tibetans and Han(Chinese) is changing in favour of the latter. The Hans generally do not follow any religion. Although the Dalai Lama is held in the highest esteem by the Tibetans and also by the Chinese people, his role and relevance will decline, thus, facilitating the objectives of Chinese. The Chinese are determined to retain Tibet in order to engage the South Asian countries. After the signing of the 17-point agreement, Tibet became an integral part of China with a promise of near complete internal autonomy. The promise was not kept. The Chinese also sought to impose their systems which ran counter to the Tibetan way of life and religion. The widespread riots which started in 1956, culminated in the respective policies and the escape of the Dalai Lama to India in 1959.³⁸

The ultimate goal of the Tibetan freedom movement would be to make the people of Tibet pursue their traditional way of life in Tibet. The fundamental characteristics of Tibet as a nation have been peace, compassion, non-violence, spirituality and democracy. Political freedom is only a means and not the end. The youth contends that the Tibetan struggle would be neither a political movement nor an anti-Chinese one. The Dalai Lama, his

36. *Collected Statements of His Holiness The Dalai Lama on Devolution of Power to the Elected Leaders of Central Tibetan Administration* (DIIR Publication, 2011), pp. 1-2.

37. "Why Teach and Learn Tibet?" Tibet Education Network, www.globalsourcenetwork.org/TibetWhyTeach.htm, accessed on March 28, 2013.

38. "The Dalai Lama: What He means for Tibetans Today", Roundtable before the Congressional Executive Commission on China, one hundred twelfth session, July 2011, pp. 2-3.

government and the Tibetans would endeavour to undo the obliteration of their country by peaceful means, according to the Buddhist traditions. But like any other youth, the Tibetan youth is getting restless and is convinced that non-violent means are being seen as Tibetan weakness and may not lead to any tangible results. The Tibetan youth may well adopt the Indian model, a combination of non-violent and violent means. The Dalai Lama would continue to hold his spiritual and temporal position but the more assertive part of the movement could be without his sanctions. The Dalai Lama continues to pursue peaceful means and the path of compassion, but the Tibetan community, which even though it has displayed enough patience, will have to create compelling circumstances for China before the damage done to Tibet becomes irreversible.

APPENDIX A

The Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet

Following is the agreement between the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet:-

1. The Tibetan people shall unite and drive out imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet. The Tibetan people shall return to the family of the motherland, the People's Republic of China.
2. The local government of Tibet shall actively assist the People's Liberation Army to enter Tibet and consolidate the national defence.
3. In accordance with the policy towards nationalities laid down in the *Common Programme of the Chinese Political Consultative Conference*, the Tibetan people have the right to exercise national regional autonomy under the unified leadership of the Central People's Government.
4. The central authorities will not alter the existing political system in Tibet. The central authorities also will not alter the established status, functions and powers of the Dalai Lama. Officials of various ranks will hold office as usual.

5. The established status, functions and powers of the Bainqen Erdini shall be maintained.
6. By the established status, functions and powers of the Dalai Lama and of Bainqen Erdini are meant the status, functions and powers of 13th Dalai Lama and the 9th Bainqen when they were in friendly and amicable relations with each other.
7. The policy of freedom of religious belief laid down in the *Common Programme of the Chinese Political Consultative Conference* shall be carried out. The religious beliefs, customs and habits of the Tibetan people shall be respected and lama monasteries shall be protected. The central authorities will not effect a change in the income of the monasteries.
8. Tibetan troops shall be recognized by stages into the People's Liberation Army and become a part of the national defence forces of the People's Republic of China.
9. The spoken and written language and school education of the Tibetan nationality shall be developed step by step in accordance with the actual conditions in Tibet.
10. Tibetan agriculture, livestock raising, industry and commerce shall be improved step by step and the people's livelihood shall be improved step by step in accordance with the actual conditions in Tibet.
11. In matters related to various reforms in Tibet there will be no compulsion on the part of the central authorities. The Local Government of Tibet should carry out reforms of its own accord and demands for reform raised by the people shall be settled by means of consultation with the leading personnel of Tibet.
12. In so far as former pro-imperialist and pro-Kuomingtang officials resolutely sever relations with imperialism and the Kuomingtang and do not engage in sabotage or resistance, they may continue to hold office irrespective of their past.
13. The People's Liberation Army entering Tibet shall abide by all the above-mentioned policies and shall also be fair in all buying and selling and shall not arbitrarily take a single needle and thread from the people.

14. The Central People's Government shall conduct the centralised handling of all external affairs of Tibet and there will be peaceful coexistence with neighbouring countries and the establishment and development of fair commercial and trading relations with them on the basis of equality, mutual benefit for territory and sovereignty.
15. In order to ensure the implementation of this agreement, the Central People's Government shall set up a military and administrative committee and a military area headquarters in Tibet and apart from the personnel sent there by the Central People's Government shall absorb as many local Tibetan personnel as possible to take part in the work.
16. Funds needed by the military and administrative committee the military area headquarters and the People's Liberation Army entering Tibet shall be provided by the Central People's Government. The Local Government of Tibet will assist the People's Liberation Army in the purchase and transport of food, fodder and other daily necessities.
17. This agreement shall come into force immediately after signature and seals are affixed to it.

Signed in Beijing on the 23rd of May 1951.

Chinese Representatives: Li Weihang, Zhang Jingwu, Zhang Guohua and Sun Zhiyuan.

Tibetan Representatives: Ngabo Nggawang Jigme, Khampe Sonam Wangdu, Lhawutara Thupten Tenther, Thupten Lekmon and Sampho Tenzin Dhundup.