

The second liberation of Tibet?

Sunday September 3, 2006

A rather strange piece of news appeared recently in the press: a German Google Earth user spotted a military base in China's Northern plains. There would be nothing extraordinary in this if the free satellite imagery software had not shown an accurate scale model of a highly sensitive stretch of the disputed Sino-Indian border in the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh. Now, the model is located 2,400 km away in the Huangyangtan province. The military complex is said to be used for training and familiarisation of troops, helicopters and infantry vehicles. The facility, with 'uncharacteristic and man-made snow peaks, glacial lakes and snow rifts ironically in the middle of an arid plain' is flanked by a large military depot.

The Indian Express was told by an army official: "Militaries are always known to simulate potential conflict zones as a standard practice. ...There is nothing alarming, these are standard training methodologies."

Alarming or not, one can only conclude that training on a Himalayan terrain is still very much a part of the PLA's preparation today.

It is in South Block corridors alone that some still believe that because Special Representative M K Narayanan and his Chinese counterpart Dai Bingguo regularly meet to discuss 'border issues', the Chinese are not preparing for any contingency.

After the last round of talks, the Indian public was told: "the focus of the current round of talks is on devising an agreed framework for a settlement of the border issue on the basis of the political parameters and guiding principles" finalised during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to India in 2005. The Indian Envoy even declared that a 'package deal' on the boundary issue would be agreed upon within the next two or three rounds of dialogue. It probably means that like in the fifties, the Chinese negotiators will tell their Indian colleagues: "you give us Aksai Chin and we will recognise that Arunachal is part of India."

Whatever it is, the Chinese planners are cautious people and in case they do not get what they want, they prepare for any eventuality.

That is why some ten years ago, the Chinese government undertook to consolidate its western borders. Today the arrival of a railway track to Lhasa provides a tremendous boost to the 'consolidation of the borders' and it changes the strategic and military balance in the region. Beijing is now able to bring troops and medium range missiles to the Tibetan capital, located less than two days by road from both the Eastern and Western sectors of the Indian border (Arunachal or Ladakh).

Beijing has further decided to include a railway track from Lhasa to Shigatse in southern Tibet. The following step will probably be to close China's western railway loop and bring the train from Shigatse to Kashgar, cutting across the same disputed Aksai Chin. Who can doubt that it is the most serious threat to India's security since the not-so by-gone Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai era.

In 1959, while intervening in Parliament on the Chinese intrusions in Aksai Chin, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had declared: "Nobody has been present there. It is a territory where not even a blade of grass grows." Nehru had thus justified that his government had taken

several years to inform the Indian Parliament about the road built on the barren heights of the Aksai Chin.

A few years ago, former Defense Minister George Fernandes is reported to have told a news agency: "China has built roads up to the border, while there has been negligence on India's part." But since then nothing has been done to counter the Chinese moves.

In October 1950, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had entered Tibet under the pretext that "China's borders had to be consolidated."

In 1994, China's Vice Minister of Railways Sun Yongfu had first announced that the train was a way to "promote the economic development of the Tibet Autonomous Region and to strengthen national defense." Although the 'strengthening of the borders' is listed second in the program, it is undoubtedly, the most crucial factor for the leadership in Beijing.

The 'Tibetan railway dream' (since the early days of the Sun Yat Sen regime, Chinese engineers had dreamt of a railway to Lhasa) was part of a grand Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005). UPI had commented: "Sun's mention of defense concerns is a reminder that China's borders with India, the former Soviet Union and Vietnam have been troubled by skirmishes and full-blown war over the past three decades. Better rail links will facilitate swifter access for military personnel and equipment, which may also be targeted against the country's occasionally restive minorities."

In 1996, Xinhua News Agency had made public the project known as 'Third Railway Construction Boom', part of a 'Go West' campaign.

Ten years later, in July 2006, the 1118-km railway stretch from Golmud to Lhasa was inaugurated. With about 960 km of the Qinghai-Tibet railway located 4,000 meters above sea level (the highest point

is 5,072 meters), the arrival of the first train in Lhasa attracted as much attention in world media as Zidane's head butt.

Indeed it is a great achievement for the Chinese engineers and one can only remain in awe of such a technical feat. During the last few weeks, the press has continued to carry stories of the highest railway in the world. It appears that the train transported 7,241 people from Xining, capital of Qinghai Province, to Lhasa, in its first two weeks of operation: all trains were full.

All this should not make us forget that the railway is not only a showcase of Chinese technology and wealthy economy. John Ackerly in the *The Wall Street Journal* wrote: "Its \$4.1 billion dollar price tag makes it the largest and one of the most unprofitable projects ever undertaken in Western China." And to add: "It is also the most unwanted by local residents."

Chinese are pragmatic; there is no question for them to invest in 'unprofitable' projects. It is clear that China will profit in two ways: the first one by bringing more Han settlers to the Roof of the World.

The Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile see the opening of Lhasa to railway traffic as a Chinese plot to 'liberate' Tibet a second time. Bringing 'vast seas of Chinese colons' into their country would be the best way to demographically 'cleanse' the Tibetan plateau, a technique successfully implemented in Inner Mongolia and more recently in Xinjiang.

The London-based Tibetan Information Network had reported sometimes ago: "the construction of railways to Urumqi and Kashgar in the western-most Xinjiang Autonomous Region was accompanied by a significant influx of Han Chinese migrants, as was the establishment of a railway to Golmud in the 1960s."

Apart from the flood of Han settlers, the extraction and transport of minerals (like uranium) and precious metals out of Tibet by railway will also benefit the Chinese government which could thus quickly recover its investments. Even in Communist China, business is business and investments have to be recovered.

And ominously for India, the main beneficiary is bound to be the People's Liberation Army, which today faces huge costs in feeding and equipping hundreds of thousands of soldiers in Tibet.

During the course of a stay in Lhasa in 2001, President Hu Jintao declared: "With the passage of 50 extraordinary years, Tibet of today presents a scene of vitality and prosperity with economic growth, social progress and stability, ethnic solidarity and solid border defense."

It is important to note the emphasis on the 'solid border defense'. The train will be the crucial factor to reinforce Chinese 'border defense'.

Even if India would decide to build similar roads or railway tracks to protect her borders, it would take at least eight to ten years to begin the work and perhaps as many years to complete it.

In the meantime, India and China will continue their ritual border talks: the last one was the 8th round since the appointment of special representatives in 2003.