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Civilian and Military Developments in Tibet

Suyash Desai

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Executive Summary

This paper traces China's Tibet-specific civilian and military developments under General Secretary Xi Jinping. It details the changes in the civilian leadership and the construction of dual-use infrastructure and border development villages across Tibet. It also documents changes in the military leadership and key military installations while discussing patterns in PLA's exercises in the region. It concludes with a brief assessment that these developments have made Tibet more stable internally than it was in the previous decade. There are ongoing issues on the border with India, but the recent military modernisation, the dual-use civilian infrastructure developments, and the ongoing PLA reforms aim to address the Indian threat - China's secondary strategic direction.

Keywords: *Tibet, People's Liberation Army, Xi Jinping, Military, Civilian, Infrastructure, Military Exercises, Border Villages*

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1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) considers Tibet¹ an integral part of Chinese territory. It has controlled Tibet since the early 1950s. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman Mao Zedong said, "Although Tibet's population is small, its international position is extremely important, and we must occupy it."¹ Since then, Tibet has been subordinated through a combination of political pressure and military force.² Although the region has considerably developed under Communist rule, many Tibetans, including the Tibetan government-in-exile operating from Dharamshala in India, demand genuine autonomy for the region.³

Tibet has also been a major sore point between India and China. The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) suppression of the 1959 Tibetan rebellion and the Dalai Lama and his followers' escape to India sowed the seeds of long-term strain in the Sino-Indian relations.⁴ The two countries are involved in a territorial dispute on at least 13 areas on the India-China border.⁵ They have also engaged in an armed conflict in 1962, and have had multiple border skirmishes and stand-offs like Sikkim in 1967, Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1987, Doklam in 2017 and Eastern Ladakh in 2020, to name a few. Despite India's formal recognition of Tibet as an intrinsic part of the PRC on at least two occasions - 1954 under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and 2004 under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee - China has always suspected India's role in the multiple Tibetan uprisings.⁶

Since the turn of the century, Tibet witnessed two waves of protests: A major wave in 2008 and a relatively minor wave in 2011 and 2012.⁷ In 2008, the unrest spread from Lhasa to Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces, with as many as 30,000 Tibetans participating

¹ In this paper, Tibet means wider Tibetan region which comprises of three provinces of Amdo (now split by China into the provinces of Qinghai, Gansu & Sichuan), Kham (largely incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai), and U-Tsang (which, together with western Kham, is today referred to by China as the Tibet Autonomous Region). The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) refers to the province that China created for the administrative purpose in 1965.

in more than 100 separate incidents across the plateau. More than 120 Tibetans had set themselves on fire in protest against government policies, and the self-immolators included monks, nuns and students.⁸ Similarly, in 2011 and 2012, there was an increase in the frequency of self-immolations by the Tibetan monks to protest against the PRC rule.⁹ From February 2009 to December 2011, 13 Tibetans committed self-immolations. Additionally, 33 more self-immolation cases were reported from December 2011 to August 2012 in the region.¹⁰

Xi Jinping was the Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman in 2011 when the second round of protests began in Tibet. During his trip to Lhasa as the CMC Vice Chairman and PRC's Vice President, he said, “[We] should thoroughly fight against separatist activities by the Dalai clique by firmly relying on all ethnic groups... and completely smash any plot to destroy stability in Tibet and jeopardise national unity.”¹¹ In one of the earliest moves after taking over as CCP General Secretary, Xi strengthened the role of leading small groups in the Party's decision-making process and formalised them to the level of Central Committee Commissions.¹² He also chaired important groups and appointed his loyalists and trusted associates to head these groups. For instance, the National Security Leading Small Group (国家安全领导小组, *guojia anquan lingdao xiaozu*), the National Anti-Terrorism Leading Small Group (国家反恐怖工作领导小组, *guojia fankongbu gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*) and the Central Coordination Group for Tibet Affairs (中央西藏工作协调小组, *zhongyang Xizang gongzuo xiediao xiaozu*) are together responsible for the Tibetan Plateau's peace, development, stability and security.¹³ Xi himself chairs the leading small group for national security, while China's Public Security Minister Zhao Kezhi, who is from the newer Guizhou crop of Xi loyalists, heads the anti-terrorism group.¹⁴ ⁱⁱ Such appointments have allowed Xi to establish firmer

ⁱⁱ Wang Xiaohong recently replaced Zhao Kezhi as the Public Security Minister. He was Zhao's deputy and is also a Xi loyalist.

and direct control over the region. It has also enabled him to securitise and stabilise the restive plateau region.ⁱⁱⁱ This behaviour is what scholars have described as the Chinese Party-state's feeling of insecurity towards the Tibetan nation - "A strong power, weak state," and an "insecure empire behaving like a nation-state."¹⁵ China scholar Tsering Topgyal argues that such developments result in a spiralling cycle of insecurity as China attempts to increase its security through state-building, thereby provoking Tibetan resistance, which causes even more intense state-building efforts.¹⁶

But the motivations, when Xi came to power, were not only confined to Tibet's domestic stability. China's approach to foreign and security policies took an assertive turn in 2008. It started shifting from the Deng Xiaoping's model of keeping a low profile (韬光养晦, *taoguangyanghui*) to a more active framework of "to strive for achievement" (奋发有为, *fenfayouwei*).^{17,iv} Under Xi, the policy has crystallised into an ideology with a broad set of global interests and the political will to pursue them.¹⁸ This change has manifested in the issues related to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity across China's every disputed territory, including in Tibet on the border with India. For instance, India and China were involved in at least five major stand-offs in the past decade. This includes the 2013 Depsang stand-off, 2014 Chumar and Demchok stand-offs, 2015 Burtse stand-off, 73 days stand-off at the Doklam Plateau near the India-China-Bhutan tri-junction and the ongoing 2020 stand-off at multiple points in eastern Ladakh.¹⁹ But these are just the more prominent incidents, as the Government of India's official data suggest that Chinese transgression on the Indian side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has increased in the last five years.²⁰ These incidents reveal that China under Xi has focused on both Tibet's internal stability and security of its border areas with India.

ⁱⁱⁱ These moves were also aimed to reduce the chances of dilution of his power and gain firmer control over the Party.

^{iv} The literal translation of (奋发有为, *fenfayouwei*) is to work hard. However, in this context, it is used as "to strive for achievement."

Table 1: Increased Incidents on the LAC

Year	West	East	Mid	Total
2019	497	138	28	663
2018	284	89	31	404
2017	337	119	17	473
2016	208	71	17	296
2015	342	77	9	428

Source: Sushant Singh, “Big Surge in Chinese Transgressions, Most of them in Ladakh,” *The Indian Express*, May 22, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/aksai-chin-army-big-surge-in-chinese-transgressions-most-of-them-in-ladakh-6421674/>

The PRC sets its policy direction towards the region in the “Symposium on Work in Tibet” (西藏工作座谈会, *Xizang gongzuo zuotanhui*).²¹ These forums were held in 1980, 1984, 1994, 2001, 2010, 2015 and 2020.²² In the 2015 Work Forum, Xi said that developments in Tibet are related to the overall work of the party and the country, and the focus of work in Tibet should be “safeguarding” the motherland’s reunification and national unity.²³ However, the tone of his speech in the 2020 Work Forum changed as the phrases like “safeguarding the unification of motherland” (维护祖国统一, *weihu zuguo tongyi*), which Xi used in 2015, were replaced by “maintaining stability” (坚持稳中求进工, *jianchi wen zhong qiu jin gong*) in 2020.^{24, v} Xi said, “the cadres and masses of all ethnic groups in Tibet have united and worked hard, and have solved many long-term problems that have not been resolved (in the past)... various undertakings have made all-round progress and historic achievements.”²⁵ The subtle change in the tone of his speeches indicates that China now considers Tibet more stable internally than it was in the previous decade. There are unresolved issues on the border with India, however, as this document highlights in the subsequent sections, the recent military modernisation, the dual-use

^v The literal translation of 维护祖国统一 · 加强民族团结, *wéihù zǔguó tǒngyī, jiāqiáng mínzú tuánjié* is to “the unification of the motherland and strengthening national unity.” While the literal translation of 坚持稳中求进工, *jianchi wen zhong qiu jin gong* is to “persist in seeking progress while maintaining stability.”

civilian infrastructure developments, and the ongoing PLA reforms aim to address the Indian threat, which is also China's secondary strategic direction.²⁶

This paper traces China's Tibet-specific civilian and military developments under Xi. The first section highlights the changes to civilian leadership and the construction of dual-use civilian infrastructure and border development villages. The second section outlines the changes to the military leadership, traces PLA's military instalments in Tibet and identifies a pattern to the PLA's military exercises in the region. The document concludes with the brief implications of these developments for the Sino-Indian border dispute and underlines the scope for further research.

2. *Civilian Developments*

This section is divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section identifies the Tibet Autonomous Regions's (TAR) civilian leadership and details its role in “stabilising” the restive plateau region. The second sub-section highlights civilian infrastructure development like roads, railways, airports, logistic centres, oil pipelines and internet connectivity within the region, all of which have dual-use potential. A part of this sub-section also underlines China's ongoing efforts to build dams on the middle section and the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo, known as the Brahmaputra River in India. The final sub-section highlights the Chinese central leadership's policy of developing “well-off villages in border areas” in the TAR as a part of its rural revitalisation programme.

2.1 *Civilian Leadership*

Over the past decade and particularly since the 2008 Tibetan protests, securitisation and surveillance in Tibet have intensified. Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, who was previously appointed as the TAR's Party Secretary in 2011, played a major role in it. China scholars Adrian Zenz and James Leibold argue that Chen borrowed a strategy from the imperial playbook as he enlisted the native population to watch over their own people, earlier in Tibet and now in Xinjiang.²⁷ A combination of “convenience police stations” (便民警务站, *bianmin jing wu zhan*) and “grid-style social management” (社会网格化管理, *shehui wang ge hua guanli*) enabled him to manage law and order within the region.²⁸ Building “convenience police station” is a community-based policing strategy. It is estimated that around 698 such police stations have been established in Tibet over a decade since Chen was appointed as the TAR party secretary in 2011.²⁹ The practice of “Grid-style social management” segments urban communities into groups and zones, allowing the security staff to monitor the local

population's activities continuously.³⁰ Thus, less than 60 self-immolation incidents are reported in the region from November 2013 up to December 2019 as per Central Tibetan Administration's data.³¹ It is precisely half of what was reported in the previous four years since 2009, when self-immolations peaked.

However, a year before the 19th Party Congress in 2017, Chen Quanguo, who had completed over five years as the Party chief in Tibet, was named Xinjiang's Party Chief.³² Wu Yingjie replaced him as the TAR's Party Secretary. Notably, Wu's appointment superseded Chairman of Regional Congress Pema Choeling and Head of TAR Government Lobsang Gyaltzen's candidatures.³³ He came through the ranks instead of a provincial reshuffle, as he was the Party's Deputy Secretary in the region under Chen since 2011. The CCP maintains that it would not appoint a Tibetan as the provincial Party Chief in Tibet. Wu is a Han but with long-serving experience in Tibet. Previously, he was the TAR Government's Vice Chairman in 2003, the Director of the Propaganda Department in 2005, and the TAR Government's Executive Vice Chairman in 2006. He was also a member of the TAR's Party Standing Committee since 2006 and a member of the 12th National People's Congress. Similarly, he was named Deputy Regional Party chief in November 2011 and Executive Deputy Party chief in April 2013, before Beijing appointed him as the TAR Party Secretary in August 2016. Currently, he is also a member of the 19th Central Committee.³⁴

In 2019 and 2020, under Wu's watch, the region witnessed "military-style" (军旅式, *jūnlǚshì*) vocational training, which aims to reform "backward thinking," "imbibe discipline", and improve Chinese language skills among Tibetans.³⁵ Under this programme, the central government trained over half a million Tibetan rural labourers involving mainly farmers and herders and relocated them within the region and to other provinces.³⁶ Beijing has argued that this is part of its effort to alleviate poverty.³⁷ However, Adrian Zenz argues that this is likely intended to further political indoctrination,

undermine cultural identities and expand surveillance measures.³⁸ Similarly, the central leadership has initiated an organised campaign to Sinicise Tibet by “separating religion from life.” In 2020, Wu used campaigns like “four standards” (四条标准, *sitiao biao zhun*) and “four distinguishes” (四个区分, *si ge qufen*) to increasingly coerce monks, nuns, schools children, workforce and villages to reject their allegiance to their spiritual leader.³⁹ However, and more importantly, in the context of the India-China border dispute, Beijing has constructed 628 border villages (小岗村, *xiao gang cun*) on the Tibet-India border in the last three years under Wu’s watch. As detailed in the later sub-section, these villages are a part of China’s poverty alleviation programme and are intrinsically linked to Tibet’s dual-use infrastructure development, act as border watch posts, and help China reaffirm its claim on the disputed territories along the India-China border.

Besides the TAR’s Party Secretary, Party Deputy Secretaries, Discipline Inspection Secretary and the Head of the Party School are also important party positions for the region. All of them are a part of the TAR’s Party Standing Committee, the most important decision-making body within the region. Table 2 details the TAR’s Party Standing Committee.

Another member who is not a part of the Party’s standing committee but is vital for the region’s infrastructure development is the TAR government’s Head of Department for Transportation, Dawa Ozhu.⁴⁰ The next sub-section details Tibet’s infrastructure development in the past two decades since 1999 and the impetus given to it under the 12th, 13th and 14th Five-Year plans.

Table 2: TAR Party Standing Committee^{vi}

Name	Roles
Wu Yingjie	TAR Party Secretary, 1st Party Secretary of the Tibet Military District
Lobsang Gyaltzen	Chairman of TAR Party Congress, Deputy Party Secretary of TAR Party Committee
Che Dalha	Chairman of TAR People's Government, Deputy Secretary of TAR Party Committee
Yan Jinhai	Party Secretary of Lhasa Municipal Party Committee, Deputy Secretary of TAR Party Committee
Zhuang Yan	Executive Deputy Secretary of TAR Party Committee and Secretary of TAR People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC)
Lt Gen Wang Kai	Commander of TMD
Norbu Dhondup	Deputy Secretary of TAR People's Government
Danko (Tib: Tenko)	Danke (Ch: Tenkho), Standing member of TAR Party Committee, Deputy Secretary of TAR Party Committee, Vice Chairman of TAR PPCC and Minister of TAR United Front Work Department (UFWD)
Wang Weidong	Standing Member of TAR Party Committee, Secretary of the Disciplinary Committee and Director of TAR Supervisory Committee

Source: Multiple sources from the Chinese internet. **Note:** This table is compiled with inputs from Jayadeva Ranade.

The positions might change as we head towards the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

^{vi} Under the recent provincial leadership reshuffle, the CCP appointed Wang Junzheng as the TAR Party Secretary in October 2021. Wu Yingche reportedly retires by the end of 2021. Reports also indicate that even CheDalhas left Lhasa to take up bigger responsibility in Beijing. His vacancy is expected to be filled by Yan Jinhai. We can expect more changes as we head towards the 20th Party Congress.

2.2 Tibet Dual-Use Infrastructure

Tibet was sparsely connected internally and with China proper in 1951 when the PLA entered the region. The total road network in 1959 was only 7,300 km.⁴¹ However, by 2021, the region was connected by a comprehensive network of highways, railways, and air routes. It had around 1,18,800 km road network by 2021, which means approximately 4.93 km were added per day since 1959.⁴² In May 2021, Wu claimed that the central government had allocated an accumulative investment of RMB 1.63 trillion (about \$253 billion) in the past 70 years for the region.⁴³

Although the central leadership has invested heavily in improving Tibet's infrastructure and connectivity since 1951, the speed and scale of the projects have increased since 1999.⁴⁴ China's "Go West" campaign, initiated as a part of the western development strategy (西部大开发, *xibu da kaifa*) in 1999, aimed at developing its 12 provinces, autonomous regions, and Chongqing Municipality – to catch up with the east.⁴⁵ This included the TAR and XUAR. The TAR has benefited immensely from this campaign. China invested RMB 31.2 billion (US\$4.2 billion) for completing 117 infrastructure and development projects in Tibet under its 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-05).⁴⁶ Under its 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10), the State invested around RMB 137.8 billion (US\$ 21 billion) in supporting 188 key development and infrastructure projects in Tibet.⁴⁷ Under the same Five-Year plan, China also encouraged Chinese cities and companies to assist Tibetan cities and counties by providing them aid under the 101 Aid Programme (对口支援, *dui kou zhi yuan*).⁴⁸

Such emphasis on infrastructure development for the region has continued under Xi. During the 2020 Work Symposium, Xi said, "the promotion and construction of a number of major infrastructure and public-service facilities around the Sichuan-Tibet railway line and other roads, and build more unity lines and happiness roads (in and connecting the region)."⁴⁹ He highlighted this as one of the five developments to improve people's livelihood and unite people's hearts (五大部署改善民生、凝聚人心, *wuda bushu*

gaishan minsheng, ningju renxin).⁵⁰ Previously, the 2015 Work Symposium decided that the central government would continue to support many key infrastructure projects from China's 12th and 13th Five-Year Plans.⁵¹ But more recently, under the 14th Five-Year Plan, China plans to spend over RMB 190 billion (approximately \$30 billion) on infrastructure projects in Tibet between 2021 and 2025.⁵² China's regional transportation department outlined that the total mileage of highways in Tibet will exceed 120,000 km and of expressways by 1,300 km by 2025.⁵³

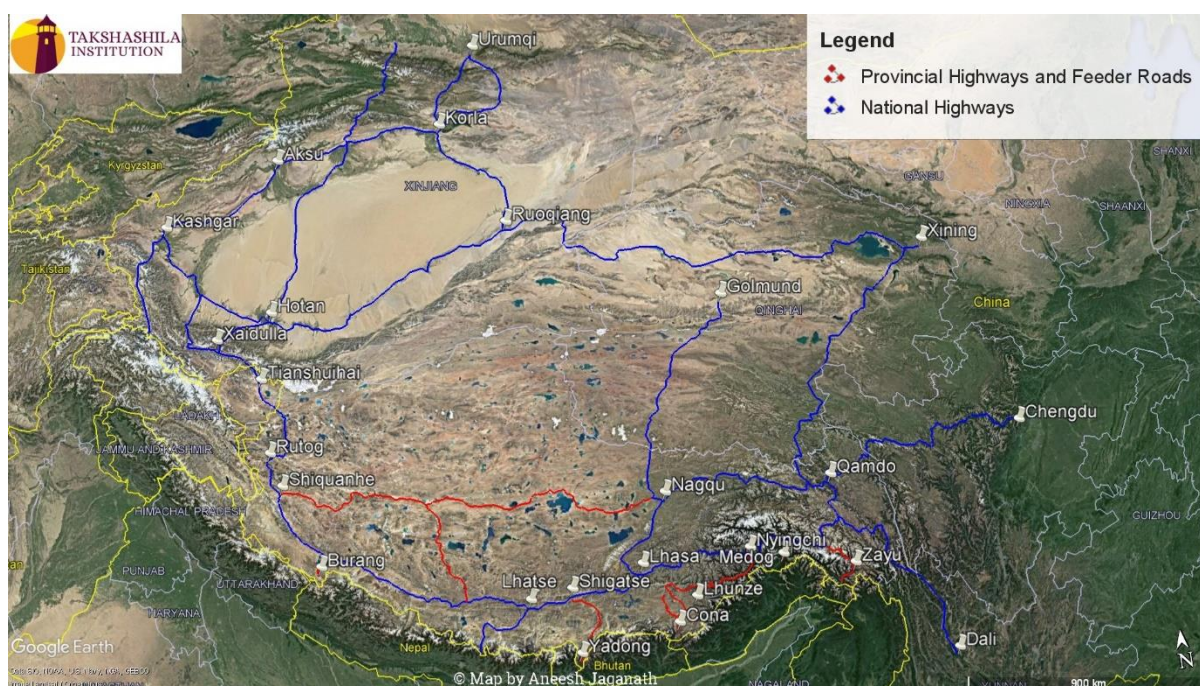
China's Tibet-related poster projects under the 14th FYP include the Ya'an to Nyingchi phase under the Sichuan Tibet railway line, preliminary work of Hotan-Shigatse and Gyirong-Shigatse (China-Nepal border) railway lines and Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high-speed railway network.^{54, vii} The plan also mentions upgradation of the national highways G219 and G318 – both running parallel to the India-China border near Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, respectively.⁵⁵

Maps 1 and 2^{viii} highlight the national and provincial roads and railway network that connects Tibet internally, Tibet and Xinjiang and China proper and Tibet. Details of these roads and railway network can be found in Appendix 1.

^{vii} Although the Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high-speed railway line is not a part of Tibet, it would be crucial to mobilising forces during escalation on the border with India.

^{viii} Please note that all five maps in this paper are indicative of the developments that China is undertaking in Tibet. They might not represent the exact Indian boundaries and borders. Please refer to the political map of India by Survey of India, Department of Science and Technology. <https://surveyofindia.gov.in/documents/polmap-eng-11012021.jpg>

Map 1: Tibet's Road Network



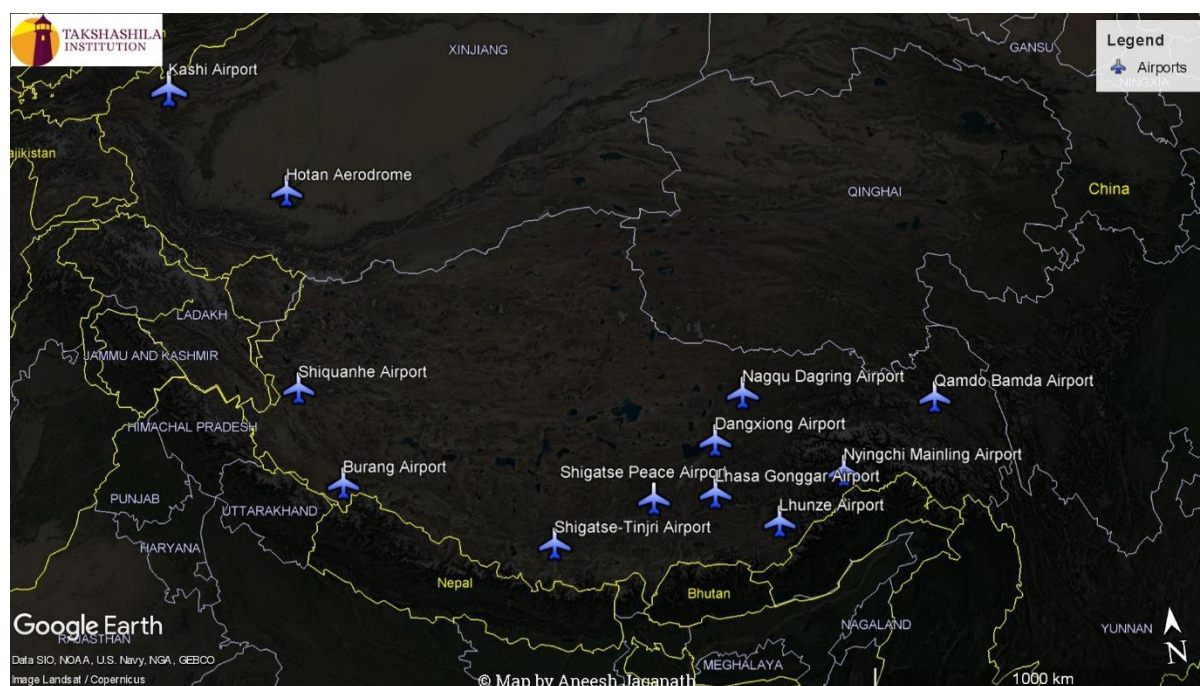
Map 2: Tibet's Railway Network



Note: The dotted red line represents the Hotan-Shigatse railway. China claims that the railway line would broadly follow the G 219, connecting Xinjiang and Tibet through the Aksai Chin region. China claims that the railway line will pass through the Ngari Prefecture but has maintained ambiguity on if it would pass through the disputed Aksai Chin region. The author was unsure of this, thus, have bypassed the Aksai Chin region while mapping it. However, it could, in all possibility, pass through the Aksai Chin region.

Furthermore, the 14th Five Year Plan claims that China would build Chengdu-Chongqing “world-class” airport cluster and Chongqing international airport.^{56,ix} It also mentions that China will add 30 more civilian transport airports, but the location for these airports is not known yet.⁵⁷ Currently, Tibet and the South Xinjiang region have around 12 airports either operational or under construction. Map 3 highlights these 12 airports and airbases, and the table in Appendix 2 presents their current functional status and details.

Map 3: Airports in Tibet



Most of these airports are civilian airports with dual-use facilities. But the ongoing military up-gradation at these airports, especially since 2017, indicates a sense of urgency due to the increasing tensions with India and the ongoing stand-offs on the India-China border.⁵⁸

Besides roads, railways and airports, China is also investing heavily in logistics facilities in the region. Beijing had developed a 739 km long oil pipeline from Golmund to Lhasa

^{ix} Details of the Chengdu-Chongqing airport cluster are not available yet, however, it is most likely that it would be dual-use airports with implications on the border dispute with India.

in the 1970s with a carrying capacity of 0.5 million tonnes per year.⁵⁹ The “Snow Mountain Oil Dragon” (雪山油龙, *xueshan you long*) pipeline is now being reconstructed as the old one is scheduled to be decommissioned due to the corrosion of pipes.⁶⁰ The newer line will be 1076-km long, over 150mm larger in diameter and will run parallel to the existing line.⁶¹ The TAR 2021 Work Report demands a speedy reconstruction of this pipeline.⁶² Furthermore, the 13th FYP highlighted that China would also increase the number of oil depots in Tibet to ten. It is unclear if this target was met during the plan period.⁶³

China is also working on increasing internet connectivity in major Tibetan cities, towns and border villages with India, Bhutan and Nepal. The Lanzhou-Xining-Lhasa optical cable communication line (兰州-西宁-拉萨”光缆通信专线, *Lanzhou-Xining-Lasa guanglan tongxin zhuanxian*) is one of the three major arteries connecting Tibet to the rest of the country for the past several decades.^{64, x} By the end of 2019, Tibet had complete access to the optical fibre network, and even the border administrative villages had a 4G access rate of around 98%.⁶⁵ Select Tibetan towns also have 5G network access.⁶⁶ Under the current FYP, China plans to increase its 5G access across the region.⁶⁷

Similarly, by December 2020, China installed its central power grid connection across all 66 counties and eight districts in the TAR.⁶⁸ Chinese media reports highlight that the integrated power grid throughout the region has enabled power supply to almost 3.3 million Tibetans by December 2020.⁶⁹ The 2021 TAR Work Report claims that this will be further expanded to reach 3.5 million Tibetans, which is roughly the TAR’s total population.⁷⁰ More importantly, the work report also calls for electrification of villages along the borders with India, Bhutan and Nepal.⁷¹

Finally, the 14th FYP also confirms that China will build hydropower bases on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo, known as the Brahmaputra River in India.⁷² The lower

^x The other two being the Golmund-Lhasa oil pipeline and Qinghai-Tibet highway.

reaches refer to the sections of the river in Tibet before it flows to India. In November 2020, a Chinese state-owned company, POWERCHINA, signed “a strategic cooperation agreement” with the TAR government to “implement hydropower exploitation in the downstream of the Yarlung Tsangpo.”⁷³ Chinese media reports that China could build a massive project with 60 gigawatts of power generation capacity – three times larger than the Three Gorges Dam - on the great bend of the river at the Yarlung Tsangpo Grand Canyon in Medog County.⁷⁴ This is the first official Chinese plan to endorse such a proposal. Only vague references were made earlier to developing hydropower resources in “southwestern China.” In the mid-2010s, however, Chinese authorities had approved a series of four small dams on the middle section of the Yarlung Tsangpo – the Zangmu Dam, the Jiacha Dam, the Jiexu Dam and the Dagu Dam.⁷⁵ Two are now operational, and the others remain under construction.⁷⁶ Map 4 depicts the locations of these dams. China scholars Nilanthi Samaranayake, Satu Limaye and Joel Wuthnow argue that hydropower development in Tibet is a part of China’s broader “Open up to the west” (西部大开发, *xibu da kaifa*) campaign.⁷⁷ More recently, it has been argued that the dam construction is needed to provide revenue for Tibetan coffers, contribute to China’s clean energy goals, and enhance local job creation.⁷⁸

Map 4: Dams on the Middle and Lower Sections of Yarlung Tsangpo



Source: Nilanthi Samaranyake, Satu Limaye and Joel Wuthnow, “Water Resources Competition in the Brahmaputra River Basin: China, India and Bangladesh,” CNA Analysis and Solutions, May 2016. https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/cna-brahmaputra-study-2016.pdf

2.3 China’s Border Villages

Since late 2016, the central leadership has pushed the policy of developing “well-off villages in border areas” (边境地区小康村建设规划, *bianjing diqu xiaokang cun jianshe guihua*) in the TAR as a part of its rural revitalisation programme.⁷⁹ The TAR government’s 2017 Work Report, for the first time, mentioned “the construction of well-off villages and simultaneous relocation of Tibetans in these villages.”⁸⁰ This process picked up pace after the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, when Xi called for “Chinese people with talent to work in remote poor areas, border areas with the ethnic minority population, as well as in communities and on the frontlines.”⁸¹ In July 2017, the TAR government issued the “Plan for the Construction of Well-off Villages in the Border Areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2017-2020).”⁸² It involved building 628 border

villages in TAR's 112 border towns across 21 border counties in Shigatse, Lhokha, Nyingchi and Ngari prefecture-level cities.⁸³ Shigatse is building 354 of these 628 villages on the border with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.⁸⁴ The Central government has allocated around RMB 30.1 billion (\$4.6 billion approximately) for this initiative, and it was to be completed by 2020.⁸⁵ This includes construction of housing facilities, infrastructure, public service facilities, industrial construction, ecology and human settlements in the border villages.⁸⁶ Of these 628 administrative border villages, 427 are first-line, and 201 are second-line villages.⁸⁷ The PRC plans to move 62,000 border residents and 2,41,835 people into these 62,160 households across 628 villages.⁸⁸

On average, the residents from the first line villages receive RMB 4700, and the second line villages receive RMB 4500 as an annual subsidy.⁸⁹ However, data on the subsidy varies. For instance, a Tibet Daily article quotes a villager from one of these villages receiving an additional ecological subsidy of RMB 8871 per year and a total annual subsidy of RMB 30,000.⁹⁰ Tu Deng Kezhu, a member of the National Committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the Director of Economic and Cultural Research at Central Tibet University, writes that it is important to financially support and improve public and transport facilities in these border villages for long-term migration.⁹¹ "It is necessary to continue to exert the power of inclusive finance to benefit the people in terms of financing for construction projects in border areas and inclusive financial services for border residents, strengthen financial support in well-off border villages, and open up the "last mile" of financial services (for migration and long term stay in these areas)," argues Tu.⁹² Most of these villages are connected to national and state highways through feeder roads, 65.3% of the border population was covered by the central power grid and at least 98% villagers had access to broadband, optical fibre or 4G connections by December 2020.⁹³ Table 3 details these villages.

Table 3: China's Border Villages

No	Prefecture-level City	County	Villages
1	Lhokha City	Cona County	Quna Village, Yama Rong Village, Khatak Village
		Lhodrak County	Lhakhang Township, Gongzu Village, Sangyul Village, Lagyab Township
		Lhuntse County	Zhongna Village, Yumai Border Well-off Village, Dakri Township, Douyu Lopa Township, Sanlin Township, Jieluobu (Gyalaphug) Village
2	Shigaste City	Yatung (Dromo) County	Guru Village, Pangda Village
		Gampa County	Jiru Village
3	Ngari Prefecture	Rudog County	Jagan Village - Risom Township
		Gar County	Dianjiao village (Demchok) - Zhaxigang township
		Zanda County	Chusong Village - Chulu Songjie Township
4	Nyingchi City	Medog County	Dhamo Village - Lopa Ethnic Township, Guthang Township
		Minling County	Dekyi New Village - Linlong Township, Bangzhong Village
		Zayu County	Zhala Village - Zhuwagen Town, Shama Village - Xiayu Township, Kyoto Village, Jingdu Village - Zayu township,
		Unknown	Qionglin Village

Sources: Multiple sources from the Chinese internet; Jayadeva Ranade, "China's Xiaogong (well-off) Border Defence Villages in the Tibet Autonomous Region, Vivekananda International Foundation, September 24, 2019. <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/september/24/china-s-xiaokang-border-defence-villages-in-the-tibet-autonomous-region>

Note: It is not a comprehensive list of all 628 villages but broadly representative of what is happening on the India-China, China-Bhutan and China-Nepal borders.

Jiang Jie, Executive Vice Chairman of TAR government, presided over a special meeting in the Autonomous Region Strong Frontier Work Conference held in Yatung (Dromo) County, Shigatse City, in December 2020.⁹⁴ The purpose was to study the progress of the construction of the well-off border villages. The meeting noted that 94% of the project was completed by December 2020, and 93% of the allocated funds were used. A recent People's Daily article also highlights that China has completed the construction of 604 well-off border villages by mid-2021.⁹⁵ It looks like all the villages would be constructed before the 20th National Party Congress, if not before the end of 2021.

On completion, these villages would act as border watch posts for the PLA. It would also help China in limiting cross-border Tibetan migration and, more importantly, would reaffirm the PRC's claims on the disputed territories along the India-China border.

3. Military Developments

This section is divided into four sub-sections. The first sub-section details ongoing military reforms, changes to the military leadership and the impact of these changes on Tibet. The second sub-section highlights PLA's Tibet-centric force structure and composition, details China's border defence units and discusses PLA's firepower modernisation for the region. The third sub-section elaborates on China's improving airpower capabilities in Tibet, especially the up-gradation after the 2017 Doklam stand-off. The final sub-section discusses patterns in the PLA's exercises in the region involving the WTC (Western Theatre Command) and TMD (Tibet Military District) since the military reforms.

3.1 Military Reorganisation and Leadership

After assuming charge of the CMC in November 2012, Xi set the stage for sweeping military reforms. This was to enhance China's deterrence posture, raise army's combat readiness, achieve complete modernisation of military theory, organisation, personnel, and weapons, and convert the PLA into a "world-class force" by 2049 - a phrase that has yet to be defined officially.⁹⁶ An educated guess is that it would mean being on a par with the US, UK, French, Russian, and, to an extent, even Indian armed forces.⁹⁷

On February 1, 2016, the leadership announced changes to China's force structure. China shifted from the old Soviet-inspired Military Region (MR) system to the US-inspired Theatre Command (TC) system.⁹⁸ Under this new system, China reorganised the seven military regions - Shenyang, Beijing, Jinan, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Lanzhou – into five geographic theatre commands while also providing specific "strategic directions" to each.⁹⁹ This was reportedly the outcome of a thorough risk assessment that was conducted after Xi took over as the CMC chairman.¹⁰⁰ Under the new system, the WTC, which is the largest among the five, was formed by merging the Lanzhou and

Chengdu MRs.¹⁰¹ It is mandated to ensure security along China's land boundaries with Central Asian states, India, Nepal, and Bhutan while maintaining internal stability within the region. China also retained Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts.¹⁰² Furthermore, in May 2016, the TMD was elevated to a level higher than all 28 other provincial military districts and brought directly under the PLA Ground Forces' jurisdiction.¹⁰³ Previously, in 1952, the TMD was formed as a second-level border defence military region under the PLA's 18th Group Army.¹⁰⁴ It was reorganised into a large military region in 1955 and adjusted to a military rank under the Chengdu MR in 1968.¹⁰⁵ It is unclear what the latest upgrade under Xi means for the operational relationship between the TMD and WTC.¹⁰⁶

China and India share a territorial dispute along three different areas. The eastern sector is about 90,000 sq. km and roughly corresponds to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and the border opposite Sikkim.¹⁰⁷ The western sector is about 38,000 sq. km and includes parts of Ladakh and Aksai Chin regions.¹⁰⁸ This region is the centre of activities during the ongoing 2020 India-China stand-offs. The central or middle sector is in the west of Nepal. It is relatively small compared to the other two sectors with only 2,000 sq. km disputed area and includes parts of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.¹⁰⁹ The TMD is responsible for the operations against India in the eastern sector. It is also reportedly mandated to train forces for specialised high-altitude mountain warfare and long-range mobility training for the Indian contingencies across all three sectors.¹¹⁰

Currently, the TMD is headed by Lt Gen Wang Kai.¹¹¹ Before Wang Kai, Lt Gen Wang Haijiang held this post - who is now the Commander of the Western Theatre Command.¹¹² Before being appointed as the Commander of the TMD in April 2021, Wang Kai was the Western Theatre Command Army's Deputy Commander since April 2017. Under his watch, the PLA and the Indian armed forces were involved in a 73-day stand-off at Doklam, Bhutan, in 2017.

Another important military position in Tibet is the Political Commissar. The Commissar is second-in-command after the Commander and is largely responsible for administrative tasks such as public relations and counselling. But more importantly, the Commissar is also mandated for inducting and maintaining political and military discipline within the unit.¹¹³ Currently, Lt Gen Zhang Xuejie is the TMD's Political Commissar. Before his transfer to the TMD, Zhang Xuejie was the deputy director of the Eastern Theatre Command's Political Work Department.¹¹⁴

Table 4: Military Leadership - WTC, TMD and Xinjiang Military District (XMD)

Name	Position	Unit
Gen Wang Haijiang	Commander/Head	Western Theatre Command
Gen Li Fengbiao	Political Commissar	Western Theatre Command
Unknown	Head/ Commander of Ground Forces	Western Theatre Command
Lt Gen Wang Qiang	Head/ Commander of Air Force	Western Theatre Command
Lt Gen Wang Kai	Head/ Commander	Tibet Military District
Lt Gen Zhang Xuejie	Political Commissar	Tibet Military District
Maj Gen Kuang Dewang	Deputy Commander	Tibet Military District
Lt Gen Liu Lin	Head/ Commander	Xinjiang Military District
Lt Gen Yang Cheng	Political Commissar	Xinjiang Military District
Unknown	Head/ Commander	South Xinjiang Military District

Source: Multiple sources from the Chinese internet. **Note:** The positions might change as we head towards the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

The TMD comprises six military sub-districts (MSDs): Lhasa, Shigatse, Nyingchi, Shannan, Qamdo and Nagqu MSDs. Of these six, Nyingchi, Shannan and Shigatse MSDs share a border with India. Nyingchi and Shannan are responsible for the eastern sector opposite Arunachal Pradesh - although Shannan's major jurisdiction is on the

China-Bhutan border. Shigatse MSD is responsible for the India-China border opposite Sikkim. It was in charge of the PLA activities during the 2017 Doklam stand-off.

Ngari (Ali) and Hotan MSDs also share a border with India in Ladakh. Similarly, Kashgar MSD shares a border with Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of Pakistan occupied Kashmir. However, Ngari (Ali), Hotan and Kashgar MSDs are under Xinjiang Military District's South Xinjiang Military District's jurisdiction.^{xi} The South Xinjiang Military District covers the western half of the Tarim Basin and the western one-third of Tibet.^{ii5, xii}

3.2 TMD Force Structure

Frank O' Donnell and Alex Bollfrass estimate that China maintains around 200,000 to 250,000 ground forces personnel under the WTC, TMD and XMD.ⁱⁱ⁶ They argue that around 90,000 to 120,000 troops are a part of the 76th and 77th Group Armies that form the WTC.ⁱⁱ⁷ The 76th and 77th Group Armies are headquartered at Baoji, Shaanxi province and Chongqing.^{ii8, xiii} They are tasked with mobilisation of the forces to the border areas in Tibet and Xinjiang during stand-offs, escalation and conflicts.ⁱⁱ⁹

The TMD is headquartered in Lhasa. It has around 40, 000 troops and the XMD has 70,000 personnel.ⁱⁱ²⁰ Table 5 highlights the TMD's force structure and composition. For XMD's force structure and composition, check Appendix 3.

^{xi} Due to the size and remoteness of the Xinjiang Military District, it is divided into three parts: the North, East and South Xinjiang Military Districts.

^{xii} The South Xinjiang Military District was not created under Xi's military reforms. It was already a part of the Lanzhou MR, which WTC inherited under Xinjiang Military District.

^{xiii} Some elements of the 77th Group Army are also located in Chongzhou City, Chengdu City, Sichuan Province.

Table 5: TMD's Force Structure and Composition

Sr no	Brigade/ Division/ Regiment	Headquarters	Unit No	Location	Force Type
1	52nd Mountain Combined Arms Brigade - Nyingchi				
			77675	Bayi Village	Infantry
			77678	Nixi, Bayi Village	Artillery
			1st Battalion	Bujiu Village	Infantry
			2nd Battalion	Yongjiu Village	Infantry
			3rd Battalion	Yongjiu Village	Infantry
			4th Battalion	Bujiu Village	Infantry
2	53rd Mountain Combined Arms Brigade - Nyingchi				
			77680	Mainling	Infantry
			77683	Jiage Village, Mainling County	Artillery
			1st Battalion	Wolong Village, Gongbo'gyamda County	Infantry
			2nd Battalion	Tingre County, Shigatse	Infantry
			3rd Battalion	Mainling	Infantry
			4th Battalion	Wolong Village, Gongbo'gyamda County	Infantry
3	Heavy Combined Arms Brigade - Lhasa				
			77625	Doilungdêqên County	Unknown
			Artillery Regiment	Unknown	Artillery
			Mechanised Infantry 1st Battalion	Unknown	Mechanise d Infantry
			Mechanised Infantry 2st Battalion	Unknown	Mechanise d Infantry
			Mechanised Infantry 3rd Battalion	Unknown	Mechanise d Infantry
			Tank Battalion	Unknown	Artillery

			Chemical Warfare Battalion	Unknown	Unknown
4	308th Artillery Brigade	Lhasa	Unit 77611	Lhasa	Artillery
5	15th Engineering Brigade	Lhasa	Unit 77619	Dhazi, Lhasa	
6	65th Air Defence Division	Lhasa	Unit 77616	Lhasa	
7	16th Vehicle Regiment	Lhasa			
8	Communications Battalion	Lhasa			
9	Special Operations Brigade	Lhasa	Unit 77606	Lhasa	
10	Helicopter Brigade	Lhasa			
11	Electronic Warfare Regiment	Lhasa			
12	Signal Regiment	Lhasa			

Source: Frank O' Donnell and Alex K. Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/strategic-postures-china-and-india-visual-guide>; Jayadeva Ranade, "China's Focus on Military Activities in Tibet," Centre for China Analysis and Strategy, August 21, 2015. https://ccasindia.org/issue_policy.php?ipid=36; Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan and Pulkit Mohan, "PLA Joint Exercises in Tibet: Implications for India," ORF Occasional Paper No 238, February 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/pla-joint-exercises-in-tibet-implications-for-india-61735/>; "Asia" The Military Balance 2021 ([dataset]; accessed July 31, 2021), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2021> **Note:** Check Appendix 3 for XMD's force structure and composition.

The TMD is also the biggest beneficiary of the limited ground force modernisation that has taken place in all five theatre commands, especially in the WTC. The advanced T-15 tanks, PCL-181 howitzers, Z-20 helicopters and GJ-2 drones, displayed for the first time at the 2019 military day parade, are deployed with the WTC.¹²¹ These are unique weapons developed especially for mountainous terrain and harsh climate found in Tibet along the Sino-Indian border region.¹²² Notably, such specialised equipment was commissioned with the TMD after the 2017 India-China Doklam stand-off.¹²³ The latest analysis and reports indicate that these weapons are now fully integrated with the TMD and are deployed to address the Indian contingency along the Sino-Indian border.¹²⁴ Similarly, China also commissioned newer weapons with its South Xinjiang Military District (SXMD) – which is responsible for the western sector with India in the Aksai Chin region – during the ongoing 2020 India-China stand-offs.¹²⁵ This includes the new PHL-03 truck-

mounted self-propelled rocket launchers, PCL-161 and PCL-181 self-propelled howitzers, Type-15 tanks, ZBL-09 infantry fighting vehicle, Type 08 armoured vehicle and Z-20 and Z-8G helicopters.¹²⁶ The TMD and SXMD weapons modernisation is not only China's reaction to the 2017 Doklam and 2020 India-China stand-offs but also a part of its ongoing military reforms.

The TMD also commands several border defence regiments that are deployed on India-China, China-Bhutan and China-Nepal borders. China scholar M. Taylor Fravel argues that the responsibility for securing China's 'first line of the border' (便井一线, *bianjing yixian*) lies with the PLA's border defence regiments.¹²⁷ These regiments are organised in each military sub-districts adjacent to the international border.¹²⁸ Each regiment is normally composed of three battalions, each with three companies and regiment headquarters units.¹²⁹ He also highlights that several additional independent border defence battalions (独立边防营, *duli bianfang ying*) are located in TMD and XMD sub-districts to bolster the security of China's western border.¹³⁰

Chinese military scholars Jayadeva Ranade and Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan separately list the Chinese border defence regiments in Tibet Military District and on India-China, China-Bhutan, and China-Nepal borders.¹³¹

Table 6: Chinese Border Defence Regiments

Border Defence Regiments	Unit No	Border	Location
1st Border Defence Regiment	77629	India-China and China-Bhutan Borders	Lhunze County, Shannan
2nd Border Defence Regiment	77635	India-China and China-Bhutan Borders	Cona County, Shannan
3rd Border Defence Regiment	77639	India-China and China-Nepal Borders	Tingre County, Shigatse
4th Border Defence Regiment	77643	India-China Border	Zayu County, Nyingchi

5th Border Defence Regiment	77646	China-Nepal Border	Saga County, Shigatse
6th Border Defence Regiment	77649	India-China and China-Bhutan Borders	Yadong County, Shigatse
Nathula Outpost, 6th Border Defence Regiment	Data Not Available	India-China Border	Yadong County, Shigatse
9th Border Defence Regiment	Data Not Available		Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture
1st Independent Battalion	7655	India-China and China-Bhutan Borders	Gyantse County, Shigatse
2nd Independent Battalion	77656	India-China Border	Gangba County, Shigatse
3rd Independent Battalion	77659	India-China Border	Beibeng Village, Medog County, Nyingchi
4th Independent Battalion	Data Not Available	India-China Border	Nanyi Township, Mainling County, Nyingchi
5th Independent Battalion	Data Not Available	China-Bhutan Border	Lhozhag County, Shannan

Source: Frank O' Donnell and Alex K. Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/strategic-postures-china-and-india-visual-guide>; Jayadeva Ranade, "China's Focus on Military Activities in Tibet," Centre for China Analysis and Strategy, August 21, 2015. https://ccasindia.org/issue_policy.php?ipid=36; Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan and Pulkit Mohan, "PLA Joint Exercises in Tibet: Implications for India," ORF Occasional Paper No 238, February 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/pla-joint-exercises-in-tibet-implications-for-india-61735/>; M Taylor Fravel, "Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, no 4-5 (August 2007): 722-723. <http://taylorfravel.com/documents/research/fravel.2007.JSS.securing.borders.pdf>

Besides the PLA's core units and the border defence forces, the Chinese militia also plays an important role in China's border defence.¹³² Its primary role is to be an external defence force, and its secondary role is to be a domestic security force.¹³³ It is also an important reserve force for mobilising in times of escalation or crisis.¹³⁴ During the ongoing 2020 military stand-off, the TMD commissioned five new militia units, i.e., air

patrol, polar communications, plateau fighting, express delivery and extreme climbing teams in Lhasa.¹³⁵ These units are mandated to patrol and perform emergency rescue missions along the Sino-Indian border.¹³⁶ The TMD is also reportedly raising new militia units comprising of local Tibetan youth for high altitude warfare and intelligence gathering along the India-China border.¹³⁷

3.3 Chinese Air Power in Tibet

Over the past 20 years, China has improved the PLA Air Force's (PLA AF) capacity and capabilities to operate in Tibet.¹³⁸ Under Xi, China has modernised the PLA AF by improving the required infrastructure, support capabilities and firepower. It has accelerated the process of expanding the fixed-wing infrastructure like runways, hangars and new support and maintenance areas in most of the Tibetan air bases, as highlighted in the table in Appendix 2. For instance, China is building 12 hardened aircraft shelters at the Ngari Gunsa airbase.¹³⁹ It is constructing 24 hardened shelters and new maintenance areas at the Lhasa airbase.¹⁴⁰ Reportedly, the support infrastructure in the mountainous region to the south of the Lhasa airbase resembles an additional PLA AF military facility.¹⁴¹ More recently, China opened its newly constructed Terminal 3 – the biggest in the region- for Lhasa's Gonggar airport in August 2021. It is also constructing an additional second runway for the airport.¹⁴² Notably, Lhasa was China's primary airbase for PLA AF's activities during the 2017 Doklam stand-off.¹⁴³

Similarly, China has built apron-type constructions at the Kashgar base, which indicates the presence of strategic bombers close to the Indian border.¹⁴⁴ At the Qamdo Bamda Airport in eastern Tibet, the runway is extended and refurbished to accommodate additional capacity.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, China is also building three new airports at Tingri, Lhunze and Burang, as detailed in the table in Appendix 2.¹⁴⁶ Although the construction of these airports was announced in a conference on the Civil Aviation System Supporting Tibet Airport Construction Development in June 2018, the airports would

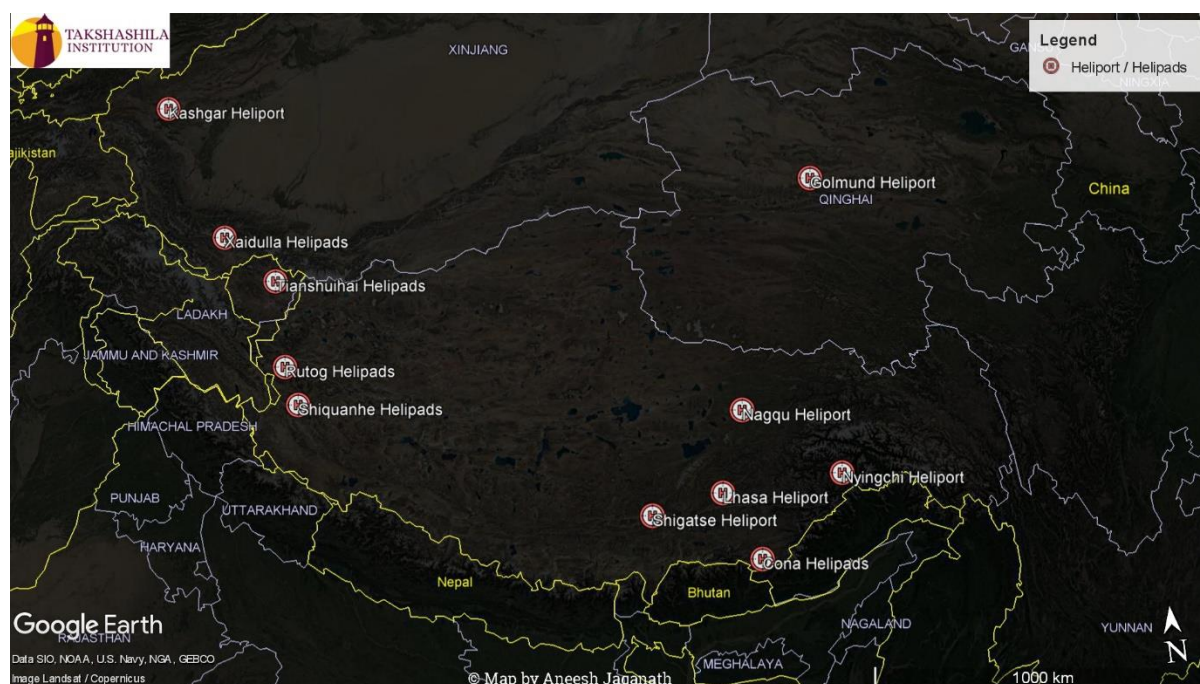
likely be of dual-use nature and used by the PLA in case of an escalation on the Indian border.¹⁴⁷

These are a select few examples indicating a broader trend of an upgrade in air infrastructure across almost all Chinese air bases in Tibet. A recent report, which drew on data from satellite imagery, highlights that the PLA has substantially expanded and upgraded its air infrastructure in Tibet, especially after the 2017 Doklam stand-off.¹⁴⁸ It outlines that the PLA has established at least 13 new air infrastructure military positions in Tibet since 2017, which include airbases and air defence positions.¹⁴⁹ It also documents that the rate of construction has considerably increased since 2019 - a year before the ongoing stand-off started.¹⁵⁰ In addition, the 14th Five Year Plan claims that China will construct 20 new “multipurpose” airfields for Tibet over the next five years.¹⁵¹

China has also improved the PLA AF’s firepower capabilities for operating in this region. Frank O’Donnell and Alex Bollfrass’ study highlights that China has deployed advanced fighter jets like the J-10, J-11, J-15, Su-27, J-8 and J-7 in the TMD, XMD and WTC.¹⁵² Additionally, during the ongoing stand-off, China’s advanced J-20 stealth jets, its H-6 bombers and Y-20 large transport planes were also spotted in Tibet and South Xinjiang airbases close to the Indian border.¹⁵³

Improvements in the air infrastructure are not only limited to the fixed-wing capabilities. China has also improved the rotary-wing capacity and capabilities by deploying the Z-10 and Z-20 attack helicopters and Z-8G large transport helicopters for the plateau region.¹⁵⁴ This document identifies eleven locations where China has built heliports, helipads, rotary-wing hangers and rotary-wing support infrastructure in Tibet. These locations are spotted in Map 5 and detailed in the Table in Appendix 4.

Map 5: Heliports and Helipads in Tibet



Besides these facilities, China has deployed precision strike and reconnaissance UAVs and reconnaissance aircraft with the TMD, XMD and WTC.¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, multiple satellite imagery experts spotted China's surface to air missiles, especially the latest S-400s units at Nyingchi airbase in Tibet and Hotan air base in South Xinjiang during the ongoing stand-off.¹⁵⁶ This is alongside the PLA RF's 16 DF-26 dual-use intermediate-range ballistic missile launchers in Xinjiang near the India-China border, and a few DF-21 medium-range road-mobile ballistic missiles at the banks of a lake near *Kailash-Mansarovar* (Mount Kailash) spotted during the ongoing stand-off.¹⁵⁷

3.4 Military Exercises in Tibet

The nature of PLA's military exercises has evolved since Xi initiated military reforms in 2015. Previously, the PLA was saddled with poor military training, which impacted its combat readiness. But after coming to power, Xi revived the Deng-era slogan - "Two Inabilities" (两个能力不够, *liangge nengli bugou*) - meaning the PLA's ability to fight a modern war is limited, and the ability of its personnel to command the modern war was

insufficient.¹⁵⁸ He demanded raising the overall level of combat readiness and that the PLA should overcome the challenges by training “harder in realistic conditions.”¹⁵⁹

The ongoing reforms and reorganisation have emphasised military training, exercise and education, as imperatives for increasing jointness within the forces.¹⁶⁰ China has created two combined armed tactical training bases at Xichang in south Sichuan and Qingtongxia, north-central Ningxia.¹⁶¹ Its Qingtongxia training base resembles the China-occupied territory in Aksai Chin to enable joint training in “realistic conditions.”¹⁶²

Since 2015, the scale of PLA’s military exercises in Tibet has also steadily increased. In 2015, both Chengdu and Lanzhou MRs, which together formed China’s WTC, organised separate “Joint Action- 2015” joint military exercises in and around the plateau region. Both sets of exercises involved around 150,000 troops each from 140 PLA regiments.¹⁶³ Chinese military scholar Kevin McCauley highlights that the PLA training exercises in the WTC have often featured offensive and defensive, mountain and cold weather warfare training and long-distance movement of units.¹⁶⁴ He outlines that the *Stride*, *Joint Action*, and *Firepower* series of exercises have trained units from the WTC to move long distances by multiple means to reinforce another region and engage in combat since 2015.¹⁶⁵

Furthermore, during the 2017 Doklam stand-off, the PLA was involved in multiple large-scale military exercises in Tibet close to the Indian border.¹⁶⁶ It conducted combat-strike exercises involving 4000-7000 troops, rapid deployment, multi-unit joint strike and anti-aircraft defence exercises, live-fire drills and mobilisation drills during the 73 days when two countries were involved in a stand-off in the Doka La area of the Doklam Plateau.¹⁶⁷ In 2018, the PLA conducted a “civilian-military” integration mock exercise, first in Tibet since the Doklam stand-off.¹⁶⁸ The exercise was used to test the PLA’s logistics and armament support capabilities. The provincial government of Lhasa was

actively involved in ensuring a steady supply of food and fuel to the soldiers during this exercise.¹⁶⁹ In addition, the TMD also conducted live-fire drills and artillery bombing exercises in Nyingchi, close to the Indian border near Arunachal Pradesh, in May 2018.¹⁷⁰

Since 2019, the frequency of the PLA's military exercises in Tibet and Xinjiang has increased, simultaneously with its improving military infrastructure in the region, as documented in the previous subsection. The PLA's 76th Group Army participated in intensive combat training exercises in the first quarter of 2019 in the remote Gobi desert.¹⁷¹ In July 2019, an artillery brigade with the TMD was sent to Xinjiang for participating in live-fire drills.¹⁷² After Xi signed his first CMC order to mobilise the armed forces for training on January 1, 2020, the PLA began major military exercises in Tibet.¹⁷³ It was uncovered later that the troops and conscripts from the same military exercises were diverted to the India-China border in eastern Ladakh, where two countries are involved in the ongoing stand-off.¹⁷⁴ Since then, there have been multiple PLA training attack drills, defence exercises, combat training, reconnaissance training drills, logistics training drills, artillery drills, air exercises, live-fire exercises and night-time military drills in the region.¹⁷⁵

Force projection and indulging in "Three Warfares" are the drivers of these military exercises, however, they also help in mobilising and keeping troops combat-ready for the future contingencies.¹⁷⁶ A recent unconfirmed report highlights that China has conducted around 100 drills or more close to the LAC in Tibet in the first six months of 2021.¹⁷⁷ But the authenticity of this claim cannot be verified.

4. Conclusion

Although Communist China has ruled Tibet since the early 1950s, the scale and scope of regional development increased only after the PRC launched the Go West campaign in 1999. Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, China has continued building a vast network of infrastructure projects like roads, railways and airports in Tibet - all with dual-use capabilities. Under the 14th Five-Year Plan, the PRC plans to spend RMB 190 billion (approximately \$30 billion) on infrastructure development projects within the region – most allocated to the region’s infrastructure development under any previous five-year plan. Besides conventional infrastructure projects, Xi has also emphasised improving the region’s internet and power supply delivery capabilities, including on the border with India. China is also reconstructing the Golmund-Lhasa oil pipeline and increasing the number of oil depots in the region. Furthermore, since late 2016, China has been constructing border villages on the India-China, Bhutan-China and Nepal-China borders under its rural revitalisation programme. These 628 border villages, on completion, would act as watch posts and help China reaffirm its sovereignty claims along with the disputed territories on the borders.

Simultaneously, under Xi, the region has been subjected to intense CCP control using newer surveillance techniques, grid management and social and political control. A combination of “convenience police stations” and “grid-style social management” has enabled China to manage law and order within the region. In addition, the military-style vocational training helps to further political indoctrination, undermine cultural identities, expand surveillance measures and thereby Sinicise the region.

Similarly, since assuming charge of the CMC, Xi undertook sweeping military reforms to convert the PLA into a “world-class force.” The TMD has benefited tremendously from China’s ongoing military modernisation as newer weapons were commissioned with the

military district, especially after the 2017 Doklam stand-off. China also started commissioning newer weapons with the SXMD during the ongoing India-China border stand-offs at Ladakh. Its air power in the region has also improved in the past four years, and under the current five-year plan, China plans to construct 20 new “multipurpose” airports in and around Tibet. Finally, the nature of Chinese military exercises has also evolved since the military reforms, and the PLA now conducts advanced military exercises more frequently in the region.

Broadly, from Xi’s recent speeches, it looks like these developments have made Tibet more stable internally than it was in the previous decade. There are ongoing issues on the border with India, China’s secondary strategic direction. But China aims to address the Indian threat with a combination of the recent military modernisation, the dual-use civilian infrastructure development and construction of “well-off villages” along the border in Tibet.

The future remains uncertain, but the crystallisation of China’s assertive foreign and security policies into an ideology under Xi and improved border infrastructure on both sides indicate an increase in tensions and a high probability of frequent stand-offs on the border between India and China. Scholars and analysts can look for how these individual changes, both civilian and military, can impact the border dispute with India. Every change would likely have some impact on the border dispute, which could be explored in the form of a series of research articles. This document does not factor India’s reactions to Chinese developments in Tibet, which could be another interesting area for further research. Furthermore, this document also doesn’t refer to China’s national strategy of “military-civil fusion” (军民融合, *jūnmín rónghé*) and its application in Tibet. That is because the Chinese aren’t just involved in a border conflict with India but are also developing the economy of the border areas and militarising society in general, whether Han or Tibetan.

Additionally, it is also important to study China's other theatre commands and their force capabilities while assessing Tibet's military developments. This is due to China's military texts' description of its approach to securing its territory by indulging in 'border area counterattack campaign' (边境地区反击战, *bianjing diqu fanji zhan*). As M Taylor Fravel argues, these campaigns occur in two phases. The first phase begins with defensive operations to create favourable conditions for the counterattack after the adversary's attack. More importantly, the second phase includes counterattacking after main force units have arrived in the theatre of operation from the interior.¹⁷⁸ In Tibet and South Xinjiang, the interior primarily means the WTC's 76th and 77th Group Armies and forces from China's other theatre commands. However, studying their structure and force capabilities are beyond the scope of this paper. But further research could also focus on the mobilisation of these units to launch a counterattack from China's interior when defensive operations are underway in Tibet and South Xinjiang military regions.

5. Appendix

Appendix I

Table 7: Tibet's Road and Railway Network

Project Description	Project Details
Roadways	
National Highway G6/G109	G109 connects Beijing to Lhasa. The G6 is the portion that connects Lhasa to Xining in Qinghai. The construction for the 1,897 km Xining-Lhasa stretch began in February 2018. ^{xiv}
National Highway G219/G564	G219 connects Xinjiang to Tibet. It originates from Yecheng in Xinjiang and terminates at Lhatse in Tibet. The road was constructed in 1957, however, under China's 13th FYP, China started upgrading it. G564 will emerge from G219 and will reach Purang near the India-China-Nepal trijunction. It will pass between Mansarovar and Rakshas lake.
National Highway G318	The 14th FYP discusses the extension of G318. G318 connects Shanghai to Tibet through Chengdu in Sichuan. It then enters Nepal near Zhangmu near the China-Tibet border. The road passes through Nyingchi, close to the India-China border near Arunachal Pradesh, and a feeder road originating from G318 also reaches opposite Tawang near Cono county.
National Highway G317	G317 originates in Chengdu, Sichuan and runs parallel to G318 through Qamdo and Nagqu before meeting G109-which meets G318 at Lhasa.
National Highway G580	G580 is currently under construction, and on completion, will connect Ashu to Kangxiwar through Hotan. It would be completed by 2022.
Other Important Highways	G315 (East-west highway connecting Qinghai and Xinjiang); G314 (connecting Urumqi and Khunjerab Pass); G216 (linking northern Xinjiang to Kyirong County in Tibet by meeting G218 near Hejing county in Xinjiang).

^{xiv} The construction of G6 was started after the 2017 India-China Doklam stand-off. However, it was long planned before the stand-off.

Other Important Roads/Provincial Highways/Feeder roads	Pei-Metok Highway (Nyingchi to Mehtok), Lhasa-Nagqu highway, Nagqu-Ngari Ali Highway, Bome to Medok Highway, Qiongjie to Cona Highway, Bayi-Manling Highway, G214 Kunming-Lhasa Highway and more.
Railways	
Sichuan-Tibet Railway	Divided into three sections: 1) Chengdu to Ya'an Section (140 km): Opened in December 2018 2) Lhasa to Nyingchi Section (435 km): Opened in June 2021 3) Ya'an to Nyingchi Section (1, 011 km): Estimated to finish by 2030.
Qinghai-Tibet Railway	The construction began in 2001 and was completed by 2006. This line was further extended up to Shigatse in 2014. It's the only railway that connects China proper to Tibet.
Shigatse-Yadong Extension	The line will be further extended from Shigatse to Yadong County. Yadong County is the last county on the India-China border near Sikkim and adjacent to India's Nathu la pass.
Shigatse-Gyirong-Katmandu (Nepal)	To be completed by 2022.
South Xinjiang-Tibet Railway Loop	Hotan-Shigatse Railway (825 km – under construction), Hotan-Ruoqiang Railway (Xinjiang – under construction), Ruoqiang-Korla Section of the Golmund-Korla Railway (in operation since 2014) and Gomund-Lhasa Section of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (in operation since 2006). All these railway lines form the Tibet-South Xinjiang loop connecting most major cities in the region.
Other Important Railways	Yunnan-Tibet Railway (still planned); Dunhuang-Golmund Railway (opened in 2019).

Source: Compiled from multiple sources including the TAR Government Work Reports from 2009-2021.

<http://www.xizang.gov.cn/zwgk/xxfb/zfgzbg/>

Appendix 2

Table 8: Airports in Tibet

Sr no	Airports/Airfields/Airbases	Province	Status	Nature
1	Lhasa Gonggar Airport	Lhasa, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
2	Shigatse Peace Airport	Shigatse, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use*
3	Nyingchi Mainling Airport	Nyingchi, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
4	Qamdo Bamda Airport	Baxoi, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
5	Nagqu Dagrang Airport	Nagqu, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
6	Dangxiong Airfield	Damxung County, Lhasa City, Tibet	Unknown	Unknown
7	Shiquanhe Airport	Ngari Gunsa, Tibet	Functional	Dual use
8	Hotan Aerodrome	South Xinjiang Region, Xinjiang	Functional	Dual-use
9	Kashi Airport	Kashgar, South Xinjiang Region, Xinjiang	Functional	Dual-use
10	Shigatse-Tinjri Airport	Tingri County, Shigatse, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown
11	Lhunze Airport	Lhunze Country, Shannan, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown
12	Burang Airport	Burang Town, Ngari, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown

Source: Compiled from multiple sources from the Chinese and Indian internet.

Appendix 3

Table 9: XMD's Force Structure and Composition

Sr no	Brigade/ Division/ Regiment	Location	Force Type
1	6th Mechanised Infantry Division - Kashgar		
	6th Armour Regiment	Yarkant	Armoured
	17th Infantry Regiment	Hotan	Infantry
	18th Infantry Regiment	Kashgar	Infantry
	Artillery Regiment	Kashgar	Artillery
	Air Defence Regiment	Kashgar	Air Defence
2	4th Motorised Infantry Division - Kuqa		
3	8th Motorised Infantry Division - Gongtamucun		
4	2nd Artillery Brigade - near Urumqi		
5	11th Motorised Infantry Division - Urumqi		
5.1	High-Powered Artillery Brigade	Ergongxiang	Artillery
5.2	Special Operations Force Brigade	Kashgar	
6	Engineering Regiment		
7	Helicopter Brigade		

Source: Frank O' Donnell and Alex K. Bollfrass, "The Strategic Postures of China and India: A Visual Guide," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, March 2020.

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Appendix 4

Table 10: Heliports and Helipads in Tibet

Sr.no	Heliports/ Helipads	Details
1	Lhasa	Lhasa has a heliport to house 20 Z-20 attack helicopters. Reportedly the heliport has 24 hangers. Since Xi's military reforms, the TMD got an additional helicopter brigade.
2	Nyingchi	China is upgrading the old Nyingchi heliport to accommodate more helicopters.
3	Shigatse	It's at Shigatse airbase. Satellite imagery suggests that China has recently constructed nine new aprons and eight new helipads at the airbase.
4	Golmund, Qinghai	China is building a large heliport at Gomund with at least 60 helicopter hangars.
5	Nagqu town	PLA's new heliport with at least 3-6 hangars.
6	Tianshuihai, near Galwan	China is building an unknown number of heliports at Tianshuihai near Galwan.
7	Rutog County, Ngari	China is building an unknown number of helipads near Pangong Tso in Rutog county. It's reportedly almost 86 km from Pangong Tso.
8	Kashgar airbase, Xinjiang	China's Kashgar airbase has an unknown number of heliports.
9	Shiquanhe, Ngari	New helipads were constructed in the past one year at Shiquanhe in Ngari.
10	Xaidulla, Kashgar	New helipads were constructed in the past one year at Xaidulla near Daulat Beg Oldi.
11	Cona	New helipads were constructed in the past one year in Cona county.

Source: Compiled from multiple sources from the Chinese and Indian internet; Detresfa., Sim Tack, *The Intel Lab* and Tyler Rogoway, "Tracking China's Sudden Airpower Expansion on its Western Border," *The Drive*, June 16, 2021. <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/41065/tracking-chinas-sudden-airpower-expansion-along-its-western-border>; Sim Tack, "A Military Drive spells out China's Intent Along the Indian Border," *Stratfor Worldview*, September 22, 2020. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/military-drive-spells-out-chinas-intent-along-indian-border>; Col Vinayak Bhat, "China Constructing Heliport in Occupied Aksai Chin, Reveal Satellite Images," *India Today*, December 14, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/china-constructing-heliport-in-occupied-aksai-chin-reveals-satellite-imagery-1740503-2020-12-14>; Col Vinayak Bhat, "Chinese PLA's New Heliport at Nagqu in the Fast Lane," *India Today*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/chinese-pla-s-new-heliport-at-nakchu-in-the-fast-lane-1736330-2020-10-29>; Col Vinayak Bhat, "Lhasa Gonggar Airport gets Military Upgrade amid India-China Stand-off in Ladakh," *India Today*, August 29, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/lhasa-gonggar-airport-gets-military-upgrade-amid-india-china-standoff-in-ladakh-1716504-2020-08-29>

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About the Author

Suyash Desai is an Associate Fellow researching on China's defence and foreign policies at The Takshashila Institution, Bangalore, India. He also publishes a weekly newsletter on the Chinese armed forces called [The PLA Insight](#). His degrees are from Jawaharlal Nehru University (M Phil, International Organisations), Mumbai University (Masters, Political Science) and Indian School of International Law (Diploma, International Law). (Twitter: @suyash_desai).

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