

Issue Brief

China-Tibet Issue, and its implications on India's Border Security

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Tibet: The balance or conflict in regional security?

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Introduction

For Tibet, India has always represented a land of nobility and all things great because it is the land of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism practised predominantly across their country as the Aryabhumi. Tibet and India share several religious landmarks like Lake Manasarovar and cultural history wherein it is believed that Tibetans are believed to be the descendants of General Rupati of the Kaurava clan. Indian and Tibetan people and governments have always had mutual respect and love for each other. Though at a point in time, the Government of India did consider Tibet as a de facto country, subsequent negotiations and agreements declared that the GoI now views Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) which was met with a lot of protests from the Tibetan people. China had control over Tibet briefly in the early 20th century, after which it had suzerainty. This was until 1951 after which China gained full power over Tibet. This happened after several negotiations that lasted for over 2 years but concluded with the signing of a 17 Point Agreement that listed how things are to be dealt with by the two countries in the future which was signed by the Tibetan representatives under duress. Tibetans have shown their displeasure through various protests in the preceding years that have varied from non-violent protests to self-immolation. Tibet is situated between India and China, which makes it crucial for the countries in light of the increasing war between the two countries. China, before the annexation of Tibet, did not share such a long border with India making it very crucial to India's border security. Ever since the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China has made continuous efforts to develop its border security and infrastructure. The TAR budget for 2023 has allocated a considerable amount to border infrastructure development involving hydropower plant development that has seemingly led to the Chinese infiltration into the Demchok region of Ladakh posing a severe threat to the security of people in the northeastern borders.

As the Tibetan glaciers provide water to the rivers flowing into India, the increasing control of China over Tibet poses a serious problem to India's water security. Before the PRC's annexation, the country had practised various ways to protect plants and animal species in the Tibetan Plateau with around 2.5 million sq. km. Since the Tibetan culture and their religion were influenced by Bon Buddhism, it has helped the people to conserve and protect their environment and ecological diversity for a very long time till the 1950s, when the People's Liberation Army invaded the country's borders and forcefully took over. After 1959, commercial hunting has also been legalised in the country leading to the endangerment of various species. The PRC has overly exploited the natural resources of Tibet like their water, soil and minerals in the name of development. Excessive logging in the Tibetan plateau led to one of the worst floods experienced by the country in 1998 in the Yangtze River displacing over 15 million people and killing over 3000 people in the affected regions. Post the Chinese takeover of Tibet, the country has witnessed a surge in water pollution due to the dumping of toxic matter and poisoning by metallic mines near the basins. Though the Chinese government has continuously boasted about developing Tibet and China has derided Tibet for not using its natural resources as much as it should be, the Chinese have caused major setbacks for the Tibetan people due to the heavy pollution and exploitation of the resources that the Tibetan people had safeguarded for centuries.

China's efforts to Sinicize Tibetan Buddhism and control the Dalai Lama succession are part of a broader strategy to assert dominance over Tibet. By promoting the narrative that Tibetan Buddhism has always been part of Chinese culture, China aims to undermine the authority of the Dalai Lama and ensure future religious leaders align with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political objectives. This move weakens the influence of the Tibetan exile community and consolidates China's control over the Tibetan spiritual hierarchy. In India, the policy of not granting citizenship to Tibetans born after 1987 has led to growing dissatisfaction among the Tibetan refugee youth, exacerbating their socio-economic challenges and fostering a sense of statelessness and marginalization. This frustration adds to the complexities of the refugee community's integration into Indian society. Xi Jinping's 2021 visit to Tibet underscored the emphasis on Sinicization and the promotion of Chinese national identity, highlighting Tibet's strategic importance. By encouraging the resettlement of Chinese citizens in border areas, China aims to enhance its strategic presence and defend its sovereignty. Recent border clashes with India further underscore Tibet's significance under Xi's leadership and the region's potential as a flashpoint for future conflicts

Tibet as a bone of contention

Tibet's strategic significance extends far beyond its serene landscapes and rich cultural past. Tibet's advantageous location at the confluence of Central and South Asia has a big impact on regional stability as well as international relations. Its borders with India, its role in Sino-Indian tensions, and the security concerns resulting from China's military activity in the region create a complex geopolitical context. China and India are separated by Tibet, which is a mountain range in the centre of the Himalayas. The Tibetan Plateau, often known as "the Roof of the World," provides China with a high-elevation strategic advantage. The borders between Tibet and India are a subject of intense debate, particularly in the provinces of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. Tibet's role in regional stability is underscored by the strategic competition between China and India. The increased assertiveness of China in Tibet and along its border areas with India has led to heightened tensions and has influenced security dynamics across South Asia. The strategic importance of Tibet extends beyond its immediate borders, affecting the stability and security of neighbouring countries and shaping regional geopolitical alignments.

Tibet's Role in Sino-Indian Border Disputes

The core of the Sino-Indian boundary disputes, namely about the McMahon Line and Aksai Chin, is Tibet. China contests the legitimacy of the McMahon Line, which was agreed upon during the 1914 Simla Accord, and does not recognize it. Since the Sino-Indian War of 1962, China has ruled Aksai Chin, which India claims is part of its borders. These disagreements draw attention to China's and India's larger strategic rivalry, which affects regional security. The intricate interaction between geopolitical interests and historical grievances that continues to influence the two countries' relationship is reflected in the historical background of these issues. The continuous conflicts over these areas highlight Tibet's importance in the larger strategic equation between China and India.

Military Presence and Infrastructure Development

China's military presence in Tibet has grown significantly, with extensive infrastructure development, including roads, railways, and military bases. The development of the Lhasa-Golmud Railway and various military installations enhances China's ability to project power and respond to potential conflicts. This military build-up is part of China's broader strategy to strengthen its regional influence and secure its interests in South Asia.

China's recent infrastructure development in Tibet highlights its strategic priorities. The construction of border defence villages, dams, an all-weather oil pipeline, and extensive internet connectivity projects aims to bolster China's control over Tibet and strengthen its border security against India. These developments are part of a broader strategy to enhance the CCP's presence and consolidate its authority in the region, creating a loyal population base capable of supporting its military and strategic objectives.

The strategic infrastructure in Tibet enables China to maintain a robust military presence and respond rapidly to potential security threats. The increased military capabilities and infrastructure development have implications for India's security and its ability to manage and respond to threats along its borders.

Surveillance and Intelligence Threats

There are serious dangers to the security of the region from China's intelligence and surveillance operations in Tibet. China is better equipped to keep an eye on activities happening near its borders because of the installation of sophisticated monitoring equipment and intelligence-gathering operations. India's military plans and border security are directly affected by these capabilities. There are worries about how the growing surveillance infrastructure in Tibet, which includes satellite and ground-based monitoring systems, can affect regional security. China's capacity to obtain intelligence and keep an eye on regional affairs strengthens its strategic position and affects the dynamics of South Asian security.

Impact on India's Border Security

China's growing military buildup and infrastructure in Tibet have an immediate effect on India's border security. India has had to modify its border control and military tactics to deal with China's increasing influence and maintain its security. This entails bolstering the infrastructure along the border, deploying more troops, and stepping up surveillance and reconnaissance. India's reaction to China's actions in Tibet is indicative of a larger plan to control China's influence and deal with border security issues. An important part of India's strategy for guaranteeing its security in the area is striking a balance between diplomatic engagement and military readiness.

India's Strategic Responses

India advocates for restraint and stability in the Taiwan Strait, urging avoidance of unilateral actions and the de-escalation of tensions, reflecting its broader call for peace and stability in the region. Historically, India maintained a low profile on Taiwan Strait issues, but recent concerns about its militarization signal a shift to a more vocal stance. This includes a reluctance to endorse the One China policy, indicating a more assertive approach. While India historically recognized Tibet as part of China (1954) and the Tibet Autonomous Region (2003), Tibet remains a sensitive issue due to ongoing border claims and historical rights from the British era. Hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile continues to cause friction with China, and India asserts that the succession of the Dalai Lama should be determined by Tibetans, reflecting its complex position on the issue.

Today, India, along with countries like the US, has utilised Tibet as a diplomatic lever to challenge Chinese policies. This involves highlighting human rights abuses and autonomy issues to pressure China. By doing so, India aims to draw international attention to Tibetan issues and counterbalance China's assertive stance.

Military and Diplomatic Strategies

India has implemented various military and diplomatic strategies to address the security concerns arising from China's activities in Tibet. Militarily, India has focused on strengthening its border infrastructure, modernizing its armed forces, and increasing troop deployments along the border. These measures aim to enhance India's capacity to respond to potential threats from China and secure its borders.

Diplomatically, India has engaged in multiple efforts to build support for its position on Tibet and regional security. This includes working with international partners and leveraging diplomatic forums to address security concerns and promote stability. India's diplomatic strategies also involve engaging with regional allies and strengthening relationships with other democracies to counterbalance China's influence

Role of Alliances and Partnerships

India's alliances and partnerships, particularly the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), play a significant role in addressing regional security concerns. The Quad, which includes the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, aims to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific and enhance regional security cooperation. These partnerships help India strengthen its position and collaborate with other democracies to counterbalance China's influence in the region. The role of alliances and partnerships extends beyond the Quad, encompassing various regional and global engagements that contribute to India's strategic posture and security efforts. Collaborative initiatives with other countries and international organisations help India address security challenges and promote regional stability. Saving Tibetan culture and managing relations with China, while both countries coordinate on addressing the Dalai Lama's succession to mitigate potential Chinese pressure. The visit by prominent U.S. lawmakers, including Nancy Pelosi and Michael McCaul, to Dharamshala to meet the Dalai Lama was a strategic move to showcase international support for Tibetan autonomy and human rights. This visit was intended to send a clear message to China regarding global support for Tibetan issues. China's strong condemnation of the visit underscores its sensitivity to international involvement with Tibetan exiles, reflecting its broader strategy to suppress Tibetan dissent and prevent international support for the Tibetan cause. Strategic Dynamics in Tibet and Taiwan: U.S. and India Coordination The U.S. has progressively involved India in its strategy towards China, enhancing cooperation through civil nuclear agreements, intelligence-sharing, and strategic partnerships. The U.S. recognizes Tibet as part of China but seeks to preserve Tibetan culture and religious traditions, advocating for a Tibetan succession decided by the Buddhist community. Regarding Taiwan, the U.S. maintains a policy of strategic ambiguity, supporting its defence capabilities while recognizing the One China policy to avoid explicit defence commitments. Quiet consultations between the U.S. and India focus on pressure. India has increased its economic and quasi-official engagement with Taiwan since the 1990s, establishing the India-Taipei Association and becoming vocal on Taiwan Strait tensions. Influenced by the recent border crisis with China, the COVID-19 pandemic, and global conflicts, India's stance on Taiwan reflects its security considerations. India's role includes communicating the global impact of a Taiwan Strait crisis, supporting Taiwan economically and culturally, and maintaining a strong military presence on its borders with China. The U.S. expects India to support efforts to limit China's warfighting capacity and provide logistical support, though direct involvement is not anticipated. Potential impacts on India from the Taiwan crisis include significant GDP effects and shifts in regional power dynamics.

India's Stance on Tibet in International Forums

India has used international platforms to highlight human rights issues and challenge China's policies while balancing its strategic interests. Engaging with international organizations and leveraging diplomatic channels are crucial for advancing India's position on Tibet and addressing regional security concerns. India's diplomatic efforts include working with global partners to build support for its stance on Tibet and regional security. These efforts aim to influence international opinion and address security challenges while promoting regional stability and cooperation. India's strategic response to the security concerns in Tibet combines military and diplomatic strategies to address immediate threats and long-term regional stability. Strengthening border infrastructure and military capabilities is crucial for countering China's activities, while enhancing intelligence and surveillance ensures better preparedness against potential security threats. India also places significant emphasis on building alliances and partnerships, such as the Quad, to address regional security challenges and counter China's influence. Engaging with international partners and leveraging multilateral forums is essential for creating a robust strategic network to navigate the complex security dynamics in Tibet. Additionally, India's proactive stance on the Tibet issue in international forums aims to promote global awareness and support for Tibetan human rights, ensuring the preservation of Tibetan culture and religious autonomy. By advocating for Tibetan rights on international platforms, India seeks to build global opposition to China's policies and strengthen its strategic position.

Tibet in India's Foreign Policy

India's humanitarian stance on Tibet, grounded in principles of compassion and refuge, has earned global admiration and serves as a testament to India's soft power. This position, however, faces persistent challenges from China, which portrays Tibetans as terrorists and accuses India of harbouring them. The arrival of the Karmapa in India in 2000, initially perceived as a security risk due to his followers in Sikkim, has had a limited impact on Indian society. Nonetheless, the succession of Tibetan leadership, including the future role of the Karmapa, will require careful and strategic management, especially in the post-Dalai Lama era. This reflects the intricate balance India must maintain between its humanitarian values and national security interests in its foreign policy

Implications for India-China Relations

India's active support for Tibet and alignment with the US bring significant diplomatic and strategic risks, primarily by increasing tensions with China. This stance risks provoking retaliatory measures from China, potentially impacting trade, investment, and regional security. Leveraging Tibet as a diplomatic tool could escalate the situation, leading to economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, or heightened military pressure on India's borders. However, the Tibet issue also offers potential benefits. It provides India with leverage in negotiations, allowing it to challenge Chinese policies and assert its position in the geopolitical landscape. Additionally, increased engagement with Tibetan exiles and collaboration with the US can enhance India's international standing, garnering support in countering Chinese aggression. This approach strengthens the strategic partnership between India and the US, aligning their interests in the Indo-Pacific region and bolstering their collective influence against China's expanding power.

Policy Recommendations

To effectively tackle the China-Tibet issue, India needs to work on implementing a multifaceted strategy. First, India needs to increase its diplomatic efforts to form and maintain a coalition of foreign partners which will pressurise the Chinese to acknowledge the legal validity of the agreement signed by the Tibetan officials under duress. Second, India needs to retaliate against Chinese penetration and defend our territorial sovereignty by ramping up border vigilance and defences. Penultimately, India needs to implement economic policies that will lessen our dependence on the country and hence its influence on us. Indian representatives and diplomats should also actively advocate for Tibet's autonomy and natural rights in international forums, as well as advocate for protecting the Tibetan community and their culture. Lastly, India should also address the transboundary issue of water pollution caused by the Chinese government to the Tibetan rivers which provide for the livelihoods of various people in Tibet and the lower riparian countries.

India should pursue a comprehensive strategy to manage its Tibet-related issues effectively. This involves bolstering border infrastructure and military capabilities, including the development of all-weather roads and advanced surveillance systems, to counter security threats from China. Simultaneously, India must prioritize international advocacy for Tibetan human rights, engaging global partners to build support against Chinese policies. Strengthening diplomatic alliances, such as with the Quad, and participating in multilateral forums will help balance China's influence and promote regional stability. It is also crucial to regularly assess the security implications of Tibetan refugees and leverage India's cultural ties to Tibetan Buddhism to enhance regional influence. India should focus efforts on advocating for specific issues within the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), while proposing gradual governance transitions to maintain stability. Aligning short-term actions with long-term strategic goals will enable India to effectively counterbalance Chinese influence and assert its role as a major regional power, ensuring proactive management of emerging challenges in the geopolitical landscape.

Future Prospects

India's approach to Tibet is part of a broader geopolitical strategy that must adapt to the shifting dynamics of international relations. The effectiveness of this strategy will depend on India's ability to navigate changes in China's policies, US-China relations, and regional developments. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, India should remain flexible and responsive to new challenges and opportunities. By adopting a proactive stance and integrating Tibet-related strategies into its broader foreign policy framework, India can strengthen its regional influence and better align with long-term strategic goals. This approach will be crucial in managing emerging issues and ensuring that India's Tibet strategy contributes positively to its overall geopolitical objectives.

Conclusion

India's current strategy on Tibet represents a significant shift in its approach towards China. By aligning with the US and increasing support for Tibetan exiles, India aims to leverage the Tibet issue to challenge Chinese policies and assert its strategic interests. This strategy carries both risks and potential benefits, requiring careful navigation of the complex geopolitical landscape and management of tensions with China. A proactive and adaptable approach will be essential for achieving long-term strategic goals.

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