

Development and Stability

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“Divide to rule” is a well known concept. Was not the Indian sub-continent divided in two parts by the colonial power to better retain control?

On the other side of the Himalayas, the Communists rulers also know this very basic rule of colonial politics. Fifteen years after invading Tibet in October 1950 (or ‘liberating’ in their jargon), they administratively partitioned the country. One part became the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR); other parts were amalgamated into the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu and Qinghai. Half of Tibet thus disappeared from the Asian map.

In September, Beijing celebrated with pomp the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the TAR. For the occasion, a delegation led by the Chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference and China's No. 4 leader, Jia Qinglin came to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital. State television showed the delegation of Chinese officials disembarking from a plane in Lhasa. They were greeted by children, dancers and about 300 Tibetan ladies dressed in traditional Tibetan costumes waving kathags, the white welcome scarves. To further adorn the ceremony, a small group of monks pounded drums.

Soon after his arrival, Jia Qinglin highlighted the “the significant progress the autonomous region has achieved in the last 40 years” and mentioned two targets for Tibet: development and stability. To understand what means development and stability, it is necessary to return a few decades in history.

China becomes Communist

“The Chinese people have stood up, long live the Chinese Communist Party”, Mao told a million Chinese assembled at Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949; the People's Republic of China was proclaimed. While independent India was just two years old, the Communists had taken control over China; a new empire was born. Like India's, leaders of China wanted to break from their colonial past. Nehru's India believed that all the nations which had gone through the colonial ordeal, should now

share a common future. However, there was a fundamental difference between India and China: India had not imperialist views on its neighbours, China had.

The Invasion of Tibet

It materialized on October 7, 1950, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invaded Tibet. For Mao, the 'liberation' of Tibet was a masterly 'coup'. It demonstrated to the world that he was the most powerful leader of Asia, while showing that India was incapable of defending a smaller country with whom she had close cultural and historic links.

Ideologically, the 'liberation' of Tibet meant that the Marxist theory could spread to another 'feudal' country; it was a true 'liberation' in Marxist terms.

Furthermore China was *de facto* re-establishing her suzerainty over Tibet (Lord Curzon had called it 'a constitutional fiction' at the beginning of the 20th century), which had been lost many decades earlier. It was a first step towards the South, the opening of the gateway to India and to other neighbouring countries — Mao used to say that Tibet was the palm and Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, NEFA and Ladakh were its five fingers.

The 17-Point Agreement

On May 23, 1951, Dalai Lama's representatives initialed a '17-Point Agreement' with the Chinese leaders in Beijing. Signed under duress by the Tibetan delegates, the '17-Point Agreement' (also known as '*Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet*') meant in practical terms for Tibet the loss of her two-thousand years independence.

The invasion of Tibet and the signing of the '17-Point Agreement' were the two first steps taken by Beijing to consolidate the Empire and protect China's newly acquired borders. During the following years the process continued. On September 9, 1951, several thousands Communist troops entered Lhasa. A few months later, they were followed by 20,000 PLA troops who started occupying strategic points on the Tibetan Plateau.

The planned strategy of the Chinese was clear: since the matter had been 'legalized' and as no strong objection had been raised by the Government of India, the supremacy of the PLA had to be established on the ground and Tibet's occupation 'stabilized'.

Strategic Location

An analyst once wrote: *"he who holds Tibet dominates the Himalayan piedmont; he who dominates the Himalayan piedmont, threatens the Indian subcontinent; and he who threatens the Indian subcontinent may well have all the South-east Asia within his reach, and all of Asia."* Mao the strategist knew this well, so did the British who had always managed to maneuver to keep Tibet an 'autonomous' buffer zone between their Indian colony and the Chinese and Russian empires. The Government of India, upon inheriting the past treaties and obligations of British India, should have worn the British mantle with its advantages for Indian security and its sense of responsibility vis-à-vis Tibet; unfortunately for fear of looking like a neo-colonialist state, they failed without giving any thought to the consequences which would follow.

The Roads

Soon after the PLA entered Lhasa, the Chinese made plans to improve communications and built new roads on a war-footing. The only way to 'stabilize', unify and develop the Empire was to construct a large network of roads. The construction work began immediately after the arrival of the first young Chinese soldiers in Lhasa. Priority was given to motorable roads: the Chamdo-Lhasa, the Qinghai-Lhasa and the western Tibet road which would later become the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway. The first surveys were done at the end of 1951 and construction began in 1952.

Xinhua News Agency reported in November 1954: *"The two large armies of road builders from the eastern and western section of the Sikang-Tibet Highway joined hands on November 27. Sikang-Tibet Highway to Lhasa is now basically completed."* The communiqué further mentions that *"gang builders and workers, including about 20,000 Tibetans, covered over 31,000 li on foot in the summer of 1953 and began construction of the 328 km of highway eastwards from Lhasa."*

Three weeks later, another report stated: *"The Qinghai-Tibet Highway is now open to traffic. The first vehicles reached Lhasa on the afternoon of December 15. Over 2000 km long, the highway... traverses 15 large mountains... crosses 25 rivers, grasslands and basins at an average elevation of over 4,000 meters above sea level."*

The construction of one of the feeder roads leading to Nathu-la, the border pass between Sikkim and Tibet had some strange consequences. India began feeding the Chinese troops in Tibet, sending tons of rice for the PLA through this route. John Lall, a former Dewan of Sikkim, was posted in Gangtok while the supply of rice was

transiting through the Himalayan State; he could witness long caravans of mules leaving in the direction of Nathu-la.

The Official Report of the 1962 China War prepared by the Indian Ministry of Defense gives a few examples showing that the construction of the road cutting across Indian soil on the Aksai Chin plateau of Ladakh was known to the Indian ministries of Defense and External Affairs long before it was made public. To quote the Report: *“B.N. Mullik, who was then Director, Intelligence Bureau, has, however, claimed that he had been reporting about the road building activity of the Chinese in the area since as early as November 1952.”*

Different incidents occurred in the early fifties which should have woken the Government of India out of its soporific *Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai* dream-like world. It was not to be so.

The harassment of the Indian Trade Agent in Rutok (Western Tibet) is undoubtedly linked with the work which was starting on the Tibet-Xinjiang highway. Rudok, located midway between Lhasa and Kashgar is the last small town before the Aksai Chin. The presence of an Indian official there was embarrassing for the Chinese; their Army had begun to build a road on Indian soil.

If the Indian government had been ready to read beyond the Chinese rhetoric and Zhou's assurance of friendship, it could have seen many more ominous signs. One of them was the closure of the Indian Consulate in Kashgar by the Chinese authorities. India had been trading with Central Asia and more particularly Kashgar and Yarkand for millennia. The Government of India accepted the closure of its trade with Sinkiang as a *fait accompli*.

Finally on October 6, 1957, a Chinese newspaper reported: *“The Sinkiang-Tibet – the highest highway in the world – has been completed... The Sinkiang-Tibet Highway... is 1179 km long, of which 915 km are more than 4,000 meters above sea level; 130 km of it over 5,000 meters above sea level, with the highest point being 5,500 meters.*

...Two trucks fully loaded with Hami melons, apples and pomegranates, all native products of Sinkiang, headed in the same direction [Tibet]. These fruits were gifts brought specially by the road builders of Sinkiang for the people of various nationalities.”

The circle was closed. The two newly-acquired western provinces of Communist China were linked. It took nearly two more years for the news to become public in

India. In August 1959 Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister dropped the bombshell in Parliament: what the Chinese called the 'highway' was crossing over Indian territory! For Beijing, the border was finally 'stabilized'. Development remained to start.

The Railway and the consolidation of the Empire

During the nineteenth century, the railway has been the main instrument to colonize vast territories the world over. The best known example is the conquest of the West in the United States. In China also, the development of a railway network has been used to bring under effective control remote 'vassal' provinces such as East Turkestan (Xinjiang) and Inner Mongolia. Tibet was not forgotten; Dr. Sun Yatsen had thought to bring a railway line to Lhasa, the practical and political difficulties were then insurmountable. After the return of the Thirteenth Dalai to Tibet in 1912 and his declaration of Independence, the Nationalist government had no control (or even presence) on the Roof of the World; therefore, there was no question of bringing a railway line to the Tibetan plateau.

Till the fifties, the railway remained a faraway dream in Tibet. The new leaders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) had decided to concentrate on the road network. Only once the occupation of Tibet fully under control, could plans be made to bring the train onto the Tibetan plateau.

We should always keep in mind the dual purpose of the rail in the history of Communist China: one is the colonization (what Beijing calls the 'integration of the different nationalities') and the second one is the 'strengthening of the borders'. Since the early fifties, Beijing was able to establish military garrisons which helped to stabilize the 'liberation' and control the remote and rebellious province. Another advantage was that natural resources could be extracted from these richly endowed regions to supply the Mainland's industrial production with raw materials.

The History of the Rail on the Tibetan Plateau

The first railway link to reach the Tibetan plateau was inaugurated in 1959; however, it became operational in 1961 only. This corresponds to the period during which the tension had started building up between India and China. In 1958, another important event occurred in China which needs to be mentioned. After Moscow had refused to transfer nuclear technology to its fraternal state, Beijing made up its mind to become a nuclear power. For Mao the only solution for China was 'to stand up' and build her own bomb. It is around this time that the *Northwest Nuclear Weapon Research and*

Design Academy (known as the Ninth Academy) was established in the Tsojang Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

The location, on the marches of the Tibetan plateau was an ideal place for China to hide her secret most researches and protect it from foreign eyes (particularly those of the Russians and Americans). The difficulty of access and the altitude (11,000 feet) provided this protection. However for the purpose of setting up nuclear bases around the Academy, the railway between Xining and Golmund in Eastern Tibet had to be built.

The catastrophic Great Leap Forward and its 40 million of deaths cut short the momentum of the project. The starvation was such, that there was no question to continue the construction of the track for several years. It is said that more than 9,00,000 people lost their lives in the Amdo region alone.

It is only in 1977 that the project was revived. It was completed two years later. The rail became functional in 1984 only. One of the causes of the delay might have been the famous visit of Hu Yaobang, the CCP Secretary General, to Tibet in May 1980. When the railway to Golmund became fully functional in 84-85; the influence of Hu Yaobang had begun to fade in the CCP. In the meantime, it was used for nuclear research in the Ninth Academy located some 40 km from the Xining-Golmund railway, as well as for the Gangca military airbase and the nuclear missiles sites at Terlenka and Xiao Qaidam (Tsaidam).

At that time, the Dalai Lama brought to the attention of the world the difficult situation in his own birthplace near Xining. In fact, this 'second invasion' corresponds with the arrival of the train in Eastern Tibet. In an article entitled *A Vast Sea of Chinese Settlers Threatened Tibet*, he wrote: *"The area where I was born, the Kokonor region of north-eastern Tibet, now already has a population of 2.5 million Chinese and only 700,000 Tibetans, according to recent Chinese newspaper reports. The Chinese claim to be giving special care and attention to the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region, which comprises only the western and central parts of Tibet, but they are sending large numbers of young Chinese colonists into eastern and north-eastern parts of our country."*

The Golmund-Lhasa line

The time was ripe to revive the old project of Dr Sun Yatsen when in October 1992, Hu Jintao was elected to the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the 14th Central Committee. Hu was just back from Tibet where he had served as the Party boss.

He knew well the Tibetan issue and understood that the easiest solution for Beijing to 'settle' the problem once and for all was to follow the example of Inner Mongolia. Once the rail reached Lhasa, the local Tibetans would become a small minority in their own country and would slowly be assimilated into the Han mainstream population. A railway line was also the best way to keep an eye on India which was fast becoming an economic and military rival. A tighter military occupation of the Tibetan plateau would certainly put Beijing in a far better situation for future negotiations on the border dispute with her neighbour.

Thus in 1994, the decision was taken to include the survey and the feasibility studies of the railway to Lhasa into the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000).

In December 2000, China's Railway Ministry announced that the Golmund-Nagchu-Lhasa had been chosen for execution during the Tenth Plan. It was the shorter and cheaper option.

In the meantime, Jiang Zemin, the PRC's President had initiated a 'Go West' campaign. More resources would be invested in China's western regions and particularly into the Tibet railway. In February 2001, China's Vice Minister of Railways Sun Yongfu presented the project as a way to "*promote the economic development of the Tibet Autonomous Region and to strengthen national defense.*" The train to Lhasa was presented as a part of the grandiose Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) which would 'boost the infrastructure of western China'.

However, it is clear from all the studies made so far (and particularly the *International Campaign for Tibet's*) that the investment incurred by the Chinese Central Government is completely disproportionate to the benefits to be gained by the local population. But it would be wrong to assume that Jiang Zemin's "Go West" development program was designed to help local populations. Its main objective seems to 're-balance' China's economy by bringing more settlers in the 'Western provinces' and by 'sharing' the wealth of these provinces with the Mainland. Hu Yaobang's slogan '*Strive to build a united, prosperous and civilised new Tibet*' had been forgotten long ago.

The Strengthening of the Borders

The Chinese Railway Minister Sun Yongfu clearly spoke about the 'strengthening of the borders' as the second objective of the scheme. It is as important as the 'economic development of the region.' In fact, both of them are very much interlinked.

Since 1949, the defense of China's borders has been a very crucial factor for the leadership in Beijing. When in February 2001, the 1118-kilometer railway stretch from Golmud to Lhasa received the final approval from the Chinese State Council, Premier Zhu Rongji declared: *"The railway has great significance for the acceleration of economic and social development in Tibet and for the increase of economic and cultural exchanges."* One wonders what are these 'cultural exchanges'!

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Diaspora saw the opening of Lhasa to railway as a Chinese plot to 'liberate' (or invade) Tibet a second time. To bring 'vast seas of Chinese settlers' into their country would be the best way to demographically 'cleanse' the Land of Snows.

Perhaps, more than the 'cultural' investment of Zhu Rongji, the investment on strengthening the PLA's position, is essential in the eyes of the Chinese leadership. A few years ago, the PLA was deprived of its lucrative businesses, and since then, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have been looking for ways to pacify and keep the Army busy. For an authoritarian regime, it is always better to keep the Army on its side. For India, the consequences are tremendous. Would New Delhi 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. The completion of the railway to Lhasa has to be seen in this context.

For India, it indicates that for the next few years, China is bound to go for a *Chini-Hindi Bhai Bhai* policy. Beijing knows that preparations to 'strengthen the borders' take time.

Today the stakes are clear. Whether the border talks continue or not, whether India gives in to the Chinese claims on Aksai Chin or elsewhere in UP or Arunachal, the Chinese planners will include in their Eleventh Five-year plan, a few new railway tracks, particularly one to Shighatse and perhaps even to Kathmandu.

The Lesson of 1962 War

To fully appreciate the military implications of the railroad to Lhasa, it is necessary to come back forty years in history. One event which has not been properly explained to the Indian public is the sudden announcement of a ceasefire after the October 1962 Chinese attack on NEFA and Ladakh. The Official Report of the 1962 War stated: *"On November 20 the situation at Tezpur went completely out of control. An advance party of IV Corps Headquarters left for Gauhati as a first step of withdrawal. In an*

atmosphere thick of rumour and beset with panic, this opened the floodgates, The civilian administration lost its nerve.”

The situation could not be more catastrophic. The nation could fear the worse. Then, broadcasted by *Radio Beijing*, came the news that the PLA had been ordered to withdraw. The Official Report analyzed later on: *“The Peking radio announcement in the early hours of 21 November declaring a unilateral cease-fire from mid-night 21/22 November came as a surprise. Strictly in military terms, it was an understandable and logical decision. As winter had already set, the Chinese would have found it extremely difficult to maintain the forces across the snow-bound Himalayan passes. Having reached the plains of Assam, any further advance would have meant facing Indian Army that had tanks and heavy guns. The Chinese could at best muster light machine guns and mortars. Induction of Chinese tanks was a physical impossibility... The Chinese were apparently worried about the safety of their forces operating at the end of a tenuous line of communication.”*

Similar situations occurred in September 1965. Though China threatened India to enter the battle and side with Pakistan in its war with India, nothing happened and by the end of the month, a cease-fire was finally brokered by the UN. One can presume that one of the reasons which motivated Beijing not to get involved in the conflict was the difficulty of sustaining an invasion.

During the 1971 Bangladesh Operations, the Pakistani Army (particularly General Tikka Khan in East Pakistan) was waiting for the Chinese messiahs to come and save them, they never came. It was probably clear for Beijing that the implications of an intervention against India posed too many problems, not only political, but also tactical and logistic.

Nuclear China and Tibet

Another aspect of the opening of the railway line between Golmund and Lhasa will be the nuclear aspect. No doubt that the railway will give a tremendous boost to China's nuclear delivery capacity by giving the possibility to the PLA to bring missiles as well as heavy machinery for construction of new deployment sites, closer to the Indian border. It will also make possible the delivery of heavy armaments such as tanks which were badly missed by the Chinese forces during the 1962 Operations.

In fact a major aspect of the problem changed after China became a member of the very restricted nuclear club in October 1964. In this new context, the opening of the Xining-Golmund railroad in 1979 tremendously helped the strategic planners in

Beijing. They could finally find the beginning of answers to their problem with India. The construction of the IXth Academy near Xining in Qinghai province in the early sixties was a step in the new direction planned by Beijing.

On 29 July 1998, the Tibet Daily reported a speech of Tibet's deputy Party Secretary Ragdi who declared: *"Tibet holds a crucial status in the overall order of China's political, economic, and cultural development, being one of China's key defence outposts and strategic points, so speeding up the economic and social development of the Tibetan region, to preserve its united and stable order, is of key significance to national security."*

It has to be understood that both aspects of the railway scheme: the colonization of plateau and the stabilization of the borders are very much linked and can only progress hand-in-hand. Once the 'Tibetan nationality' problem is settled by waves of Han settlers, it will be possible for the leadership in Beijing to complete the military control of the region.

It has been estimated by the International Institute for Strategic Studies that 128 nuclear missiles were based in Tibet. Some put the figure even higher. Most of the missiles are located in the proximity of the Xining-Golmund Railway in Eastern Tibet. This practically means that the potential to strike Indian targets is being changed to mobile launchers from silo based launch facilities. This trend will accelerate once the rail track is operative.

Forty Years later

In the above context, Jia Qinglin's words about "the significant progress achieved in the last 40 years" sounds like mere propaganda. Throughout all these years, only one Chinese leader has had the honesty and courage to admit the failure of Chinese policies supposedly designed to improve the lives of local Tibetans: this was Hu Yaobang, a former Communist Party Secretary. During his visit to Tibet in May 1980, Hu publicly acknowledged that Tibetans had not benefited from the much-vaunted Chinese assistance. He called a meeting of top functionaries of the TAR and asked them if all the financial assistance earmarked for Tibet had been "thrown into the Yarlung river".

Unfortunately, in the past five years, the Chinese assistance to their 'backward' province has not been thrown in the Yarlung, but it is used to 'develop' Tibet in the framework of the 'Go West campaign'. It is also aimed at 'stabilising' China's borders with India. The train to Lhasa is the instrument of this policy.

In what way will the people of Tibet benefit from this 'development and stability? This is a one billion yuans question!