

The Train to Lhasa

A Threat to India's Security



Claude Arpi

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In recent weeks, Beijing projected the railway line from Golmud (Qinghai province) to the capital of the Roof of the World, as one of the greatest technological feats ever achieved. Journalists from all over the world were invited to cover the inauguration of the Chinese engineers' prowess.

Just two and half months after the inaugural journey, *Xinhua News Agency* announced: "450,000 passengers carried on Qinghai-Tibet Railway". This made the Chinese nation proud!

But behind the media staged scene, things are quite different. First, the train will certainly not promote 'exchanges' between Tibetans and Chinese Hans, as announced by Beijing, simply because it will be only one way traffic. Millions of Chinese Hans will now participate in what former President Jiang Zemin called the "Go West" campaign. This will undoubtedly result in a change in the demography of the Tibetan plateau.

Further for us in India, this Chinese 'achievement' does not augur well. It is enough to look at the history of China during the past 50 years to understand why.

The History of the Railways on the Tibetan Plateau

Though the first railway link to reach the marches of the Tibetan plateau (Qinghai province) was inaugurated in 1959, it became operational in 1961 only¹. Its construction corresponds to the period during which tensions had started to build up between India and China². In 1958, another important event had occurred in China: 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*³ was established in the Tsojang Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

The location, on the edge of the Tibetan plateau, was an ideal place for China to hide her most secret research from prying foreign eyes (particularly Russians and Indians). The difficulty of access and the altitude (11,000 feet) provided protection. However in order to set up nuclear bases around the Academy, the railway between Xining and Golmund in Eastern Tibet had to be built.

The catastrophic Great Leap Forward with its 40 million dead cut short the momentum of the project. The famine⁴ was such, that there was no question of continuing the construction of the track for several years.

In 1977 the project was revived and completed two years later although it became functional only in 1984. One of the causes of the delay might have been the famous visit to Tibet of Hu Yaobang, the CCP Secretary General in May 1980. He made a sincere and passionate speech which could have changed the face of Tibet if his decisions had fully been implemented.⁵ In front of a gathering of 5,000 cadres in Lhasa, Hu made an appeal to *'Strive to build a united, prosperous and civilised new Tibet'*. Nobody doubted his sincerity when he listed six tasks for the Chinese Central government in Tibet. The first one was *"To exercise nationality autonomy in the region fully-- that is to say, to let Tibetans really be the masters of their own lives."* Unfortunately, Hu Yaobang's influence in the CCP began to fade in early 80's.

The main purpose of the railway to Golmund was to service not only the Ninth Academy as well as the Gangca military airbase and the nuclear missiles sites at Terlenka⁶ and Xiao Qaidam (Tsaidam).

The Golmund-Lhasa line

In October 1992, Hu Jintao was elected to the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the 14th Central Committee. He would later become a member of the Central Committee's secretariat. The time was ripe to revive the old railway project.

Posted back in Beijing, Hu Jintao⁷, must have been the first to plead for the railway to Lhasa. He knew the Tibetan issue well 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 could become an economic and military rival. A tighter military occupation of the Tibetan plateau would also put Beijing in a far better position 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 in the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000).

In October 1995 *Xinhua News Agency* had announced the "Third Railway Construction Boom." The new railway construction drive was expected to bring fresh hope for the *"economic development of land-locked southwest China"*. The news agency had also reported that Tibet was going to be linked to the mainland by a railway track: *"the economic potential of the region, with rich agricultural and mineral resources is yet to be brought into full play due partly to inadequacy in railways."*

In December 2000, China's Railway Ministry announced that the Golmund-Nagchu-Lhasa sector had been chosen for execution during

the Tenth Plan. It was the shorter and cheaper option; furthermore, it would bring Lhasa relatively closer to Beijing than the other options. In the meantime, Jiang Zemin, the PRC's President had initiated a 'Go West' campaign. More resources had to be invested in China's western regions. 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." Sun Yongfu made the announcement in front of other Cabinet ministers and western executives. The train to Lhasa was part of the grandiose Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005) which would 'boost the infrastructure of western China'. It also included the laying of tracks along the ancient Silk Road from the Southern Xinjiang Railway to the states of former Soviet Central Asia⁸.

Impact of the Railway on Lhasa: the Strengthening of the Borders

It is clear from all the studies made so far on the implementation of the railway project 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 Beijing's "Go West" development program was designed to help local populations. Its main objective seems to be to 're-balance' China's economy by bringing more settlers to the 'West' and to 'share' the wealth of these provinces with the Mainland.

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 and interlinked to the 'economic development of the region. We need to dwell upon this objective of the defense of China's borders as it has a vital bearing on India's security.'⁹

Defense has been a very crucial factor for the leadership in Beijing since 1949. After Minister Sun's announcement, UPI 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 February 2001, the 1118-kilometer railway stretch from Golmud (the current terminus of the Qinghai-Tibet railway) to Lhasa received the final approval from the Chinese State Council¹⁰, former 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."*

Of the 12 billion dollars earmarked for railway construction in China's western regions during the 10th Five-year Plan, a significant portion went for the Tibetan railway¹¹.

The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Diaspora saw the opening of Lhasa to railway as a Chinese ploy to 'liberate' Tibet a second time. Bringing 'vast seas of Chinese settlers' into their country would be the best way to demographically 'cleanse' the Land of Snows, as was done in Inner Mongolia.

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. Some years ago, the PLA was deprived of its lucrative businesses¹², and since then, Hu Jintao and his colleagues have been looking for ways to pacify and keep the Army busy. In an authoritarian regime, it is always better to keep the Army on one's side.¹³ The Tibet Information Network, an independent news agency

based in London, commented: "*The interests of the People's Liberation Army are paramount in determining the foundation of national security and military infrastructure in China -- two of the key motivations for constructing the railroad*".

For India, the consequences are tremendous. In comparison, if New Delhi 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. Some other events should be seen in the same context. First, the visit of Hu Jintao (then Vice President) to Tibet in July 2001, to celebrate the 50 years of 'Liberation'. During the course of his stay in Lhasa, Hu 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. The people here are living and working in peace and contentment.*"

While most Tibetans may not agree with his statement and hate him for his excesses some 12 years earlier as the head of the dreaded Martial Law Committee in Lhasa. It is important to note the emphasis on the 'solid border defense'.

For India, it indicates that for the next few years, China is bound to go for a *Chini-Hindi Bhai Bhai* policy.¹⁴ Beijing knows that the 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 new railway tracks in their Eleventh Five-year plan¹⁵.

The Lesson of 1962: the Lack of Railways

To fully appreciate the military implications of a railroad to Lhasa, it is necessary to return to more than forty years ago. An event which has never been properly explained to the Indian public is the sudden ceasefire after the October 1962 Chinese attack in 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 was slightly better on the Western Front thanks to the heroic defense of Chushul¹⁶ which left Leh still far away for the advancing PLA. But in NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh), the situation could not have been more catastrophic. The nation feared the worst. Then, came the news broadcast by Radio Beijing that the PLA had been ordered to withdraw. The Official Report analyzed later: *"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 the 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 cease-fire proposal also mentioned the Chinese intention to immediately start withdrawal from captured territory. The Chinese were apparently worried about the safety of their forces operating at the end of a tenuous line of communication."*

As reinforcements for the Chinese lines of communication had to come from Sichuan, Yunnan or Qinghai provinces, it was practically impossible for the Liberation Army to sustain their advance. By the end of November, winter was advancing on the Tibetan plateau. Mao and his generals must have pondered the question of how to sustain a prolonged attack on India¹⁷. The answer was obvious: develop the roads, communication links and eventually bring a rail track to the heart of Tibet.

A similar situation occurred in September 1965. Though China threatened to enter the battle¹⁸ alongside Pakistan in its war with India nothing happened. By the end of the month, a cease-fire was 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 without a proper communications and supply-delivery network.

Another important fact which hampered a more decisive victory for the PLA in 1962 was the Tibetan factor. The population of the high plateau had begun showing signs of discontent. A 70,000-character petition was sent by the Panchen Lama to Zhou Enlai in April 1962¹⁹. In the September the CCP Conference, Mao denounced the 'poisonous arrow' sent by the Lama and called him 'an enemy of our class'. The mere fact that the Panchen Lama, a moderate who had been chaperoned by Beijing, could write such a long critical letter showed the hostility of the local people against the forced occupation of their land. A longer war, with its supply base in Tibet, would have been very difficult to sustain in the atmosphere of 'rebellion' prevalent on the Roof of the World at that time.

Nuclear China and Tibet

Another implication of the opening of the railway line between Golmund and Lhasa is the nuclear aspect. There is no doubt that the railway will give a tremendous boost to China's nuclear delivery capacity. It will enable 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 transportation of heavy armaments such as tanks which were badly missed by the Chinese forces in 1962.

In fact when China became a member of the very restricted nuclear club in October 1964, the stakes were changed. In the new situation, the opening of the Xining-Golmund railroad in 1979 tremendously helped the strategic planners in Beijing to find the beginning of the answer to the problem of 1962 operations. The construction of the Ninth Academy near Xining in Qinghai province in the early sixties was one step in this new direction.

On 29 July 1998, the *Tibet Daily* reported a speech of Tibet's deputy Party Secretary Raidi 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."*

Raidi added: *"keeping a long stable core of officials of the Han and other nationalities in Tibet...is needed to defend national unity"*.

The *Tibet Information Network* commented: *"The authorities are linking the construction of the railway to the key political struggle in Tibet today, against "separatism" and the "Dalai clique", both of which are blamed for the underdevelopment of Tibet and instability in the*

region... The construction of a rail link in Tibet would facilitate the supply of grain and other resources into Tibet."

The construction of airbases on the Tibetan plateau and the acquisition of mid-air refueling technology will also help the Chinese Air Force to execute combat operations over the Indian Himalayas.

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

The Chinese Missiles

A great change occurred at the end of the eighties: the Soviet Union collapsed, changing the main target of the Chinese nuclear program. Since the mid-fifties when the split between Moscow and Beijing occurred, the Soviet nuclear arsenal had been a source of worry for China. At this time the Third Front²⁰ scheme was put in place. With the disappearance of Soviet Union, the Chinese strategy shifted to new strategic theaters, namely Taiwan, South Asia and the Korean peninsula.

It has been estimated by the *International Institute for Strategic Studies*²¹ that 128 nuclear missiles are 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.

Several long range DF-4 missiles are positioned in Da Quaidam, some others at Terlenkha and Xiao Qaidam. They can reach a target at 7,000 km.

Regarding the deployments of China's medium range missiles, Brig. V.K. Nair,²² an analyst explained that according to the U.S. Air Force National Intelligence Center: *"in areas where the CSS-2's 3,100 km [also known as Dong Feng 3 or DF3] range capability is required, crew training activities remain robust and the number of deployed launchers likely remains unchanged."*

What is worrying for India is *"the large scale CSS-2 training activity involving at least two launch units from Datong field garrison has also recently been noted at Haiyan training facility in the 56th Army, [located on the Tibetan Plateau]."*

The report explains: *"From Datong the CSS-2 can strike targets in India and Russia.... [and] there is evidence of replacement of some CSS-2 assets in Datong with the CSS-5 Mod 1[DF-21]."*

It is worth saying a few words about the DF 21 missile. Its development began in 1967 and it was first successfully tested in May 1985. Later, its range was improved to 1800 kms (DF-21A) carrying a 600 kg warhead with a nuclear capability estimated to be 200-300 kilotons. The particularity of the missile is that it can be launched from a transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) vehicle.

The Federation of American Scientists²³ believes that *"over 100 DF-21/JL-1 missiles have been built, and as of 1995 some 15 to 20 DF-21 missiles had been deployed, with deployments increasing to some 36 by 1997. Some DF-21s have been reconfigured with conventional warheads for use along China's southern and northwestern borders. From these locations, the DF-21 can hit targets throughout Northern India, the Republics of Central Asia, and most of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. As of late 1997 China had about 40 DF-3 refire-capable launchers at six field garrisons and launch complexes. Many of*

those launchers are being converted to handle new, solid-fuel DF-21 [CSS-5 Mod 1] launchers and missiles."

Practically this means that the potential to strike Indian targets is being changed from silo based launch facilities to mobile launchers. The trend will accelerate once the rail track is operative to the Nepal border.

Further highlighting Chinese designs is the up-grading of the highways network²⁴ stretching from Jianshui-Kunming-Yunan-Chengdu-Lhasa-Haiyan-Datong. This new road network makes it possible to carry heavy mobile missiles to existing launch sites.²⁵

The railway opens new vistas for the PLA. It allows the Chinese generals to change the theater of ballistic missiles in a very short time and can facilitate a rapid redeployment in case of need by using the railway. Firepower could be directed to India much more effectively from already prepared launch sites hidden in tunnels. From these sites, not only India but also Europe and the US could be targeted through the ICBMs such the DF-31A.

In another *China Brief* of the Jamestown Institute, William Triplett II described some of the advantages of the rail for the tactical and strategic new potentialities of China's defense program: "*With this railroad in place the PLA will have excellent hiding places for its new rail-mobile ICBM, the DF-31A. If the PLA follows the Russian lead and rail-bases its ICBMs, each missile train could carry up to thirty nuclear warheads capable of destroying any strategic target in Japan and many in the Western United States.*

... From a military logistics standpoint, rail has an enormous advantage over roads in moving heavy equipment, supplies and manpower. In effect, this means the permanent militarization of the entire plateau into a staging ground for aggression into South Asia. With even a

*single line, the PLA could move about 12 infantry divisions to Central Tibet in 30 days to meet up with their pre-positioned equipment.*¹²⁶

The extension of the rail track to Lhasa will bring major changes to the high plateau. The missile launch brigades based in Datong and Wulan near Xining could be transferred closer to Lhasa where they would be much better protected against enemy attacks. India would suddenly come closer to the MRBM range. Longer range missiles such as DF-31 and DF-41 with their nuclear warheads could also be redeployed in the region for the same tactical reasons.

The report of the Washington D.C. based International Campaign for Tibet noted:

Chinese military planners have been exploring a doctrinal strategy that would preserve the deterrent value of its strategic forces ever since the days of Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI or Star Wars). Moving away from the 'minimum deterrence' strategy of a 'no first-use' policy, the concept of 'limited deterrence' has emerged. It provides for "the ability to respond to any level of nuclear attack," whether tactical or strategic, which puts a premium on survivability of its nuclear forces. Mobile delivery systems would be one means of reducing the vulnerability of China's arsenal from a crippling first strike. It would also preserve a powerful counterstrike capability. To that end, China has reportedly completed development of a rail mobile version of the DF-31 ICBM, similar to the Ukrainian built SS-24s, and may shift focus away from road launch vehicles. If deployed in the west, missiles could be moved up and down the Xining-Lhasa line and concealed in tunnels throughout the mountainous terrain, away from populated eastern areas. In addition to presenting a moving target to military adversaries, launches could

*be made at any point along the 1,987 km of track, within striking range of targets as far away as the United States.*²⁷

Perhaps the most distressing aspect is that while China took five years to complete the 1,142 kms Tibet railway, India is struggling to complete the 292 kilometer Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link in Kashmir since more than 11 years. The Railway Ministry recently informed the Parliament that the crucial 148-kilometer stretch between Katra and Qazigund would only be complete by 2008-9 and that only 12 per cent work had been completed so far. India simply does not want to see the danger.

Conclusions

The above developments have extremely serious implications for India's security.

- First, it will bring a tremendous change in the demography of Tibet. For millennia, India has had very close cultural and religious links with the Tibetan people. It will be entirely different when a large Han majority will be settled in Tibet.
- The advance of the railway line close to the Indian border will be a new strategic card in Beijing's hands for future negotiations on the border issue. When the first negotiations were conducted in 1960, China had just completed the network of strategic roads in Tibet. The fact that Beijing was in occupation of the Tibetan plateau certainly influenced the negotiations. India's arguments about history were of little value when faced with an occupying power. The railway further establishes this occupation, leaving little space for India to bargain.
- The railway will also make it easier to shift a ballistic theater at short notice in case of a conflict. What is absolutely impossible

by road due to the difficult terrain will not pose any serious logistic problem with train transportation. As can be seen from the yearly October 1 Parade on Tiananmen Square, many missiles are transportable by train, but far too long to travel by road in mountainous areas.

All these factors make the situation precarious and unless India reacts fast, she might be placed in front of a *fait accompli*.

Notes

¹ The same year as the Urumqi line in Xinjiang.

² The correspondence on the Aksai Chin between the Governments of India and China started in October 1958. The same year, Beijing decided to build the Xining-Golmund link.

³ The construction of the *Northwest Nuclear Weapon Research and Design Academy* (known as the Ninth Academy) started in 1958. China's first nuclear weapons research and development facility is situated 16 km east of Lake Kokonor in Haiyan County. China's first atomic bomb and first hydrogen bomb were successfully developed there, hence the local name 'two-bomb base'. The 1,100 square kilometer base was a closed city. It is perhaps the most secret place in China. Located some 40 km from the Xining-Golmund railway, a special track had to be laid to serve the Academy.

⁴ More than 9,00,000 people are believed to have lost their lives in the Amdo region alone.

⁵ Hu's vision of an autonomous Tibet could have provided an acceptable starting point for the negotiations between the People's Republic of China and the Dalai Lama.

⁶ Terlenka (Chinese: Delingha) is located 521 km from Xining on the Xining-Golmund line.

⁷ Hu Jintao had been the Party Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region between 1989 and 1992. In fact, he did not like Tibet and rarely visited the region.

⁸ Yet another plan was to open a rail link to Burma and Indo-China. One of the tracks would follow the Mekong River from Kunming and turn towards southern Yunnan to go into Indo-China. This would also be linked to the existing networks to create a 'pan-Asian' railway right down to Singapore. At the same time, it would bring a railway head very close to north Burma and India.

⁹ We should not forget that it took nearly ten years between the time the PLA began the road construction in Tibet and the attack against India on Thagla Ridge in October 1962. Chinese leaders, unlike their Indian counterparts, are in the habit of always planning their 'development' and 'border defenses' decades in advance.

¹⁰ The Chinese Cabinet of Ministers.

¹¹ According to some estimates, 2.34 billion dollars.

¹² The People's Liberation Army was forbidden to engage in business activities.

¹³ Everyone still remembers the events of Tiananmen in 1989, when the Army saved the Deng Xiaoping Dynasty.

¹⁴ Possibly in developing the idea of a strategic triangle between Russia, China and India.

¹⁵ In September 2006, Beijing made it official that the newly-built Tibetan railway will be extended to the Nepal border. It was announced by the Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region during the visit of Nepali Deputy Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli to Lhasa. A few days earlier a Chinese official Yu Yungui had told a news conference in Lhasa that the railway would reach Shigatse, some 270 km from Lhasa, in three years time. According to the Chinese official: *"The railway will offer great opportunities for the social and economic development of Shigatse."*

¹⁶ Which left more than 1,000 Chinese dead.

¹⁷ In *"Railway Patterns and National Goals"*, Leung Chi-Keung argues that control of the railway system, more than control of the territories, cities or population was in fact the decisive factor in the outcome of the civil war. He cites June 1949 as the turning point in the Communists' favor. At the time, the Communists held only a third of the territory, but the government had lost more than 80 percent of the railway system.

¹⁸ See correspondence between Delhi and Beijing in *Notes, Memoranda and Letters Exchanged and Agreements signed by the Governments of India and China, White Paper XII*, (New Delhi: Publication Division, 1954-61).

¹⁹ After the Great Leap Forward, the young Panchen Lama openly sided with the 'reformists' camp led by Lui Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.

²⁰ The Third Front scheme was a set of defense preparations in the eventuality of a war with the Soviet Union.

²¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 2002-2003* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 222.

²² V.K. Nair, *China's Nuclear Strategy and Its Implications for Asian Security* (China Brief, Jamestown Foundation, Volume 1 Issue 9, November 8, 2001).

²³ See *Federation of American Scientists* website
<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/china/index.html>.

²⁴ Reported by Tibet Information Network. See site <http://www.tibetinfo.net>.

²⁵ The poor surface conditions of roads, closure of many passes in winter, relatively low capacity of bridges and even traffic congestion in case of conflict, make the transport of missiles extremely difficult in the present conditions. This will change once the railway is functional.

²⁶ *William C. Triplett, II, The Dragon in The Indian Ocean* (China Brief, Jamestown Foundation, Volume III, Issue 4, February 2002).

²⁷ See *Crossing the Line*, a Report of the International Campaign for Tibet
<http://www.savetibet.org/documents/pdfs/2003RailwayReport.pdf>