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SACRED AUTHORITY AND STATE POWER: THE FUTURE OF THE DALAI LAMA INSTITUTION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

PART TWO: REINCARNATION AND THE DALAI LAMA: THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

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OVERVIEW

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has implemented a multi-faceted strategy to counter Tibetan Buddhism's global influence and consolidate control over religious institutions both within and beyond its borders. This campaign combines traditional hard power tactics with new approaches to cognitive warfare, leveraging economic influence, social media manipulation, and institutional control to reshape the Buddhist landscape. As the Dalai Lama approaches his ninth decade, Beijing sees a historic opportunity to establish dominance over the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist world during what it anticipates will be a crucial transition period.

Combining tactics of repression and co-option, China has imposed extreme policies against religion in Tibet – from imposing Party rule over monasteries and imprisoning Tibetans who keep the Dalai Lama's picture to preventing even online teachings. Beyond PRC borders, Xi Jinping has dramatically expanded the role and scope of the United Front in countering the global spread of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama's influence. The PRC is actively seeking a more central role for the Chinese

Party state in international Buddhist organisations in competition with India and the Tibetan exile administration.

In an alarming escalation of transnational repression, a respected Tibetan reincarnate lama who had apparently refused to host China's official Panchen Lama at his monastery was pursued to Vietnam only for China to announce his death in March. Demonstrating China's extreme efforts to control influential Buddhist figures even beyond China's borders, prominent Tibetan abbot Humkar Dorje, a 56-year old reincarnate lama and head of a monastery in Tibet, was detained in a joint cross-border operation by Chinese and Vietnamese security agents in Ho Chi Minh City. Humkar Dorje Rinpoche had escaped into exile in Vietnam after facing persecution from Chinese authorities in Tibet for his commitment to preserving Tibetan language and cultural identity.¹

The Dalai Lama's public recognition of a child as the new Bogd Lama (Jebtsundampa), the Mongolian spiritual leader, in March 2023 provided an early warning of the political complications of succession. The announcement triggered reactions from China, which seeks to

control Buddhist institutions across Asia. While Tibetan Buddhism is recognised by the Mongolian government to have a “civilisational importance”, the ruling party effectively aligns itself with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The economy is dependent on China’s investments and only a few Mongolian politicians dare to openly support the Dalai Lama.²

The Chinese leadership believes that it has a ‘historic’ opportunity to exert control over the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist world during a vacuum of leadership before

either the new 15th Dalai Lama or the Tenth Bogd Lama or Jebtsundampa (the spiritual leader of Mongolia, equivalent to the Dalai Lama in Tibet) grow into adulthood. According to one Chinese commentator, “As the Dalai clique enters the Post-Dalai era, contests over the ‘reincarnation issue’ will be unavoidable, but as far as our side is concerned, this is also an opportunity: we can use the recognition of the reincarnated soul boy and the new Dalai Lama to attack the pseudo-regime”.³

China’s strategies, explored in this paper with a particular focus on India and Nepal, involve:

- The PRC combines economic heft with a ‘Sincized’ version of Buddhism to project sharp power and fulfill its strategic ambitions. China pressures countries not to issue visas for the Dalai Lama, bankrolls Buddhist organisations across Asia in exchange for loyalty, secures the exclusion of Indian and Tibetan scholars from religious initiatives and seeks to block publication of books by the Dalai Lama in other Asian countries. These initiatives have gained increased momentum as the Dalai Lama ages, particularly given his absence in some cases for decades from Buddhist countries in Asia
- Xi Jinping regards the Party state’s security and its place in the international order to be linked to efforts to maintain its frontiers, particularly with India, as a ‘Steel Wall’ and to Tibet’s ‘long term stability’, a political term meaning ensuring compliance to CCP and maintaining Party control over every aspect of everyday life. This extends to policing Tibetans’ inner lives and most deeply held religious beliefs, including in reincarnation.
- PRC cognitive warfare strategies are aimed at changing not only what people think, but how they think and act. The objective is to fracture and fragment an entire society and vulnerable diaspora communities beyond China’s borders. Outside China, United Work Front officials seek to influence universities, thinktanks and policy, spreading censorship and disinformation to creating schisms and fears among prominent Buddhist groups with the aim of achieving hard power military and territorial objectives. These methods are combined with physical acts of transnational repression, including abductions, abuse of Interpol Red notices, and intimidation of family members. Social media is used as a tool to disseminate narratives favourable to

Beijing. Disinformation for instance on the Dalai Lama's health is spread on platforms like YouTube and Tiktok, and internet influencers are cultivated to shape public opinion and undermine India and Tibet's democracy in exile.

- The Tibetan exile community and administration in Dharamsala, India, along with Tibetan Buddhists worldwide, confront increasingly sophisticated disinformation campaigns orchestrated by the Chinese government. This is particularly the case in countries like Nepal and Mongolia, where significant concessions to China have already been made. False narratives, including historical revisionism and cultural misrepresentation, disinformation, and propaganda are spread through social media platforms, websites, and traditional media channels, influencing perceptions and attitudes toward Tibet, its leadership in exile, and its people. This creates divisions and mistrust not only among Tibetan exiles in order to weaken collective resolve and advocacy, but across the Tibeto-Buddhist-Mongolian world. For instance, fake information that the Dalai Lama had died was spread in Mongolia in 2021, and following the circulation of a malicious video about the Dalai Lama's interaction with a small child, virulent rumours have been spread about abuse in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in India. Targeted PRC operations blending more traditional cyber espionage with a disinformation flood tide are likely to intensify.
- Digital transnational repression wielded by the PRC against Tibetans involves the intersection of technology, psychology, and geopolitics. Chinese surveillance efforts target exiled dissidents and diaspora around the world. Such groups can be subjected to smart city surveillance collection flowing back to China – rendering a target in a city along the Digital Silk Road as transparent as if they were in Beijing – or they could be tracked with targeted digital threats through malware on their devices.
- China's strategies in relation to the Dalai Lama and Tibet's future risk worsening regional instability as long standing alliances and relationships are disrupted. This particularly applies given the tensions around border issues with India (the number of Chinese border incursions has tripled since Xi Jinping took charge, intensifying risks of regional instability and armed conflict). Cross-border movement of Tibetans could prove a flashpoint.
- China's strategies are harmful not only to Tibetans in the PRC and in exile, but also Buddhists worldwide, peoples across the Himalayas, Asian nations and the West. The Chinese government has passed national security laws that mandate Chinese citizens and private companies to cooperate with the military and security services whenever they are asked and without any recourse. This means there are serious risks to Tibetan Buddhists particularly in Mongolia and Nepal where their physical security can be compromised by pressures by their powerful neighbour. This also applies to their supporters, for instance Nepalese intellectuals who speak out for the Dalai Lama or Tibet or Mongolians living in exile even in countries like the US.

- In its efforts to develop and exploit divisions among Tibetan communities in the diaspora, particularly in Mongolia, China's United Front has drawn upon long-term tactics promoting a pro-CCP sect, Shugden, as part of a systematic ideological and political campaign to undermine the Dalai Lama. Mongolia appears to be both the frontline and centre of the Shugden offensive globally, with Shugden supporters at the heart of government, business, cultural and religious life and the sect used as a front for advancing Chinese political and business interests.
- Tibetans in exile would be vulnerable to splits along religious lines and divisions during a possible interregnum period. China is actively seeking to deepen those divisions and to cultivate and co-opt religious figures from different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and different traditions. It is pitting itself against India in efforts to persuade Tibetan religious figures in India or elsewhere to return to Tibet or to visit pilgrimage sites in the PRC. In a symbolic move which went mostly unobserved, in Tibet in 2000, China installed a two-year old boy as the Seventh Reting Rinpoche, one of only a few high-ranking incarnation lines empowered to manage Tibet during the absence or minority of the Dalai Lamas, which has been in history a period of crisis.



The young reincarnation of Bakula Rinpoche (1918-2003) from Ladakh, former Indian ambassador to Mongolia. Image courtesy of Thomas Kelly.

1. CHINA'S EXTRATERRITORIAL THREATS AND STRATEGIES: THE BATTLE FOR BUDDHISM

Under Xi Jinping, Buddhism has become integral to China's foreign and domestic policy framework, aimed at advancing China's geopolitical interests regarding Tibet and beyond.

Recognizing the Dalai Lama's worldwide popularity and influence, the CCP has developed a state-approved version of Buddhism that supports Party objectives, and is seeking to appropriate leadership over Buddhism globally. China's extreme policies against religion in Tibet are combined with intensified efforts towards securing a central role for the CCP in international Buddhist organisations in competition with India and Tibetan Buddhist institutions across the world.

Confronting CCP influence operations, which combine tactics of repression and co-option, is particularly critical as the Dalai Lama ages. Buddhism's decentralized

structure makes it potentially more manageable for China without its current preeminent leader.

Internationally, China actively cultivates relationships with Buddhist organizations and clergy across Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, complementing China's broader diplomatic and political initiatives. The CCP encourages friendly nations like Nepal to establish Buddhist organizations with Chinese support while pressuring them to exclude any involvement from the Dalai Lama or the exile CTA.

Just a few kilometres across the border from India, China has forged a close institutional relationship with the Lumbini Buddhist University at the site of the Buddha's birthplace. Through its collaboration with Nepal at Lumbini, China aims to displace Bodhi Gaya, the sacred site in India where the Buddha was

enlightened (and where the Dalai Lama taught almost every winter until the COVID pandemic) in the imagination of Buddhists. This is an element of China's efforts to reframe Buddhism's historical development, diluting India's historical and cultural connection to Buddhism.

Despite the contribution of Tibet's sophisticated religious culture and the Dalai Lama's vigorous efforts leading a cultural and spiritual revitalization across the Himalayas, Tibetans' role in protecting and developing Buddhism in India is often undermined or obscured. For instance, Tibetan Buddhists played a vital role in saving the Buddhist university of Nalanda in Bihar and its teachings when it was razed to the ground centuries ago, as well as contributing to its revival today through the Dalai Lama's scholarship and emphasis on the tradition as the wellspring of Tibetan Buddhism. But when PM Modi and Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar inaugurated the revived Buddhist Nalanda

University in Bihar on 20 June 2024, they were accompanied by the Chinese Ambassador, and not by the main living proponent of the tradition, the Dalai Lama.

Meanwhile, the Chinese leadership set up a multi-million dollar institute in China to 'offer the world a Sinicised Buddhist system', led by a Chinese official, Master Yinshun, who praised a report by Xi Jinping to the 19th Party Congress as "contemporary Buddhist scripture".⁴

China has institutionalised its efforts to control Buddhist discourse through the World Buddhist Forum based in Wuxi, China and the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Bangkok, Thailand. Through the World Buddhist Forum, China has provided an international platform to their official Panchen Lama Gyaltsen Norbu, promoting him as the supreme leader of Tibetan Buddhists, and the anti-Dalai Lama Shugden group.

IMPACTS: THE DALAI LAMA'S PRE-EMINENCE

Beijing's efforts with respect to his travels to other Buddhist countries have impacted the Dalai Lama's pre-eminence particularly across Asia, if not in the West. While he is regarded as the world's best-known Buddhist teacher, the Dalai Lama has been unable in recent years to visit most Buddhist countries (even before the pandemic, when he did not travel at all).

Instead, more and more devotees from other Buddhist countries – and from China

and the West - travel to Dharamsala to attend his teachings or receive blessings in person. During the COVID pandemic, many of the teachings by the Dalai Lama were requested by Buddhists across Asia, who appeared before him on large screens online. (In winter 2023 his most extensive teaching tour within India post COVID lockdown encompassing Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh was cancelled due to a bout of flu, although he later travelled to Sikkim and in January 2025 received

thousands of devotees at Tibetan monasteries in southern Indian settlements).

Earlier the Dalai Lama was able to visit Thailand, Indonesia, and Taiwan (meeting the first popularly elected President of Taiwan, Lee Teng-Hui, and beginning a close connection with the thriving democracy and its citizens), but in recent years, pre-pandemic, has not been as welcome. The Dalai Lama made a third visit to Taiwan in 2009, although the then President Ma Ying-jeou avoided meeting him. While former President Tsai Ing-wen was supportive, the government rescinded the visas of the Dalai Lama and Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer to attend a forum about religious freedom in Taiwan in 2019. When U.S. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a prominent supporter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet, visited Taiwan in August 2022 she made a point of meeting the Dalai Lama's representative there.

South Korea was wary of the Tibetan leader flying over their airspace. Singapore allows him to pass through or spend the night in the transit facilities at the airport – but not in a hotel. The Dalai Lama has been denied visas by Russia to visit Buddhist regions there (since visits between 1979 and 1991) and also to transit Russia to Mongolia since his last visit to Ulaanbaatar in 2016. Thailand even denied a visa to his sister Jetsun Pema in 2010 although more than 90% of Thais are Buddhist.

The Dalai Lama has met scores of world leaders since his escape into exile. The first leader he met beyond those in India and China was the King of Thailand in 1967, opening a period of global diplomacy in

which the Dalai Lama made his first trips to Europe, engaging with Pope Paul VI at Vatican City, Prince Bernhard in the Netherlands, the President of Ireland and the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1973. From 2004 to 2007, his website dalailama.com details no less than 99 meetings with world leaders, Nobel Laureates and religious figures, and 167 in 2005 to 2010 – a high number of which were U.S. Presidents and officials from various administrations of the U.S. government during this period.

Over decades of global travel by the Dalai Lama, China has sought with varying levels of success to prevent or influence meetings at every level, from local Mayors to Prime Ministers. This has ranged from threats to Leeds city council in the UK after the Tibetan leader was invited to speak about business ethics ⁵ to Lady Gaga's Chinese fans concluding after she interviewed the Dalai Lama that "All these years' love for her is in vain".⁶ China's attempts to influence foreign leaders on who they should not meet can be characterised as 'Trojan Horse' ⁷ or 'Dalai Lama diplomacy'. China is positioning itself to gain greater concessions, by pressing on a relatively small-scale ask in strategic and political terms, and so leaders who acquiesce lose leverage.

CASE STUDY: PRESSURES ON BUDDHISTS IN SRI LANKA

When Sri Lankan monks attending teachings in Bodh Gaya in December 2023 expressed interest in inviting the Dalai Lama to Sri Lanka, China sent the Charge d’Affaires of the embassy in Colombo to their monastery in the central highlands to complain in the strongest terms. The embassy issued a press release saying that the Dalai Lama is “not a simple monk” as he claims, but a dangerous “separatist”. Nevertheless senior monastic leaders from Sri Lanka made a strong counter statement by delivering important Buddhist relics to Dharamsala in April 2024. This was likely to have been assisted by several visits of a prominent young generation lama, Ling Rinpoche (the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama’s former tutor) to the region to give dharma teachings. Sri Lankan Tibetan Buddhist leader, Dr. Waskaduwe Mahindawansa, who travelled to India to make the offering the Dalai Lama told Indian media: “We respect him and invited to Sri Lanka, but China did not like that. China pressed against our government as well, we don’t like that. He is a Buddhist leader, he has the freedom, and we have freedom to invite.”⁸

This is progress nevertheless compared to the situation a decade ago. In 2015, months after a strongly pro-China government in Sri Lanka was defeated in elections, senior Sri Lankan monks had expressed a wish to host the Dalai Lama. But a top official of the foreign ministry in Sri Lanka was cited as saying that while the Dalai Lama is very important, “Sri Lanka’s “close relationship with China is more important.” China praised Sri Lanka for not providing “venues

of connivance” to the Tibetan leader.⁹ While the Dalai Lama himself expressed a willingness to visit, he did not apply for a visa consistent with his position of not seeking to inconvenience host governments.

In 2017, a leading newspaper in Sri Lanka was pressured into abandoning its weekly serialization of the first autobiography of Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. This was despite appeals by the autobiography’s main translator Mr Ruwan Harischandra and its publisher Dr Damenda Porage, President of the Sri Lankan Tibetan Buddhist Brotherhood Society, who said that publication of the Dalai Lama’s story was inspirational to Buddhists in Sri Lanka; “Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country like Tibet.” When the group organized two Dalai Lama photo exhibitions, the Chinese embassy complained to the Criminal Investigations Department. When a Sinhala translation of the autobiography of a retired CTA official and diplomat Chope Paljor Tsering was launched in December 2017 at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, the Ministry of Defence even sent an investigating team following Chinese official complaints.”¹⁰

CHINA'S MOVES TO USURP BUDDHA'S LEGACY IN ASIA

In Thailand, Tibetan scholars were gradually eased out of a major translation project of Buddhist texts, with the objective of relegating Tibetan and Sanskrit tradition as subsidiary to Chinese Buddhism. The Common Buddhist Text project was undertaken by the International Council of the Day of Vesak under the stewardship of Maha Chulalongkorn University (MCU) of Thailand, involving selected translations from Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan into English, representing Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism. The project began in 2012 after years of discussion and planning with Geshe Ngawang Samten of the Central University of Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India, as a key member. But as a result of China's growing influence over the University and International Council of the Day of Vesak, the Tibetans have been eased out of the project, with Thailand refusing a visa for Geshe Samten. The Tibetan textual sources which earlier formed major part of the project along with Pali texts are now reduced to a few chapters and footnotes. Instead, Chinese texts are credited as the source.¹¹

Citing Indian government documents produced for the National Security Advisor, Indian journalist Yatish Yadav characterized the new 'Chinese great game' not as military power but as a "discreet move to usurp Buddha's legacy in Asia through massive bankrolling [...] using Buddhist sects as a vehicle for bolstering the country's soft power to counter India's big brother image in the region. [...] The

Chinese plan is to consolidate Buddhist sects—Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and Japan—and all powers should be vested in World Buddhist Forum at Wuxi, a city near Shanghai. The ultimate objective of Chinese strategy is to replace Tibetan religious hierarchy."¹²

The same briefing document referred to China's plans to project Pakistan as a cradle of Buddhism culture and heritage by funding the 'Gandhara Trail' linking Lahore, Taxila and Peshawar, and focusing on connecting its history with South Korea and Japan.¹³

It also referred to large investments by the China-ASEAN Buddhism Cultural Centre in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Thailand aiming at constraining India's influence in the region.

Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Pakistan, all receive arms from China and have defence contracts with the PRC. China has port facilities in Bangladesh, radar and refuelling stations in Myanmar and a deepwater port at Gwadar, Pakistan.¹⁴

In a policy report, the Delhi-based thinktank Foundation for Non Violent Alternatives notes that China seeks to control the World Buddhist Sangha Councils and bodies, helping to restore Buddhist institutions across Theravada and Mahayana countries and participating in major international events such as Vesak Day (Buddha Day).¹⁵

ANTI-DALAI LAMA GROUP ALIGNED WITH CCP

The Dalai Lama regards the ‘protector spirit’ Shugden as a sectarian divisive force that threatens Tibetan unity, and requests those who wish to practise this form of worship not to attend his teachings¹⁶

China uses Shugden followers to undermine Tibetan Buddhism and to fragment Tibetan society. There is evidence that Beijing is quietly stepping up these activities as the Dalai Lama ages in preparation for any succession scenario, building regional alliances and forging connections with lamas or devotees who may be open to persuasion to endorse, or at least refuse to object to, a CCP-installed Dalai Lama in future. China’s Panchen and several prominent Tibetan leaders, for instance from Chamdo in the TAR, are aligned with the Shugden group. Beyond PRC borders, Mongolia has become a stronghold for the Shugden sect, with prominent supporters active in pushing an anti-Dalai Lama agenda.

Cultivating Dolgyal worship represents a key element of Beijing’s policies aimed at undermining Tibetan religion and culture and enforcing allegiance to the CCP. This was officially acknowledged when the General Office of the Communist Party Committee of the TAR published an internal directive in 2014 that described the Shugden issue as “an important front in our struggle with the Dalai Clique”.¹⁷

From around 1996-7, members of a sectarian group called the International Shugden Community – which former practitioners describe as a cult – hounded

the Dalai Lama wherever he travelled, staging noisy and increasingly aggressive demonstrations at his teachings in the USA, Australia and Europe.¹⁸

Police in various countries established that a group of people belonging to the ISC, both Westerners and Tibetans, had been effectively ‘stalking’ the Dalai Lama in his travels, and seeking to check in at the same hotels and identifying entry and exit points at venues. The International Shugden Community called off the demonstrations and disbanded in March 2016, after a Reuters investigation revealed that the CCP backed the sect behind the protests.¹⁹

GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS OVER BUDDHISM IN MONGOLIA



In 2016, following a visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama announced that a reincarnation of the Ninth Jebtsundamba (Bogd Lama), equivalent to a Mongolian Dalai Lama, had been found. The identity of the child was kept secret until the boy, then eight years old, was introduced by the Dalai Lama at a public teaching in Dharamsala on 8 March 2023, before thousands of devotees from all over the world. This image depicts the reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba presenting traditional offerings to the Dalai Lama at the start of the Chakrasamvara empowerment at the temple. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL

In Mongolia, the Dalai Lama's recognition of the Tenth Bogd Jebtsundampa, the country's spiritual leader at the heart of the nation-state's political identity, propelled the nine-year old boy, his family and the monastic establishment into the heart of a complex web of geopolitical tensions. Since the child was introduced in public by the Dalai Lama in March 2023, the family business has been targeted, and there have been intensified pressures on the monastic establishment linked to Dharamsala.²⁰

While Tibetan Buddhism is recognised by the Mongolian government to have a "civilisational importance", the ruling party effectively aligns itself with the Chinese

Communist Party (CCP). The economy is dependent on China's investments and only a few Mongolian politicians dare to openly support the Dalai Lama. Mongolia is on the frontline and centre of the Shugden anti-Dalai Lama sect aligned with the CCP used to advance Chinese political and business interests.

The health and resilience of Buddhism in Mongolia, which barely survived Stalinist purges of the 1930s, has become an important litmus test of democracy and human rights in the independent country.

CCP PROXIES SEEK TO INFLUENCE BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

China also seeks to cultivate prominent figures in different schools and traditions of Buddhism in the West. For instance, an influential Sri Lankan Theravada monk accepted an invitation in June 2024 to China by proxies of the CCP, monks connected to the China Buddhist Association. The monk who accepted the invitation to travel to Beijing had represented British Buddhists at national occasions. One British monk from the Theravada tradition of Buddhism is said to have refused to go because accepting hospitality from the Chinese government would be against religious rules of conduct regarding the acceptance of unethical gifts. The monk believed there might be a payback expected from the visit such as endorsement for a Chinese selected Dalai Lama candidate in future or China's Panchen Lama.

Chinese monks from the London temple of Fo Guang Shan, which has grown into a multi-million dollar movement in the West, are active in promoting a Chinese form of Buddhism. Monks at the Fo Guang Shan centre in London are believed to have China Buddhist Association affiliations, and seek influence at the highest levels of the establishment in the UK (a representative from the London Fo Guang Shan temple attended a Vesak or Buddha Day celebration at 10 Downing Street on 22 May 2024.)

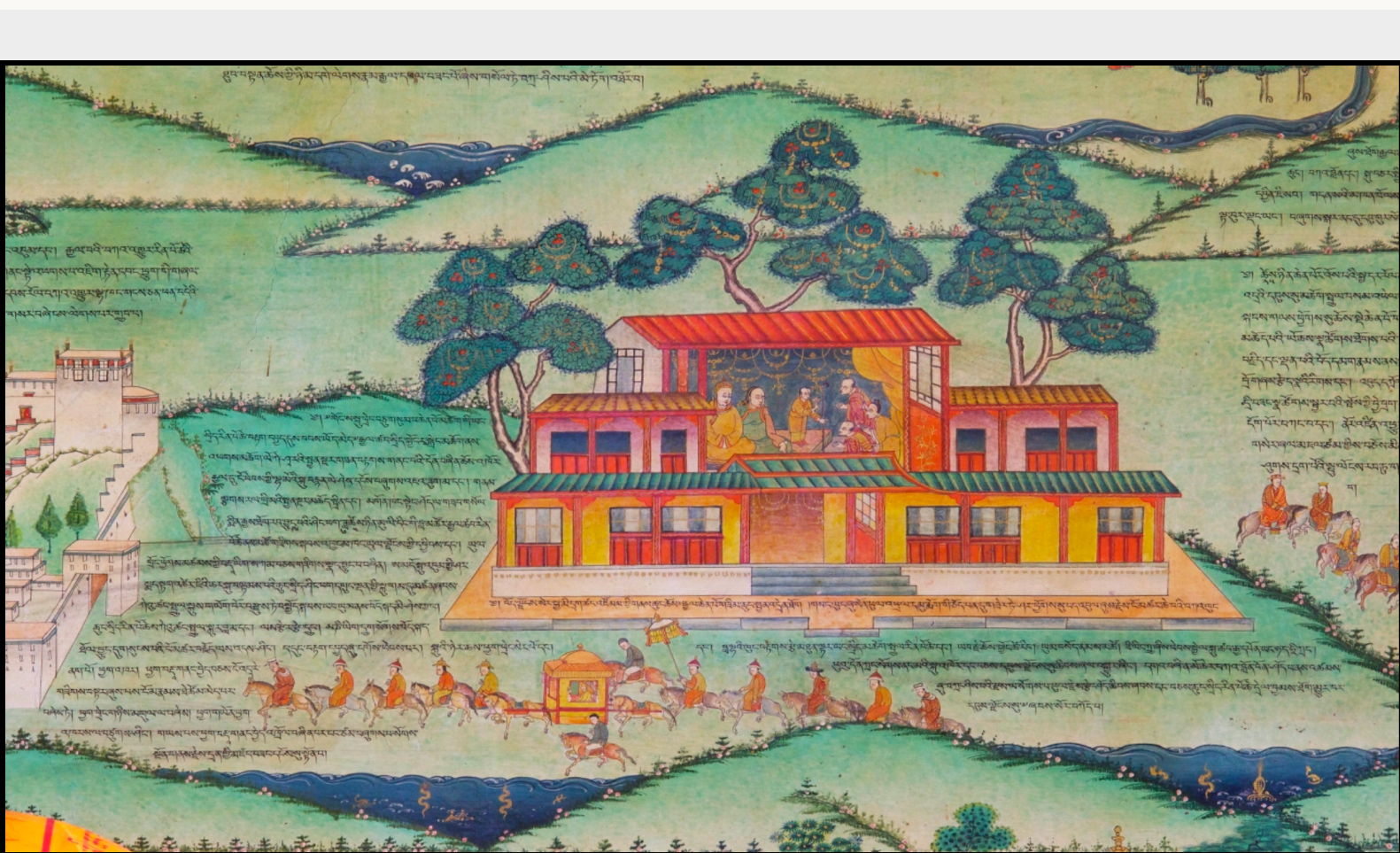
The biography online of the main religious teacher of the group, Master Hsing Yun from Jiangsu, details his 2013 meeting with three successive Chinese leaders Xi Jinping, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, which "has written a new page in the Buddhism

history.”²¹ Master Hsing Yun joined the Chinese-installed Panchen Lama, Gyaltsen Norbu, who is not regarded as legitimate by Tibetans, at the first CCP ‘World Buddhist Forum’ in Hangzhou in 2006, to which the Dalai Lama was not invited.

China’s use of Buddhism to project power globally can be traced back to the same year that the PRC installed Gyaltsen Norbu as the Panchen Lama. In 1995, the PRC

initiated a meeting for Buddhist monks from China, South Korea and Japan, which became the China-South Korea-Japan Buddhist Friendly Interaction Conference. Xinhua reported that it hoped the conference, held 13 more times since then, would “promote friendship among the three countries in generations to come”.²²

2. BUDDHISM, BORDERS AND GEOPOLITICS: INDIA, TIBET AND CHINA



A mural in the Dalai Lama's summer palace, the Norbulingka in Lhasa, showing the child Lhamo Thondup who became the 14th Dalai Lama recognising the belongings of the 13th Dalai Lama.

OVERVIEW

- Tibet is where India and China's competing interests intersect, in a complex and high stakes relationship of rivalry, deadly conflict and partnership. Historically, there was no contiguous border between China and India until the PLA took control of Tibet in 1950, a development that permanently altered the region's political and military dynamics. In recent years there has been a dramatic intensification of militarization in Tibet as Xi Jinping aims to forge a "great wall of steel" along the country's borders.
- As the home of the Dalai Lama and base of the Tibetan exile administration, India is the main target of China's military, economic and diplomatic pressure over Tibet and the future of the Dalai Lama institution. China has warned India not to interfere with any possible reincarnation, and has also indicated that any refusal by India to recognize the future Dalai Lama chosen by China will impact bilateral ties.
- Since the Dalai Lama's arrival in exile in 1959, Dharamsala has become a major global spiritual and cultural centre, and the subcontinent has emerged as a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism, home of the exile administration and a large exile community. The Sixth Dalai Lama was born in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state that China claims as part of the PRC, raising questions of strategic importance to both countries linked to the possibility of a 15th Dalai Lama being recognised there too.
- China is expanding efforts to deepen alliances with states along the subcontinent's northern frontiers, in order to weaken India's broader geopolitical influence. This is combined with efforts to coalesce a pro-China grouping of leaders from countries with Buddhist heritage through trade and connectivity networks that include Mongolia and Pakistan and exclude India.
- China's assertiveness in the region, extensive infrastructure developments on the border and the Sinicisation of Buddhism threaten India's national security, while the absence of a global figure akin to the Dalai Lama in the future could potentially impact India's efforts to address the Tibet issue effectively. Despite its significance and the Dalai Lama's role in revitalizing Buddhist culture in India, the Tibet issue has often been sidelined by Delhi and the exile Tibetan leader treated as an irritant in Sino-Indian relations. But there is an increasing recognition of the need for a more coherent and strategic approach to Tibet that is not only essential for safeguarding national security but also for maintaining diplomatic influence in the region.



Kora around the Dalai Lama's temple and residence in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India.

In Dharamsala in June 2024, a delegation of American lawmakers from Washington participated in a solemn and unprecedented ceremony in which the Nechung Kuten went into trance at the request of the Dalai Lama as the medium of the State Oracle. The powerful Republican Chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee Michael McCaul and Democrat Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi were pictured kneeling before the invocation of a Tibetan deity.²³

The Congressional delegation met Modi in Delhi within days of the Indian Prime Minister being sworn in for a third time. The

visit highlighted the centrality of Tibet in the geopolitical landscape of India and South Asia.

The question of how India might handle the matter of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation and exile Tibetan Buddhist institutions is of critical importance domestically as well as for its future relationship with China. China has not only warned India not to interfere with any possible reincarnation, but has also indicates that any refusal by India to recognize the future Dalai Lama chosen by China will impact bilateral ties.²⁴



Former Democrat Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi and long-time supporter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet receives a blessing from the Nechung Kuten in trance as the medium of the State Oracle. Pelosi and other delegation of American lawmakers from Washington including the Republican Chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee Michael McCaul visited the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and later met Prime Minister Modi in Delhi in June 2024. Screenshot from Tibet TV.

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While the Modi administration has often appeared to view the Tibet issue and the Dalai Lama as problematic rather than as central to India's strategic interests and cultural heritage, more recently there are indications of a more robust approach and acknowledgement of the importance of supporting Tibetan agency and institutions.

Questions about the future previously discussed only in private government circles have been recently raised in the public domain by establishment figures

including Foreign Minister Vijay Gokhale. Although FM Gokhale, who was India's Ambassador to Beijing and a known Sinologist, has not been publicly supportive of Tibetans in the past, in a paper published in November 2024 he urged India to develop a strategy on the question of the reincarnation and recognition of a 15th Dalai Lama, as well as the interregnum period.²⁵ "Inaction would not be sustainable in the face of international and domestic public pressure to allow the Dalai Lama candidate to take up his duties in Dharamsala," Gokhale writes in a paper published by Carnegie India. "Taking unilateral steps to please the PRC in the hope that the passing of the 14th Dalai Lama is an opportunity to reset the bilateral relationship is unlikely to be viewed in a similar vein by the PRC." Gokhale recommended that India should state clearly that the Tibetan Buddhist community are permitted to select its own religious leaders freely and without interference, saying that: "In constitutional terms, religious organizations have the right to determine their own leadership, residence, and practices without state interference. [...] Allowing the [Dharamsala-recognised] candidate to reside in India is also in keeping with India's ethos and past practice."²⁶

Since the Dalai Lama's arrival in 1959, Dharamsala has become a major global spiritual and cultural centre, and the subcontinent has emerged as a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism, with more than 200 monasteries populated by more than 30,000 monks and nuns.²⁷ Although the population of Tibetan new arrivals to these monasteries has dropped in recent years since the crackdown of 2008, they are

still socio-political powerhouses of higher monastic education, ensuring the continuation of undiluted Tibetan cultural identity under the Dalai Lama's leadership. The people of the Indian Himalayan region, spread across 13 Indian states or union territories with a population of around 50 million, share deep religious and cultural affinities with Tibetans, and revere the Dalai Lama – who has been responsible for a spiritual revitalization across the Himalayas – as an important spiritual leader.

Prominent leaders and monastic communities (labrang) of all four Tibetan Buddhist schools now live in exile mostly in India and Nepal following the Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959,²⁸ and will be pivotal figures in the future of the institution of the Tibetan religious leader.

Of the high-ranking religious leaders of his generation, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, is the only one to have been born in Tibet, to have been enthroned there and lived there for the first 15 years of his life. As the only head of a major school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Karma Kagyu, recognised by both the Dalai Lama and acknowledged by China, he is a key figure for Tibetans in exile, India and China. He was based at a monastery in India near the Dalai Lama, where he faced significant restrictions and as a result is now at an undisclosed location in the West.

All four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism trace their lineage to the Indian Nalanda tradition, with the Dalai Lama leading efforts to establish Tibetan Buddhism as the most complete and robust Buddhist tradition in modern India, relying on logical argument and reason rather than simply

faith, and promoting the importance of India's ancient philosophical civilization.

The disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC) has become a scene of often fatal conflict in assertions of state power by two nationalist governments. Since Xi became leader, the number of Chinese border incursions has tripled, intensifying risks of regional instability and armed conflict.²⁹ Slogans in large Chinese characters including 'Follow the CCP's command; win the war, we are the best' and 'we must win the war' are inscribed on the hillsides (and captured on Google Earth) near the border with India.³⁰

A fierce round of fighting in 2020 between the Indian and Chinese armies on the border with Ladakh, in which a Tibetan soldier from a paramilitary unit, the Special Frontier Force, was killed and accorded a hero's funeral, created a marked shift in relations between the two powers. While Tibet had often been treated as an irritant by the foreign policy establishment, the Galwan clashes changed the dynamic and there was a new recognition of Tibet's importance. Amid an upsurge in Indian nationalism, contracts with Chinese firms were cancelled, and calls were made to stop the entry of Chinese companies into strategic markets in India. India imposed a ban on TikTok along with 50 other Chinese mobile apps.

At the same time, there is an important trading relationship between the two powers. China recently overtook the US to become India's largest trading partner, with total trade between the neighbours reaching a record \$118.4bn in 2024.³¹

PM Modi's subsequent meeting with Xi Jinping on the sidelines of BRICS in October



Dawn at the Nechung monastery in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, the seat of the State Oracle of Tibet, March 2025. Tibetans gather outside to witness the Nechung Kuten going into trance

2024 re-established political contact at the highest level after the 2020 border incidents, representing a new turn in Sino-Indian relations that will likely affect how Delhi handles Tibet policy.³²

Tibet is also central to India given its geographical position downstream, as the PRC constructs massive dams in the seismically unstable upper reaches of Asia's great rivers, already subject to climate precarity as the Tibetan plateau is warming almost three times faster than the rest of the planet.³³ The Tibetan plateau also impacts the Indian monsoon.³⁴ Chinese control of water upstream has caused flooding in the Indian Himalayas and detrimental impacts on agriculture, irrigation and the generation of hydropower. In 2000, major landslides and the blocking of rivers in Tibet had significant impacts in India.³⁵ The two countries have no formal water sharing agreement,³⁶ and when tensions are high, China cuts off information and cooperation. Following the Doklam standoff on the border of India and China in 2017, China stopped sharing river flow data with India - despite having multiple memorandums in place for hydrological data sharing in the Brahmaputra and Sutlej Rivers.

There was alarm in Delhi when Xinhua announced on December 25 (2024) approval of a mega dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo, which flows into the Brahmaputra. Long-term observer of hydro projects and development across the plateau Gabriel Lafitte urged caution in assuming the dam may be built at all, saying that there is no sign yet of preparatory design work, backroom engineering modelling, costing, feasibility

or business case. Lafitte writes: "Instead, we do find a torrent of scientific research reports on the difficulties of wanting to tame the pivot of Asia, where continents both collide and tear away, contradictory energies deep in the earth, at precisely where this dam would be."³⁷

The PRC is making intensified efforts to outmanoeuvre India and assert its dominance across the Himalayas. Leaders from nations including Pakistan and Mongolia were hosted in heavily-militarised Nyingtri, the TAR, in October 2023 as part of efforts to develop a China-led, trans-Himalayan group of powers excluding India. Party leaders from Tibet have also been sent to sympathetic neighbouring countries such as Nepal with Buddhist populations to strengthen China's influence and weaken India's.

TAR Party chief Wang Junzheng visited Kathmandu, Colombo and Singapore in November 2023, followed shortly afterwards by a delegation led by Yan Jinhai, chairman of the TAR, to the Maldives, Thailand and Myanmar.³⁸ The cluster of visits, during which Beijing stepped up the pressure on friendly governments to describe Tibet with its Chinese-imposed name, Xizang, were likely to be part of a pattern of broader efforts by China to secure allegiance and support for Beijing's planning over the Dalai Lama's succession and undermining support for the CTA in India. In October, a number of delegations from the TAR visited areas that bordered India's Himachal Pradesh in the west, Uttarakhand in the south, and Ladakh to the northwest as well as new model villages bordering Arunachal Pradesh.

Mirroring its tactics in the South China Sea, Beijing is also threatening India's strategic interests by building a network of roads, settlements and military installations in the independent kingdom of Bhutan, India's historic ally and neighbour. While pressuring Bhutan to sign a border deal, The PRC is relocating its citizens to these new settlements. China is seeking possession of the western area of Bhutan because it includes an 89-sq km plateau called Doklam, control of which would give China major strategic advantage in its ongoing confrontation with India. Social media postings, blogs, videos and comments by Chinese tourists and unofficial online commentators in China openly celebrate what they see as China's 'recovery' of these villages and their surrounding areas from Bhutan. Official Chinese media reports and academic articles never indicate that these villages are in disputed territory, let alone that they are within Bhutan's customary borders.³⁹

As the Dalai Lama ages, the pressures have become more acute linked to the possibility of a future reincarnation or prominent Tibetan leader in India. Military activity in the Tibet Autonomous Region across the LAC including across Arunachal Pradesh – which China claims as 'south Tibet', and where the Sixth Dalai Lama was born - has intensified, and tensions across the border could escalate.

China will seek to disrupt and fragment the Tibetan exile community and the Tibet support movement in exile. In the information space, there is already evidence of disinformation flows seeking to blacken the Dalai Lama's reputation and cast doubt on his health. Although the anti-Dalai Lama Shugden group appears to be in tactical retreat, the possibility that they may select a candidate in exile with China's support cannot be ruled out.

2.1 THE DALAI LAMA, BUDDHISM AND INDIA'S POLICIES

"As His Holiness' reincarnation affects social stability in Tibet and neighbouring Buddhist countries, India, China, Nepal, Bhutan, and the faith and aspirations of millions of Buddhists worldwide, it is essential that it not become a matter of political gain by any government, group or individual, but one for the benefit of the sacred Dharma and overall good of all sentient beings."

- Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa, in an open statement to other religious leaders, 27 November 2019

"India must stop putting Tibet on the back burner and capitalize on China's weaknesses, including lack of credibility vis-à-vis the reincarnation politics, by extending vocal support to the Dalai Lama and his choice; and thus strengthen its 'non-interfering' but valid stake in the reincarnation process."

Jagannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj in 'The Dalai Lama's Succession and the China-India-Tibet Complexity'⁴⁰

The future of India, with its centuries-old ties to Tibet and Buddhism, and the Dalai Lama's leadership are closely intertwined, for cultural, geographic and political reasons.

The Dalai Lama says that he "realised the value of freedom" the moment he arrived in India on 31 March 1959.⁴¹ He describes India as his second home and one of the four commitments to which he has dedicated his life is the promotion of ancient Indian wisdom, on the basis of compassion (karuna) and nonviolence (ahimsa).⁴² "Most important, I have enjoyed in exile the freedom to pursue my spiritual development, even as I have tried to take care of Tibetan affairs. For many decades now, I have had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with leaders of different religious traditions, scholars, and scientists," the Dalai Lama told Time magazine. "These new friends have enabled me to understand more clearly the state of humanity and the ways in which I can contribute to a better world. Today, I am stateless, unable to return to my country. But we Tibetans have a saying, 'Your homeland is wherever you are happy. And whoever loves you is your parent'. India and its people, as well as many across the world, have provided me with constant love and support."⁴³

India describes its position on the Dalai Lama as "clear", describing him as an "honoured guest" and "respected religious leader who enjoys a large following in India"⁴⁴ who "is accorded all freedom to carry out his religious activities".⁴⁵ The Dalai Lama's envoys too enjoyed good relationships with Indian officials during the period of engagement in dialogue with China from 2002.⁴⁶

But in recent years there has been an inconsistent and uncoordinated approach, even while on the ground engagement with the Dalai Lama appeared to be viewed as a vote winner in India's elections last year. PM Modi asserted during his election campaign in May 2024 that he "often talks" to the Dalai Lama.⁴⁷ Modi, who was returned to power in June 2024 (with a greatly reduced majority), even criticised the Congress Party for being so "timid" that "it was afraid to even take the name of the Dalai Lama".⁴⁸ In the meantime, a BJP candidate campaigning for votes in Himachal sought the blessings of the Dalai Lama in a personal audience, despite critiquing him in a social media tweet the year before.⁴⁹ Buddhists in Lahul and Spiti demonstrated their disapproval by holding black flags against BJP candidate, actor Kangana Ranaut.⁵⁰

After the clashes in Ladakh, the Tibetan soldier from the Special Frontier Force who was killed during the conflict was given a hero's funeral with full military honours. Previously India had scarcely made it public that it used Tibetan commandoes in the SFF, which an Indian media reported stated "owes its allegiance to the Dalai Lama, the flag of Tibet and the flag of India." In the resulting upsurge in India nationalism, India imposed a ban on TikTok, which had over 200 million Indian users at the time, along with 50 other Chinese mobile apps. (By November 2020, the Indian government had banned over 200 Chinese apps, including those owned by Alibaba, Tencent, Baidu and Sina.)

A Congressional visit in June 2024 led by the influential chair of the Foreign Relations Committee Michael McCaul added weight to those who have pressured the government to give Tibet due prominence and develop a consistent strategy.⁵¹ Delegations from the U.S. Congress, often facilitated by the Indian government, have been taking place for some years, with successive U.S. State Department Coordinators for Tibet meeting the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, most recently former Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya in May 2022. But in this case, the delegation was officially hosted by Modi in the presence of his External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, indicating the visit was a notch above India's usual diplomatic position and intended to send a signal to China.

It was also significant that the showpiece of the delegation visit was the successful U.S. Resolve Tibet Act. The Washington-based legislators, including long-time Tibet

supporters Nancy Pelosi and Jim McGovern, could instead have travelled to New York to meet the Dalai Lama later that month when he visited for medical treatment.

India has given refuge to hundreds of thousands of Tibetans who followed the Dalai Lama into exile, providing a firm foundation for the preservation of culture and religion in exile, the basis of their political struggle, with the Dalai Lama, the Central Tibetan Administration and cultural institutes based in the Northern hill town of Dharamsala, and monasteries and Tibetan settlements in South India.

In 2014, when PM Modi came to power, the Tibetan Rehabilitation Act was adopted by the Indian government, providing the first set of guidelines aimed at offering some legal security for Tibetan refugees living in India, including lease agreements with state authorities for land where Tibetans reside and the extension of benefits to Tibetans under rural employment schemes.⁵²

But Modi's approach has been inconsistent, often appearing to view the Dalai Lama and Tibet as a problem or obstacle as opposed to a central pillar of the relationship and strategic asset.⁵³ And for over six decades, the Sino-Tibet conflict has been relegated to the periphery of political discourse by various political parties in India. Delhi-based thinktank the Foundation for NonViolent Alternatives urges the ruling BJP instead to "assert its national interests autonomously, irrespective of potential reactions from China".⁵⁴

Tibetans who have fled Tibet since the 1980s to India, known as 'new arrivals' or 'newcomers' have faced major problems. Denied legal status by the Indian

government, and often marginalized by the Dharamsala establishment, an unknown number of them were forced to return to Tibet, or to leave for the West if they were able to do so.⁵⁵ Often these Tibetans are regarded with high levels of suspicion by Indian security services.⁵⁶

The 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje is the most prominent 'new arrival' from Tibet to seek a legal status outside India, securing a passport from the Caribbean island of Dominica.⁵⁷

Developing Indian strategies

"Every Indian should take up more serious thinking on how to spread the realisation of ancient Indian knowledge that can be so useful in today's world. I think Gandhiji really promoted India's ahimsa tradition in practice. Now the time has come to practice karuna, compassion through education. India is the only country which has the opportunity and resources to combine ancient Indian wisdom on inner values with modern education to promote both physical and mental well being. If you make efforts in that vision, you can surely benefit the rest of the world."

- The Dalai Lama

"Tibet's role in India's national security extends beyond traditional military considerations, touching upon environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and strategic lessons for navigating regional dynamics. Recognising and addressing these complexities is crucial for safeguarding India's interests in the broader Himalayan region."

- Foundation for Non Violent Alternatives recommendations to Indian National Congress, February 2024

Indian commentators highlight the importance of India's stand on the Dalai Lama and Tibet in the context of several factors; India's large exiled Tibetan population, the revitalization of its Buddhist heritage,⁵⁸ and India's fight to stabilize the border conflict with China. "Tibet is not Taiwan. It has rapidly been elevated — for geopolitical, cultural and ecological reasons — as one of India's more important interests. They all run through the Dalai

Lama," wrote Indrani Bagchi, foreign policy commentator in The Times of India.⁵⁹

Despite future risks to security and international standing of not doing so, the Indian government has yet to develop a comprehensive strategy on Tibet. While various statements supported by the Indian Cultural Ministry endorse the Dalai Lama's authority over his own reincarnation, so far India has not taken a formal position on the

issue of the Dalai Lama's succession, which leaves open the possibility of future deferral to China. The future of Tibetan institutions in India, too, remains vulnerable to shifting pressures and political priorities.

Informed Indian analysts and security policy experts have long advised that it is in India's interest to position itself as the centripetal force in safeguarding the sanctity of any future succession process, protect Tibetan political and cultural institutions across India and firmly oppose interference and influence from China.⁶⁰ The CTA has been involved in discussions behind the scenes with Indian policymakers with the view of continuing to support cultural, educational and spiritual activities in future, and handling an interregnum period.⁶¹

Former Foreign Secretary and Sinologist Vijay Gokhale warns against India losing leverage by making any concessions to China on a future Dalai Lama. "Given the domestic stability and national security sensibilities of the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC on the matter of the Dalai Lama's succession, any unilateral gesture or goodwill that India makes toward the PRC with regard to the Dalai Lama on the assumption that China might view it positively is not likely to resonate in Beijing and should therefore be avoided," says Gokhale, who previously argued for the sidelining of Tibetan exiles from particular events.⁶² "The PRC distrusts India's motives but tolerates its current policy in pursuit of larger stability and security goals. Their approach with India on the Tibet issue is unidirectional—India must be sensitive to Chinese concerns, but China

need not show reciprocal sensitivity to India's concerns relating to Tibet. Hence, any unilateral step that seeks to please China should not be pursued as it will not result in any benefit for India."⁶³

Gokhale also urges the Indian government not to postpone consideration of detailed and sensitive questions such as the the possible establishment of a regency council within India and the historically unprecedented possibility of the 14th Dalai Lama passing away on Indian soil and not in Lhasa, "bearing in mind that the place of interment of the 14th Dalai Lama's mortal remains [in future] will automatically become a holy shrine for millions of pilgrims. [...] Since the PRC still claims that the Dalai Lama is a citizen of the PRC, albeit a renegade, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it might demand his mortal remains for interment in Lhasa.

The government of India would need to develop an appropriate policy response, including potential recourse to legal means, to deal with such demands from the PRC."⁶⁴ India should also develop policy positions now to anticipate and counter PRC positions and demands, for instance that the ritual objects and symbols of the Dalai Lamas belong to China and must be returned to them.

Indian commentators have cited the ecological damage and impacts downstream resulting from China's policies on the Tibetan plateau as a further key rationale for India to adopt a robust approach in its engagement with China.⁶⁵ Scientists have noted a correlation between weather patterns on the plateau and monsoons in the subcontinent.⁶⁶ Indian journalist Shishir Gupta wrote: "There is

serious concern in Indian officialdom over the ecological impact of rapid industrialization of Tibet on trans-border rivers and the monsoon, as this could lead to a crisis of global proportions.”⁶⁷

Tibetan analyst Bhuchung K Tsering of the International Campaign for Tibet described the Modi administration’s policy on the Dalai Lama and Tibet with a Tibetan saying: “Drawing the curtain for fear of being seen, while at the same time lighting a lamp for fear of not being seen.”⁶⁸ Tsering notes that between 2015 and 2021, Modi stopped making public greetings to the Dalai Lama on his birthdays. This changed, probably because of a more charged nationalist atmosphere following the Chinese attack on Indian troops in Ladakh in 2020, and birthday greetings resumed in 2021. “At this time, the Indian government seemed to view the Dalai Lama as a card in hand,” Tsering observed.

While PM Modi said during his election campaign in May that he talked often to the Dalai Lama, little is known publicly about the rare conversations between the two men. Most recently both leaders were present at the Global Buddhist Summit in Delhi in April 2023 – but on different days. Narendra Modi inaugurated the meeting on the first day, while the Dalai Lama was invited to address the summit on the second day (although the official schedule did not mention the name of the chief guest).⁶⁹ “Observers had speculated on how Modi would share the stage with the Dalai Lama for the first time. [...] Thus, like in the Tibetan saying, the lamp had been lit but the curtain had also been drawn simultaneously,” wrote Bhuchung K.Tsering.⁷⁰

At an earlier Buddhist summit in Rajgir in

2017, the historic site of Buddhist university Nalanda, a similar arrangement had been made, with the Indian President and the Dalai Lama appearing at the venue on separate days.⁷¹

The Dalai Lama’s website lists a meeting between Modi and the Dalai Lama on 20 August 2014, but this was not acknowledged at the time by the Indian government. Indian sources reported at the time that the Dalai Lama was “visibly shaken” by the encounter, ahead of Xi Jinping’s September 2014 visit to Delhi.⁷²

Treating the Dalai Lama, Buddhism and Tibet as ‘cards’ to be played solely to counter China compromises India’s leverage with the PRC, as well as threatening the future of Tibetan Buddhist people, its culture and institutions.

2.2. CHINA, INDIA AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS ON THE SILK ROAD

“While India seeks a multipolar [Asian regional order], with India as one of the leading poles, China seeks a unipolar one, with India not being a pole at all.”

- Anushka Saxena in First Post ⁷³

China is expanding efforts to encircle and deepen alliances with states along India's northern frontiers and other countries in the region and seeks to confront and exclude India from its efforts to dominate in the region.

The Silk Road, a network of pathways extending across Eurasia connecting East and West (with Ladakh at its heart) not only served as a major trade route between India and China, but also facilitated the spread of Buddhism from India to East Asia. The CCP alternative is the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, aiming at building a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient trade routes of the Silk Road.

Days after Modi had sought to showcase his efforts to lead on both an Asian and global stage at the G20 in Delhi, India was notably absent from a meeting hosted across the border in heavily militarized Nyingtri. On 4-5 October 2023, China brought together 280 representatives from more than 40 countries including the Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia and the Acting Foreign Minister of Pakistan in Nyingtri in the TAR, across the border from

Arunachal Pradesh. Using the Mandarin Chinese pinyin name for Tibet, the 'China Xizang Himalayan Rim International Cooperation Forum' hosted a number of leaders from across the region and neighbouring countries including the Deputy Prime Minister of Mongolia, the Vice Chairperson of the National Assembly of Nepal Urmila Ayal and the Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Bhutan Karma Tshering. The presence too of Acting Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Jalil Abbas Jilani; the Interim Foreign Minister of Afghanistan Amir Khan Muttaqi and Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs of Sri Lanka, Roshan Ranasinghe, signaled China's intention of involving these countries in plans for the region, forming a China-dominated grouping. Several of these countries already have interests in Tibet's mineral or other resources.⁷⁴

The meeting, described as the 'Nyingchi initiative' was aimed at deepening China-led international cooperation in the trans-Himalaya region, representing a further step in China's planning for a Trans-Regional Himalayan Corridor to draw these countries closer in the PRC's orbit, offering trade and connectivity.⁷⁵

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the meeting that: "China welcomes friends from all over the world to come to Tibet to witness with their own eyes the great achievements in Tibet's economic and social development, the happy lives of the people of all ethnic groups in Tibet, and the sound inheritance and protection of Tibetan culture."⁷⁶

These plans are directly linked to China's propagation of a Chinese version of Buddhism above Dharmasala's. "Under the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the cultural exchange of Tibetan Buddhism would be endowed with new connotations in line with the times," said Chinese professor Wu Xi according to Xinhua.⁷⁷

A month later, on 4 November 2023 a conference was held in Lhasa to discuss China's trans-Himalayan ties with South Asia. According to the state media, the annual conference of the China South Asia Society was aimed at providing "intellectual support for the high-quality development and high-level opening up of the Tibet Autonomous Region".⁷⁸

Following the meetings, TAR Party chief Wang Junzheng visited Kathmandu, Sri Lanka and Singapore. Tibet Daily reported that the aim of the trip was to "comprehensively promote the successful practice and rich experience of the Communist Party in governing Tibet [...] and to promote extensive exchanges and cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative".

During their travels, Wang Junzheng and Yan Jinhai used the Chinese term 'Xizang' to refer to Tibet,⁷⁹ which was echoed by the leaders of the nations they visited, including Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister who used the term on his X/Twitter handle.⁸⁰ India-based historian Claude Arpi points out that this attempt to enforce governments to use a Chinese name or Tibet has ramifications for India and Britain too. "India's north-eastern boundary was signed between Sir Henry McMahon, India's foreign secretary and Lonchen Shatra, Tibet's prime minister. 'Xizang' was nowhere in the agreement," wrote Arpi. "By erasing Tibet's name, China tries to bury forever Independent Tibet which existed for centuries."⁸¹

2.3 HOW TIBET SAVED NALANDA AND CHINA'S COUNTER ATTACK

"So we hover between war and peace, between the atom [bomb] and the Buddha."

Indian Prime Minister Nehru in 1956

"I always describe Tibetan Buddhism as pure Buddhism from the Nalanda tradition. ...Nalanda had great masters such as Nagarjuna or Arya Asanga. ...During the 8th century, the Tibetan Emperor invited Shantarakshita. He was a famous, well-known scholar and master of Nalanda. He went to Tibet and spent the rest of his life there. He introduced Buddhism in Tibet. I myself studied the Nalanda tradition of Buddhism; first I learned by heart and memorized what we call the Root Texts. All these Root Texts have been written by Nalanda masters. ...The Tibetan Buddhist tradition is the Nalanda tradition which combines the Sanskrit and the Pali traditions as well Buddhist Tantrayana. Masters like Nagarjuna, Aryadeva and Chandrakirti wrote tantric treatises in Sanskrit."

-The Dalai Lama ⁸²

In earlier times, there was a constant flow of Tibetan lamas and monks crossing the unguarded Himalayan borders to visit great Indian viharas (early Buddhist monasteries in India) and a similar traffic in the other direction of Himalayan masters and pilgrims. This was replaced by desperate and dangerous escapes across the border by several thousand Tibetans a year throughout the '80s, '90s and 2000s, until China succeeded in almost closing the gateway into exile via Nepal from 2008 onwards.

In exile, the Dalai Lama has been responsible for a spiritual and cultural revitalization across the Indian Himalaya,⁸³ while Dharamsala has become a major global spiritual and cultural centre. In his

dialogues with scientists and scholars over several decades, the Dalai Lama has sought to demonstrate how India's Nalanda tradition is, as he describes it, a "science of the mind" of direct relevance to 21st century secular concerns.

In his 1962 autobiography, the Dalai Lama refers to India as the 'holy land', a site of pilgrimage that every Tibetan wishes to visit. Tibet is portrayed as "the child of Indian civilisation".⁸⁴ While the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile acknowledge the deep impacts of Indian Buddhism and sacred sites on Tibetan culture, the same is rarely the case from the Indian side. "The Dalai Lama mentions 'saints and seers' as the transmitters of Buddhism to Tibet, thus completely omitting the comparatively

huge Tibetan input that was actively invested in the same process,” writes Toni Huber in her study of Tibetan exiles in India. “This statement is actually very typical of premodern Tibetan Buddhist historiography in general, in which, when Tibet is compared with India, the Indian role is often inflated while the Tibetan one is reduced or obscured.”⁸⁵

The official inauguration of the revived Nalanda University in Bihar on 19 June 2024 by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accompanied by Minister of External Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar, highlighted the complex politics and history of Tibet’s ties to the subcontinent and the future of Tibetan Buddhism. PM Modi inaugurated the ancient Buddhist university a day before meeting Nancy Pelosi and the Congressional delegation in Delhi. The ceremony was attended not by the Dalai Lama, but by Chinese Ambassador to India Xu Feihong.⁸⁶ India has struggled to re-establish the ancient Nalanda institution where Buddhism was preserved by Tibetan scholars. When a major project to revive the university began, funded by the Indian government, the Dalai Lama had no formal role. This was linked to pressures from China, a partner in the project, exerted through members of the governing board.⁸⁷

The Dalai Lama has often said that the source of all Buddhist knowledge is Nalanda, the ancient university founded north of Rajgir in Bihar in 427 CE, predating the University of Oxford and Europe’s oldest university, Bologna, by more than 500 years. The great monastic university attracted thousands of students from across Eastern and Central Asia to learn Buddhist principles, logic, astronomy, the

ancient Indian medical system of Ayurveda and mathematics. Nearby, the Buddha achieved enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. Tibetan Buddhists played a vital role in saving Nalanda and its teachings when it was raised to the ground centuries ago, as well as contributing to its revival today through the Dalai Lama’s scholarship and emphasis on its importance.

When the university was destroyed in the 1190s, the library was so large that it is said to have been ablaze for over three months after Turko-Afghan invaders set it on fire during their invasion and conquest of northern and eastern India.⁸⁸

While the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang of the great monastic university are well documented, Tibet’s vital role in the protection and restoration of its knowledge base has received less attention. When the philosophical, scientific and spiritual treasures of Nalanda were ransacked and destroyed, Tibetan monks and lamas rescued texts and materials, transferring them to the high plateau. From the Seventh century onwards and continuing for 900 years, more than 700 Tibetan translators travelled to India and translated more than 500 texts, almost the entire Buddhist canon, into Tibetan, an endeavour that has been described as among the finest achievements of the art of translation in any place or time.⁸⁹

The Dalai Lama told the BBC: “The only reason these ancient Buddhist texts survived the destruction [...] is because, centuries earlier, Tibetan monks had trekked down to the hot Indian plains from their icy redoubts in the Himalayas to

translate them. They returned to their monasteries in the mountains with these Tibetan versions. [...] The wisdom came from India [...] but now we know it better than the original Indian masters." ⁹⁰

Centuries later, in 1959, Tibetans sought refuge from religious persecution themselves in India. Today, as the roots of the Nalanda tradition are in danger of being wiped out in Tibet,⁹¹ the Dalai Lama is regarded by many as the rightful 'throneholder' of the monastic university.

Meanwhile the Chinese leadership set up the Nanhai Academy of Buddhism to "offer the world a Sinicised Buddhist system", headed by the VP of the Buddhist Association of China, Master Yinshun. Nanhai hosts foreign students for study from countries including Cambodia and Nepal. Yinshun says that China is using the vehicle of BRI to "strengthen the construction of Buddhist cultural platforms" and that not only is the South China Sea actually Chinese, but also that China has become the centre of the world's Buddhism.⁹²

Nalanda began when learned sages such as Nagarjuna and Arya Deva decided to set up a vihara in Bihar. It is said that Arya Deva once invited Nagarjuna for a discussion on Buddhist philosophy; when the former tried to argue with Nagarjuna, he failed to grasp his reasoning. Arya Deva then understood that he had found his master; Nagarjuna later initiated him into the mysteries of the science of mind. ⁹³ Aryabhata, considered the father of Indian mathematics, is speculated to have headed the university in the sixth Century CE. Aryabhata was the first to assign zero as a digit, a revolutionary concept, which helped evolve more complex

avenues such as algebra and calculus and was critical for the development of computing.⁹⁴

From the fifth century CE to 1193 CE, the Buddhist vihara flourished under the patronage of not only Buddhist emperors like Harsha and later the Pala dynasty, but also received the support of Hindu rulers. The Chinese monk Xuanzang, who studied there in the Seventh Century, described a nine-storey library "soaring into the clouds." ⁹⁵

To underpin the relevance of Buddhism to the modern world and science, the Dalai Lama has recounted the story of a nuclear physicist Raja Ramanna, who told him that he was surprised to find the concept of quantum physics and relativity in one of Nagarjuna's texts. "The West discovered these concepts at the end of the 19th century or beginning of the 20th century. Some Indian sages like Nagarjuna knew it nearly 2,000 years ago," the Dalai Lama said. The Tibetan leader differentiates between this 'science of mind' originating from Nalanda, Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist religion, saying: 'When we say 'Buddhist science', we mean 'science of the mind'; it is something universal; it is not a religion.'" ⁹⁶ In a major new endeavour, a four volume series of books by the Dalai Lama and Tibetan scholars have been published, bringing together ancient Buddhist scientific and philosophical explorations of the nature of reality which draws upon the wisdom of thousands of sutras and treatises written in Sanskrit by scholars at Nalanda.⁹⁷

2.4 CHINA'S BUDDHIST NARRATIVES AND COMPETITION WITH INDIA

“For Buddhists, [the Dalai Lama] is the personification of the Avalokitesvara. His reincarnation — or not — will determine whether the world can save Tibetan Buddhism from the Chinese Communist Party.”

I- ndrani Bagchi, foreign policy commentator and CEO designate for the Ananta Centre ⁹⁸

There are thought to be just over 10 million Buddhists in India, or 0.70% of the population.⁹⁹ While the numbers are overwhelmingly larger with an estimated 200 million or more Buddhists in China, at nearly a fifth of the population according to the same study, it is unclear to what extent these are active practitioners, and they have to operate within the constraints of a Marxist-Leninist Party state that promotes atheism. Buddhism, together with Daoism and Confucianism, is acknowledged as one of China's three major religious traditions.

Tibetan Buddhism is increasingly popular in China, with Tibetan lamas attracting a huge following. Kirti Rinpoche, the head lama of the influential monastery in Ngaba, Tibet, who is now in exile in Dharamsala, has said that the reason is that “Most exponents of Chinese Buddhism are merely trained in liturgical recitation, and those with deep knowledge of the philosophical tradition are now extremely rare. On my (1984) visit, I met many old monks in Chinese temples who had met the Dalai Lama and asked after him with great reverence. I also came across Chinese monks who had gone to the three great monasteries in Lhasa for study and then returned to their temples in China. Such people had a good impression of

Tibet, the Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism based on what they had seen for themselves.” ¹⁰⁰

Using Buddhism to achieve a political agenda serves the PRC in various ways. Buddhism has been more deeply rooted in China than Islam or Christianity and so is perceived as a localized faith rather than a ‘foreign’ one. It is also “a convenient resource given that many Asian countries have large number of Buddhists and are historically influenced by Buddhism,” wrote scholar Dr Juyan Zhang. “Buddhism was seldom associated with major upheavals and social conflicts in Chinese history and is thus deemed relatively harmless to the regime.”¹⁰¹

Party leaders and officials have even sought to characterise Buddhism as an “ancient Chinese religion”, implying it originated in China rather than in India. At a press conference on the sidelines of the Party Congress in 2017, Executive Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department Zhang Yijiong asserted that Tibetan Buddhism is a “special form of religion” that originated in ancient China.”¹⁰² (The statement contradicted Xi Jinping’s acknowledgement in 2014 at a speech

made in Paris that Buddhism originated in ancient India).¹⁰³ Zhang Yijiong spent much of his career in the Qinghai and the Tibet Autonomous Region, where he served as Deputy Party Secretary from 2006-10. He has emphasized the importance of the CCP's aggressive 'counter-terror' drive, that conflates peaceful resistance with violence, including on a visit to the TAR in 2014, where he also met China's official Panchen Lama Gyaltzen Norbu.¹⁰⁴

In another example of the same narrative, academic at the state-run China Tibetology Research Centre, Li Decheng wrote: "In the middle of the Seventh century A.D., Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from Nepal and inland China, and Han Buddhism and Zen Buddhism were spread in Tibet."¹⁰⁵ The formation and development of Chinese Buddhism had an important influence on, and became an important source of Tibetan Buddhism." Ignoring centuries of religious connections across borders, Li claimed that the Sinicisation project goes back hundreds of years: "By the end of the Tenth century, the Buddhism that was transmitted into the Tibetan areas of [China] completed the process of localization and Sinicisation, forming a new sect of Sinicised Buddhism, which became a distinctive culture within Chinese culture."

The CCP's political representations of Buddhism ignore the interwoven history of the spiritual and philosophical development of Buddhism in India and Tibet.¹⁰⁶ As early as 792-794 CE, the 'Samye debate' became known as a pivotal moment in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, which would continue to follow the late Indian model or the 'Nalanda path' with only minor influence from China.¹⁰⁷ "The Chinese fought hard to impose their

own system of Buddhism in Tibet, but finally it is the Nalanda Path which prevailed," writes historian Claude Arpi.¹⁰⁸

Chinese state media has also appropriated the legacy of the Indian Emperor Ashoka who had presided over the spread of Buddhism. When the Chinese Panchen Lama visited a replica of the Ashoka Pagoda created in Hong Kong to house a visiting Buddhist relic in 2012, China Daily said that the relic was met with "dharma joy."¹⁰⁹

Some official sources present a narrative in which Sinicisation is a natural next stage of the process of merging Buddhism with Chinese culture and philosophy. A discussion in state media with Sheng Kai, vice president of Tsinghua University's Institute of Ethics and Religion, examined the question: "Is Sinicisation the Secularization of Buddhism? Since Buddhism was introduced from India to China more than 2,000 years ago, it has not only merged with Chinese culture and philosophy, but also deeply integrated into the daily lives of Chinese people without their noticing. Buddhism comprises three major schools: Han, Tibetan and Southern, each with a different language. Has the Sinicisation of Buddhism been completed? Can the historical process be interpreted as the secularization and Sinicisation of Buddhism?" While acknowledging that Buddhism came from India, Sheng Kai said that it should "be compatible with the traditional inheritance of Confucian and Taoist cultures, blended into the faith and belief of the Chinese ritual culture ...so discussion of the historical connotation of the Sinicisation of Buddhism means exploring the process and laws of

Buddhism's transformation from an alien civilization to Chinese religion." One of his conclusions is that Buddhism in China has four fundamental characteristics; the last being: "an integration of globalization and localization. As a result of the Sinicisation of Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism is not only a local transformation of religious civilization from overseas [read India] but also a rediffusion to East Asia and Southeast Asia."¹¹⁰

To counter China's narrative, India has taken more considered efforts to promote Buddhist culture and philosophy in recent years. In 2011, it launched an inaugural Global Buddhist Confederation meeting in Delhi, attended by the Dalai Lama and involving around 900 religious leaders and monks from across the world. According to one delegate, "The whole world looks to India because of Buddhism. If someone from India takes initiative, India can take leadership of the Buddhist world."¹¹¹ The International Buddhist Confederation was established as a result to promote India as a leader in Buddhism and to spread Buddhist traditions and practices.¹¹²

Buddhism is also used by India's leadership as a means of strengthening its relations with Southeast Asian nations. At his address at the Global Buddhist Summit in Delhi on 20 April 2023, Prime Minister Modi stressed the contemporary relevance of Buddhism and said that he had told the United Nations a few years ago that 'we are the country that has given the world Buddh, not Yudh (war)'.¹¹³ Prime Minister Modi highlighted his personal connection with Buddhism as his native village, Vadnagar, was an important Buddhist centre historically. In what may have been

intended as a reminder to China at India's Buddhist origins he referred to the visit to his home area of the famous Chinese monk Xuanzang in the seventh century, who later took hundreds of Indian texts back to China, helping to develop Chinese Buddhism.¹¹⁴

In an earlier parallel to diplomatic manoeuvring on Buddhism nearly 70 years ago, Nehru and the then Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai struggled to push their own agendas during a fraught visit by the 21 year old Dalai Lama to India in 1956, where he attended Buddha Jayanti celebrations. Although India had explicitly recognised Tibet as a part of China in the 1954 Sino-Indian Panchshil Agreement,¹¹⁵ to the annoyance of Beijing, during his visit the Dalai Lama was treated by India "like a head of state".¹¹⁶ The Chinese then decided to engage in their own Buddhist ceremonial, by donating money for the construction of a Xuanzang Memorial Hall in Nalanda, Bihar. By placing the Dalai Lama in charge of the ritual offering, they sought to demonstrate he was there as a Chinese representative rather than a Tibetan leader and guest.¹¹⁷

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has invoked Buddhism as a central plank of Indian identity, for instance during his visits to Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Japan, and more recently, the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini, Nepal, as part of efforts to draw Buddhist countries out of China's orbit and strengthen cooperation. Indian government officials have emphasised how Indian Buddhists have carried the teachings abroad to Sri Lanka, Tibet, China, and from central Asia to the islands of Japan.¹¹⁸ During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Japan

in August 2014, he and the late Japanese Prime Minister Shizo Abe prayed at Buddhist temples together and released a series of social media posts on how “looking at statues of Buddha, we were reminded of the deep historical ties between Japan and India.”¹¹⁹

Modi’s invocation of Buddhism in asserting nationalist interests and soft power has something of a precedent more than half a century ago. When local officials discovered a Chinese government book called ‘Buddhism in China’ circulating in Sikkim marketplaces in 1955, the Ministry of External Affairs, under the advice of the political officer in Gangtok, instructed the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to produce 10,000 copies of a comparable India-focused ‘History of Buddhism’ in Tibetan, Hindi and English. “[...] The authorities believed that propagating Buddhism would send a clear message to the border communities that India and not China is their real ‘homeland’,” writes Douglas Ober in his investigation of how Buddhism shaped India’s modern history.¹²⁰

Ober notes that a year later in 1956, Nehru expressed support for plans to build an institute of Tibetology in Gangtok, Sikkim, during a visit by the Dalai Lama from Lhasa. On his way back to Tibet the Dalai Lama laid the foundation stone, with Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi presiding over its inauguration 20 months later. In subsequent years, Tibetans would cross the Himalayan passes with religious texts to be stored at the institute in order to protect them from China’s onslaught on Buddhism.

“As a product of his age,” wrote Douglas Ober, “Nehru understood Buddhism to be

the primary link between India and the rest of Asia. [...] Embellishing a universalist message of Buddhist fraternity, tolerance, and peace with slogans about pan-Asian unity, he argued that India was a kind of axis mundi for the Buddhist world.”¹²¹

Ober writes that the first major rupture in Nehru’s Buddhist politic came when his former law minister, B.R. Ambedkar, and nearly half a million of his followers – an oppressed population of dalits, or ‘untouchables’ - converted to Buddhism.¹²²

For the celebrations of 900 years of the Karmapa lineage in Bodh Gaya, India, in 2010, the Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje curated the performance of a ‘doha’ (old verse format of Indian poetry) by the great Indian mahasiddha Tilopa, the first performance of the work, a Tantric song of realization, for several hundred years. The opening ceremony included a song in Sanskrit, a language that the Karmapa was studying.

2.5 STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF TAWANG, BIRTHPLACE OF THE SIXTH DALAI LAMA

Close to today's border with China in present-day Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, which was over run by Chinese troops in 1962, there is a humble whitewashed home strung with prayer flags. It was the home of the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, who was born in the territory of Monyul in 1683, and it is the only one of the birthplaces of the 14 Dalai Lamas freely accessible to pilgrims.¹²³

Tawang is of high strategic significance for both China and India, with China claiming

the territory as 'south Tibet', and Chinese commentators in the official media saying that they can "never give up the place".¹²⁴ On a map published soon after Narendra Modi became Indian Prime Minister in 2014, Beijing depicted Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory,¹²⁵ while in March (2024) a new official Chinese map of 'south Tibet (Zangnan)' was published giving standardised Chinese names of 30 locations in the Indian state. "This renaming by Beijing is not merely an isolated act but part of a long-term plan aimed at



Close to today's border with China in present-day Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, which was over run by Chinese troops in 1962, is the home of the 6th Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso, who was born in the territory of Monyul in 1683. It is the only one of the birthplaces of the Dalai Lama freely accessible to pilgrims.

destabilising the region, confusing the public, and promoting a narrative akin to its actions in Tibet and other occupied territories since the establishment of the PRC in October 1949,” wrote three Tibetan researchers for Indian thinktanks in a policy brief.¹²⁶

The Dalai Lama is revered in Arunachal Pradesh, as he is everywhere in India, and has strong historic and cultural ties with the region. After crossing the border in 1959, he sought refuge in the historic Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Tawang. He has subsequently visited Arunachal Pradesh on a number of occasions, leading to standard China issued threats. In 2017 when the Dalai Lama gave religious teachings, China’s Foreign Ministry warned that this would “gravely damage the peace and stability of the border regions between China and India, and China-India relations,” adding that by inviting the Dalai Lama to an area where China and India had territorial disputes, the Indian side had “violated its commitment on Tibet-related issues, and escalated the boundary dispute.”¹²⁷ China also complained about a previous visit by the Dalai Lama in 2009 and when the then US Ambassador to India, Richard Verma, visited Tawang in 2016.

During his 2017 visit, the Dalai Lama was asked whether the wishes of local people might be fulfilled by the exile leader being reborn there, given Tawang is the birthplace of the Sixth.¹²⁸ “It is difficult to say,” he responded at a press conference.¹²⁹ He added more stakeholders to the list, including Ladakhis, Chinese Buddhists, Mongolians as well as some Europeans, saying that these followers have on various occasions expressed their desire for the

Dalai Lama to be reborn in their respective home regions: “[...] Judging [the] present situation and many Mongolians really also [are] showing deep devotion to the Dalai Lama. Besides Tibetan refugees, thousands of local people from Arunachal to Ladakh [are] very, very devoted.”¹³⁰

In the past, the Dalai Lama has equated India’s openness to his visits to Tawang despite China’s reservations with a positive shift in their approach to Sino-Indian relations.¹³¹

Before leaving India for the West, the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje made several visits to the region. In 2016 he taught to a crowd of 20,000 in Tawang at the request of the Buddhist Monpa people from the west of the Indian state. He emphasised the relationship between the Karmapas, heads of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and the Monpa people – which go back 900 years to his first incarnation. Indicating the strength of the religious and cultural connections, the then Chief Minister of the state CM Pema Khandu said that “the people of Monyul had long aspired to receive the blessings of His Holiness” and that in schools in the region, the study of Tibetan (Bhoti) had been introduced as a third language. He expressed his hope that this initiative would “help people to understand the ancient Buddhist scriptures and lead to deeper spiritual lives.”¹³²

2.6 FORGING THE 'GREAT WALL OF STEEL' : THE INDIA-TIBET BORDER

"[The Line of Actual Control] is four lines, actually. One is the Indian perception of the Line of Actual Control. Another is the Chinese perception of the Line of Actual Control. Third is the Indian perception of the Chinese perception of the Line of Actual Control — because we have a perception based on their line of patrolling. And the fourth is, of course, the Chinese perception of the Indian perception of the Line of Actual Control."

- Vinod Bhatia, (retired) director general of military operations for the Indian Army, cited by the New York Times, 27 June 2024 ¹³³

"Once the Chinese entered Tibet in 1950, in a sense the Himalayas was fractured. One of our diplomats at that time said: 'The Chinese have entered Tibet: the Himalayas no longer exist.'"

- Ambassador Nirupama Rao ¹³⁴

Xi Jinping has called on China's border troops to forge a "great wall of steel" along the country's borders by enhancing their capabilities in frontier defence and control.¹³⁵ Underlining the imperative of securitisation which now dominates every CCP policy, Xi says that "We must adhere to our strategic thinking that to govern the nation, we must first govern our borders, to govern our borders, we must first stabilize Tibet."¹³⁶ Reflecting the priorities of the top Party leadership and unlike his predecessors, Xi has made a number of visits to troops in border regions, including an inspection tour to Nyingtri (Chinese: Nyingchi) in the TAR in 2021, located in a strategically important area bordering Arunachal Pradesh in India. The administrative seat of Nyingtri is called Bayi in Chinese, meaning 'eight one', a reference to the PLA's creation on 1 August 1927.

The main focus of Xi Jinping's Nyingtri visit in 2021 was the new strategic railway route from Lhasa, an important segment of the Sichuan-Tibet link. Like all infrastructure in the region, this high-speed electrified railway has both civilian (attracting tourists) and military purposes (making the transfer of troops to border areas easier). "If a scenario of a crisis happens at the China-India border, the railway will provide a great convenience for China's delivery of strategic materials," Qian Feng, director of research at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University was cited as saying by Global Times.¹³⁷ Global Times, an official mouthpiece of the Chinese government, confirmed on 4 August that the Lhasa-Nyingtri (Ch: Nyingchi) railway was also being used for military transport missions. Unnamed analysts were cited describing it as "a move that will boost the capability of

the People's Liberation Army (PLA)".¹³⁸ Opened in 2021 and with its highest part standing at over 5,100 m above sea level, the railway line features 47 tunnels, 121 bridges and a 525m long bridge.¹³⁹

The day after Xi Jinping's visit to border, the Chinese HJ12 man-portable anti-tank missile made its debut in an exercise organised by the People's Liberation Army's Tibet Military Command. The Global Times and Tibet Military Region's official WeChat account reported that this missile can destroy any main battle tank in the world.¹⁴⁰

TAR Party leader Wang Junzheng has reiterated Xi Jinping's "orders to prepare for war, his insistence on placing military training in a strategic position, to combine combat training with scientific technology, to strengthen civil-military joint training in key areas such as disaster relief and emergency rescue".¹⁴¹ Visiting troops stationed on the border soon after his appointment as TAR Party chief, Wang Junzheng told border guards to "stick to their post in the ice and snow", underlining Xi Jinping's message that 'social stability' in Tibet is related to 'national stability', and that border security in Tibet is tied to the Party's perception of its national security. Wang Junzheng stressed that border officials should "put the cause of the party and the people first, loyalty to the core, support to the core, maintain the core and defend the core to ensure security and stability on the border."¹⁴²

Military and security officials in Xinjiang (East Turkestan) collaborate closely with their counterparts in the border areas of Tibet and elsewhere, reflecting the Chinese leadership's alignment of Tibet and Xinjiang

and the importance of both regions to the Chinese government in fulfilling its strategic and economic objectives.¹⁴³

The appointment of Lt. General Yin Hongxing as the new Political Commissar of the Tibet Military Region (TMR), subordinate to the Western Theatre Command, was announced at a meeting of the Tibet Military Region Party Committee two days before Wang Junzheng's visit on 19 January 2022.¹⁴⁴ The former commander of Tibet Military District (from 2019 to 2021) Wang Haijiang, moved to the same role in Xinjiang for six months before assuming leadership of the Western Theater Command in 2021. Lt. Gen. Wang Haijiang's transfer to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region from Tibet came five years after Chen Quanguo trialled dystopian police strategies in Tibet before becoming Xinjiang (East Turkestan) Communist Party chief and presiding over a network of internment camps.¹⁴⁵

Wang Haijiang was lauded by the official press for his contributions to the construction of xiaokang 'well-off' border villages. According to the People's Liberation Army Daily,¹⁴⁶ Wang Haijiang stayed at the front line of border defense at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters for 10 consecutive months in 2017, leading officers and soldiers to build winding mountain roads in extreme weather, contributing to the construction of well-off villages on the border. In June 2020, during an intensive period of the border dispute with India, Wang Haijiang, then commander of the Tibet Military Region, also led a team to patrol the Sino-Indian border and "painted red" on the boundary markers at the border.¹⁴⁷

Under Wang Haijiang's command, the Tibet Military Region established its first 'Snow Mastiff Plateau Resistance Team' in 2020. At the inauguration ceremony, he praised the Militia Team and said the fighters who have come from the ring to border defense will contribute to the construction of border defense with practical actions, assisting the border defense Regiment and the Special Force Brigade in combat training.¹⁴⁸

The PLA's Western Theatre Command (WTC) is the largest of China's five Theatre Commands and exercises operational jurisdiction over the country's borders with India and Afghanistan. Since military manoeuvres against India in 2020, China has raised its grading among Theatre Commands and brought the WTC on par with the Eastern Theatre Command, which is ranked first in terms of priority for receiving new aircraft and weaponry. India-based Sinologist Jayadeva Ranade observed: "Other visible indicators of the leadership's attention are the high-level

visits; postings of new officers to the Western Theatre Command; the enhanced and qualitatively different exercises by PLA forces deployed in the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Regions subordinate to the Western Theatre Command; and the new, modern equipment that is now being supplied to them."¹⁴⁹

A number of Politburo members and senior CCP cadres continue to visit the TAR, in particular the heavily militarized area of Ngari (Ali), Shigatse (Rigaze) and Nyingchi. Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Wang Yang visited the TAR a month after Xi in 2021. Central and TAR public security, propaganda and united front teams have visited the TAR border counties. In addition to emphasising loyalty to the Party and the priority of border defence, they have also stressed the importance of "eliminating the 14th Dalai Lama's influence".

Tibetans serve in military on both sides of the border

Beijing has also stepped up its efforts to recruit Tibetans in the PLA, offering incentives to those willing to join. State media reported that many young Tibetans had signed up during its first post-COVID recruitment drive in 2021, stating that "conscription work in Tibet has entered the final stage."¹⁵⁰

According to the Tibetan service of Radio Free Asia, 18-21 year old Tibetan students were being offered reimbursement of their

school fees in exchange for enrolling in a two-year course of military training. Students already receiving state aid for their schooling were required to enroll, according to a Chinese government notice. A high school student in Tibet told RFA in a written message that "Military training has been a part of our schools' curriculum in the past, but this is the first time that an official government notice has been sent out to all the schools promoting enrolment in programs of military training."¹⁵¹

Chinese citizens from across the PRC are also offered significant financial inducements to serve on the plateau including subsidies for the soldier's family, reimbursement for university expenditures, service pay as well as job-finding assistance.¹⁵²

Across the border, Tibetans in exile carry photographs of the Dalai Lama as they serve in the Special Frontier Force, an elite unit formed in 1962 after the Sino-Indian war that primarily recruits from the Tibetan community in exile. Original SFF cadres included Khampas who became refugees after fierce resistance against Chinese troops in the '50s and '60s, and who traditionally serve as bodyguards of successive Dalai Lamas.

In a border clash in Ladakh in 2020, a Tibetan soldier called Tenzin Nyima who was serving in the SFF was killed. (This followed the Galwan clashes in June 2020, when thousands of Chinese troops advanced west of the border in the Galwan valley, triggering clashes. Twenty Indians and at least four Chinese died in hand to hand combat, using crude weapons like clubs studded with nails.) For the first time, India made it public that it had used Tibetan commandoes during the military action. Indian media reported: "Although the SFF, which is usually tasked with classified missions, functions under the operational control of the Indian Army, its official supervisory body is the Cabinet secretariat. The SFF, which consists of trained high-altitude warriors, owes its allegiance to the Dalai Lama, the flag of Tibet and the flag of India."¹⁵³ Tenzin Nyima was given an official funeral with a 21 gun salute.

Previously, while there had been disputes

and skirmishes, since the 1970s an agreement by both sides that guns were not to be used had largely been held. This changed in 2020, when warning shots were fired, with Chinese and Indian officials accusing each other's soldiers. China's Party mouthpiece The Global Times took a belligerent tack, describing India as having "the mentality of a loser"¹⁵⁴ and saying: "China is several times stronger than India, and India is no match for China. We must smash any Indian illusion that it can deal with China by colluding with other powers, such as the U.S."

"Bilateral agreements between India and China aimed at maintaining peace and tranquility [...] became meaningless the moment China moved large numbers of troops to Eastern Ladakh in May 2020," the Delhi-based thinktank Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives reported in a policy brief. "Since then, despite several rounds of talks between the two sides, there has been no forward movement in bilateral discussions to move back to the status quo ante. [...] India must plan for a new phase in its bilateral relations and be constantly prepared for fresh moves along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) by the PRC."¹⁵⁵

The Quad, or Quadrilateral Security Dialogue comprising the US, Australia, Japan and India, was revived in 2017 with the goal of preventing China from dominating in the Indo-Pacific. The grouping is centred on mutual commitment to establish a "free, open rules-based order" in the Indo-Pacific out of growing worry about Chinese assertiveness.¹⁵⁶ China does not want India not to be the long arm of the U.S. in the region as an active member of the Quad,

and is challenged too by India's defence cooperation with the U.S.¹⁵⁷

The two sides have now established buffer zones in areas where the standoffs occurred in 2020, but have also fortified their positions with fresh troops and infrastructure.¹⁵⁸ In August 2013, the Indian Air Force landed the C-130J Hercules aircraft at Daulat Beg Oldi, the highest landing ground in the world, on the frontier with China in the Ladakh sector, near the theatre

of the 1962 war. Other airstrips not used since the 1962 debacle were also brought back into use, at Chushul in the western sector and Tezpur in the eastern sector, where a squadron of Sukhoi fighter jets was placed.¹⁵⁹

On an international stage, China downplays tensions, most likely in order to signal that the border issue can be resolved bilaterally, without any engagement from the US.¹⁶⁰

Military activity and model 'well-off' villages on the Arunachal border

Xi Jinping's announcement when he came to power that a major priority was to enhance 'security' along Tibet's border with India involves a major initiative to build new villages along the borders.

The construction of 'xiaokang' (model well-off) villages was prioritized as part of China's national border defense and frontier security in its work plan for 2017-2020.¹⁶¹ China's construction of the two largest clusters of new border villages that have been built within the last few years correlates with two places that saw fighting in 1962 Sino-Indian war – Tsona (Chinese: Cuona), opposite Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, and Dzayul (Chayu), opposite Walong.

This has led to the dramatic expansion of infrastructure and militarisation in the 21 border counties of the TAR, involving repopulating the area with residents who are tasked with serving as plainclothes security alongside military and police units.

The TAR authorities announced in January 2022 that 624 'xiaokang' villages had been completed, although some analysts dispute this figure as being too high.¹⁶² (A Global Times report on 27 September 2021, several months earlier, gave a figure of 680 xiaokang villages.)¹⁶³

Military activity in TAR across the LAC including across Arunachal Pradesh has increased as China enhances its strategic deployment in the border areas. It combines dual-use civilian and military infrastructure such as new roads and 'model well-off' (xiaogang) villages with new military garrisons. PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) and PLA Strategic Support Force (PLA SSF) units are present in the PLA Western Theatre Command close to the LAC.¹⁶⁴

Satellite images show PLA construction activities in Seti Chu and Chupda Chu valleys opposite Tulung La sector in Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁶⁵

On the Indian side of the border, two mountain divisions were raised in 2009, with operational headquarters of both in Arunachal Pradesh in case of PLA attack in the region.¹⁶⁶ There were clashes on the Arunachal border in December 2022 and also in 2021, with both the Indian and Chinese governments issuing separate statements in which both sides accused each other of transgressing the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

An observer of the Indo-Tibetan frontier who monitors developments under the Twitter/X handle @NatureDesai says that increased PLA deployment in the eastern frontier compared to the “pre-Galwan clash period” suggests the changed dynamics of the Indian border in China’s strategic plans. “Construction of the new dual-use airport in Lhontse Dzong, less than 30 miles from the McMahon Line and around 100 km from Tawang, has changed the status quo in the region. China seems to be augmenting their force deployment along the Tibet-Arunachal Pradesh border areas to gain a perceived upper hand in terms of infrastructure, communication and logistics compared to India,” said Nature Desai.

The same monitor suggested that the next flash points of the eastern sector of the LAC might be directly opposite Tawang.¹⁶⁷ Analysis of satellite imagery has also suggested a massive troop deployment by the Chinese in the Tawang sector.¹⁶⁸

According to the Indian media, Indian forces successfully repelled a Chinese incursion in December 2023 in the Yangtse area of the Tawang sector, attributed at least in part to all-weather deployment at a network of small outposts in the area.¹⁶⁹

In January 2022, Wei Changqi, Party Secretary of Metok or Medog in Nyingtri (Chinese: Nyingchi or Linzhi) located on TAR’s border with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, said that along with the ‘stabilisation’ of the border, it was important to promote “the anti-encroachment struggle and implement a ‘push forward strategy’”. In this context he urged “the transfer of people in the central areas to the front line”, and the need to speed up “construction of settlements in the border areas, and ensure that the people move into new homes as soon as possible”.¹⁷⁰

In a study of the new settlements close to the LAC, the Takshashila Geospatial Bulletin assessed their unique spatial patterns and architectural characteristics differentiating border villages and dual-purpose and military settlements. “The latter are often surrounded by boundary walls and closed-circuit surveillance, distinguishing them from nearby civilian settlements that tend to be more dispersed and unstructured. Rivers and other physical features naturally mark these dual-purpose settlements, distinct from typical urban expansions. Based on time series satellite images, most construction work occurs during June and July when weather conditions are mild,” wrote Dr Nithiyanadam Yogeshwaran.¹⁷¹

The construction of the border villages is accompanied by the rapid development of infrastructure on the Chinese side. Recent analysis of satellite imagery reveals the newly built Shannan (Lhokha) Longzi Airport, located less than 50 km from the LAC at an altitude of 3,900 m, which is likely to lead to major settlements in the area.¹⁷² The total road network in TAR, which was

7,300 km in 1959, expanded to 120,000 km by 2021, a growth of 1543%. Air infrastructure has been significantly enhanced alongside the expansion of road and rail networks. Between 2017 and 2022, five airports were upgraded, and four new airports were established. Additionally, nine heliports became operational, further strengthening the region's air connectivity.¹⁷³ The Nyingchi (Nyingtri) Mainling Airport, located 15 km from China's border with Arunachal Pradesh, plays a role in supporting PLA forces in the area, potentially including elements of the 52nd and 53rd Light Combined Arms Brigades and has undergone several upgrades in recent years.¹⁷⁴ The construction of a road linking northern Xinjiang to Kyirong county in Tibet on the border with Nepal, believed to be in early stages of construction, has been described as "the greatest strategic change [in terms of infrastructure] since the 1950s for India."¹⁷⁵

In contrast, border villages on the Arunachal Pradesh side have poor accessibility, inadequate infrastructure and depressed economic growth, resulting in people migrating out of the area.¹⁷⁶ When Xi Jinping made his statement about securing the borders and its connection to China's national security, he was sending a key signal of intent to exercise regional dominance and counter any perceived opposition or threat.¹⁷⁷

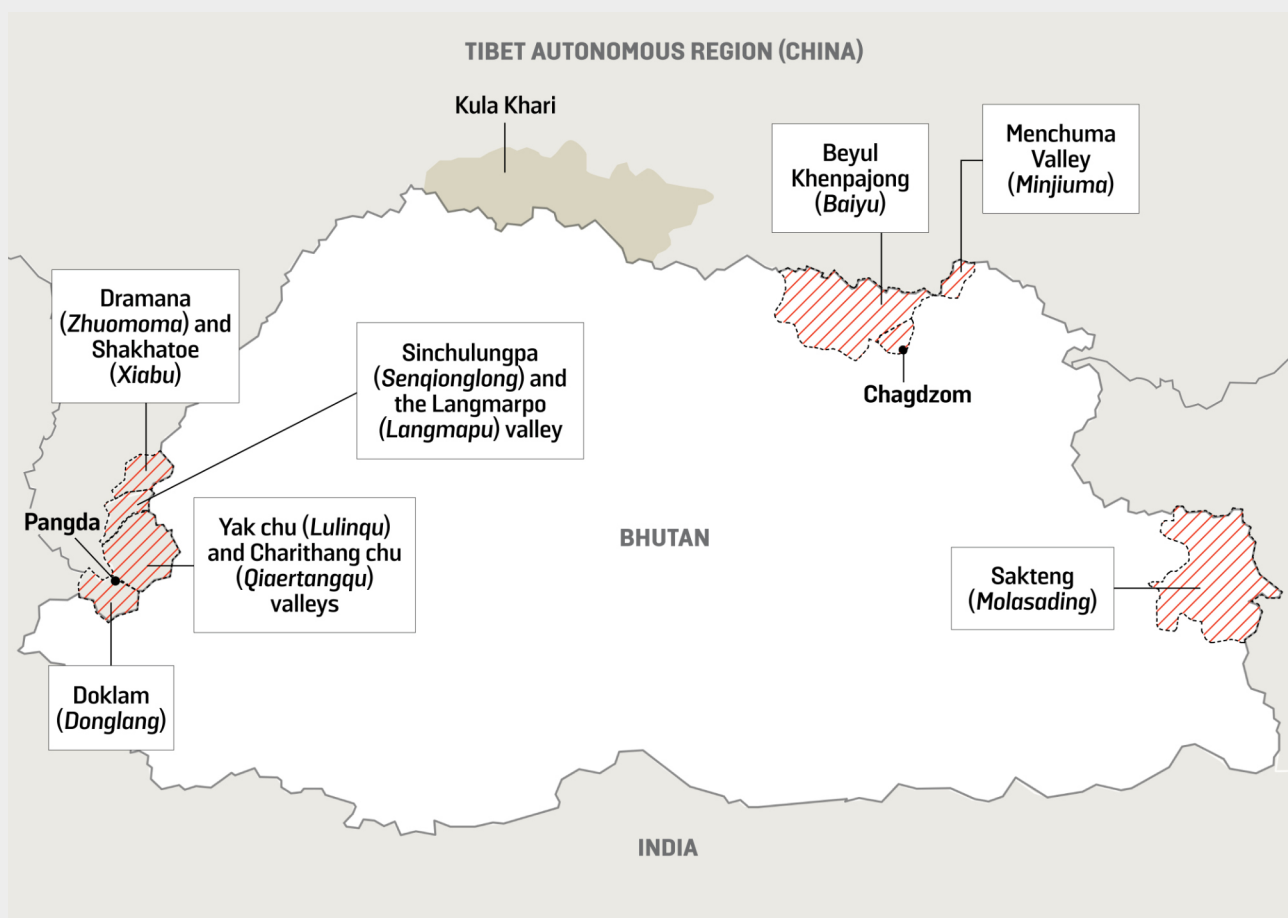
The PLA's counterinsurgency operations in Tibet following the 1959 uprising were the immediate precursor to the 1962 war. Findings by the late Chinese historian Jianglin Li demonstrated that Mao used bomber planes gifted to him by Stalin to bomb Tibetan monasteries in the period

1956-62, and gained experience in suppressing uprisings in Qinghai and Gansu in 1958 before suppressing the uprising in Lhasa in 1959. This disproportionate use of force was regarded as an opportunity to train the PLA and Chinese Air Force in high altitude warfare, essential in order to build up battle-ready military forces on the Tibetan plateau in advance of 1962. According to a classified Chinese military document unearthed by Jianglin Li, more than 456,000 Tibetans were "annihilated" from 1956 to 1962.¹⁷⁸

2.7 CHINA'S STRATEGIC THREAT TO INDIA IN BHUTAN

"A strategy that is more provocative than anything China has done on its land borders in the past. The settlement of an entire area within another country goes far beyond the forward patrolling and occasional road-building that led to war with India in 1962, military clashes in 1967 and 1987, and the deaths of 24 Chinese and Indian soldiers in 2020. In addition, it openly violates the terms of China's founding treaty with Bhutan. It also ignores decades of protests to Beijing by the Bhutanese about far smaller infractions elsewhere on the borders. By mirroring in the Himalayas the provocative tactics it has used in the South China Sea, Beijing is risking its relations with its neighbours, whose needs and interests it has always claimed to respect, and jeopardizing its reputation worldwide."

Robert Barnett, a Tibet expert at SOAS in London ¹⁷⁹



Shaded areas from left: Western sector (Haa dzongkhag/Yadong county); Kula Khari (Gasa dzongkhag), ceded by Bhutan to China in the 1980s; Beyul and Menchuma (Lhuentse dzong/Lhodrag county) in the north-eastern sector; Sakteng (Trashigang and Samdrub Jongkhar dzongkhags) in the eastern sector. Source: Foreign Policy/Robert Barnett 2021

China has constructed new settlements, roads and military facilities in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, a threat to Bhutan's historic ally and neighbour, India. To construct these villages, China has annexed approximately 825 sq kms of land that was formerly within Bhutan, constituting just over 2% of Bhutan's territory, according to Robert Barnett and his research team, who were the first to identify the developments.¹⁸⁰ Bhutan is strategically important to both China and India, and the new developments appear to be part of Beijing's pressure tactics to make Bhutan give up a strategic area in the West of the country in the context of a longstanding border dispute.

Satellite images from neighbouring Bhutan published in December 2023 showed a new Chinese settlement in the Jakarlung Valley under construction and an extensive road network built by the Chinese in the area.¹⁸¹ China has constructed a network of roads, buildings, and military outposts deep in a sacred valley in Bhutan since 2015, giving the Chinese de facto control over the Menchuma Valley, with Bhutanese herders and Royal Bhutanese Army patrols apparently denied access. China's People's Liberation Army troops are believed to be stationed in or near the settlements in both areas, and Tibetans are being pressured to move there.¹⁸² This new Chinese settlement, which had gone unnoticed for years, came about even though the 'hidden valley' (Beyul) Khenpajong is an area of great significance for the Bhutanese, both historically and for religious reasons. The royal family traces its ancestral heritage to the mountainous region.

In April 2020 the then Communist Party

boss of the TAR Wu Yingjie visited a new border settlement, (Gyalaphung in Tibetan, Jieliobu in Chinese) to mark China's success "in planting settlers, security personnel, and military infrastructure within territory internationally and historically understood to be Bhutanese."¹⁸³ More Chinese settlers are being encouraged to move to the new villages, and images reveal residential and official buildings with prominent images of Xi Jinping.

Beijing's expansion into northern Bhutan, which began three decades ago, exposes a major geographic vulnerability for India, a key land corridor known as the 'Chicken Neck'. Barnett believes that this is part of China's pressure tactics to make Bhutan give up a strategic area in the west of the country known as the Doklam plateau. In 2017 India and China clashed as China sought to extend a road into the remote territory bordering Tibet. "It is possible too that China has decided it has military advantage in holding this area not only a pressure tactic to get India to give up Doklam, but also as an opportunity for China to set up military listening posts south of the Himalayas which will give it an advantage over India," Barnett said.¹⁸⁴

It is now possible that the land grab in the Jakarlung and neighbouring Menchuma valleys may become permanent Chinese territory with a new border deal between the two countries. In October, Tandi Dorji became the first Bhutanese foreign minister to travel to Beijing where he met Chinese Vice President Han Zheng, who described the long-running border talks as an 'historic opportunity'.

A visit in April 2024 to Thimphu by the exiled head of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism, Sakya Trinzin, resurrected traditional ties to Bhutan's roots, even while "modern Bhutanese nationalism requires it to be a distance from Tibet", according to scholar and historian Tsering Shakya.¹⁸⁵ This followed a visit by India's PM Modi on 21-22 March (2024).¹⁸⁶ Historian Claude Arpi observed: "The visit [by Sakya Trinzin] has political [as well as cultural and religious] significance, at a time when the 'northern neighbour' repeatedly intrudes into Bhutanese territory to bully Thimphu; the

visit of the Indian Prime Minister Modi in April was probably linked to this, particularly the fact that Beijing is trying to force a border agreement on Bhutan."¹⁸⁷

A deal between Thimphu and Beijing would have serious implications for India. Delhi-based thinktank the Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives said: "This would offset India's influence in Bhutan, an aim that China has largely achieved in Nepal."¹⁸⁸

2.8 THE PRO CCP SHUGDEN GROUP AND INDIA

"Dolgyal is very sectarian. He wants to cause disharmony between the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug. To not make a connection with the other traditions, to not take teachings from them, is very sectarian; it brings great disharmony. [...] Buddhism is very logical, very perfect, and examination of it leads to a deep, clear understanding of the teachings. We are not asked to accept something on blind faith. We are never told we are not allowed to ask questions but must just accept what we hear. This is how it can become when somebody doesn't have an answer. [...] If we are allowed to check what has been revealed by the guru, then why not with Dolgyal? [...] Dolgyal is clearly so harmful to the world, to Buddhism, to the success of Tibet, to His Holiness's wishes and, particularly, to Lama Tsonkhapa's teaching."

-Lama Zopa Rinpoche (1945-2023)¹⁸⁹

China has been using Shugden loyalists in their expansion of influence efforts in India, seeking to cultivate individuals in Gelugpa monasteries who may in future be called upon to endorse a Chinese candidate for the Dalai Lama. The sect is not believed to be active in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh or in Ladakh. In Ladakh, for example, one of

the highest religious authorities in the area Rizong Rinpoche, who became Ganden Tripa, was a strict proponent of giving up Shugden worship.

Indian sources who follow the issue closely report that China is supporting Shugden groups who are in tactical retreat "and quietly working on building traditional

sympathies with mainstream Gelug khenpos and senior lamas along regional lines both within Tibet and in exile.” It is believed that those regional alliances have the objective of restoring Shugden and propitiating its lineages in a post Dalai Lama scenario, enabling involvement in installing an imposter candidate.

While pro-Shugden elements may be less active in India at the moment, there may be some re-invigoration of their efforts in Nepal. A temple in the development around Lumbini where the Buddha was born is exclusively dedicated to Shugden worship, the Gaden International European-Austrian temple, built by the Rabten Foundation. According to sources in Nepal, another is planned at Lumbini. Dechen Tulku, a prominent Shugden supporter who has been photographed by state media with the Chinese Panchen Lama, is pressing for the establishment of a ‘Shugden university’ in Nepal.¹⁹⁰

The Chinese authorities would deny permission for any lama or group loyal to the Dalai Lama or the CTA to visit the sacred Lhamo Lhatso lake in Tibet for traditional divination regarding a new incarnation. But it is not inconceivable that they could allow a team led by lamas affiliated to the Shugden group aided by other lineage holders from Tibet or from exile, and to grant recognition to the process. According to one academic analysis, the majority of Tibetan monks being given permission to travel to India to study are Shugden devotees.¹⁹¹

Indian analysts note the possibility, even likelihood, of a Chinese candidate Dalai Lama emerging from the ranks of Shugden

followers. They also point to the danger of some exile based senior lineage holders remaining neutral, which would be helpful to the Chinese authorities.

Further evidence of the CCP’s strategies to use Shugden outside China, notably in India and Nepal, was provided by Lama Tseta, who had a leading role in the network before he turned whistleblower. Lama Tseta, former President of a Shugden Society in India, said in a video transcript released in 2015 and an interview with Reuters that China had paid him and others to plan and coordinate activities by the sect’s followers overseas.¹⁹²

A senior Indian Interior Ministry official told Reuters for its 2015 investigation¹⁹³ that Indian authorities are aware that the Shugden sect receives funds from China. “We also keep a close watch on them because they get funding from China via Nepal,” said the official, who supervises the activities of India’s internal security agency, the Intelligence Bureau, and spoke on condition of anonymity. Lama Tseta, who says he received death threats after he went public with his story,¹⁹⁴ named a network of Chinese contacts in place since 1997 with the Shugden group in India. This included officials from the UFWD and Chinese intelligence personnel based in Lhasa. Lama Tseta gave testimony on the direct involvement of Shugden community leaders in the triple murder at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in 1997, saying that the Dalai Lama was a target of the group.

In July 1996, the 70-year old principal of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics monk Lobsang Gyatso, who was a fierce critic of those who propitiated Shugden against the

Dalai Lama's advice, had received a warning letter. Stamped with the seal of the Dorje Shugden Charitable and Religious Society, a group based at Majnu Ka Tilla in Delhi, the letter read: "It is known to all that the Shugden Society is in Delhi. We came to Dharamsala three times. In which nunnery were you hiding then? [...] Instead of writing warped compositions, you should come down to Delhi with courage and meet us as the louse meets the thumbnails. However, if your guilty conscience does not afford you the courage to come down, give us a date and we will come to you. [...]"¹⁹⁵ In the early evening of 4 February 1997, Lobsang Gyatso and his two students, also monks, Lobsang Ngawang, 25, and Ngawang Lato, 23, were knifed to death in a frenzied attack close to the Dalai Lama's home and temple in Dharamsala.¹⁹⁶

In the investigation that followed, Indian police discovered that some of the suspects were recent arrivals from China,¹⁹⁷ and calls they had made before the attack were traced by to the Delhi office of the Shugden Society. Two of the alleged perpetrators, Lobsang Chodak and Tenzin Chozin, had arrived in India some years before, and both were from Chatring (Chinese: Xiangcheng) in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province (the Tibetan area of Kham), where Chodak was apparently known for his violence against those who opposed the worship of Dorje Shugden.¹⁹⁸

Former Tibetan Minister and civil servant Tashi Wangdi became a target of the Shugden group in India in the late 1990s when he gave a speech reiterating the Dalai Lama's advice about Dorje Shugden. He received anonymous threats by individuals

who knew his movements in detail, and at one point was followed on a night bus to Dehra Dun by one of the men he later recognised in a photograph to have been involved in the killing of Geshe Lobsang Gyatso and his two monk attendants. With associates, the same individual was involved in a knife attack on Kasur Kundeling Woesser Gyaltsen, who had also been critical of Shugden worship, on 3 July 1996, according to Tashi Wangdi.¹⁹⁹

As a result, the government of India and the Himachal Pradesh state authorities upgraded security arrangements around the Dalai Lama to the highest level, known as the Z category. Some Tibetan ministers in the exile government were also given 24-hour armed guard protection and a police escort when they travelled by road.²⁰⁰

After this period, the Z category was dropped and was granted again in February this year following a recent threat analysis report by the Intelligence Bureau, according to Indian media. Previously managed by the Himachal Pradesh Police alongside other agencies, the Tibetan religious leader's security will now be overseen by the armed Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), providing a more coordinated and enhanced protection system in response to updated intelligence and potential risks. "With the Dalai Lama's prominence and the ongoing geopolitical tensions surrounding Tibet, the enhancement of his security underscores the Indian government's commitment to safeguarding the spiritual leader," stated India's official DD News.²⁰¹

All of those alleged to be involved in the triple killing of Losang Gyatso, Lobsang

Ngawang and Ngawang Latto escaped, and are believed to be in the PRC.²⁰² In June 2007, The Times newspaper reported that at the behest of India, Interpol had issued the Chinese authorities with a 'Red Notice', a document which notifies member nations that an individual or individuals are wanted in another country, asking that Chodak and Chozin be detained. Beijing did not respond, and more than two decades on, no one is known to have faced charges for the murders.

In Bangladesh, China has made efforts to foster cultural collaborations involving followers of Shugden. The Shugden faction of the Gelugpa sect, senior members of Buddhist Association of China and China's State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) have made several visits to Bangladesh and met with senior clergy,

while senior monks are also invited to visit China. According to Indian analysts, the efforts to link with Bangladesh is aimed at providing credence to Shugden elements who claim to be upholders of the Gelugpa tradition by linking them with the origins of Atisha, who was born in Bangladesh and is credited with the second coming of Buddhism in Tibet, as the main source of Gelug discourse.

China has provided financial help and expertise for conservation of Buddhist heritage sites in Comilla adjoining Tripura, with a joint China-Bangladesh excavation unearthing the Vikarpur Ruins - the first time China has collaborated with a country in the sub continent on an archaeological excavation.²⁰³

2.9 THE KARMAPA, CHINA AND INDIA

China's tactics in controlling religious figures is also an indication of China's failure to secure the allegiance of some senior reincarnate lamas in Tibet in recent years. The 17th Karmapa, who was being groomed by the Chinese as a 'patriotic' figurehead, escaped from Tibet in 1999, and is now living in exile. He was based at a monastery in India near the Dalai Lama, where he faced significant restrictions and as a result is now at an undisclosed location in the West.

There has been some acknowledgement from Delhi that the government of India mishandled the issue, and steps taken to address what caused him to leave India, with most restrictions lifted, according to

Indian officials. After a moving meeting with the Dalai Lama in August 2024, the first time the two religious leaders had met in seven years, the Karmapa urged Tibetans to focus on the greater good of Tibet, regardless of regional affiliations, religious denominations, or differing viewpoints. "We must remain vigilant not to mistake gold for copper or to devalue sandalwood as if it were common ash," he said following the meeting in Zurich. "Most importantly, we must remember that we are blessed with a lama who is like a wish-fulfilling jewel. I urge everyone to work with unwavering determination for the preservation of the Dharma and the welfare of the Tibetan people."²⁰⁴

On 28 December 1999, 14 year old Ogyen Trinley Dorje, who had been recognised by the Dalai Lama and accepted by the Chinese Communist Party as the 17th Karmapa, escaped from his monastery in Tibet in the middle of the night. He had told monastery management that he was not to be disturbed as he was on retreat. Wearing a baseball cap and trousers, he jumped into a waiting SUV where with trusted aides he made an escape, evading army and police, via Mustang on the Nepal-Tibet border, helicopter airlift to Kathmandu, and finally entering India through the Raxaul border to arrive in Dharamsala on 5 January 2000.

Despite the pressures from the Chinese authorities for the Karmapa to serve the CCP by undermining the Dalai Lama, even as a young teenager in the PRC he had managed to avoid denouncing the Dalai Lama.

China was humiliated by his escape, and did not openly condemn the Karmapa after his departure, saying that he had merely left to collect the Karmapa's ritual 'black hat' (which is at Rumtek in Sikkim).²⁰⁵ They launched an investigation at the Karmapa's monastery in Tsurphu, and erected a 22 kilometer long barbed wire fence at the 4600 metre high border between Tibet and Mustang, ending cross border and nomadic trade.

The young Karmapa, leader of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, was given a home at the Gyuto Tantric (Gelugpa) monastery in Sidhpur, a short journey from McLeod Ganj where the Dalai Lama is based. He became an accomplished scholar, artist, teacher and important figure for younger generation

Tibetans at his regular audiences while in Dharamsala. It was widely believed that the Karmapa could eventually succeed the Dalai Lama as a central figurehead of Tibetan Buddhism and by extension Tibetan communities around the world, but circumstances did not provide an environment in which he could flourish. He acknowledged this openly in a statement posted on his YouTube channel in 2018, in which he spoke about his childhood in Tibet, lack of access to religious teachers and limited freedoms in India, and how he "did not have any basis to say I'm the reincarnation of any great lama [...] and no matter how much effort I make, it [...] never reaches a level where it's sufficient."²⁰⁶

The Karmapa faced restrictions on his movement, travel, and access to his teachers in India. He was not allowed to visit the Karmapa's seat in exile, Rumtek monastery in Sikkim. Suspicion had spread after unfounded allegations that the Karmapa was a Chinese spy were circulated by Indian intelligence, and controversy was created around a rival 'claimant', a Tibetan called Trinley Thaye Dorje.²⁰⁷

Traditionally the successive reincarnations of Shamar Rinpoche, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, Tai Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche have played an important role in confirming the identity of the Karmapas. In 1992, after Ogyen Trinley Dorje was located and recognised, the search committee requested that the Dalai Lama bestow his endorsement, which he did. But some afterwards a split began to form in the Karma Kagyu leadership. Tai Situ Rinpoche recognized Ogyen Trinley Dorje as the 17th Karmapa, supported by the Dalai Lama, while Shamar Rinpoche chose Trinley Thaye



The 17th Karmapa Ogyen Thrinley Dorje met the Dalai Lama again in Zurich on 25 August 2024, when the Dalai Lama was on his way back to India from medical treatment in the U.S. In his statement about the meeting, the Karmapa said: "Recently, when I had the good fortune to once again see His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Zurich, Switzerland, and hear his nectar-like voice, I felt a mixture of joy and sadness. It was different than when I usually see him in videos or the like. Seeing his face in person, he seemed to have aged significantly, and even hearing him speak, his voice has grown weak. It was so different from how he used to be that I could hardly bear it. His Holiness has used all the strength of his body, speech, and mind for our sake, and when I saw him so physically frail, it was as if the feelings of sorrow and gratitude that filled me were competing with each other. Given his physical condition and seeming exhaustion, I did not say much but expressed how there is nothing greater that he could do for Buddhism and sentient beings than to live long. I wrote down the other matters I wished to share with him and offered them to him. He spent ten minutes reading them carefully and then spoke about the predictions that he would live to the age of 110, about how his main wish was to go on pilgrimage to Wutai Shan in China, and the importance of preserving, protecting, and spreading the complete teachings of the Foundation vehicle, Mahayana, and tantra, which are like a unique jewel found only in Tibet." Image posted on the Karmapa's official website and social media.

Dorje. (Tai Situ Rinpoche, who is based at Sherabling monastery in Himachal Pradesh, also came under the suspicion of the Indian government. But his presence beside the Dalai Lama at the Global Buddhist Summit in Delhi in April 2023, also attended by PM Modi, appeared to signal that this was no longer the case. Tai Situ Rinpoche has also travelled to Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh).

In 2011, the Karmapa's residence at Gyuto monastery was raided by Himachal Pradesh police, foreign currency (given as offerings) was seized and one of the Karmapa's monk attendants was beaten in custody.²⁰⁸

The biggest winner in the controversy, according to a prominent Indian journalist Shishir Gupta, was Trinley Thaye Dorje and his backers, said to be propped up by a section of the Indian internal security establishment.²⁰⁹ It was not until 24 April 2012 that the Himachal Pradesh police dropped all criminal charges, and the case is now closed.

As a result of these pressures, when the Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje was allowed to travel,²¹⁰ he stayed for lengthy periods giving teachings in the U.S.²¹¹ and Europe, and in 2018 he acquired a passport from the Commonwealth of Dominica, a Caribbean island, given his absence of status in India. He has now been away from India since 2017. (He is not the only Tibetan to have looked elsewhere for citizenship in terms of ease of travel. A number of high-ranking Tibetan monks and CTA officials travel on documents such as foreign passports other than the identity card issued by the Indian government.)

In 2024 the controversy over the Indian

accusations and their outcome spilled over into the Sikkim elections, when Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang accused the former Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) government for branding the Karmapa a Chinese agent, citing his own party's support for the Karmapa by including his name in their manifesto. In his re-election campaign, Chief Minister Tamang pledged to seek the return of the 17th Karmapa to his exile seat at Rumtek monastery, Sikkim.²¹²

India is believed to have made efforts to woo the Karmapa back,²¹³ but their previous treatment of him raises the possibility that in the current heightened political environment China will make further overtures to him to return home to Tibet.

In 2018, Ogyen Trinley Dorje and Trinley Thaye Dorje met for the first time and issued a statement to encourage their spiritual communities to heal the division and join in efforts to help preserve the Karma Kagyu tradition. They wrote: "We therefore ask everyone within the Karma Kagyu community to join us in our efforts to strengthen and preserve our lineage. We view it as our collective responsibility to restore harmony to our tradition which is a lineage of wisdom and compassion."²¹⁴

A year before, Trinley Thaye Dorje had announced his intention to disrobe and marry a childhood friend.²¹⁵

In 2020, Ogyen Trinley Dorje and Trinley Thaye Dorje jointly announced they would work together to find the next incarnation of the Shamar Rinpoche, followed by a statement made on 4 December 2023 that they would recognize the 15th Shamar Rinpoche together, as well as oversee his

education, empowerments and instructions.²¹⁶ The statement also asked students of the Karma Kagyu to regret their past actions, and resolve to never split into factions again.

In exile now from India as well as Tibet, the Karmapa continues to be active giving online teachings. It is not known whether he will attend the gathering of religious leaders in India in July to discuss the future of the Dalai Lama institution; he was a notable absentee from a gathering of Tibetan religious leaders from different Buddhist schools in India in 2019 to discuss the Dalai Lama's reincarnation.

Of the high-ranking religious leaders of his generation, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, is the only one to have been born in Tibet, to have been enthroned there and lived there for the first 15 years of his life, so his words have a particular weight. In a statement to the 2019 gathering in absentia, he cautioned against "vehemently rejecting" China's policies on reincarnation without presenting alternatives, saying: "It is important for us to analyze China's policy on the reincarnation and its repercussions, and our response cannot be limited to vehemently rejecting it. If we can firmly propose a credible approach and method, I think that will impress others and give ourselves some peace of mind."²¹⁷

The statement also warned about the dangers of more than one incarnation of a lama, which he says "leads to an unmanageable profusion of controversies between them". "As His Holiness the Dalai Lama is like the heart and soul of all Tibetans, it is of supreme importance, whether for this or future lives, for us

collectively or as individuals, that the recognition of his reincarnation be beyond the slightest doubt," the Karmapa writes. "As there might be those, both inside and out, who lack the slightest concern for the morale of their people, for the lama or the teachings, and are determined to seek their own interests even in the matter of recognising a reincarnation, it is imperative that His Holiness give clear guidance while he is still with us, like the proverb of building a dam before the floodwaters rise, all Tibetans with devotion for our religion must beseech him to do so in his great wisdom."

The Karmapa urged a process of clarity and transparency, avoiding 'secret' transmissions that could be questioned later: "While there are many ways of recognising a reincarnation, the most reliable is having clear recollection of the previous life and fulfilling the prophecies of the predecessor. If a reincarnation were recognised according to a pure declaration of foresight by His Holiness, I think this would render the use of other methods, like dough balls and golden urns, unnecessary, and command universal credence.

"Historically, some great masters followed the practice of entrusting sealed instructions for the recognition of their reincarnation to a qualified disciple, but since the recognition of the Dalai Lama is such a heavy and complex responsibility, this would be too difficult for any individual, no matter how learned or capable, to bear. Secretly transmitted instructions are open to unfounded doubts and suspicions being raised, and since some general comments have been made public, especially media

reports that the Dalai Lama has said he will not be reincarnated, that he will be reborn [only] in a free country, that he might be reborn as a woman and so on, I think if there is no definitive statement, we will be in an impossible position, and unscrupulous people will use these to make all kinds of mischief.”

The Karmapa recommended setting up a working group to ensure coordination and cooperation, saying: “While the main responsibility for conducting the recognition process of course lies with the Ganden Potrang Labrang, but as His Holiness the Dalai Lama is not just the lama of a single Labrang, a single religious school or a single country, but the supreme head of Tibetan Buddhism and the spiritual leader of the entire Tibetan people, the support and cooperation of the leading lamas of the great Tibetan religious schools, including Yungdrung Bon, and the Tibetan peoples representatives in the CTA, is indispensable, and without clear statements from them of support and involvement in the process of finding his reincarnation, there is bound to be trouble. In this regard, matters such as the need to constitute a special working group for the purpose of identifying a reincarnation and so on should be examined with the insight of unconditioned wisdom.”

Finally, he makes an appeal for teachers of a future reincarnation to be identified now and to receive necessary instruction by the Dalai Lama, to avoid possible problems during a long interregnum: “In essence, these are fast-changing times, possible eventualities cannot be foreseen, and even if an indubitable reincarnation appears, many exceptional individuals great in

understanding, great in insight, great in impartiality and great in learning will be needed to serve him. His tutors, qualified Geshe from the Three Great Seats and so on, should ideally be groomed by the present Dalai Lama now, and just as the 14th Dalai Lama serves as the patron of all Tibetan religious traditions without distinction, if his reincarnation likewise follows the practice of taking teachings, transmissions and empowerments from qualified masters of all Tibetan religious traditions it will surely give succour to the teachings and living beings.”

3. NEPAL: THE GIFT OF A UNICORN RHINO AND BIRTHPLACE OF THE BUDDHA

Overview

Nepal has a long history of political, economic and religious relations with the Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism is central to the Nepalese cultural landscape.

But the Nepalese government has made a decisive pivot to China over the last two decades. Since the mid-90s, Kathmandu has de-legitimized the status of a dwindling Tibetan population and under the previous King, closed down the office of the Dalai Lama's representative. China has also largely succeeded in closing down the gateway into exile via Nepal from 2008 onwards. However while this may have served more narrow political interests of the government in power, the country's interests are not always aligned with Beijing's.

A joint communiqué by Nepal and China made in Beijing on 23 September 2023 stated: "The Nepali side reiterated that Tibet affairs are China's internal affairs, that

it will never allow any separatist activities against China on Nepal's soil." The implications of this official position are complex. While China has successfully managed to project and superimpose its representations of Tibetans as a threat to Beijing's sovereignty and territorial claims beyond PRC borders on the Nepalese government and civil society, what constitutes 'anti China' or 'separatist' activities remains opaque. This allows Nepal some space for manoeuvre.

Nevertheless China's expansive engagement in every sphere of Nepalese politics, cultural life and civil society has rendered the Tibetan population increasingly vulnerable. Beijing has expanded the scope and reach of its securitization policies to Nepalese police who are often trained by Chinese People's Armed Police, which has neutralized Tibetans' peaceful protests against Chinese oppression in Nepal. China's influence is

reflected in ways that may be less immediately noticeable such as the absence of Tibetan flags or other indicators of separate Tibetan identity in culturally significant locations such as Boudhanath stupa in central Kathmandu. A few days before Xi Jinping arrived in Kathmandu in 2019, a 14-year old Nepalese schoolgirl was detained for two days for wearing a tee shirt with the slogan 'Free Tibet'.

Tibetans in border areas of Nepal also come under pressure, saying that they are urged not to display images of the Dalai Lama by Chinese security forces.

China's influence efforts are compounded by the internal and historic struggles of ethnicities of Tibetan Buddhist origin against state sponsored discriminatory policies and practices on the basis of religion. Powerful Hindu rulers subsumed Buddhism as a form of the dominant Hinduism rather than allowing it a separate identity, and many ethnicities in Nepal eventually adopted this religion and were integrated into the caste system in order to access social and economic resources.

Although the Tibetan community in Nepal (which has shrunk to around 9,000) is demoralized and disadvantaged, Tibetan religious leaders with a strong international profile now have a powerful presence and are attracting people from all over the world to their monasteries in the Kathmandu valley. They are also highly engaged in interactions between Dharamsala and Himalayan Buddhists, while many Chinese Buddhists come to Nepal to experience authentic, as opposed to Sinicized, religious teachings.

China seeks to insert itself into the revival of cultural heritage, for instance at the Buddha's birthplace Lumbini and Buddhism as an integral part of BRI, laying the groundwork for asserting its legitimacy over the next Dalai Lama with neighbouring countries such as Nepal. Although India has not signed up to BRI, Nepal has done so (although it says it has not yet implemented projects under the BRI). Nepal has also taken a step further in endorsing the 'One China position' that not only recognizes PRC sovereignty over Tibet but also does not support Taiwanese independence.

Given Nepal's concessions to China so far (although it refused a visa to China's official Panchen Lama to visit Lumbini in May 2022), there is a high risk that the Kathmandu government would not only endorse a China backed candidate as Dalai Lama in future, but might also reject Dharamsala's authority over the process. Buddhists, who have traditionally been marginalised in Nepal, are concerned that while being the birthplace of the Buddha should be a matter of national pride, instead little serious effort has been made to preserve or promote it.

Aware of the close ties with Tibet, and Nepal's international standing as a global Buddhist centre and the sacred location of the Buddha's birthplace, there is concern among some Nepalese intellectuals and journalists about the compromises involved in accommodating China. They privately raise concern about dangers to their physical safety if they criticise China or support Tibet. "We lost the whole asset of the Tibetan community, and they lost the ability to negotiate," said one Nepalese scholar from a prominent thinktank.²¹⁸

3.1 CHINA, NEPAL AND THE BRI

When Nepalese Maoist leader Prachanda visited Beijing in September 2023, he pledged to gift two one-horned rhinos (*rhinoceros unicornus*) to China to mark a “long-lasting friendship” between the two countries.²¹⁹ It was an unfortunate metaphor. Conservationists despair at the separation of a rare new-born rhino calf

from its mother, and one of the rhinos is a replacement for an earlier new-born calf separated from its mother in the jungle and flown to China, where it died in 2018.²²⁰

China seeks Nepal’s unstinting support for its security strategies, development partnership, and implementation of BRI.



The Nepalese government has made a decisive pivot to China over the last two decades. Since the mid-90s, Kathmandu has de-legitimized the status of a dwindling Tibetan population and under the previous King, closed down the office of the Dalai Lama’s representative. Nepalese police also shut down a wave of protests that occurred after China’s crackdown on Tibet from 2008 onwards. A police presence like this one at a protest at Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu became routine. Image shared by a Tibetan photographer.

It has announced that it will build a Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network with Nepal, involving railways and communications links, as part of the BRI. Nonetheless there are signs that China may have overplayed its hand in Nepal and is facing Nepalese concern and disillusionment over a growing trade deficit and the debt trap situation witnessed in countries such as Sri Lanka with the financing of BRI projects.²²¹

A five-day visit by Tibet's top leader Wang Junzheng to Kathmandu in November 2023 reflected China's objectives of accelerating BRI implementation in Nepal and making progress on infrastructure and development projects, following Xi Jinping's 2019 visit. In his meetings with President Ramchandra Paudel and Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), Wang Junzheng emphasised that Xi's "historic" visit had "elevated" the bilateral relationship to a 'Strategic Partnership of Cooperation'.²²² Even so, no agreements for implementation have been signed under BRI, seven years after Nepal signed a memorandum of understanding on Xi Jinping's flagship global project on 12 May 2017. And the Nepalese government says that not one project under BRI has been executed in Nepal.²²³

A joint statement released after Prachanda's visit to Beijing in September expressed both governments "commitment to accelerate the consultations to finalize the text on the BRI Implementation Plan at an early date". President Trump's funding freeze on U.S. support overseas from February 2025 strengthens China's hand further in the region. The American multi-million dollar grant awarding fund the

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) played an important role funding Nepalese infrastructure, balancing China's investment (it renewed funding of \$50 million on 3 January 2025.)²²⁴ But a few weeks later, it became clear that the funding freeze imperils U.S. presence in Nepal, heightening the vulnerability of Tibetans and other communities across the Himalayas.²²⁵

Wang Junzheng has emphasised trans-Himalayan cooperation, referring in particular to an intended new air route between Sichuan's provincial capital Chengdu and Nepal's second city Pokhara. Pokhara is a key destination on the tourist circuit, known as the gateway to the popular Anapurna Himalayan circuit, and is home to a large community of Tibetans. It has long been Nepal – and China's – ambition to develop this new tourist route to open up the lake city to Chinese and international tourists. But the construction of Pokhara International Airport has highlighted the dangers of countries falling into debt traps by adopting China's imposed infrastructure model. It has also led to diplomatic fallout with India, and challenged the US position in the region.²²⁶

Contrary to China's claims, the Nepalese government has said that the new Pokhara International Airport is not a flagship project of the BRI. Ambassador to Nepal Chen Song posted on his X/Twitter account on 21 June 2023 that the new Chengdu-Pokhara route "marks a new achievement for the trans-Himalayan multi-dimensional connectivity network between China and Nepal, which is a priority cooperation field between China and Nepal under the BRI initiative."²²⁷

In response, Ambassador Vijay Kant Karma, who formerly served as Nepal's Ambassador to Denmark and is one of Nepal's most prominent critics of China's influence and engagement operations in Nepal, posted: "Surprised to see your statement on Pokhara Airport. Please renegotiate with Nepal govt if you wanted to put loan agreement of Pokhara Airport. Don't declare unilaterally. Nepal and China yet not signed BRI project framework agreement." ²²⁸

Pokhara airport was built to a Chinese design, with construction company China CAMC Engineering, an arm of a state-owned conglomerate, importing building materials and earth-moving machinery from China. Security and industrial technology made in China equip the airport, with China's Ambassador to Nepal Chen Song saying it "embodied the quality of Chinese engineering."

But an investigation by the New York Times found that China CAMC Engineering had



The Boudhanath area of Kathmandu is heavily surveilled with cameras overlooking Tibetan Buddhists circumambulating the famous stupa. Image shared by a Tibetan photographer

repeatedly dictated business terms to maximize profits and protect its interests, while dismantling Nepali oversight of its work. The New York Times reported: “This has left Nepal on the hook for an international airport, at a significantly inflated price, without the necessary passengers to repay loans to its Chinese lender.” The New York Times investigation also revealed that Zhu Zhanfeng, the contractor’s project site manager, had struck and killed a Nepalese citizen in a car crash while drunk and bought off his family, offering them a payment and a coffee shop at the airport. Zhu’s lawyers later accused the person who had been killed of “hitting the car” himself.²²⁹

Nepalese thinktank the Centre for Social Inclusion and Federalism also points to the purchase of Chinese aeroplanes, that “appears to have been motivated by the need to appease the Chinese and not by Nepal Airline Corporation’s business plan. The operating cost of Chinese aeroplanes is causing the NAC to lose millions every year.”²³⁰

The airport’s association with China has

caused fallout with India, which has not signed up to BRI. So far, no Indian airlines plan to serve Pokhara. Buddha Air, Nepal’s biggest airline, has yet to grant requests for a twice-weekly flight from Pokhara to Varanasi, a city in northern India, before adding flights to Dehradun and Delhi, but the Indian government has yet to grant those requests.

When Modi visited the Buddha’s birthplace in Lumbini in May 2023, he did not travel by air to Pokhara, but instead travelled by helicopter from the sacred Buddhist site Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh.

The Pokhara airport is not the only one of China’s interventions in Nepal to create concern. As well as border encroachments (details and background are summarised later in this section), Chinese nationals in Nepal have been involved in wildlife and gold smuggling, human trafficking, online fraud and ATM hacking. There have also been prominent cases of Chinese citizens arrested for espionage in Nepalese territory.

3.2 BUDDHISM IN NEPAL AND THE SACRED SITE OF LUMBINI

“Although Nepal is the birthplace of Lord Buddha, pride of Nepal and a centre of attention for international Buddhists, no serious effort has been made to preserve or promote it. In Nepal, the Buddha only remains on the nameplates of travel agents, airlines and restaurants.”

- Jamyang Dorjee, ‘State of Buddhism under Hindu Kingdom and the emerging democratic secular government of Nepal’²³¹

“Nepal’s violent but inconclusive revolution brought in a demotic awakening [...] that the pedagogy of the nation state need not submerge the heartfelt identity of Himalayan peoples of Tibetan origin and their loyalty to the lamas and thus to a wider concept of Tibet as the spiritual home. Now, despite a repressive political scene [...] Nepal’s Tibeto-Himalayan peoples are awaking, discovering new space in which they can be both Nepali and Gurung or Sherpa or Tharu; both citizens and Buddhists; inheritors of traditions far older than the Hindu monarchy, going all the way back to the birthplace of the Buddha, which is in Nepal.”

- Gabriel Lafitte, ‘Lumbini reborn, Nepal reborn, Buddha reborn’, posted on 11 December 2011, Rukor ²³²

Buddhism is the dominant religion of the thinly populated mountain areas of Northern Nepal, which are inhabited by Sherpa, Lopa, Manangi, Thakali, Lhomi, Dolpa and Nyimbu, while ethnic groups living in central Nepal such as Gurung, Tamang, Magarm Newar, Yakkha, Thami and Chepang, are also originally followers of Buddhism, who later came under the influence of Hinduism. ²³³ The Kirant tribes, especially the Limbu and the Rai, and the Jirel, have also adopted Tibetan Buddhist practices from their Buddhist neighbours. ²³⁴ Even the Hindu majority follows variants of Hinduism that incorporate many aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly in Nepal’s hill and mountain regions where they often share deities as well as temples. ²³⁵

Nepal’s Sherpa and other communities share with many other Himalayan peoples a devotion to the Dalai Lama and Buddhism. Nepalese people face their own struggles, against significant economic, social and political challenges following a decade-long armed conflict between government forces and Maoist fighters. Nevertheless, when

Tibetans were still able to escape into exile through the treacherous Nangpa Pass, they would often receive indispensable help from Sherpa communities. When they arrived, often exhausted, starving and suffering from frostbite, in mountain villages they would be offered shelter and safety in people’s homes and help with transiting down to Kathmandu. After a massive earthquake shook Nepal in April 2015, the Nepalese Buddhist Federation and other groups coordinated various relief efforts across the community, involving many Himalayan and Tibetan monks and nuns in active rescue and rebuilding work, although there was little or no recognition of their involvement in the Nepalese (or international) media. ²³⁶

The Shah dynasty in the 11th century saw the end of the development of Buddhism as a separate religion. Just as the great monastic university of Nalanda was being ransacked and destroyed, Buddhist institutions were attacked, monks killed and books burnt. As the Hindu Gurkha



A monastic ceremony to commemorate the Tibetan New Year (Losar) in Kathmandu in 2023.

rose to prominence, Buddhism eventually merged with Hinduism.²³⁷

After the unification of Nepal, the government began to 'integrate' and 'Nepalise' many Buddhists in the northern border area and pull them into the Hindu mainstream. One of the reasons for conversion to Hinduism too was to get recruited to the British and Indian army as Gurkhas, where it was compulsory to write that one's religion is Hindu. This later changed – Gurungs in the British army appealed to the British government to allow them to retain their Buddhist faith, and this was agreed. Jamyang Dorjee points to another challenge in the education system. Most civil servants and policy makers are products of a state education that was designed to benefit the higher Hindu caste with Sanskrit as a compulsory subject. Under the same system, monastic education was not recognised by the state.

It is only in recent years that indigenous nationalities and non-Hindus are finding new opportunities to express their Buddhist identity, for instance with the foundation of a Himalayan political party, combined with a revival of Buddhism and a move by many Nepalese to return to their Buddhist roots.

Today, just as Tibetan scholars played a vital role in saving the Nalanda tradition, Tibetan lamas are ensuring the resilience of Buddhism in Nepal. "Fortunately for Nepal, many highly respected and realized Tibetan lamas have made Nepal their base," says Jamyang Dorjee, a Tibetan scholar and calligrapher who has studied the history of Buddhism in Nepal.²³⁸ Many heads of the monasteries are Nepalese of indigenous

origin. They have proved to be the binding force for Buddhists of all schools and hopefully will continue the role for sometime. His Holiness the Dalai Lama is also much respected and the most important binding force. [...] Even the Newari community has deep faith and respect for His Holiness."

Tibetan lamas play an important role in bringing together Himalayan Buddhist communities. In one initiative a few years ago, Choekyi Nyima Rinpoche, who is based in Kathmandu and oversees Tibetan language and study initiatives globally, organised a pilgrimage. He coordinated hundreds of Himalayan Buddhists who travelled in nearly 40 buses to attend a winter teaching by the Dalai Lama in Bodh Gaya. The personal transformations experienced by participants subsequently extended to their families and communities, creating far-reaching positive impacts.

The exodus of Tibetan refugees into Nepal, which started in large numbers after the Dalai Lama escaped in 1959, boosted the ties between Tibetans and Nepalis, and put Nepal on the global map for Buddhist practitioners and enthusiasts. As well as resonating with the many tourists who visit Nepal each year, the establishment of Buddhist monasteries presented an opportunity for many Nepalis to explore the religious and cultural heritage they share with Tibetans.

In late 2011, Himalayan Buddhists gathered for a conference on the Nepali plains at Lumbini, birthplace of the historic Buddha in the fifth century, Siddhartha Gautama. In a first for the multilingual Tibetan Buddhist



A monastic ceremony to mark the Tibetan New Year (Losar) at a Kathmandu monastery. The fire burns away obstacles in a symbolic offering for the year to come.

Nepali communities, the conference featured simultaneous translation in three languages, 17 members of Nepal's parliament, the Constituent assembly attended and the Deputy Prime Minister, Vijay Kumar Gacchadhar, was the chief guest. The conference created a renewed sense of "heartfelt identity" among Himalayan peoples, wrote Tibetologist Gabriel Lafitte in 2011 after a visit to Nepal, "and their loyalty to the lamas and thus to a wider concept of Tibet as the spiritual home. The Himalayan renaissance has provided the brightest young people growing up in the mountains new ways of becoming modern, educated and successful. Instead of becoming traders or tourist guides, they become monks, teachers and community leaders able to connect lowland to highland, development to continuity."²³⁹

China aims to pressure Nepal to create a narrative around the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini that can draw some of the estimated 4 million tourists²⁴⁰ who visit the Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya across the border each year. Their aim is to displace the sacred site in India where the Buddha was enlightened (and where the Dalai Lama taught almost every winter until the COVID pandemic) in the imagination of Buddhists.

China has sought to influence and establish themselves in Lumbini through offering development funding, notably through the quasi-governmental organisation the Asia Pacific Exchange and Cooperation Foundation (APECF) headed by Xiao Wunan.

Xiao Wunan proposed a \$3 billion cash injection to build temples, an airport, a highway, hotels, convention centres and a

Buddhist university to educate and train young monks – an education they intend to be a lever of political influence in a symbolically important area on India's border. Maoist leader Prachanda, former Prime Minister of Nepal, was appointed Vice Chairman.²⁴¹ In 2013, the Buddhist Association of China became involved with the project. Its figurehead vice-president is the Chinese-installed Panchen Lama Gyaltzen Norbu.

The APECF's project did not happen and has been in limbo ever since, although China continues to canvas support for the development of Lumbini, seeking to co-opt Nepalese politicians and involve investment from Chinese multinational corporations.

The Lumbini Buddhist University has forged close ties with China. Together with the Beijing Language and Culture University, the university jointly inaugurated the China Institute of Nepal at the Prime Minister's residence on 30 December 2024.²⁴²

New Delhi has responded by proposing a greater involvement in Lumbini, including a peace centre, and announced intentions to develop the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh, close to the Nepalese border.

When Prime Minister Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Lumbini in Nepal on 16 May 2022,²⁴³ he avoided using the closest airport, built by a Chinese construction company, and instead arrived by helicopter from Kushinagar. As with Pokhara airport, Chinese companies were heavily involved in construction of the Gautam Buddha (Bhairahawa) International Airport. While funded jointly by the

Nepalese government and Asian Development Bank, the airport was constructed by the Northwest Civil Aviation Airport Construction Group of China. A dispute between the Chinese contractor and the Nepali sub-contractor resulted in a long delay in completion.

Modi was accompanied by the Nepalese Prime Minister, Bahadur Deuba, to attend the 2566th Buddha Jayanti (Buddha's birthday) celebrations at the International Convention Centre and Meditation Hall at Lumbini. The visit was carefully calibrated to send a strong signal to the Chinese government as well as to Buddhists across the region.²⁴⁴

Even so, it is likely that the Chinese authorities will press for a future symbolic visit by Gyaltsen Norbu at a time that does not coincide with the visits of any Indian dignitaries, particularly given links cultivated by the Buddhist Association of China in the potential development of Lumbini.

Several prominent Nepalese scholars and Tibetan lamas based in Nepal interviewed for this report expressed their concern over neglect of Lumbini by the Nepalese authorities over the years, and said that it is in Nepal's interests as well as Buddhists to do much more to promote and strengthen its Buddhist heritage. "If you walk around you don't see many traces of Buddhism, including in Lumbini. First of all get the Buddhist community back to Nepal. Nepal should be a mecca for Buddhism," said a Nepalese scholar from a thinktank in Kathmandu. The scholar also advised that the Dalai Lama and India should help to influence the development of Lumbini,

strengthening the primacy of Buddhism in Nepal as a first step.²⁴⁵ "That can not only create a love for Buddhism but also the next step, strengthen the cause of Tibet and Tibetans, before creating a global canvas and welcoming the world to Lumbini."

Of the nearly 170,000 Chinese travellers who visited Nepal in 2019, 21,269 visited Lumbini. "The Chinese are increasingly coming to Nepal to learn yoga and meditation," a Nepalese tour guide observed. "Chinese travellers think Nepal is beautiful and mysterious, and its people are happy."²⁴⁶

"The growth in this sort of religious tourism is consistent with Beijing's push towards a people-to-people approach built on shared heritages," says Nepalese author Amish Raj Mulmi. "Buddhism is but one of the instruments of its soft-power focus, even as Beijing seeks to wean the religion away from the Tibetan variety led by the Dalai Lama."

3.3 'AN UNSPOKEN COLLUSION': NEPAL'S COMPLEX COOPERATION WITH CHINA

Nepal has moved from supporting the 'One China policy' (like most countries worldwide) to endorsing the 'one China principle' in which the Kathmandu government affirms that the PRC is the sole government representing the whole of China. This goes further than most countries worldwide that accept the 'One China policy' – for instance the U.S. does not recognise Taiwan as part of the PRC, but acknowledges that the PRC holds the position that Taiwan is part of the PRC. The Nepalese government also asserts that it does not support Taiwanese independence.²⁴⁷

A joint communiqué by Nepal and China made in Beijing on 23 September 2023 also stated: "The Nepali side reiterated that Tibet affairs are China's internal affairs, that it will never allow any separatist activities against China on Nepal's soil." The implications of this official position are complex. While China has successfully managed to project and superimpose its representations of Tibetans as a threat to Beijing's sovereignty and territorial claims beyond PRC borders on the Nepalese government and civil society, what constitutes 'anti China' or 'separatist' activities remains opaque. This allows Nepal some space for manoeuvre, as its interests are not always aligned with Beijing's.

Nevertheless China's expansive engagement in every sphere of Nepalese politics, cultural life and civil society means that even Nepalese scholars feel

vulnerable. Several interviewed for this report preferred to be anonymous for this reason, with one scholar saying: "There's no doubt that Nepalese in the public domain feel wary, frightened even, of being critical of China. There are layers of fear. When you have a law that says there is only one China, you can't talk about Tibet legally. If I confronted China on a specific issue, raised difficult questions, then I can be taken and no one could protect me. There is an unspoken collusion." The same scholar added: "China doesn't use diplomacy, it uses threats and coercion. In every Ministry, there is infiltration [by Chinese and their proxies.] They also have their presence in the military bureaucracy. China has access everywhere now."

A few days prior to Xi Jinping's arrival in Kathmandu on 12 October 2019, a 14-year-old Nepali schoolgirl wearing a tee shirt with the slogan "Free Tibet" was called in for questioning to the Boudha police station and held for two days in custody in Kathmandu. Deputy Superintendent Ramesh Bahadur Singh of the Boudha Police Station told Nepalese media: "The dress worn by the girl was an indicator of being against the Chinese government during the Chinese president's two-day visit in Nepal."²⁴⁸

The police also arrested and held for 12 hours a 65-year-old woman from a village in Mustang on the day of Xi's arrival because she was carrying a bag with Tibetan lettering. Two Tibetan shopkeepers



Monastery in the Swayambhu area of Kathmandu. Although the Tibetan community is demoralised and disadvantaged, Tibetan religious leaders with a strong international profile now have a powerful presence in Nepal and attract Buddhists from all over the world.

were detained because their merchandise included items with Tibetan flags or logos, which police described as a “threat to security”. Police were stationed outside almost all of the monasteries in the Kathmandu valley for the duration of Xi’s visit.²⁴⁹

With the timing of his visit in October 2019 coinciding with democracy protests in Hong Kong, Xi chose to make a graphic threat while still in Kathmandu that any attempt to split China would result in “crushed bodies and shattered bones.” While this was taken clearly as a reference to Hong Kong protesters, Nepalese analysts noted that his comments demonstrated no anticipation of pushback from his Kathmandu hosts.

A joint statement by Nepal and China issued after Xi’s visit reflects Beijing’s strategic imperative to maintain and enforce border control and to crush any opposition or even criticism of China’s policies in Nepal as well as inside Tibet. China’s engagement on Tibetan issues in Nepal was stepped up in Beijing’s 2008 Olympic year, when exposure to international scrutiny intensified and the Tibetan plateau erupted with demonstrations. Since then, Nepal has become a part of China’s strategic imperative to maintain and enforce political ‘stability’ in Tibet.

China demands that all governments with whom it has relations commit to a ‘one China policy,’ and it sees any assertion by Tibetans of their unique identity as a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In Nepal’s case, China has sought to stipulate the form of this commitment. Since 2008, China-Nepal interaction has been

characterized by Chinese financial or other support given in return for Nepal’s pledge to condemn, prevent or physically quash ‘anti-China’ activities on Nepali soil. But what constitutes ‘anti-China’ activity has never been defined – by either China or Nepal – leaving the term dangerously open to interpretation. So-called ‘Free Tibet’ activities – a phrase employed by both Chinese and Nepali officials to refer to protests, gatherings and events that have an overtly political tone – are assumed to be within the ‘anti-China’ category. But repression of Tibetans in Nepal since 2008 has gone beyond the political to include many aspects of Tibetans’ cultural, religious, social, civil and economic lives.

The Dalai Lama escaped across the Himalayan passes in 1959 to safety in India, and until a few years ago, several thousand Tibetans a year made the same perilous journey into exile on foot, arriving through the gateway of neighbouring Nepal. China has now effectively closed this route into exile – intensified security and surveillance in border areas since the crackdown following protests across Tibet in 2008 led to a dramatic fall in Tibetans making the crossing. According to CTA officials, in 2021, only four Tibetans arrived in Dharamshala with 10 ‘new arrivals’ in 2022 and 15 in 2023.²⁵⁰

Figures cited by Nepalese immigration officials demonstrated a drop from 1,248 Tibetans in 2010 to 85 applications for an exit permit to India (showing transit via Nepal) in 2015. Department of Immigration (DoI) Director General Kedar Neupane acknowledged the stricter controls on both sides of the border, but also revealed how Nepalese officials often appropriate China’s

language when he said this was due to “declining fervour over the Dalai Lama”²⁵¹ which is far from the case. Tibetans are instead locked in, passports are almost impossible to obtain, and the traditional routes out are shut down.

In 2017, hundreds of Tibetan pilgrims were compelled by the Chinese authorities to return to Tibet after travelling to India to attend a major teaching by the Dalai Lama in Bodh Gaya. This followed systematic measures in Tibet to prevent them travelling out of the country at all, even though many had spent years obtaining passports for legal travel.²⁵²

It was the most systematic crackdown so far linked to a Dalai Lama’s teaching in exile, following a trend of increasingly hardline steps targeting continued devotion to him within Tibet, while the Chinese authorities are unable to undermine his high global profile. Five years earlier, in 2012 the Chinese authorities launched a major operation to detain Tibetans attending the last Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya, ‘disappearing’ many pilgrims for weeks or months on their return, and holding them for long periods for ‘re-education’ in military camps and other facilities. While in July 2014, when the Dalai Lama conferred another Kalachakra initiation in Ladakh, India, China described the religious teachings as an incitement to ‘hatred’ and ‘extremist action’.²⁵³

Since China dropped its stringent zero COVID policy, there are signs of something of an uptick in new arrivals, although the dangers for those making the journey remain almost insuperable for most Tibetans. Dram, the border town which clings to the mountain on the Tibetan side

of the border, across from the Friendship Bridge, used to be a focus for the Chinese authorities as a crucial transit place for Tibetans seeking to flee into exile. Often Tibetans would obtain permits to travel to Dram, and would then make their way across the border by fording rivers and treacherous gullies. But the Chinese leadership used the devastation of the earthquake in April 2015 to progress political objectives by relocating most of its population permanently and turning it into a military garrison town.

Dram (Khasa in Nepalese) was severely affected by the 7.8-magnitude quake that struck Nepal and parts of the Tibet Autonomous Region on 25 April 2015, and hit by a powerful aftershock two days later that destroyed 10% of its buildings, causing cracks or other damage to “all buildings” in the town, according to a Chinese state media report. Hasty evacuations of people from Dram were continued even after the rebuilding of Dram after the earthquake, consistent with the Chinese authorities’ political objectives in the area to strengthen border security and prevent Tibetans escaping across the mountains into exile via Dram.

Following the earthquake, the authorities continued to relocate people from Dram to another area of Shigatse (Chinese: Rigaze) prefecture, and according to various official reports, installed more troops in the sensitive border town. A Xinhua report on 2 May 2017 confirmed that: “Zham, once the largest border trade port of Tibet region, is now an empty town.” An official media entitled ‘Soldiers work in “empty town”’ featured an image of a soldier “playing a saxophone for his comrades in arms at



Tibetans at the Boudhanath stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Gedalin frontier checkpoint”, while another image depicted soldiers sweeping up in front of shuttered buildings. The same Xinhua report stated that: “More than 4,250 people were evacuated from Zham four days after the massive earthquake as its geological structure was remarkably changed with possible secondary disasters. Before the earthquake, Zham port cleared about 90 percent of land-borne trade between China and Nepal.”²⁵⁴

The Kyirong (Gyirong) land border in Shigatse, Tibet, connecting with Rasuwa on the Nepal side, has become the most significant crossing since China and Nepal opened it up to international users in 2014 and built access roads. Situated in a lush green valley, Kyirong has been on a trade route between Tibet and Nepal for centuries. The Kathmandu Post reported that the opening up of this border put the

Tatopani-Khasa (Dram) border “in the shadows”. There were high hopes on the Nepalese side when the border post re-opened in May 2019, four years after the earthquake. But multiple traders testified to Nepalese journalist Rajesh Khanal that “Nepal has not been able to make a push to once again make the Tatopani border a vibrant trading point, largely because of China’s focus on the Rasuwagadhi-Kerung route.”²⁵⁵

Tibetans also used to escape across the snow-covered pass the Nangpa-la, where a 17-year old Tibetan nun was shot dead by border police as she crossed the mountains in deep snow in 2006.²⁵⁶ Today, the focus has switched to the western border areas.

Pressures at Nepal’s border

Two key agreements between Nepal and China were signed during Xi Jinping’s 2019 visit, on boundary management and mutual legal assistance. Nepali lawyers have warned that the latter enables the signatories to serve subpoenas and collect evidence and could be used by China to target, punish and extradite Tibetan refugees in Nepal. Indra Prasad Aryal, chairperson of the Human Rights Organisation of Nepal (HURON), told Nepali newspaper The Himalayan Times at the time that the signing of the Treaty indicates that: “China wants to take Chinese political and religious dissidents from Nepal and punish them in their own country. Our

government, which has entered a gentleman’s agreement with [the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] to provide safe passage to Tibetan refugees, needs to tread carefully on the extradition treaty issue.”²⁵⁷

The agreement signed in September 2023 between Nepal and China to undertake joint inspection and management of the border is the legal culmination of years of attempts to create joint border control mechanisms.²⁵⁸ In December 2017, China proposed to set up offices of joint security forces along the Nepal-China border under the Joint Command Mechanism agreement,

while in 2018 Nepalese media reported that China would open the Tatopani border only if Nepal agreed to a joint border security arrangement. China has long provided training and resources for Nepal's border forces, police and army.

Cross-border trade between Nepalis and Tibetans has existed for centuries, for example in wool, tea, spices and salt. Though various Nepali-Tibetan treaties were signed in the 18th-19th centuries, these concerned the ownership of often vaguely-defined territories rather than with delimiting a precise boundary. After China annexed Tibet, a border treaty was signed in 1960 recognising a "traditional customary line" and creating a joint boundary commission to demarcate a more precise border. A final protocol was signed in January 1964.

But Nepal's border is demarcated by pillars which are often far apart, which makes it difficult to delineate the exact boundaries. Some Indian media sources claim that China has exploited the lack of clarity by encroaching into Nepal and occupying at least 11 areas.²⁵⁹ A Nepalese government task force despatched to the Humla area of western Nepal close to the border found that surveillance activities by Chinese security forces had restricted religious activities in Lalungjong on the Nepalese side of the border, close to Mount Kailash in Tibet, a sacred site for both Buddhists and Hindus. Pilgrims frequently pass through the area. The report also concluded that China had been limiting grazing by Nepalese farmers. China was also attempting to construct a canal and a road on the Nepalese side of the border.²⁶⁰

According to copies of the report obtained by the New York Times and the BBC, the government mission documented a series of small border infringements by China. "Coursing through the report are worries about China's grander geopolitical intentions and fears about upsetting Nepal's powerful neighbour," reported the New York Times.²⁶¹ Ethnic Tibetans living in Nepalese villages near the border also told the reporters that they are pressured not to display images of the Dalai Lama by Chinese security forces operating in the local area.

After the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje escaped from Tibet in December 1999, arriving safely in exile in India, China erected a 22 kilometer long fence at the 4600 metre high border, which still stands. It took less than a month to construct the barbed wire fence at the Kora La border, an alpine plain that marks the traditional boundary between Mustang and Tibet, after the Karmapa's escape made international headlines and the cover of Time magazine. Through constructing the fence, China put a stop to all cross-border nomadism and trade, until China itself authorised an annual trade fair at the border later.²⁶²

The daily lives of inhabitants of the Himalayan border areas are affected by shifting China-Nepal relations. Since 2002, an agreement between the two nations has issued those who live within 30 km of the border a border citizens' card that allows them to cross over without a passport and a visa and work in the two countries.²⁶³ This agreement was built upon earlier agreements, including the 1961 border treaty and a 1974 agreement,²⁶⁴ and the

informal transnational mobility residents of the region had traditionally practised.

"What essentially is happening on the northern border is that the Nepali state is making inroads into these former zones of exclusion with the direct or indirect assistance of the Chinese state," wrote Amish Raj Mulmi. "The exclusion of the borderlands from the national narrative of 'bikas' [development] has allowed Chinese aid and provisions of mobility and employment to be viewed in benevolent terms by locals. After all, the choices are few, despite new state-making projects in these regions. But such dependence on the north also leaves us vulnerable, and gives China leverage similar to India's, especially in these districts."²⁶⁵

The Nepal-China border starts in the west with the China-Nepal-India tripoint near the Tinkar pass, which has been disputed between Nepal and India for some years. A controversial map released by China in 2023 (claiming India's Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet, and also almost the entirety of the South China Sea) also angered Nepal. The map showed that three areas (Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura) which it claims as part of Nepal were marked as part of India. Kathmandu Metropolitan City mayor Balendra Shah cancelled a visit to China stating that China had failed to include the new map of Nepal. Mayor Shah said, "This is a wrong step taken by China, ignoring the sentiments of Nepal and depicting Nepal's territory as India's."²⁶⁶ Three years earlier, Nepal had published a new political map depicting these three areas inside Nepali borders.²⁶⁷

These are familiar United Front tactics, to

exploit and exacerbate rifts, in this case a long-running border dispute between India and Nepal. After Indian prime minister Modi's visit to China in 2015, India and China had agreed to open a trading post in Lipulekh, raising objections from Nepal. The Nepalese parliament objected to the agreement between India and China to trade through Lipulekh stating that "it violates Nepal's sovereign rights over the disputed territory".²⁶⁸ The long-standing border disputes and an economic blockade by India in 2015 fueled anti-Indian sentiment in Nepal.²⁶⁹

The Nepalese government cautions against over emphasising tensions, saying in 2019 that Nepal and India have resolved 98% of the border demarcation issues.²⁷⁰

During his November 2023 visit to Kathmandu, Party chief Wang Junzheng focused on a range of infrastructure, border development and land port developments during his visit, including the fourth new land port along the Nepal-Tibet border, officially opened on 13 November 2023. This new border trade post – at 4,600 metres (15,000ft) above sea level - links Letse in Drongba county, Shigatse (Chinese: Rigaze) in the TAR with Nechung, 12 kilometres away in Mustang, western Nepal. It is a traditional gateway between Tibet and Nepal for trade in salt and grain. Construction of the Lizi facility began in 2017 and it has cost about 399 million yuan (US\$54.7 million), according to the CNS report; roads linking it to the rest of Nepal have already been built.

Using China's name for Tibet, state media reported that the opening of the land border port "is also expected to contribute

to the broader efforts of Xizang in opening up to the global market. [...] In line with China's promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Xizang region has ramped up efforts to transform itself into a crucial gateway to South Asia." Liu Zongyi, secretary-general of the Research Center for China-South Asia Cooperation at the Shanghai Institutes for International

Studies was cited as saying that strengthening construction of the ports is one of the main steps.²⁷¹ The major Kyirong cross-border economic cooperation zone was approved in March 2022, making Gyirong the 18th of its kind in China and the first in Tibet.

One of the most ambitious engineering projects in the world – a Tibet-Nepal railway?

Feasibility studies of the proposed 170 km railway planned to run from Kyirong on the Tibet side of the border to Kathmandu – one of the most ambitious engineering projects in the world – are still underway, according to both governments. But it is unclear whether the railway, which would cost an estimated \$5.5 billion and counting,²⁷² will ever be constructed.

Although only one-third of the total length falls on the Nepal side, this stretch would account for almost half of the costs due to the difficult geology and climate.

In July 2024, just before leaving office as Prime Minister, Prachanda approved plans for the construction of railway to China under the BRI. But this could have been a parting gesture to strengthen ties and goodwill. Ministers made clear that details of project implementation and BRI modalities had yet to be confirmed, and this position was complicated by the Nepali Congress resolve to only accept grants and not loans under BRI.²⁷³

Initial delays prior to feasibility studies in 2023 had occurred as both countries debated who was going to pay for the railway. China announced in 2022 that it would do so, and that it would provide RMB 800 million (\$118 million) to Nepal in 2022.²⁷⁴

Engineers believe the project is extremely difficult, but not impossible. Paribesh Parajuli, an engineer who worked as a consultant at the Department of Railways until 2019, told The Third Pole: "The feasibility study will do two important things: first it will determine the route, including ground and bridge proportion. And second, [it will determine] the type of railway that needs to be built – high speed or slow." Aman Chitrakar, spokesperson for Nepal's Department of Railways, said: "Technically this will be one of the world's toughest railways to construct as it needs to cross the lofty and fragile Himalayan range, but with China's technological prowess it is possible as they have already built railways in higher altitudes in Tibet than the proposed Nepal-China railway."²⁷⁵

The railway is regarded as an important project for Nepal because trade in the landlocked mountain country currently depends on land border ports that can be blocked and subject to extreme weather conditions. But for China it is important mainly for geopolitical reasons. A rail link between Tibet and Nepal was Mao Zedong's vision, and is now regarded as critical to China maintaining its dominance and connectivity in the Himalayas, despite non BRI partner India's misgivings at linking mainland China and the South Asian subcontinent.

A commentary published by Caijing Magazine's WeChat channel ²⁷⁶ suggested that a rail link through Nepal to India could "increase China's strategic manoeuvring

space when tensions are on the rise".

There have been hints of tensions between the Chinese and Nepal teams working on feasibility studies for the railway, and it is likely that ecological concerns in the world's youngest and highest mountain range are not being taken seriously as governments with an eye on the geopolitical prize push the project forward. Basanta Raj Adhikari, deputy director of the Centre for Disaster Studies at the Institute of Engineering, Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, said that the railway would pass through a geologically weak zone in the Himalayas known as the main central thrust, ²⁷⁷ and that there should be more concern around the fragile geology of the region.²⁷⁸

The export of Xi Jinping thought and the new 'Silk Roadster' initiative

The direct correlation between the deepening investment and aid from China and the vulnerabilities of Tibetans in Nepal has long been acknowledged openly by Beijing, which has described its investment as a reward to Nepal for its "important role in guarding against Tibetan separatists".²⁷⁹

China has pressured Nepal to delegitimize the entire Tibetan community in the country, beginning in 1994 when Nepal stopped issuing or renewing refugee identification cards, and forcing the Office of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Welfare Office to close in 2005. Peaceful protests by Tibetans have been effectively shut down completely by the Nepalese authorities, and cultural and religious gatherings often

characterised as 'anti-Chinese' and prevented. On sensitive occasions such as 10 March, the anniversary of Tibet's uprising against China in 1959, Tibetans suspected of planning protests have been pre-emptively arrested.

Individual Tibetans as well as Tibetan media, NGOs and community organisations have consistently faced danger, harassment and threats. ²⁸⁰ The first Tibetan contemporary art gallery in Nepal, the Gallery Of Modern Art (GOMA) became a target of harassment by police in Kathmandu, which led to the founder, the late artist Chungpo Tsering, seeking asylum in the U.S.²⁸¹

In the cultural sphere, China is targeting a new generation in Nepal through providing both government and privately funded scholarships at Chinese universities and cultural institutes like the Confucius Institute, as well as greater interactions with the Nepali people through language training. Although India still remains one of the primary educational destinations for Nepalis, more than 3,000 Nepalis have received Chinese scholarships, and at least 6,400 Nepalis currently study in China.²⁸²

There have been setbacks to China's influence efforts. Few Belt and Road projects have seen much progress since 2017, when Nepal signed up, and there have been challenges by the current ruling coalition headed by the Nepali Congress. In the same year, 2017, a new geopolitical element came into play with Nepal signing up to receive a large grant from the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a foreign aid agency that partners with countries to promote economic growth. China immediately objected to the grant, accusing the U.S. of "coercive diplomacy".²⁸³ (At the time of writing, it was announced

that the MCC was being shut down by Elon Musk's 'Department of Government Efficiency'.)

China accelerated its heavy-handed influence efforts with the 'Silk Roadster' programme, which does not only aim to foster practical cooperation and trade ties, but to export 'Xi Jinping Thought' to Nepal, a project supported by the Nepalese left and ruling Communist party. China launched the programme in 2023 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, which has faced challenges in Nepal with no significant projects undertaken since Nepal signed up to BRI in 2017.²⁸⁴ Among the objectives of the programme is 'Silk Road Enlightenment', aimed at cultivating Chinese Party state allegiances among a younger generation in Southeast and South Asian countries.

Nepalese officials and leaders including former Prime Minister Oli were subject to 'education' on the pronouncements of the Chinese supreme leader, sparking unease about the nation's sovereignty and judicial independence.²⁸⁵

A multi-dimensional approach

The relationship between China and Nepal is not only predicated on investment; the Chinese authorities pursue a multi-dimensional engagement with the Kathmandu government and the Nepalese people, involving a focus on tourism and cultural exchange.

The tourist industry between Nepal and China is booming, with the number of

Chinese tourists in Nepal growing at an average of nearly 25% every year. Chinese tourist arrivals to Nepal increased by 55% to 104,005 in 2016, according to the Chinese state media, assisted by increasing connectivity via new flight routes opening up.²⁸⁶ In 2013, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Nepal increased by 250% since 2009.²⁸⁷ Chinese tourists were allowed to travel visa free from January

2016, and China has designated 2017 as the Nepal Tourism Promotion Year.

China has also deepened its engagement in the social and economic sphere. Nepali politicians, professionals, students, military leaders are increasingly invited to Beijing, Lhasa, or elsewhere in the PRC for seminars or study trips, while Nepalese students are funded to study in China. Through 35 China Study Centers set up across Nepal, China aims to highlight historic and cultural links with China. While the Nepal-China Mutual Cooperation Society funded by the Chinese Embassy in Nepal, is aimed at strengthening diplomatic relations between the two countries as well as disseminating an image of a friendly China, with other associations including the Nepal-China Executives Council in Kathmandu.²⁸⁸

In 2017, a beginner Mandarin class was officially launched by Nepal's Ministry of Education, in a bid to strengthen education exchange between Nepal and China, according to Xinhua. A Nepalese joint secretary at the Ministry of Education told Xinhua, 'Nepal has a lot to learn from China

in the sectors like technology, education system, culture, trade and tourism.

Learning about these areas is possible only through language, so we felt it's necessary to train our officials first for knowledge and technology transfer'.²⁸⁹

Over the past decade, the majority of Nepal's civil society organizations have been engaged in working on conflict-related issues and human rights injustices that affect millions of Nepali people. Despite this, a few organizations have worked consistently on the Tibetan issue, notably the Human Rights Organization of Nepal (HURON). Rights organizations have also forged alliances with experts, academics and policymakers in a bid to include refugee law within the new constitution of Nepal.

The Kathmandu based NGO INHURED International even took legal action, filing a complaint at the National Human Rights Commission after multiple cases of Tibetans facing obstacles in obtaining basic documentation were observed during outreach efforts.²⁹⁰

China's communications blueprint in Kathmandu

During Xi Jinping's visit to Nepal in 2019, China published a blueprint for the Nepal-China relationship, stating that one of the key drivers is 'strategic communication'. The joint statement by Nepal and China described this as developing mutual trust and understanding and cultural exchange, the objective from China's side is an asymmetric strategy to develop long-term alliances.

Nepalese observers critical of China's interventions in Nepal note a pattern of increasingly negative news coverage of Tibetans in Nepal. "The focus of reporting is often on Chinese concerns about Tibetan activities in Nepal and less on the violations being carried out against the Tibetans," said Ambassador Vijay Kant Karna. "Such coverage is also unsurprising as the Nepal government has now begun to censure the

media for its earlier so-called 'biased' writing on Tibet."

Nepalese journalist Anil Giri, a foreign affairs correspondent for the Kathmandu Post said that journalists are discouraged from covering Tibetan affairs to mollify China, while Nepali government officials shy away from reporters seeking comments on China-related stories.²⁹¹

Cedric Alviani, director of the Asia Bureau of Reporters Without Borders, linked the suppression of news coverage on Tibetans in Nepal with China's investment via BRI, saying that as has been the case in other Asian countries, "For this development [BRI] to become successful, the media must be muzzled."²⁹²

Under the direct instructions of Nepalese information and communication minister Gokul Baskota, journalists from the Rastriya Samachar Samiti, Nepal's national news agency, were investigated in May 2019 for translating and disseminating a wire report about the Dalai Lama's health. The three RSS journalists were questioned about the dispatch they translated and circulated reporting that the Tibetan spiritual leader had left the New Delhi hospital where he was being treated and had returned to Dharamshala, the city in northern India that is the Tibetan exile community's capital.²⁹³

According to sources cited by the Nepalese news media, the investigation was initiated by Baskota after pressure from Chinese officials in Kathmandu. One of the RSS reporters said an official from Xinhua, the Chinese state-owned news agency, had visited the RSS chairman the day after the news was published on online outlets.²⁹⁴

In June 2019, the Samajbadi Party suspended its lawmaker Pradip Yadav for six months after he attended a meeting of the World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet, involving MPs from all over the world and Tibet supporters, in Riga, Latvia.²⁹⁵

3.4 CONTEXT: THE NEPAL-CHINA RELATIONSHIP

During the Cultural Revolution in China, repression and religious persecution in Tibet led many Tibetans to flee across the border. Refugee camps were established throughout Nepal, many in Himalayan areas procured by the Nepal Red Cross. The then Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (present-day Swiss Development Corporation) assisted the refugees by establishing farmland and carpet-weaving factories. As with Nepali citizens, Tibetans were allowed freedoms of expression, movement, assembly and religion as long as they did not participate in political groups or activity.

In the 1970s, a new dimension of the relationship began when Tibetan guerillas, supported in part by the CIA and with the knowledge of the Nepali monarchy, based themselves in Mustang and from there made incursions into Chinese-occupied Tibet. In 1974, the Royal Nepalese Army was deployed to disarm the guerillas, who were then settled in the Pokhara region. In the same year, Tibetan schools were co-opted into the national education system, at the loss of Tibetan language education, prompting many refugees to send their children to Tibetan schools in India. The carpet business boomed, becoming one of Nepal's biggest exports, bringing economic stability to the Tibetan community in Nepal and many Nepalis.²⁹⁶

The next significant influx of Tibetan refugees to Nepal following the Cultural Revolution was in 1989, following the imposition of martial law after nearly three years of pro-independence protests in

Lhasa. Under pressure from China, Nepal stopped accepting new Tibetan refugees in 1989, but agreed with the UNHCR to guarantee their safe transit through Nepali territory and onward safe passage to India, an arrangement that remains in place today, although it has been significantly strained.

"Since the People's Liberation Army moved into Tibet in 1949, Nepal has taken on the role of buffer zone between India and China," the International Campaign for Tibet reported in its 2011 report, 'Dangerous Crossing: Conditions impacting the flight of Tibetan refugees': "As the two Asian powers compete for regional influence, Nepal's position has become less 'buffer' and more battered. China's acquired leverage in Nepal is used to control its interests in Tibet and Tibetan activities in Nepal; India's influence, based on a traditional, some would say anachronistic, 'special relationship' is largely political and party-based, supported by ancient ties of ethnicity, culture and religion between the Nepali and Indian peoples."²⁹⁷

After the Sino-Indian war in 1962, Nepal had not accepted India's position that the Himalayas were India's defence barriers. China in the meantime saw India's concept of building a ring-fence of buffers like Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet to protect India's interests as a colonial concept to maintain domination. China viewed itself as surrounded by hostile forces, with Nepal among them. But China's strategic imperative to maintain control over Tibet required it to extend its security policies to Kathmandu.

As it grew in economic confidence, Nepal took steps to balance its relationships with both India and China. One of the first steps in the fracturing of the 'special relationship' with India was Nepal's decision to buy arms from China in 1988, contravening a previous agreement with India. India saw this as a clear shift away from its influence, suspecting possible intelligence sharing and training by the PLA.²⁹⁸ China's developing relations with Nepal at the time were constrained by political upheavals (Tiananmen Square massacre), rapprochement with India and hostility with the West. By 1990, India had built up its influence in the military and economic spheres, providing resources for roadbuilding and hydropower. China noted the importance of providing resources for connectivity with its Himalayan neighbours, and in 2016, in a key symbolic development, Nepal Telecom and China Telecom Global signed an agreement on internet protocol service between the two countries through a cross-border terrestrial cable route, dramatically lessening Nepal's dependence on India.²⁹⁹

China's state owned enterprises and large contractors like China Telecom Global laid the groundwork for expanding its economic and diplomatic influence later on through BRI and now, the new Silk Roadster programme.

Initially, China sought to work with the Nepalese monarchy to secure their interests. A people's movement in Nepal in 1990 had created a constitutional monarchy with a democratically-elected government. Under this arrangement, Tibetans enjoyed some freedom to express their political views on the situation in Tibet

although in the mid-90s, China began to criticize Nepal for allowing such protests. In response, Nepal began to curtail protest outside Tibetan settlements and stopped the issuance and renewal of refugee documentation.

Tibetans suffered beside the Nepalese people with the armed insurgency launched by Maoist rebels in 1996, which led to business owners facing extortion and general economic decline. In the early 2000s, the carpet industry, in which Tibetans had been highly successful in their communities, began to collapse in the context of the intensifying civil conflict.

In 2005, King Gyanendra dissolved parliament and seized absolute rule and India pulled out of supplying arms to the Royal Nepalese Army, creating a clear space for China to step in to assert its dominance. One of the first demands of the new monarchy was to enforce the closure of the Office of the Representative of the Dalai Lama.

4. CHINA'S DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Both physical and digital transnational repression, in which China surveils and threatens Tibetan exiles and their family and friends in Tibet, poses increasing threats to Tibetan diaspora communities in a heightened political climate.

A massive data leak from i-Soon, a Chinese cybersecurity firm tied to the nation's security apparatus, in February 2024, gave new evidence of the PRC's large-scale cyber activities. "The data dump provides valuable insight into the priorities of the Party state in hiring hackers to target peripheral communities, including the Tibetan exile administration in Dharamsala, Uyghurs in the diaspora, pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong, as well as official entities in neighbouring countries such as the Mongolian police, and India's customs agency," according to cyber specialist Greg Walton, in an analysis for research network Turquoise Roof.³⁰⁰ The use of novel intelligence tactics against diaspora populations before global deployment also suggests an approach to cyber operations in which vulnerable populations serve almost as laboratories for China to refine its espionage capabilities.³⁰¹

The i-Soon archive offered researchers a significant insight into Beijing's use of complex AI-driven surveillance systems to enforce political controls over Tibetan and

Uyghurs, not just within its own borders, but also internationally, in the diaspora(s). The revelations shed new light on China's objectives in conducting domestic and foreign cyber operations targeting Tibetans and Uyghurs, as part of a broader strategy of transnational repression that utilizes both physical and digital means to repress critics and diaspora communities. According to Greg Walton for Turquoise Roof: "Our research over the past two decades into the targeted digital threats that Tibetan and Uyghur civil society communities face would lead us to conclude that the PRC is [...] the leading perpetrator of digital transnational repression."³⁰²

At the same time, China continues to engage in physical acts of transnational repression, including assassinations, abductions, abuse of INTERPOL Red notices, and intimidation of family members. In 2024, the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) assessed publicly that the PRC is likely the leading perpetrator of physical transnational repression.³⁰³

The Tibetan experience of digital transnational repression is part of a wider global pattern in which China leverages technology to coerce diaspora communities. Clear parallels can be seen in

the experiences of Uyghur from East Turkestan (XUAR), and pro-democracy Hong Kongers. Comparing these cases highlights common tactics, and common psychological and societal consequences, of digital repression across different contexts. Since around 2017, China's transnational repression of Uyghurs escalated alongside the mass internment campaign in Xinjiang. Uyghur exiles across the world report relentless digital harassment: spyware attacks, phishing attempts, and threatening messages often referencing their families back home.³⁰⁴ A joint research report in 2021 documented how the Chinese government "pursued, coerced, and intimidated Uyghurs living abroad, resulting in anxiety, fear, and depression." Uyghur activists frequently find that their phone communications with relatives in Xinjiang are monitored or cut

off; many have experienced their contacts in China suddenly disappearing or being detained after a sensitive conversation.

Surveillance and censorship are ubiquitous across the diaspora, concluded a report by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) in Dharamsala following extensive interviews with Tibetans in exile. "The CCP and its proxies gather personal information on exiled Tibetans through several means: by questioning their relatives in Tibet, by exploiting cybersecurity breaches, and by mandating spies," reported the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. "It is important to note that the mechanisms used by the CCP to repress Tibetan activism might also be applied to wider communities, thereby constituting a threat to human rights and democracy in our societies at large."³⁰⁵

The TCHRD report found various forms and trends of transnational repression experienced by exiled Tibetans worldwide including:

- United Front Work Department operatives are spying on exiled Tibetans to collect personal information that can be used to infiltrate and sabotage diaspora networks, including through disinformation campaigns, or as a basis for blackmail through hi-tech surveillance;³⁰⁶
- China is seeking to control the activities of exiled Tibetans through direct intimidation and threats to friends and family remaining in Tibet, such as coercing them into renouncing activism;
- The Chinese authorities have sought to close all avenues for Tibetans to send money to relatives in exile, leading to increased financial precarity for those seeking to establish a foothold often as refugees;³⁰⁷
- China is trying to further sever connections between Tibetans in exile and their relatives in Tibet by making communication technically impossible or dangerous.

The digital transnational repression wielded by the PRC against Tibetans is a complex challenge involving the intersection of technology, psychology, and geopolitics. Its impacts, from anxiety disorders to broken community ties, are severe, but can be alleviated by the implementation of robust cybersecurity protections, offering psychosocial support, and marshalling international condemnation and action.

In a report for Turquoise Roof, cyber and surveillance expert Greg Walton outlined policy steps that would not only aid Tibetan people in reclaiming their agency and security, but also serve as a blueprint to protect other diaspora communities facing similar digital assaults on their freedom and dignity.³⁰⁸ A summary of those steps is included in the Recommendations section of this report.

5. METHODOLOGY

Independent research is almost impossible in Tibet due to current restrictions and conditions in the country. The Chinese authorities do not permit access for foreign researchers except in extremely rare cases, and then only on subjects that are not sensitive or likely to produce findings that are critical of the government.

While the CCP portrays Tibet as “open”, it has weaponised access, and denying access is increasingly used as a powerful tool to shut down critique by scholars, journalists, independent experts and foreign diplomats. The PRC is ranked as one of the worst countries for press freedom in the world.

Tibetans face severe danger including arrest and torture if they are even suspected of communicating about the political and social situation in Tibet either to people in Tibet or to those outside. The dangers and difficulties of communication via apps such as WeChat have been well documented; Tibet-related content is targeted for censorship on WeChat, and there are cases of Tibetans being arrested for sharing chat messages, songs, and photos on WeChat with content related to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan culture that Chinese authorities alleged to be ‘anti-Chinese’. Ethnic Chinese, too, face risks if they communicate about politically sensitive topics, particularly with foreigners or NGOs.

Given these dangers, this report is based on field research outside the PRC, involving conversations with informed Tibetans and others, as well as research and translation of Chinese scholarly papers and state media articles. The identities of Tibetan scholars either in the PRC or with families or friends still in the PRC have been withheld upon request. A variety of official sources in both Chinese and Tibetan language, including provincial, prefectural and national websites, state media, online news channels were studied. We obtained several research papers by Chinese academics at state-run institutions from the PRC, which are not

all publicly available. Some of these papers were used to inform research and briefings undertaken for the International Tibet Network in connection with advocacy work on their report 'Tibet, the Dalai Lama and the Geopolitics of Reincarnation'. 'Sacred authority and state power: the future of the Dalai Lama institution in a global context' covers new developments in policy and impacts, involving interviews in the field in India, Nepal and Mongolia. The paper is intended to stimulate broader discussion incorporating suggestions emerging from conversations with individuals on the frontlines of China's transnational repression. The report was undertaken in partnership with Czechs Support Tibet. It was authored by Kate Saunders of Turquoise Roof, a collaborative research network of digitally connected specialists, Tibetan analysts and scholars. <https://turquoiseroof.org/>

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In order to contextualise this information and understand specific Communist Party terms, we worked with trilingual Tibetan researchers and well-informed sources (Tibetan and otherwise) in exile. Senior Tibetan monastics and Rinpoches were also consulted to ensure understanding of religious protocols and we are grateful for their assistance.

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ENDNOTES

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² The situation in Mongolia is explored further in another paper by the same author.

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⁴ Martin, Miguel. 'Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia'. China Brief, Vol 18, Issue 12, 10 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/global-religion-and-the-united-front-the-case-of-mongolia/>

⁵ Branigan, Tania, and Jason Burke. 'Dalai Lama visit: Leeds stands up to 'bully boy' China'. The Guardian, 14 June 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jun/14/china-dalai-lama-leeds>

⁶ Campbell, Charlie. 'Lady Gaga infuriates Chinese fans by meeting the Dalai Lama'. Time, 28 June 2016, <https://time.com/4385043/china-dalai-lama-tibet-lady-gaga-celebrities-music-human-rights/>.

⁷ 'Tibet in China's Diplomacy: The Implications of the Trojan Horse Hypothesis', presentation by Dr Robert Barnett, 6 April 2016, roundtable of L'Observatoire Strategique et Politique de la China, cycle 2015-6. Since the mid-2000s, China became somewhat more successful in lobbying foreign governments not to meet the Dalai Lama; leaders of Australia, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, as well as the Pope, declined to see him. In a paper on China's diplomacy, Robert Barnett noted that from 2001 over a 15-year period, meetings between the Dalai Lama and national presidents decreased from previous years (from 9 in 2000 to 1 in 2014), as did meetings with Foreign Ministers (4 in 2000, 1 in 2014). However this also reflected a shift in perspective by Dharamsala. During this period, meetings with foreign leaders were simply not always sought during His Holiness' travels, particularly after the transfer of political authority to the exile leadership in 2011. As demands on the Dalai Lama's time intensified, reconciling schedules also became more of an issue.

⁸ World is One News (WION). "China Against Dalai Lama's Sri Lanka Visit, Says Top Buddhist Leader Dr. Waskaduwe." YouTube, 26 Feb. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UOsJTNgd7E.

⁹ "China Lauds Sri Lanka for Not Permitting Dalai Lama's Visit." The Economic Times, India, 3 April 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-lauds-sri-lanka-for-not-permitting-dalai-lamas-visit/articleshow/46794875.cms?from=mdr>

¹⁰ Ramachandran, Sudha. "China's Panicked Reaction to Sri Lanka's Invitation to the Dalai Lama." The Diplomat, 1 Feb. 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/chinas-panicked-reaction-to-sri-lankas-invitation-to-the-dalai-lama>.

¹¹ Former Indian intelligence Special Secretary Amitabh Mathur, who was appointed as a Special Adviser to the federal Ministry of Home Affairs advising on Tibet and Buddhism, presentation to the Indian Council for World Affairs, 2018, shared with the kind permission of the author. Mathur writes in his presentation: "Tri Pitika (in Sanskrit) and Ti-Pitika (in Pali) are the two versions that form Buddhist scripture and the basis of Mahayana and Theravada traditions. It may be noted that the Tibetan texts are considered the complete and exact translation of original Sanskrit Tri- Pitika (Kangyur and Tangyur in Tibetan) from the ancient Nalanda university. Whereas Chinese texts as taken by Xuanzang in 12th century are considered incomplete as half of the books he was carrying were believed lost while crossing a swollen river and the texts translated by Kumarjeeva (the prince/ monk from Khotan/ Kashmir) are limited to some sutras which form the basis of Chinese Mahayana practice. With [the Common Buddhist Text project] reducing Tibetan source to a secondary position and crediting Chinese texts as main source, a long-term project is underway to relegate Tibetan tradition as subsidiary to China which is now being projected as the main progenitor of Mahayana Buddhism. [The project] thus has been hijacked and metamorphized into validation of distortion of Buddhist discourse. It is in this context that His Holiness the Dalai Lama keeps referring to the need to preserve Nalanda tradition. It may be noted that the Tibetan lineage holders/ Rinpoches and scholars are acknowledged as real masters of Sanskrit/ Nalanda tradition and in their teachings and works they credit the origins to ancient Indian masters like Nagarjuna. Shantdeva, Aryadeva, Tilopa etc and not to Chinese court or incomplete Chinese translations."

¹² Yadav, Yatish. "The New Great Game." The Indian Express, 23 Apr. 2017, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2017/apr/23/the-new-greatgame-1596647.html>

¹³ According to Amitabh Mathur in his briefing to the Indian Council for World Affairs, with China's encouragement, Pakistan is developing and promoting Gandhara trail of Buddhism connecting its history to South Korea, Japan and to Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche to Tibet, Bhutan and Himalayan Buddhists.)

¹⁴ "The PRC is boldly unravelling its grand strategy of encircling India both via land and sea," the Foundation for NonViolent Alternatives (FNVA) said in its comprehensive report, 'Resetting India's Tibet Policy 2022', 6 February 2022, <https://fnvaworld.org/>

resetting-indias-tibet-policy-2022-2/

¹⁵ Citing Stobdan, P. 'China's Buddhism Card', Tribune India, 18 January 2022. FNVA report, 'Resetting India's Tibet Policy 2022', www.fnva.org

¹⁶ Prominent Buddhist author and commentator Bob Thurman, who studied as a monk with the Dalai Lama, explains further: "The young Dalai Lama himself did propitiate it as a minor worldly spirit or angel, until he studied the history of its cult and decided it was not a protector at all, but instead a mischievous 'king' spirit known as Dolgyal ('king demon from Dol'). Once his historical studies brought him to that conclusion, he recommended that other lamas in his school cease their relationship, or at least keep it to non-Buddhist religions. In the late '80s, when certain individual lamas began to proselytize its cult, inducting even Western practitioners new to Buddhism, especially in England, he took the step of asking such persons to refrain from attending his initiations and associated advanced teachings, on the grounds that they were not following his advice and so should not take him as their teacher. They then went on the attack, claiming they had been 'banned' and 'excommunicated', etc., when in fact the Dalai Lama was exercising his religious freedom by not accepting students who reject his advice, and actually go so far as to condemn him." Posted on the Dalai Lama's official website at: <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/dolgyal-shugden/contemporary-scholars/cult-dogyal-shugden> Also see Kilty, Gavin. *Understanding the case against Shukden*. Wisdom Publications, 2019.

¹⁷ The document, "Some opinions on dealing correctly with the 'Gyalchen Shugden' issue" and issued by the General Office of the Communist Party Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Region, is translated from Tibetan into English and analysed in this report by the International Campaign for Tibet: "China's new directive on controversial Shugden spirit in Tibet in bid to further discredit Dalai Lama", 7 April 2015, <https://savetibet.org/chinas-new-directive-on-controversial-shugden-spirit-in-tibet-in-bid-to-further-discredit-dalai-lama/>.

¹⁸ The protests were organized and overwhelmingly populated by members of the British Buddhist New Religious Movement (NRM), the 'New Kadampa Tradition' (NKT), under the front organisation sobriquet, the 'International Shugden Community (ISCY). The New Kadampa Tradition, a registered charity, has over 200 centres and 900 branch classes worldwide. The group has 48 centres in the UK. Previously known for its aggressive recruitment and emphasis on rapid expansion, the NKT was also considered among the most controversial of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and has been the subject of several Parliamentary Questions in the UK. Its influence has diminished since the death of its leader Kelsang Gyatso on 17 September 2022. Obituary by Vishvapani Blomfield, Kelsang Gyatso Obituary." *The Guardian*, 14 Oct. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/kelsang-gyatso-obituary>.

¹⁹ Lague, David, and Stephanie Nebehay. "Group That Hounded Dalai Lama Disbands After Reuters Exposes Chinese Backing." *Reuters*, 12 Mar. 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-dalai-lama-idUSKCN0WD203> and investigation: Lague, David, Paul Mooney, and Benjamin Kang Lim. "China Co-opts a Buddhist Sect in Global Effort to Smear Dalai Lama." *Reuters*, 21 Dec. 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/china-dalailama/>.

²⁰ This topic will be explored in an upcoming paper by the same author.

²¹ London Fo Guang Shan website, <https://londonfgs.org.uk/venerable-master-hsing-yun>

²² Xinhua News Agency, 19 October 2010.

²³ Tibet TV. YouTube, 19 June 2024, <https://youtu.be/7UxpsSmjsV0?si=3NJkvmSjS1Tf8QOi>.

²⁴ Article by the Press Trust of India citing Zha Luo, director at the Beijing-based China Tibetology Research Centre, 'India should not interfere in selection of Dalai Lama's successor: China', 14 July 2019, *Business Standard*, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/next-dalai-lama-must-be-chosen-within-china-india-should-not-intervene-chinese-authorities-119071400468_1.html

²⁵ Gokhale, who served as India's Foreign Secretary from 2018-2020, writes: "The passing of the 14th Dalai Lama will also bring a material change in the India-China-Tibet equation because they might not agree on the next incarnation. This is likely to raise important questions for which India needs to develop policy responses in advance of the event. Given his age and health, critically thinking through these questions ought not to be postponed." Gokhale, Vijay. 'The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India', *Carnegie India*, 11 November 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-next-dalai-lama-preparing-for-reincarnation-and-why-it-matters-to-india?lang=en¢er=india>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ In his book 'Understanding the India-China Border: The Enduring Threat of War in High Himalaya', Manoj Joshi gives figures of 225 monasteries hosting over 30,000 monks and nuns. A 2012 study by the Indian Institute for Defence Studies and Strategic Analyses (IDSA) gives the figure of 208 monasteries in India with over 27,451 monks and 17 nunneries with over 1,696 nuns established as labrang of the original monasteries in the Tibetan plateau. 'Tibet and India's Security: Himalayan Region, Refugees and Sino-Indian Relations', Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), <https://www.idsa.in/book/TibetandIndiasSecurity>, cited by Shishir Gupta in 'Himalayan FaceOff: China's Assertion and India's Riposte', 2014. Also see Phunchok Stobdan, n. 8; Beatrice D. Miller, "The Web of Tibetan Monasticism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (February 1961): 197-203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2050483>.

²⁸ Takling Tsetrul, a leader of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, has monasteries in Shimla and Ladakh. The Kagyu school's primary monastery, albeit currently out of bounds for the 17th Karmapa and the other contender Tinlay Thaye Dorje, is in Rumtek outside Gangtok in Sikkim, and head of the Sakya school Sakya Trinzin is based in a monastery in Raipur near Dehradun.

²⁹ International Crisis Group report, 'Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute', Asia Report No 334, 14 November 2023, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-china/334-thin-ice-himalayas-handling-india-china-border-dispute>

³⁰ These inscriptions, at Kone county in the TAR, around 25 km from the LAC, "serve a dual purpose: to symbolise the town's military significance and act as a beacon, encouraging the local populace to adhere to the directives of Chinese leadership. It is also noted at places, these inscriptions are removed or, at times, replaced with new ones. As Kone County grows, it extends along the valley in the northern and southern directions, highlighting its historical importance and contemporary geopolitical dynamics." Dr Nithiyanandam Yogeswaran, "China's Expansive Frontier: The Rise of Dual-Purpose Settlements in Tibet." *Geospatial Bulletin*, 31 Mar. 2024, <https://geospatialbulletin.takshashila.org.in/p/8-chinas-expansive-frontier-the-rise>.

³¹ The U.S. was not far behind at \$118.3 billion. Data at Economic Times, India, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/china-overtakes-us-to-become-indias-top-trading-partner-in-fy-2023-24/articleshow/110049223.cms?from=mdr> and <https://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/china-surpasses-usa-and-becomes-largest-trading-partner-of-india-in-fy24-volza-302164453.html>. But this partnership has been heavily skewed towards India's imports of Chinese goods, resulting in a massive trade deficit for India. India imported over \$100bn worth of goods from China in this period, while its exports to China were only \$17bn, particularly in the telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and advanced technology sectors. In response, India has already taken multiple tariff and non-tariff measures to protect domestic industries and manufacturing.

³² While the two sides agreed to some de-escalation in the border areas, on the ground there is little evidence yet of a significant change in approach. The PLA continues to build border defences and induct new weaponry and additional personnel along the LAC which demarcates Indian-controlled and Chinese-controlled territory. "It is too early to see the meeting as a 'reset' of the relationship or as a 'grand bargain' between Beijing and Delhi," writes Ananth Krishnan in 'The India China Newsletter', 5 November 2024, <https://indiachina.substack.com/p/making-sense-of-where-india-china>

³³ In his book 'Aflame for freedom in Tibet' (Lexington Books, 2024), writer Namloyak Dhungser argues that the international community has failed to grasp the significance not only for India, but also Asia and the rest of the world, of Tibet as the source of most of Asia's major rivers and as an epicenter of climate change. Also see Turquoise Roof report, 'Occupying Tibet's rivers: China's hydropower 'battlefield' in Tibet', 21 May 2024,

³⁴ In a briefing to the European Parliament, Tibet environment specialist Gabriel Lafitte explained: "The Tibetan Plateau is the size of Western Europe, and its bulk, its seasonal cooling and heating directly affect the atmosphere, right across the northern hemisphere. The jet stream that meanders across the planet is deflected by the sheer bulk and altitude of the Tibetan Plateau, which is close to two percent of the planetary land surface. In winter, cold polar air pushes southwards, and the jet stream is deflected to the Himalayas, which protect India from the intense cold of continental inner Asia. In spring and summer, the Tibetan Plateau, especially the bare rock of the upper slopes, heats fast, so fast that the jet stream switches far to the north, deflected around the northern plateau edges, thus drawing in from the far Indian Ocean the rain bearing clouds of the monsoon. This seasonal alternation of the jet stream is a driver, an engine of the monsoons of India and of East Asia. The effects go further, as far as Europe. Climate scientists have looked along the latitude circling the northern hemisphere, from the Tibetan Plateau, across East Asia, the north Pacific, North America, the Atlantic and on to Europe, and found that air pushed into the upper troposphere by Tibet only descend when they reach Europe. So, climatically, Tibet and Europe are directly connected." Lafitte, Gabriel. 'Environmental Degradation on the Third Pole.' *Rukor*, 16 Nov. 2015, <https://rukor.org/environmental-degradation-on-the-third-pole/>.

³⁵ Delaney, Keith B., and Stephen G. Evans. "The 2000 Yigong Landslide (Tibetan Plateau), Rockslide-Dammed Lake and Outburst Flood: Review, Remote Sensing Analysis, and Process Modelling." *Geomorphology*, vol. 246, 2015, pp. 377–393. Cited in Dhungser, Namloyak. *Aflame for Freedom in Tibet*. Lexington Books, 2024, p. 139, footnote 4.

³⁶ They rely instead on a collection of memorandums of understanding that are periodically updated. Neeraj Singh Manas wrote for the Lowy Institute: "Both MoUs expired in 2023, but China has continued to supply data on the Sutlej River. The two countries are currently in the process of renewing the MoUs. However, these agreements are not legally binding, and there is no process in place to settle disagreements between the parties. In addition to the MoUs, India and China also have an Expert Level Mechanism to discuss transboundary water issues. The ELM has met regularly since 2006, but it has not been able to resolve any of the major disputes between the two countries." Neeraj Singh. "A Fragile Lifeline: India and China Must Collaborate on Water." *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 21 Nov. 2023, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/fragile-lifeline-india-china-must-collaborate-water>.

³⁷ Analysis on Lafitte's blog: "Chasing Phantoms." *Rukor*, 28 Jan. 2025, <https://rukor.org/chasing-phantoms/>.

³⁸ Yan Jinhai's visit laid the groundwork for a trip by Xi Jinping in January 2024 to deepen ties with the Maldives "through the ancient Maritime Silk Road" and the Belt and Road. "China, Maldives Upgrade Ties as Presidents Hold Talks." *Xinhua*, 10 Jan. 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240110/e3c680e411794b23a37f25b7e6d3b385/c.htm>

³⁹ Dr Barnett, Robert. 'Forceful diplomacy: China's land grab in Bhutan', *Turquoise Roof*, 15 October 2024, <https://turquoiseroof.org/forceful-diplomacy-china-cross-border-villages-in-bhutan/>

⁴⁰ 'The Dalai Lama's Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question', edited by Janannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj, 15 May 2023, Institute for Security and Development Policy and the Organisation for Research on China and Asia', <https://isdp.eu/content/uploads/2023/05/ISDP-Special-Paper-Tibet-May-15.pdf>

⁴¹ "The moment I was able to cross over from Tibet to India on March 31, 1959, I realized the value of freedom. Since then, I have been the longest-staying guest of the Indian government, enjoying every possible liberty," the Dalai Lama told *Time* magazine. "The Dalai Lama on the Gratitude He Feels Looking Back at His Escape From Tibet." *Time*, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://time.com/6257018/dalai-lama-time-cover-tibet-escape/>.

⁴² "I am now pledged to devote myself to my four principal commitments: promoting human values; religious harmony; ancient Indian wisdom, on the basis of compassion (karuna) and nonviolence (ahimsa); and, obviously, Tibetan culture—the basis of our identity." Cited by Time magazine, "The Dalai Lama on the Gratitude He Feels Looking Back at His Escape From Tibet." Time, 28 Feb. 2023, <https://time.com/6257018/dalai-lama-time-cover-tibet-escape/>.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Statement by the Ministry of External Affairs reported by Indian media including India Today, "India Has Consistent Policy to Treat Dalai Lama as an Honoured Guest: MEA." India Today, 9 July 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-has-consistent-policy-to-treat-dalai-lama-as-an-honoured-guest-mea-1825737-2021-07-08>.

⁴⁵ Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India statement, 'Official Spokesperson's response to a query regarding a recent media report on the Government's position on His Holiness the Dalai Lama', MEA website, 2 March 2018, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+query+regarding+a+recent+media+report+on+the+Governments+position+on+His+Holiness+the+Dalai+Lama>

⁴⁶ In his memoir, former Special Envoy to the Dalai Lama the late Lodi Gyaltsen Gyari wrote that during the dialogue with China in the 2000s, "While we regularly consulted with Indian government officials and took them into confidence, at no point did they pressure us or try to induce us to adopt a particular position. [...] If I have any criticism of India, it is not about interference but rather about its reluctance to act." Lodi Gyaltsen Gyari. 'The Dalai Lama's Special Envoy: Memoirs of a Lifetime in Pursuit of a Reunited Tibet', Columbia University Press, 2022.

⁴⁷ 'PM Modi Refers to His Frequent Talks with the Dalai Lama in Election Speech.' Tibetan Review, 25 May 2024, <https://www.tibetanreview.net/pm-modi-refers-to-his-frequent-talks-with-the-dalai-lama-in-election-speech/>

⁴⁸ IANS from Mandi: "Timid Congress Was Afraid to Even Take Dalai Lama's Name, Says PM Modi at Mandi Rally." Morung Express, 24 May 2024, <https://www.morungexpress.com/timid-congress-was-afraid-to-even-take-dalai-lamas-name-says-pm-modi-at-mandi-rally>.

⁴⁹ The actor described the meeting with the Dalai Lama as one of the "most memorable moments" of her life. "Kangana Ranaut Meets Dalai Lama in Dharamshala Ahead of Lok Sabha Polls. What Tibetan Spiritual Leader Told Her." Hindustan Times, 15 Apr. 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/trending/bjps-star-candidate-kangana-ranaut-meets-dalai-lama-in-dharamshala-ahead-of-mandi-elections-such-a-privilege-honour-101713178423412.html>.

⁵⁰ "Kangana Ranaut Shown Black Flags over '23 Dalai' Tweet; BJP Files Complaint." The Times of India, 21 May 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/kangana-ranaut-shown-black-flags-over-23-dalai-tweet-bjp-files-complaint/articleshow/110291636.cms>.

⁵¹ "The signalling from Delhi to Beijing on the Tibet issue [by receiving the U.S. delegation] shows how Prime Minister Modi, now in his third term but politically weaker, might be preparing to approach ties with Beijing, in tatters since the Chinese ingress into eastern Ladakh in 2020," said Indian journalist Nirupama Subramanian. 'Tibet won't ease Modi's China challenge', Tribune India, 25 June 2024. Sikyong Penpa Tsering went further, being cited in the Indian media as saying that the Congressional visit was part of a carefully calibrated response to China that had also involved India's support for the Philippines in the South China Sea, and the Indian prime minister's decision to skip the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit. Bhattacharjee, Kallol. "China-Tibet Back-Channel Talks Ongoing: Sikyong Penpa Tsering." The Hindu, 25 July 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-tibet-back-channel-talks-ongoing-with-the-help-of-a-third-country-sikyong-penpa-tsering/article68414923.ece>.

⁵² For analysis of Indian policy towards Tibetans, see Tibet Justice Centre report, 'Tibet's Stateless Nationals II: Tibetan Refugees in India – 2014 Update', 20 June 2015, <https://www.tibetjustice.org/?p=724>

⁵³ The paper by former Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale on the succession question typifies this political approach, when he refers to the Dalai Lama's presence in India as "a continuing sore point in India's relations with the PRC." Gokhale, Vijay. "The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 Nov. 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-next-dalai-lama-preparing-for-reincarnation-and-why-it-matters-to-india?lang=en¢er=india>.

⁵⁴ "Tibet in BJP's Election Manifesto." FNVA, Policy Brief, 2024, <https://fnvaworld.org/2024-election-tibet-in-bjps-election-manifesto/>. FNVA is the only Indian organisation that focuses solely on Tibet from an Indian security perspective.

⁵⁵ In a rare and extensive documentation of the plight of thousands of new arrivals to India, see MacDonald, Pauline: 'Dharamsala Days, Dharamsala Nights: The Unexpected World of the Refugees from Tibet', 2013. MacDonald writes vividly and from personal experience of the plight of marginalized and impoverished 'new arrivals' in Dharamsala, including decades-long difficulties in staying legally in India after finishing schooling and poor conditions at the exile-run transit schools.

⁵⁶ Former advisor on Tibet and Buddhism to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs Amitabh Mathur recommends the following: "The entire Tibet policy will become a non starter if problems and grievances of the Tibetan community are not addressed. Tibetans who were eligible for Indian citizenship and have taken foreign nationality having settled abroad could be considered for grant of OCI. Urgent steps should be taken to give better documents to enable international travel and procedures to obtain identity papers should be simplified, Tibetans taking enormous risks to illegally visit India to have darshan of high ranking Lamas must not be repatriated thereby dealing a blow to the conception of India being a safe haven. Persecuted Tibetans fleeing to India should be treated on par with minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan seeking asylum in India. Archaic rules forbidding visiting Tibetans, if holding foreign passports, from staying overnight in the Settlements unless permitted by the FRRO must be reexamined. In most cases these affect expatriate Tibetans coming back to meet their relatives.

Such rules are arbitrarily and sometimes dishonestly implemented.” Mathur, Amitabh, ‘Recalibrating India’s Policy and Strategy on Tibet, China’, Deepstrat, 13 July 2021, <https://deepstrat.in/2021/07/13/india-policy-and-strategy-on-tibet/>

⁵⁷ Tibetans in India and the Dharamsala administration have also expressed fears for the loss of identity and culture for Tibetans if they take up Indian citizenship, even when it is possible. That taboo now seems to be easing with more Tibetans who live in India seeking citizenship. In an article about voting rights for Tibetans in India, Tenzing Dhamdul and Kalyani Yeoli wrote: “Historically, Tibetans have participated in Indian general elections primarily in the border regions adjacent to Tibet, including Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, and West Bengal. However, recent years have witnessed a rise in Tibetan voter participation across India. This increase can be attributed to a landmark decision and subsequent directives issued by the Election Commission of India. In 2014, the Election Commission’s chief instructed all Indian states to include Tibetans and their descendants born in India in the electoral rolls. This directive aligned with the 2013 court order that granted Indian citizenship to Tibetan refugees born in India between January 26, 1950, and July 1, 1987. However, in implementing the 2014 directive, the government of India effectively decoupled the right to vote from citizenship for Tibetans residing in India. The government mandated that Tibetans must legally apply for citizenship rather than claim it as a birthright.” Tenzin Dhamdul and Kalyani Yeoli, ‘Tibetan participation in India’s elections, past, present and future’, The Diplomat, 7 June 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/tibetan-participation-in-indias-elections-past-present-and-future/>

⁵⁸ “India cannot leave the future of Buddhism to either China or chance,” wrote commentator Indrani Bagchi, ‘India should declare support for Dalai Lama’s reincarnation as the spiritual leader directs it’, 12 July 2021, Times of India, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/globespotting/india-should-declare-support-for-dalai-lamas-reincarnation-as-the-spiritual-leader-directs-it/>

⁵⁹ Indrani Bagchi, *ibid*.

⁶⁰ Former Special Adviser to the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs Amitabh Mathur recommends: “It is imperative that the Government of India should declare without further delay that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is a religious matter which is to be decided by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans and the Indian government will honour his wishes. This has been unequivocally stated in the US government’s Tibet Policy and Support Act. The Act seeks to sanction officials who would interfere in the process of Dalai Lama’s reincarnation. India should be seen as the centripetal force in safeguarding the sanctity of the process and firmly oppose outside interference and influence. This will remove doubts and anxiety from the minds of Tibetans whether the 15th will be welcome in India and Indian support will continue after the 14th is no more.” ‘Recalibrating India’s policy and strategy on Tibet vis-à-vis China’, Deepstrat, 13 July 2021, <https://deepstrat.in/2021/07/13/india-policy-and-strategy-on-tibet/> For further analysis see Gabriel Lafitte, rukor.org

⁶¹ “Along with the political implications, this might also have legal implications.” Gokhale, Vijay. ‘The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India’, 11 November 2024, Carnegie India, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-next-dalai-lama-preparing-for-reincarnation-and-why-it-matters-to-india?lang=en¢er=india>

⁶² In 2018, when the Dharamsala leadership organized an event to thank India for its support, the then secretary for foreign affairs Vijay Gokhale sent a directive to Indian officials saying that it was “not desirable” for them to participate in the event and referring to “the sensitive nature of the subject.”

⁶³ *Ibid*

⁶⁴ *Ibid*.

⁶⁵ Amitabh Mathur says: “A critical component of a more robust engagement would be to bring the Tibet issue on the table not merely for its humanitarian aspect but also for safeguarding our territorial integrity and preventing the ecological and environmental damage that indiscriminate Chinese policies pose.” ‘Recalibrating India’s policy and strategy on Tibet vis-à-vis China’, Deepstrat, 13 July 2021, <https://deepstrat.in/2021/07/13/india-policy-and-strategy-on-tibet/>

⁶⁶ For further analysis see Gabriel Lafitte, rukor.org

⁶⁷ Shishir Gupta in ‘The Himalayan Faceoff: Chinese Assertion and the Indian Riposte’, 2014. Gupta describes how on 1 August 2000, a 50-foot high wall of water from the Sutlej river tore into the mountain gorges of Kinnaur, Shimla and Mandi districts in Himachal Pradesh, washing away everything that came in its path. More than 100 people lost their lives, while 120 km of the strategic Old Hindustan–Tibet highway was washed away and 98 bridges of various sizes and shapes were completely destroyed. He writes: “The two flash floods were initially dismissed by the then NDA government as freak natural phenomena caused by cloudbursts. In fact, they would have remained nondescript files in the National Disaster Management Cell of the Ministry of Agriculture but for Indian Space Research Organisation’s (ISRO) stunning revelation that the floods had been caused by the premeditated release of excess water that had collected in water bodies in the Sutlej and the Siang river basins in Tibet. The Sutlej is part of the Indus river system and enters India from Tibet through Kinnaur district in Himachal Pradesh, while the Siang is part of the mighty Brahmaputra system and enters India in the Upper Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh.” P 60.

⁶⁸ Tsering, Bhuchung K. “Modi’s Uncoordinated Approach on Tibet Gives China the Advantage.” Himal,

⁶⁹ Vincent, Pheroze L. “Dalai Lama Skips Event Attended by Modi.” The Telegraph India, 21 Apr. 2023, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/dalai-lama-skips-event-attended-by-modi/cid/1931180>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹ Account of the event on the Dalai Lama’s website: “Inauguration of International Conference on Relevance of Buddhism in 21st Century.” Dalai Lama Official Website, 17 March 2017, <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2017/homepage-news->

inauguration-of-international-conference-on-relevance-of-buddhism-in-21st-century-inauguration-of-international-conference-on-relevance-of-buddhism-in-21st-century.

⁷² The Tibetan leader was apparently taken to the PM's official residence in an unmarked car and Modi did not come out to receive him, unlike other Indian leaders in the past. The Indian government was apparently concerned about the possibility of an in-person meeting between Xi Jinping and the Dalai Lama in Delhi. According to Jyoti Malhotra in India Today on 13 July 2015, "It seems the Dalai Lama, his advisers and a Hong Kong-based Chinese businessman friend had been discussing a possible meeting between the Dalai Lama and Xi during the latter's Delhi visit. It is believed the government wasn't too happy with these developments and had made its views known to the Dalai Lama's people." Malhotra, Jyoti. "The Dalai Lama Is Making Overtures to Beijing Even as China Seems to Be Hardening Its Stand." India Today, 13 July 2015, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20150713-dalai-lama-narendra-modi-beijing-china-india-820022-2015-07-02>. The Dalai Lama later appeared to confirm that there had been a possibility of a conversation with Xi Jinping, but that had been derailed by India. In 2018 he told Indian journalist Sonia Singh: "I have a brief meeting with prime minister Narendra Modi when Xi Jinping came to Delhi, I also wanted a meeting with him," he said. "So I already have some connection, some contact directly through my friend. So Xi Jinping agreed, but the Indian government ... was a little cautious." The Guardian, 19 May 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/19/dalai-lama-cautious-india-vetoed-china-meeting-2104-xi-jinping>

⁷³ Anushka Saxena is a Research Analyst with the Indo-Pacific Studies programme at Takshashila. "Analysing China's Threat Perception of India-United States Relations." Firstpost, 8 Apr. 2023, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/analysing-chinas-threat-perception-of-india-united-states-relations-12427052.html>.

⁷⁴ Chinese state media, Xinhua. "Update: Nyingchi Initiative released to boost development of trans-Himalaya region." Xinhua, 5 Oct. 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20231005/79bbf537ee2e488c9a05ec73653afce4/c.html> and http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-04/29/c_137144424.htm

⁷⁵ "We will strengthen infrastructure development in railways, roads, power grids, communications and aviation across the trans-Himalayan region, build a three-dimensional trans-Himalayan interconnection network, further expand opening up, intensify economic and trade exchanges and cross-border cooperation, deepen agricultural cooperation and rural revitalization, and jointly build the Trans-Himalaya Economic Cooperation Belt," read the initiative. "Senior Chinese Official Addresses Opening Ceremony of Trans-Himalaya Forum." Xinhua, 6 Oct. 2023, <http://english.news.cn/20231006/28cb0770b68b4d5780146c1975896dca/c.html>.

⁷⁶ Xinhua, 6 October 2023, <http://english.news.cn/20231006/28cb0770b68b4d5780146c1975896dca/c.html>

⁷⁷ Xinhua, 29 August 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/29/c_139325752.htm

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ An article published by the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in August 2024, titled 'United Front Work New Language', stated that Tibet should be translated as 'Xizang' instead of 'Tibet'. The article pointed out that in the context of the use of 'Tibet' outside China, the word 'Tibet' not only represents the Tibet Autonomous Region, but also covers the Tibet-related prefectures and counties in four provinces, namely Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan, and "highly overlaps with the so-called 'Greater Tibet' that the 14th Dalai Lama's group has been advocating to establish for a long time." Wang Linping, a professor at Harbin Engineering University's School of Marxism, says: "Translations like 'Tibet' have created serious misunderstanding in the international community's understanding of the geographical scope of Tibet." See International Campaign for Tibet, 'China is trying to replace "Tibet" with the artificial term "Xizang"', 23 October 2023, <https://www.savetibet.eu/china-is-trying-to-replace-tibet-with-the-artificial-term-xizang/>

⁸⁰ A day later, on 14 November 2023, Wang Junzheng was seen in Colombo with the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister who wrote on his X handle: "Pleased to meet with Wang Junzheng, Secretary of the CPC of Xizang Autonomous Regional Committee in #China at the Foreign Ministry. Amongst other areas, we discussed potential bilateral cooperation."

⁸¹ Arpi, Claude, 'China's "Xizang" move seeks to erase Tibet's historical footprint', posted 28 November 2023, <https://chs.snu.edu.in/commentaries/chinas-xizang-move-seeks-erase-tibets-historical-footprint-beijings-envoys-push>

⁸² Cited by Claude Arpi on his blog: "Nalanda Tradition Excluded from Nalanda?" 5 Aug. 2010, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/2010/08/nalanda-tradition-excluded-from-nalanda.html>.

⁸³ Historian Claude Arpi writes: "One of the present Dalai Lama's most remarkable achievements has been the spiritual and cultural renaissance of the Himalayan Belt. [...] In July 2022, when the Dalai Lama arrived in Leh, more than a lakh devotees (100,000) welcomed him in the streets of Ladakh's capital; at around the same time, Gyaltzen Norbu, the Chinese-educated Panchen Lama toured the areas north of the Indian border (in Arunachal Pradesh sector), hardly 20-30 Tibetans received him." Included in the collection 'The Dalai Lama's Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question', edited by Janannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj, 15 May 2023, Institute for Security and Development Policy and the Organisation for Research on China and Asia, <https://isdpeu/content/uploads/2023/05/ISDP-Special-Paper-Tibet-May-15.pdf>

⁸⁴ Huber, Toni. 'The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India', University of Chicago Press, 2008.

⁸⁵ Toni Huber, *ibid.* This approach is often mirrored in accounts by Western authors of Buddhism, India and Tibet, for instance the notable omissions of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism's central role in William Dalrymple's latest 'The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World', Bloomsbury, September 2024.

⁸⁶ "During the ceremony, [...] both Nitish Kumar and Chancellor Prof. Arvind Panagariya openly acknowledged Tibet's historical and contemporary ties with Nalanda University," Tenzin Dhamdul for FNVA, 'India, Tibet, and the US: Scoring a Diplomatic Six', 22 June 2024, <https://fnvaworld.org/india-tibet-and-the-us-scoring-a-diplomatic-six/>

⁸⁷ Former chancellor George Yeo and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen resigned from the governing board in 2016 in a row over Indian domestic politics and funding of the project. Devraj, Ranjit. "Political Meddling Causes Nalanda University Turmoil." University World News, 9 Dec. 2016, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20161209184008373>. Also "Amartya Sen Justifies Omission of Dalai Lama from Nalanda University Project." Bihar Times, 5 Aug. 2010, <http://www.bihartimes.in/Newsbihar/2010/Aug/Newsbihar05Aug4.html>.

⁸⁸ The troop of invaders was led by Turko-Afghan military general Bakhtiyar Khilji, who sought to extinguish the Buddhist centre of knowledge.

⁸⁹ Schaeffer, K.R, Kapstein, M.T & Tuttle, G. 2013. 'Sources of Tibetan Tradition', Columbia University Press: New York, cited by Rebecca Novick, in a paper prepared for the International Buddhist Conference, 'Buddhism in the 21st Century', 17-19 March 2017, Rajgir International Convention Centre and Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India (unpublished, shared with the kind permission of the author).

⁹⁰ BBC interview by Justin Rowlett, 13 March 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-43208568>

⁹¹ Rebecca Novick wrote: "Now, it is as if the Nalanda tradition has returned with the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism as the most complete and robust Buddhist tradition in modern India. With the decline of Nalanda, [...] 'India's tremendous loss turned out to be Tibet's good fortune' but today Tibet's loss is India's good fortune, since the Tibetans, having proved themselves such loyal guardians of this sacred knowledge, continue to contribute significantly towards the revival and development of Buddhist scholarship and practice in India." Paper prepared for the International Buddhist Conference, 'Buddhism in the 21st Century', 17-19 March 2017, Rajgir International Convention Centre and Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India (unpublished, shared with the kind permission of the author). The J.C. Gold reference cited is from 'The Dharma's Gatekeepers: Sakya Pandita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet', 2008, SUNY Press: New York.

⁹² Martin, Miguel. 'Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia', China Brief, Vol 18, Issue 12, 10 July 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/global-religion-and-the-united-front-the-case-of-mongolia/>

⁹³ Arpi, Claude. "At Nalanda, Science First Met Spirituality." Claude Arpi's Blog, 11 Apr. 2013, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/2013/04/at-nalanda-science-first-met.html>. Also Rebecca Novick in 'The Nalanda Throne: Restoration and Succession', paper prepared for the International Buddhist Conference, 'Buddhism in the 21st Century', 17-19 March 2017, Rajgir International Convention Centre and Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Bihar, India (unpublished, shared with the kind permission of the author).

⁹⁴ According to Anuradha Mitra, a Kolkata-based professor of mathematics. "Without zero, we wouldn't have computers," Dr Mitra said. "He also did pioneering works in extracting square and cubic roots, and applications of trigonometrical functions to spherical geometry. He was also the first to attribute radiance of the moon to reflected sunlight." 'Nalanda, the university that changed the world', BBC, 23 February 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20230222-nalanda-the-university-that-changed-the-world>

⁹⁵ Sharma, Yojana. "India's Ancient University Returns to Life." BBC News, 29 May 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-22160989>.

⁹⁶ Arpi, Claude. "At Nalanda, Science First Met Spirituality." Claude Arpi's Blog, 11 Apr. 2013, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/2013/04/at-nalanda-science-first-met.html>.

⁹⁷ Published by Wisdom Books, <https://wisdomexperience.org/product/science-and-philosophy-in-the-indian-buddhist-classics-vol-4/>

⁹⁸ Bagchi, Indrani. "India Should Declare Support for Dalai Lama's Reincarnation as the Spiritual Leader Directs It." The Times of India, 12 July 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/globespottings/india-should-declare-support-for-dalai-lamas-reincarnation-as-the-spiritual-leader-directs-it/>.

⁹⁹ World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/buddhist-countries>

¹⁰⁰ Kirti Rinpoche, 'Three Lives in One Lifetime' by Jianglin Li, translated and edited by Matthew Akester, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Zhang, Juyan. "China's Faith Diplomacy." In: Religion and Public Diplomacy, edited by Phillip Seib, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, New York.

¹⁰² The full statement by Zhang Yijiong at the press conference on 21 October 2017 can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeYXMZIUaIA>. Cited by International Campaign for Tibet, 1 November 2017, <https://savetibet.org/xi-jinping-cementsgrip-on-power-at-party-congress-new-leaders-revealed-and-their-influence-on-tibet-policy/#6>

¹⁰³ Xi told an audience at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March 2014: "Buddhism originated in ancient India. After it was

introduced into China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism and finally became [...] Buddhism with Chinese characteristics." For an English translation, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/201403/t20140331_678150.html

¹⁰⁴ The Chinese state media described his visit to the TAR to discuss security and counter-terror work in July 2014, accompanied by Wu Yingjie, who later became Party Secretary, and Deng Xiaogang, the former executive vice chairman of Tibet Autonomous Region and Secretary of Politics and Law Commission. Zhang Yijiong met troops from the People's Liberation Army stationed in the border areas of Ngari (Chinese: Ali) in the TAR, and visited checkpoints and Buddhist monasteries in the border area. He talked about the need for Buddhist monks and nuns to "resolutely fight against the 14th Dalai Clique's separatist activities in Tibet and safeguard the reunification of motherland." Tibet Daily, 10 July 2014, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0710/c83084-25263321.html>

¹⁰⁵ Van Schaik, Sam. 'Tibetan Zen: Rediscovering a Lost Tradition' (2015), examines texts spanning a period of Chan (Zen) presence and influence at the oasis kingdom of Dunhuang during the imperial Tibetan period. Buddhist Door, 11 May 2019, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/the-chen-zen-connection-between-china-and-tibet-a-conversation-with-sam-van-schaik/>

¹⁰⁶ Van Schaik, Sam. 'Tibetan Zen: Rediscovering a Lost Tradition' (2015), examines texts spanning a period of Chan (Zen) presence and influence at the oasis kingdom of Dunhuang during the imperial Tibetan period. Buddhist Door, 11 May 2019, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/the-chen-zen-connection-between-china-and-tibet-a-conversation-with-sam-van-schaik/>

¹⁰⁷ "In the so-called 'Great Debate' that the sources tell us took place at the then newly founded monastery of Bsam yas between 792 and 794 c.e., the renowned Indian scholar Kamalasila is supposed to have debated the Chinese Ch'an master, Hwa shang Mahayana. [...] Most of the Tibetan accounts tell us that Kamalashila won the debate, and this is said to have sealed the fate of Tibetan Buddhism forever. King Khri srong lde'u btsan, who served as 'arbiter' or 'judge' (dpang po) in the debate, declared that henceforth Tibetans would follow the Indian Buddhist tradition, in particular the system of Nagarjuna." Cabezon, Jose. 'Freedom from Extremes', Wisdom Publications, 2007, p 19.

¹⁰⁸ Claude Arpi summarises the debate as follows: "The first one — the Chinese school, influenced by Taoism — was of the opinion that enlightenment was an instantaneous revelation or realization. This system of thought had spread throughout China. The second school, taught by the Indian Pandits of Nalanda, known as the 'gradual school' — asserted that enlightenment was a gradual process, not an 'instant one', but requiring long study, practice and analysis." Arpi, Claude. "Nalanda Tradition Excluded from Nalanda?" Claude Arpi's Blog, 5 Aug. 2010, <https://claudeparti.blogspot.com/2010/08/nalanda-tradition-excluded-from-nalanda.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Guo, Jiaxue. "Buddha's Skull Bone in Hong Kong." China Daily, 26 Apr. 2012, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-04/26/content_15144030.htm.

¹¹⁰ Jing, Yuxin. "(W.E. Talk) Sheng Kai: Is Sinicization the Secularization of Buddhism?" China News Service, 19 Feb. 2023, <http://www.ecns.cn/voices/2023-02-19/detail-ihckwpqq4531890.shtml>.

¹¹¹ Banagala Uptatissa, head of the Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka, Saxena 2011, cited by David Scott, 'Buddhism in Current China-India Diplomacy', Journal of Current Chinese Affairs 3/2016.

¹¹² Arpi, Claude. "China Is Preparing the Dalai Lama's Succession." Indian Defence Review, 14 Mar. 2023, <https://indiandefencereview.com/china-is-preparing-the-dalai-lamas-succession/>.

¹¹³ The two-day Summit was hosted by India's Ministry of Culture in collaboration with the International Buddhist Confederation on 20-21 April 2023. The theme was: "Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis". Posted on April 20 2023 to Prime Minister Modi's website: <https://www.narendramodi.in/prime-minister-narendra-modi-inaugurates-global-buddhist-summit-569442>

¹¹⁴ Previously, before heightened tensions over the border issue between India and China, Prime Minister Modi used the historic relationship and travels of Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuan Zang to India to highlight connections with China that pre-date the Dalai Lama's arrival. Prior to Xi Jinping's leadership, Indian and Chinese governments agreed to cooperate in the development of a bilateral project at a Chinese temple in Luoyang in 2005, during the then Chinese PM Wen Jiabao's visit to India. In 2015, Xi Jinping took Modi to the White Goose Temple in Xi'an, which commemorates Xuan's return from India. But the political context is now very different.

¹¹⁵ The Panchshil agreement, referencing the five (panch) principles of Buddhist morality, epitomized the 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' (Indo-Chinese Brotherhood) accord. By 1956 and as China-India relations deteriorated, the policy became known as "Bye bye bhai bhai".

¹¹⁶ Shakya, Tsering. Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet since 1947. Pimlico, 1999.

¹¹⁷ Ober, Douglas. 'Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India', Stanford University Press, 2023, p 279.

¹¹⁸ Pranab Mukherjee 2008, cited by Scott, David. 'Buddhism in Current China-India Diplomacy', Journal of Current Chinese Affairs 3/2016: pp 139-174.

¹¹⁹ Twitter/X post, @AbeShinzo, 30 August 2014, cited by Ober, ibid.

¹²⁰ Ober, Douglas, 'Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India', Stanford University Press, 2023.

¹²¹ Ibid. Following a cultural convention in Calcutta in 1949, Nehru remarked: "It was gratifying to see all these nations of the Buddhist world looking to India, not only with friendship but as the mother country where their great religion originated."

¹²² Ober writes in his book 'Dust on the Throne', "Like most Indian leftists and liberal caste Hindus, Nehru believed that caste would disappear after the 'progress' of 'modernity' and economic socialist reforms. The annihilation of caste, in other words, played no role in Nehru's secularized Buddhism. Ambedkar's conversion cut to the very foundations of this oppression and, in doing so, re-emphasized the historical antagonism between brahminism and Buddhism, Hindus and Buddhists. [...] Growing dalit conversions to Buddhism and the Dalai Lama's exile to India in 1959 undermined Nehru's attempt to synthesize universalism and nationalism."

¹²³ For images and context of birthplaces of the Dalai Lamas, see International Campaign for Tibet, 'Chinese Policy and the Dalai Lama's birthplaces', 10 July 2014.

¹²⁴ Chinese commentator Liu Silu acknowledged in the PRC-owned Hong Kong newspaper Wen Wei Po that: "Recovery of the entire 90,000 square kilometers of land will be very difficult. At least, the birthplace of the Sixth Dalai should be recovered." Wen Wei Po Online, March 22, 2009, cited in International Campaign for Tibet. Chinese Policy and the Dalai Lama's birthplaces, 10 July 2014, <https://savetibet.org/chinese-policy-and-the-dalai-lamas-birthplaces/>.

¹²⁵ The Indian Republic News Portal, New Map Shows Arunachal As Part Of China, 28 June 2014. In December 2021, on the eve of a new Chinese Land Border Law taking effect, China announced that it had standardized in Tibetan and Chinese characters the names of 15 places in Arunachal Pradesh, which it names as 'Zangnan'. Mohan, Geeta. "China Renames 15 Places in Arunachal Pradesh; India Rejects 'Invented' Names." India Today, 31 Dec. 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-renames-15-places-arunachal-pradesh-india-rejects-invented-names-1894377-2021-12-31>.

¹²⁶ Tenzing Dhamdul, Tenzin Sherap and Tenzin Younten, 'Thread of Beads: An Analysis of China's renaming of 62 locations in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh since 2017', Foundation for Non Violent Alternatives, 10 April 2024, <https://fnvaworld.org/thread-of-beads-an-analysis-of-chinas-renaming-of-62-locations-in-the-indian-state-of-arunachal-pradesh-since-2017/>. When three Indian athletes from Arunachal Pradesh were barred by China from participation in the Asian Games in Hangzhou in September 2023, India responded by saying that it "firmly rejects differential treatment of its citizens based on domicile or ethnicity. Arunachal Pradesh was, is, and will always remain an integral and inalienable part of India." "3 Athletes from Arunachal Pradesh Denied Visa to China; MEA Responds." Business Standard, 22 Sept. 2023, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/3-athletes-from-arunachal-pradesh-denied-visa-to-china-mea-responds-123092200653_1.html and other Indian media.

¹²⁷ Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, link no longer working, cited by Pokharel, Sugam. "Why the Dalai Lama's Visit to a Tiny Town in India Is Causing Such a Stir." CNN, 5 Apr. 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/05/asia/china-tibet-dalai-lama-border/index.html>.

¹²⁸ Those who asked included local officials as detailed in the New York Times: "Dalai Lama's Journey Provokes China." The New York Times, 6 Apr. 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/asia/dalai-lama-sucessor-tibet-china-buddhism.html?_r=0. Also see Bhutia, Tshering Chonzom. "The Politics of Reincarnation: India, China, and the Dalai Lama." The Diplomat, 20 Apr. 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/the-politics-of-reincarnation-india-china-and-tibet/>.

¹²⁹ In answer to a similar question at the same press event in Tawang, the Dalai Lama said about the place of his rebirth "Nobody knows". He also referred to his "everyday prayer", the Shantideva prayer, saying that as long as sentient beings remain, he will be there to help them. The press conference on 9 April 2017, can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9o6RTKzNOqE>

¹³⁰ The Dalai Lama gave a lighthearted response to a query he received in the UK of whether he would be reborn in London, saying: "Yes, that's possible. Since my childhood, we have described Englishmen as 'big noses'. So my next reincarnation could be as a big nose! That is theoretically speaking. It is important that there is some usefulness. As I always pray, as long as sentient beings' pain and suffering remains, I will remain in order to serve them. That is my favourite sort of prayer. I try to develop that kind of determination. So naturally, my next life will be wherever it would have some usefulness. That is for sure. So, if there is more usefulness here, then naturally I will be reborn here." Transcript of the Dalai Lama's public talk at the Royal Albert Hall, London, 22 May 2008, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/transcripts-and-interviews/universal-responsibility-modern-world>

¹³¹ The Dalai Lama said: "I see that India is standing more firm [sic] in dealing with China. I saw this shift when I was allowed by the Indian Government to go to Tawang in November 2009 despite reservations from Beijing." Interview with Shishir Gupta in 2012, 'The Himalayan FaceOff: China's Assertion and the Indian Riposte', p 220.

¹³² Account by the Karma Kagyu office, <https://kagyuoffice.org/after-400-years-the-gyalwang-karmapa-returns-to-arunachalpradesh/>

¹³³ Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. "Why Do India and China Keep Fighting Over This Desolate Terrain?" The New York Times, 27 June 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/27/magazine/india-china-border.html>.

¹³⁴ The Fractured Himalaya: India Tibet China 1949-1962', Penguin Random House India, 2021.

¹³⁵ "Xi Focus: Xi Urges Troops to Forge 'Great Wall of Steel' in Guarding Chinese Borders." Xinhua, 9 June 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20230609/3bb4c5a7d3b44352925b9c027064f0bd/c.html>.

¹³⁶ China sets policy directions for developing Tibet': CCTV.com, 30 August 2020.

¹³⁷ Youd, Frankie. "Travelling through the Tibetan Mountains: Tibet's First Bullet Train." *Railway Technology*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.railway-technology.com/features/travelling-through-the-tibetan-mountains-tibets-first-bullet-train/>.

¹³⁸ Xi Jinping visits troops in the TAR in 2021, CCTV video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk-cEQmh_al

¹³⁹ A Chinese tourist's YouTube video shows the bullet train route: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWnmUbsO1C8>

¹⁴⁰ Liu, Xuanzun. "Man-Portable HJ-12 Anti-Tank Missile Makes PLA Debut in Tibet." *Global Times*, 25 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1229590.shtml>.

¹⁴¹ Liu, Xuanzun. "Man-Portable HJ-12 Anti-Tank Missile Makes PLA Debut in Tibet." *Global Times*, 25 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1229590.shtml>.

¹⁴² "王君正在西藏出入境边防检查总站调研." *Tibet Daily*, 28 January 2022, http://www.xizang.gov.cn/xwzx_406/zwyw/202201/t20220128_282147.html

¹⁴³ For examples, see International Campaign for Tibet report: "Inside Tibet report – Alignment of Xinjiang, Tibet security forces underline China's lockdown policies for Tibetans and Uyghurs". 22 January 2019, <https://www.savetibet.eu/inside-tibet-report-alignment-of-xinjiang-tibet-security-forces-underline-chinas-lockdown-policies-for-tibetans-and-uyghurs/>.

¹⁴⁴ Ranade, Jayadeva. "Border Security Is Receiving Higher Salience in Tibet." *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 11 Feb. 2022, <https://www.vindia.org/article/2022/february/11/bordersecurity-is-receiving-higher-salience-in-tibet>.

¹⁴⁵ International Campaign for Tibet report: "The origin of the 'Xinjiang model' in Tibet under Chen Quanguo: Securitizing ethnicity and accelerating assimilation". 19 December, 2018, <https://savetibet.org/the-origin-of-the-xinjiang-model-in-tibet-under-chen-quanguo-securitizing-ethnicity-and-accelerating-assimilation/>.

¹⁴⁶ In April 2019.

¹⁴⁷ Real Time China, PLA personnel by Su Zimu, 4 August 2021, <https://shorturl.at/y5T6d>

¹⁴⁸ Ranade, Jayadeva. "Implications of Recent Developments in PLA's Western Theatre Command." *Centre for Air Power Studies*, 28 Sept. 2021, Appendix, <http://capsindia.org.managewebsiteportal.com/files/documents/d81e5271-4e92-4ced-901c-9a7b569fb683.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ Ranade writes: "Underscoring Xi Jinping's attention to the WTC, the CCP-owned *Global Times* on 13 September (2021), publicised that Xi Jinping had written a letter to a Battalion (Unit No: 77656) stationed in the border region of Tibet 'at the northern foot of the Himalayas'. The letter complimented them for guarding the 'sacred territory of the motherland with youth and blood' and accomplishing their mission 'brilliantly'. The letter is obviously intended to encourage PLA personnel deployed in harsh conditions at high-altitudes and is confirmation that close attention is being paid to this border." Jayadeva Ranade, *ibid*.

¹⁵⁰ Cited by Arpi, Claude. "The Dragon's Dilemma: Recruiting Tibetans in PLA." *The Daily Guardian, India*, 19 Mar. 2021, <https://thedailyguardian.com/the-dragons-dilemma-recruiting-tibetans-in-pla/>.

¹⁵¹ "Tibetan Students Offered Military Training for a Break on School Fees." *Radio Free Asia*, 11 Aug. 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/training-08112021123320.html>.

¹⁵² "Beijing Gives Higher Pay Raise for Graduate PLA Recruits Posted in Tibet." *Tibetan Review*, 17 May 2016, <https://www.tibetanreview.net/beijing-gives-higher-pay-raise-for-graduate-pla-recruits-posted-in-tibet/>.

¹⁵³ Ram Madhav Attends Funeral of Tibetan Soldier in Ladakh, Then Deletes Tweet." *The Wire, India*, 8 Sept. 2020, <https://thewire.in/politics/ram-madhav-attends-funeral-of-tibetan-soldier-in-ladakh>.

¹⁵⁴ Long, Xingchun. "India Flexing Its Muscles at the Border Shows Its Loser Mentality." *Global Times*, 14 Nov. 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238931.shtml>.

¹⁵⁵ FNVA report: Resetting India's Tibet Policy 2022. FNVA, 6 February 2023, <https://fnvaworld.org/resetting-indias-tibet-policy-2022/>.

¹⁵⁶ White House. 'Quad Leaders Joint Statement: "The Spirit of the Quad"', 12 March 2021.

¹⁵⁷ According to one Chinese analyst cited by the International Crisis Group, the bilateral relationship of India and China faced "troubling times" from 2016 onwards, when India began to deepen defence cooperation with the U.S.. India signed the Military Logistics Support Agreement and the U.S. designated India as a Major Defence Partner. Fn 75 in the International Crisis Group report, 'Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute', Asia Report No 334, 14 November 2023: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-china/334-thin-ice-himalayas-handling-india-china-border-dispute>. See for example, Li Minwang, 'New Trends and Challenges in China-India Relations', *China International Studies*, September-October 2017.

¹⁵⁸ "Nationalist governments in both countries are hardening their stance on the border dispute," the International Crisis Group stated in its report 'Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute' published in November 2023. "The lack

of clarity as to where the line lies means that hostile encounters are bound to recur, potentially even leading to interstate conflict, with far-reaching consequences for regional and global security. The group, an independent organisation which seeks to prevent, resolve or better manage deadly global conflict, said: "While resolution of the dispute remains elusive, China and India should hedge against risks by creating more buffer zones between their armies and strengthening crisis management mechanisms. The two sides should also resume regular political dialogue to modulate the developing rivalry in their relationship."

¹⁵⁹ Malhotra, Jyoti. "The Dalai Lama Is Making Overtures to Beijing Even as China Seems to Be Hardening Its Stand." *India Today*, 13 July 2015, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20150713-dalai-lama-narendra-modi-beijing-china-india-820022-2015-07-02>.

¹⁶⁰ For example, in 2021 high-ranking Chinese diplomat Wang Yi said: "The boundary dispute, an issue left from history, is not the whole story of the China-India relationship," and that "it should be kept in its own place and context. The China-India relationship is essentially about how the world's two largest developing countries get along and pursue development and rejuvenation together." Chinese Consulate in Mumbai. "Statement by the Chinese Consulate in Mumbai." 7 Mar. 2021, http://mumbai.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zxhd/202103/t20210309_10010392.htm. China Daily adopted a similar tone in August 2023, when it undermined Indian concern over the buildup of infrastructure across the border, saying that in contrast talks at military commander level were 'positive' and 'constructive'. "On a more promising note [to Modi's statements], the 19th round of the China-India Corps Commander Level Meeting concluded [...] and it is good to see that the two sides agreed to maintain peace and tranquility on the ground in the border areas," China Daily stated on 16 August 2023. "New Delhi Should Show Sense and Foresight: China Daily Editorial." *China Daily*, 16 Aug. 2023, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/16/WS64dcb3d3a31035260b81c859.html>. China Daily blamed the British, saying: "In the meeting, the two sides had a positive, constructive and in-depth discussion on the remaining issues along the LAC in the western sector, and they agreed to resolve these issues in an 'expeditious manner' and to maintain the momentum of dialogue and negotiations through military and diplomatic channels. The border disputes are in essence historical issues intentionally left by the British colonialists." This differed from India's position. "Our relationship is not normal," External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said in 2022. "Our relationship is not normal, it cannot be normal as the border situation is not normal." Cited by the *Hindustan Times*: "India-China Relation Can't Be Normal Unless...: Jaishankar on Border Issue." *Hindustan Times*, 13 Aug. 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indiachina-relation-can-t-be-normal-unless-jaishankar-on-border-issue-101660362937123.html>.

¹⁶¹ CPPCC report, 2020, on official website: "加快推进西藏边境小康村建设." Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), 24 Sept. 2020, <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/2020/09/24/ART11600907994469243.shtml>.

¹⁶² Announced by Chair of the TAR People's Government Yan Jinhai to the Fifth Session of the 11th TAR People's Congress.

¹⁶³ "A villager of Tibetan ethnic [sic] told the *Global Times* that Chinese residents in border regions live a better life than their Indian neighbours. "The border regions of India are some of the country's poorest regions, but China's poverty reduction and all-round well-off society policy have brought its people better life conditions," said the state-affiliated outlet. Shan, Jie, Fan Wei, and Cui Fandi. 'Villagers in Xizang Border Villages Refute Indian Media's Hype, Which Experts Say Is a Usual Means to Ignore India's Own Problems.' *Global Times*, 27 Sept. 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1235191.shtml?id=11>.

¹⁶⁴ Ranade, Jayadeva. 'Tibet: The Fulcrum of China's Strategic Policy in the Himalayas'. *Vifindia International foundation*, 5 December 2023, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/december/05/tibet-the-fulcrum-of-china-s-strategic-policy-in-the-himalayas>. Also see Singh, Rahul. "Chinese PLA Activity North of Tawang Raises Red Flags." *Hindustan Times*, 26 Oct. 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/more-pla-activity-in-key-sectors-on-eastern-front-101635186129027.html>.

¹⁶⁵ Twitter/X@ChinaWatcher posted on 31 October 2023, <https://twitter.com/PRCWatcher/status/1719396459618161023>

¹⁶⁶ The Army divides the border state into two areas, with Kameng which includes Tawang area and the other called 'Rest of Arunachal Pradesh'.

¹⁶⁷ NatureDesai posted: "Analysis of satellite imagery indicates that the PLA transferred some of the elements of their field camp in Tsona Dzong directly opposite the Tawang sector to a relative depth area at Ritang of Lhontse Dzong. The field camp of a light Combat Aviation Brigade established along the bank of Nyel Chu (Subansiri) also serves as a node for another troubling area along the LAC, the Subansiri frontier. Asaphila, and Tsari Chu valley (of the Longju incident of 1959 and recently built a new village allegedly in Indian territory fame) might be the next flash points along the eastern sector of the LAC in coming times." Cited by Kumar, Ankit. 'China deploying Combined Arms Brigade near Tawang after clashes in Arunachal'. *India Today*, 25 October 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Quoting an Indian Home Ministry security official, the *Indian Telegraph* on 31 October 2023 reported: "A close analysis of recent satellite imagery suggests a massive troop deployment by the Chinese in several depth areas, especially Yangtze in the Tawang sector along the LAC." Also in October, a Light Combined Arms Regiment (CAR) of the Xinjiang Military Region conducted combined training in the Pangong Lake border area in Ladakh. Also see Ranade, Jayadeva. 'Tibet: The Fulcrum of China's Strategic Policy in the Himalayas', *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 5 December, 2023: <https://www.vifindia.org/print/12224>

¹⁶⁹ "China Deploying Combined Arms Brigade near Tawang after Clashes in Arunachal." *India Today*, 25 Oct. 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-deploying-combined-arms-brigade-tawang-clashes-arunachal-pradesh-border-tensions-india-2453475-2023-10-25>.

¹⁷⁰ Cited by Ranade, Jayadeva. "Border Security Is Receiving Higher Salience in Tibet." *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 11 Feb. 2022, <https://www.vindia.org/article/2022/february/11/border-security-is-receiving-higher-salience-in-tibet>.

¹⁷¹ "China's Expansive Frontier: The Rise of Dual-Purpose Settlements in Tibet." *Geospatial Bulletin - Takshashila Institution*, 31

Mar. 2024, <https://geospatialbulletin.takshashila.org.in/p/8-chinas-expansive-frontier-the-rise>.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Figures given by Takshashila Geospatial Bulletin: "Unlocking Tibet: In-Depth Mapping of Transport Infrastructure Through Geo-Spatial Analysis." Geospatial Bulletin - Takshashila Institution, 4 June 2024, <https://geospatialbulletin.takshashila.org.in/p/unlocking-tibet-in-depth-mapping>.

¹⁷⁴ "How Is China Expanding Its Infrastructure to Project Power Along Its Western Borders?" China Power, Center for Strategic and International Studies, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>.

¹⁷⁵ Arpi, Claude. "The Most Serious Strategic Development for India in 2020." Claude Arpi's Blog, 8 Jan. 2021, <https://claupearpi.blogspot.com/2021/01/the-most-serious-strategic-development.html>.

¹⁷⁶ "The border areas are neglected, resulting in meager connectivity, underdevelopment and harsh living environments, triggering enormous migration from such areas. These areas are seeing an enormous emigration due to hostile living conditions, abysmal infrastructure, lack of connectivity and poor health and education facilities all along the border. Certain villages in border districts are completely depopulated and called ghost villages. Migration from the border areas generates both internal and external security problems." Colonel B S Nagial, "Development at border villages near LAC". The India Foundation blog, 24 January 2023, <https://chintan.indiafoundation.in/articles/development-at-border-villages-near-lac/>

¹⁷⁷ Matthew Akester, presentation for the Foundation for Non-Violent Alternatives, Delhi, 13 September 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZX7eTqrTJs&t=36s>

¹⁷⁸ Jianglin Li. 'When the Iron Bird Flies: China's Secret War on Tibet'. Stanford University Press, 2022.

¹⁷⁹ In a report for Turquoise Roof, Barnett summarized his findings as follows: "China now has constructed 22 villages and settlements within Bhutan's customary borders, of which 19 are villages and three are small settlements. Seven of these cross-border villages and settlements have been constructed since early 2023, signaling a marked increase in the speed and extent of construction in the annexed areas. Three of the 19 villages are going to be upgraded to towns. It looks increasingly certain that China will not fulfill its original offer to give back to Bhutan the land in Bhutan's north-east where it has built villages. Bhutan is likely to get back only those areas that China appears to have claimed or annexed largely as leverage and to give the subsequent appearance of concessions. China's cross-border village strategy sets a problematic precedent for the international community, since there is no obvious counter for a small state acting alone in response to opportunistic territorial claims and subsequent annexation by a major power. [...] Eight of the Chinese villages are in a western area of Bhutan that the historian Tsering Shakya says was ceded to Bhutan in 1913 by the then ruler of Tibet, the 13th Dalai Lama. China has built those eight villages for strategic reasons: it seeks possession of that western area of Bhutan because it includes an 89-sq km plateau called Doklam, control of which would give China major strategic advantage in its ongoing confrontation with India. China also says its aim is to get Bhutan to agree to host a Chinese embassy in the Bhutanese capital, Thimphu." 'Forceful diplomacy: China's cross-border villages in Bhutan', 15 October 2024, <https://turquoiseroof.org/forceful-diplomacy-china-cross-border-villages-in-bhutan/>

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Pollock, John, and Damien Symon. "China Takes More Land in Bhutan Before Expected Border Deal." The World Today, Chatham House, 1 Dec. 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-12/china-takes-more-land-bhutan-expected-border-deal>.

¹⁸² Robert Barnett and his team published the news on 7 May, 2021 in Foreign Policy: Barnett, Robert, et al. "China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country's Territory." Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces/>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Wall Street Journal video interview, 8 May 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9xe7N_OEXs

¹⁸⁵ Facebook post, April 2024.

¹⁸⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, India. "Visit of Prime Minister to Bhutan (March 21-22, 2024)." Government of India, 2024, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/37721/Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Bhutan_March_2122_2024.

¹⁸⁷ Arpi, Claude. "Why a Tibetan Lama Visiting Bhutan Is Significant." Firstpost India, 21 Apr. 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/why-a-tibetan-lama-visiting-bhutan-is-significant-13762045.html>.

¹⁸⁸ FNVA. Resetting India's Tibet Policy 2022. FNVA, 2022, <https://fnvaworld.org/resetting-indias-tibet-policy-2022/>.

¹⁸⁹ Sun of Devotion: Stream of Blessings'. Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2016.

¹⁹⁰ At a meeting of pro-Shugden supporters in Nepal in 2019, Dechen Tulku said he was donating \$1000 to begin the project.

¹⁹¹ Hillman, Ben. 'Monastic Politics and the Local Estate in China; Authority and Autonomy in an Ethnically Tibetan Prefecture',

The China Journal no. 54, July 2005, p38

¹⁹² Lague, David, and Stephanie Nebehay. "Group That Hounded Dalai Lama Disbands After Reuters Exposes Chinese Backing." Reuters, 12 Mar. 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-dalai-lama-idUSKCN0WD203> and Lague, David, Paul Mooney, and Benjamin Kang Lim. "China Co-Opts a Buddhist Sect in Global Effort to Smear Dalai Lama." Reuters

¹⁹³ Ibid

¹⁹⁴ Lama Tseta showed a video of one such threat to the author of this report.

¹⁹⁵ The letter is reproduced in the book 'Dolgyal Shugden: A History: The Real Story behind the Shugden Cult's Campaign against the Dalai Lama'. Dolgyal Shugden Research Society, Tibet House, New York, US, and Hay House, 2014.

¹⁹⁶ The Ven Lobsang Gyatso was the author of many books and a renowned teacher born in Kham, Tibet. Educated at Drepung Monastic University, he founded the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics in 1973 with the blessing of the Dalai Lama. He was a strong advocate for the education of nuns.

¹⁹⁷ Jane McCartney, The Times, 22 June 2007.

¹⁹⁸ 'Dharamsala Murder Linked to Shugden Group' in Jansatta (28 April 1997), Hindi language national daily, Chandigarh edition, footnote 334 in the book 'Dolgyal Shugden: A History: The Real Story behind the Shugden Cult's Campaign against the Dalai Lama' by the Dolgyal Shugden Research Society, published by Tibet House, New York, US, 2014, distributed by Hay House, which gives a full account of the triple murder. Also see Bultrini Raimondo, 'The Dalai Lama and the King Demon: Tracking a Triple Murder Mystery Through the Mists of Time'. Hay House UK, July 2013.

¹⁹⁹ Wangdi, Tashi. "My Life: Born in free Tibet, served in Exile", Tibetan Library of Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 2024.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ "Centre provides Z-Category security to Dalai Lama after threat assessment", DD News, the Government of India, with inputs from ANI, 13 February 2025, <https://ddnews.gov.in/en/centre-provides-z-category-security-to-dalai-lama-after-threat-assessment/>

²⁰² Accounts in two books cited.

²⁰³ Former Indian intelligence Special Secretary Amitabh Mathur, who was appointed as a Special Adviser to the federal Ministry of Home Affairs advising on Tibet and Buddhism, presentation to the Indian Council for World Affairs, 2018.

²⁰⁴ 'Karmapa urges Tibetans unity following emotional reunion with the Dalai Lama', Phayul newsdesk, 29 August 2024, from the Karmapa's statement posted on his official Facebook account. <https://www.phayul.com/2024/08/29/50781/>

²⁰⁵ From Dharamsala, the Karmapa retorted that the only purpose of doing so would be to put it on the then Chinese leader Jiang Zemin's head.

²⁰⁶ Posted on the Karmapa's YouTube channel, 16 March, 2018 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Adl4DMRFkm4&t=588s>

²⁰⁷ In February 2012, the then National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon had chaired a meeting among intelligence and other government officials, concluding that "While no one from Indian agencies could vouch that Ogyen Trinley has nothing to do with Beijing, the chances of his being a Chinese agent are extremely remote as he came to India when he was 14. By calling him a Chinese agent, India was not only antagonizing his supporters and Tibetans at large but also potentially delivering him into Beijing's lap. Hence, the decision to engage Ogyen was taken and his future statements on China would be watched." Gupta Shishir. 'The Himalayan Faceoff: Chinese Assertion and the Indian Ripose', Hachette India, 2014.

²⁰⁸ Tashi Wangdi, who was Dharamsala's Minister for Religion at the time, gives a detailed account of the case and its background in his memoir. Wangdi, Tashi. "My Life: Born in free Tibet, served in Exile", Tibetan Library of Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 2024.

²⁰⁹ "The criminal case against Ogyen Dorje sparked off a war of words between R&AW and the Intelligence Bureau, with the former accusing the latter of trying to put Ogyen Dorje and his chief backer the Dalai Lama in place," Gupta, executive editor of the Hindustan Times, writes in his book 'The Himalayan Faceoff: Chinese Assertion and the Indian Ripose', Hachette India, 2014. "Given the implications of the 17th Karmapa and the Tibet issue and the strong difference of opinion between Indian agencies, National Security Advisor [Shivshankar] Menon stepped in as soon as the details of the Una police raid were made known to Delhi. Much to his credit, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh saw through the complex high-voltage game after a top-level Buddhist delegation met him on 29 January 2011 in support of Ogyen. After discussing the issue with his principal advisors, the PM made it clear that the Karmapa or his supporters could only buy land in India through benami transactions which normally have a cash component. It was also brought to the notice of the Una police that as the Karmapa's supporters were Tibetans, Europeans and Americans, the cash offerings had to be in Chinese Yuan, Euros or US dollars."

²¹⁰ The Modi government dropped most travel restrictions, with the exception of Sikkim – he is still not allowed to travel to Rumtek.

²¹¹ His first visit to the U.S. was in 2008, where he visited Woodstock, an influential Buddhist centre set up by the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje.

²¹² Tamang claimed that his administration has actively pursued the Karmapa's return engaging with Union Ministers Rajnath Singh, Kiren Rijiju and Home Minister Amit Shah to facilitate it. The election results for the new Sikkim Legislative Assembly were declared on 2 June 2024. "Prem Singh Tamang, Pawan Chamling Labeled 17th Karmapa a 'Chinese Agent', Forced His Exit from India and Sikkim." India Today North East, 11 Apr. 2024, <https://www.indiatodayne.in/elections/sikkim-assembly-election/story/prem-singh-tamang-pawan-chamling-labeled-17th-karmapa-a-chinese-agent-forced-his-exit-from-india-and-sikkim-978008-2024-04-11>.

²¹³ Indian media broadcasts said that the Karmapa's meeting with the Dalai Lama in Zurich in August – the first since January 2017 – had "fuelled speculation" that the religious leader might return to India. Northeast Live, India, 27 August 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V7o8FHWcQw> Whether the Karmapa will be able to trust the Indian government sufficiently to do so is another question.

²¹⁴ There was no reference to the Dalai Lama in the statement, with the third clause simply stating: "As the topic of Shamar Rinpoche's reincarnation is a crucial point of concern within the Kamtsang, we will not accept interference from any uninvolved parties." Lewis, Craig C. "Two Karmapas Issue Joint Statement Aimed at Healing Decades-Old Rift." Buddhist Door Global, 18 Oct. 2018, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/two-karmapas-issue-joint-statement-aimed-at-healing-decades-old-rift/>.

²¹⁵ Lewis, Craig. 'Senior Tibetan Lama Announces Decision to Disrobe, Marry Childhood Friend', Buddhist Door, 30 March 2017, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/senior-tibetan-lama-announces-decision-to-disrobe-marry-childhood-friend>

²¹⁶ Whitaker, Justin. "Two Karmapas Issue Joint Statement on Reincarnation of Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche." Buddhist Door, 5 Dec. 2023, <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/two-karmapas-issue-joint-statement-on-reincarnation-of-kunzig-shamar-rinpoche/>.

²¹⁷ Translation from Tibetan into English of the Karmapa's statement on 27 November 2019 by Matthew Akester, shared with kind permission.

²¹⁸ Interviewed by the author; anonymity was requested.

²¹⁹ The pledge was made during Prachanda's visit to Beijing in September 2023. The China-Nepal joint statement from Prachanda's visit said: "The Nepali side pledged to provide the Chinese side a pair of Ek Singhe Gaida (unicorn rhino) as a gift from the Government and people of Nepal to the Government and people of China, as a symbol for the long-lasting friendship between the two countries." <https://mofa.gov.np/joint-statement-between-the-peoples-republic-of-china-and-nepal/>

²²⁰ A Nepalese conservationist said that he wept when required to separate newborns from their mothers to provide China with a rhino given previously, so that the calves can grow at their facility. Conservationist Bed Kumar Khadka, who was involved in the capture for a previous gift to China, said: "The zoos want calves that can grow at their facility. So we need to separate the newborns from their mothers. At times, I even cried and asked myself why I was doing that." According to Nepal's 2021 rhino census, Chitwan National Park is home to 694 rhinos, Bardiya National Park in the west has 38, Shuklaphanta National Park, also in the west, has 17, and Parsa National Park, adjacent to Chitwan, has three. Joshi, Abhaya Raj. "Conservationists Urge Caution as Nepal to Gift More Rhinos to China." Mongabay News, 30 Sept. 2023, <https://news.mongabay.com/2023/09/conservationists-urge-caution-as-nepal-to-gift-more-rhinos-to-china/>.

²²¹ Bipindra, N.C. "China-Nepal Ties 'Nose-Dive' Over Encroachment, Espionage & Economy; \$64B BRI Fails To Impress." EurAsian Times, 6 Nov. 2023, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/xi-jinpings-china-hasnt-provided-desired-bri-outcomes/>.

²²² As defined in a joint statement between Nepal and China signed in September 2023, 'Strategic Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship for Development and Prosperity', <https://mofa.gov.np/joint-statement-between-the-peoples-republic-of-china-and-nepal/>

²²³ Nepalese Foreign Minister Saud was cited by Outlook India in July 2023 as saying: "Not a single project in Nepal under the BRI has been executed. The project implementation plan of the BRI is still under consideration." "Nepal Foreign Minister Rejects China's Claim of Building Pokhara Airport Under Belt and Road Initiative." Outlook India, 12 July 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/nepal-foreign-minister-rejects-china-s-claim-of-building-pokhara-airport-under-belt-and-road-initiative-news-302254>.

²²⁴ "MCC Board Approves \$50 Million Additional Funding for Nepal Compact." Kathmandu Post, 3 Jan. 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/01/03/mcc-board-approves-50-million-additional-funding-for-nepal-compact>.

²²⁵ Anupam, Birat. 'How Will US Foreign Aid Freeze Affect Nepal?' The Diplomat, 10 February 2025, <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/how-will-us-foreign-aid-freeze-affect-nepal/>

²²⁶ "CPC Tibet Secretary Wang Calls on Prime Minister Dahal." Kathmandu Post, 9 Nov. 2023, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/11/09/cpc-tibet-secretary-wang-calls-on-prime-minister-dahal>.

²²⁷ Chinese Embassy in Nepal (@PRCAmbNepal). X, 21 June 2023, <https://twitter.com/PRCAmbNepal/status/1671564603707502592>.

²²⁸ @Vijaykarna, 22 June 2023.

²²⁹ Wakabayashi, Daisuke, Bhadra Sharma, and Claire Fu. "China Built Nepal a New Airport. It's Now a Burden." *The New York Times*, 16 Oct. 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/business/nepal-pokhara-airport-china.html>.

²³⁰ 'China's Engagement in Nepal'. Edited by Vijay Kant Karma and Ajaya Bhadra Khanal, the Centre for Social Inclusion and Federalism, 2022.

²³¹ Dorjee Jamyang. 'State of Buddhism under Hindu Kingdom and the emerging democratic secular government of Nepal'. Unpublished briefing paper, shared for this report with the kind permission of the author.

²³² Lafitte, Gabriel. "Lumbini Reborn, Nepal Reborn, Buddha Reborn." *Rukor*, 7 Dec. 2011, <https://rukor.org/lumbini-reborn-nepal-reborn-buddha-reborn/>.

²³³ Jamyang Dorjee, a well-known calligrapher, worked for years with Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari providing direct assistance to the Nepali Buddhist community on the ground. His research for this paper was undertaken at Lodi Gyari's request, and as a result Buddhist colleagues are now involved in key positions within the Nepali government and civil society. Jamyang Dorjee points out that after the unification of Nepal, the government began to 'integrate' and 'Nepalise' many Buddhists in the northern border area and pull them into the Hindu mainstream. One of the reasons for conversion to Hinduism too was enable recruitment in the British and Indian army as Gurkhas, where it was compulsory to write that one's religion is Hindu. This later changed – Gurungs in the British army appealed to the British government to allow them to retain their Buddhist faith, which was agreed.

²³⁴ Details from Jamyang Dorjee, *ibid*.

²³⁵ Jamyang Dorjee and Dilli Ram Dahal. 'Social Composition of the Population: Caste/Ethnicity and Religion in Nepal'. *Population Monograph of Nepal*, Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal, 2003, 1: 104-106.

²³⁶ International Campaign for Tibet. *The Impact of the Nepal Earthquake in Tibet*. 1 May 2015, <https://savetibet.org/the-impact-of-the-nepal-earthquake-in-tibet/>. Among the Buddhist groups involved were the Karuna Shechen, Nepal Buddhist Foundation, and Chogyur Lingpa. Information about the impact of the earthquake on different monastic communities in Nepal can be found on various websites including: <http://www.benchen.org/en/earthquake-in-nepal> and <http://earthquakerelief.cgif.org/>

²³⁷ Hindu rulers explained this through the belief that Buddha is the tenth incarnation of Vishnu.

²³⁸ *Opus cit*.

²³⁹ Lafitte, Gabriel. "Lumbini Reborn, Nepal Reborn, Buddha Reborn." *Rukor*, 7 Dec. 2011, <https://rukor.org/lumbini-reborn-nepal-reborn-buddha-reborn/>.

²⁴⁰ 'Buddhism by Numbers', *Tricycle magazine*, winter 2020, <https://tricycle.org/magazine/buddhist-climate-by-the-numbers/>

²⁴¹ "The Lumbini Project: China's \$3bn for Buddhism." *Al Jazeera, Reporters' Notebook*, 17 July 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/7/17/the-lumbini-project-chinas-3bn-for-buddhism>. Kalinga Seneviratne wrote for *Indepth News*: "When asked what happened to the grand Chinese plan [about Lumbini] announced almost a decade ago, Hari D Rai, Information and PR Chief of the Lumbini Development Trust said, after some initial hesitation, that the investors were Chinese multinational corporations (MNC's) many from the U.S., Indonesia and China." <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/the-world/asia-pacific/3098-mega-developmentproject-at-buddha-s-birthplace>

²⁴² The initiative "aims to strengthen Nepal-China academic and cultural relations through collaborative research and educational exchanges", according to the university website. The ceremony was chaired by Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli, and saw the signing of a formal agreement between Prof. Dr. Subarna Lal Bajracharya, Vice Chancellor of LBU, and Prof. Dr. Duan Peng, President of BLCU. Bhattarai, Usha Kiran. "Lumbini Buddhist University and Beijing Language and Culture University Launch China Institute of Nepal to Strengthen Bilateral Ties." *Lumbini Buddhist University*, 30 Dec. 2024, <https://lbu.edu.np/lumbini-buddhist-university-and-beijing-language-and-culture-university-launch-china-institute-of-nepal-to-strengthen-bilateral-ties/>.

²⁴³ He wore a turmeric coloured kurta for the visit. "The story goes that when Sakyamuni Siddharth left the palace to rediscover the meaning of life, he was clad in a simple white garment," Indian commentator Jyoti Malhotra wrote. "Over the months, the rain, sun and cold leached the white cloth and turned it into pale yellow." 'Modi walked into dragon's den in Lumbini. Why India wants to reclaim Nepal influence from China', *The Print*, India, 17 May 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/global-print/modi-walked-into-dragons-den-in-lumbini-why-india-wants-to-reclaim-nepalinfluence-from-china/959133/>

²⁴⁴ Previously one of the only references to Lumbini in Indian tourist literature had been for the Indian Buddhist circuit tourist train, which for around \$1300 one can travel first class from Delhi to the key sites of Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Kushinagar and Lumbini. <https://www.ircctbuddhisttrain.com/>

²⁴⁵ Although the Dalai Lama lives relatively close to the important Buddhist site of Lumbini, he has only visited once, in 1987, and appears to have chosen not to put the Nepalese government in a sensitive position by asking to do so again.

²⁴⁶ Amish Raj Mulmi notes that the 2013 Chinese film 'Up in the Wind', a coming-of-age story that was shot in Kathmandu, Pokhara and Chitwan, seems to have been influential in forming this impression. Cited by Amish Raj Mulmi, 'All Roads Lead North', *Hurst*.

²⁴⁷ According to a joint China-Nepal statement made on 26 September 2023: "The Nepali side reiterated its firm commitment to the one-China principle. Recognizing that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal Government representing the whole of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, the Nepali side is against 'Taiwan independence.'" Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and Nepal, Beijing, 26 September 2023. http://au.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw_3/202309/t20230926_11150168.htm

²⁴⁸ Rai, Bhriki. 'Nepali citizens detained during Xi Jinping's visit for Tibetan signage on clothes and accessories'. Kathmandu Post, 17 October 2019, at: <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/10/17/nepali-citizens-detained-during-xi-jinping-s-visit-for-tibetan-signage-on-clothes-and-accessories>

²⁴⁹ Others detained included Tibetans, Sherpas, Tamang, a Bhutanese and a Ladakhi, according to the Nepali human rights organization HURON. HURON also reported that in the days leading up to Xi's arrival, and during the visit, many streets in Kathmandu where Tibetans live were deserted as people stayed home for fear of arrest. Even Tibetan homes for the elderly were kept under close watch, and the Tibetan refugee settlement of Jawalakhel was put under virtual lockdown.

²⁵⁰ At the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV), the numbers of Tibetan students arriving from Tibet dropped from 700-800 annually pre-2008 to just six in 2023. Rana, Yudhvir. "No New Arrivals at Tibetan Children Village in Dharamshala This Year as China Tightens Grip." Times of India, 17 Oct. 2024, citing director Tsultrim Dorjee, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/shimla/sharp-decline-in-tibetan-student-arrivals-to-india-amid-chinese-oppression/articleshow/114264529.cms>.

²⁵¹ Nepali Times, 14 June 2016, <http://www.nepalitimes.com/blogs/thebrief/2016/06/14/fewer-tibetan-refugees/>. The Nepalese Department of Immigration gives the following figures in the article of the number of Tibetan refugees in Nepal seeking exit permits to India: 2010: 1,248; 2011: 521; 2012: 320; 2013: 185; 2014: 92; 2015: 85; 2016 (until mid-June): 53. Neupane was cited as saying: "We are implementing a stringent inspection policy at all border points. As a result, the number of Tibetan refugees entering Nepal has dropped, which accounts for the decreasing number of applicants for exit permits for India."

²⁵² See reports on difficulties in obtaining passports by the International Campaign for Tibet, 'A Policy Alienating Tibetans: The Denial of Passports to Tibetans as China intensifies control', <https://www.savetibet.org/policy-alienating-tibetans-denial-passports-tibetans-china-intensifies-control/> and Human Rights Watch, 'One Passport, Two Systems: China's Restrictions on Foreign Travel by Tibetans and Others', <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/13/one-passport-two-systems/chinas-restrictions-foreign-travel-tibetans-and-others>

²⁵³ Kalon Karma Gelek Yuthok, Chairman of the Kalachakra Organising Committee, said that the number compelled to return at the time totaled nearly 7,000. A Tibetan in Bodh Gaya told the International Campaign for Tibet: "The Chinese authorities are using methods that show they really know how to hurt people and force them to go home. Monks have been told that if they do not return home, they will have to leave their monasteries. With others, when warnings that they will lose their pension or job do not work, they threaten their families. Even if they do not care what happens to them, because being at the Kalachakra in the presence of His Holiness is so important, they obviously cannot accept that." ICT report, 9 January 2017, <https://www.savetibet.org/tibetan-pilgrims-compelled-to-return-from-dalai-lama-teaching-in-bodh-gaya-india-china-calls-the-teaching-illegal/>

²⁵⁴ Chinese state media report at http://english.xxw.com/gdtp/201705/t20170502_1788740.html, cited by International Campaign for Tibet: "Inside Tibet: children banned from prayer during holy month and intensification of border security". 12 June 2017, <https://savetibet.org/ict-inside-tibet-children-banned-from-prayer-during-holy-month-and-intensification-of-border-security/#16>.

²⁵⁵ "China's Focus on Rasuwagadhi-Kerung Puts Tatopani-Khasa Border in the Shadows." Kathmandu Post, 10 Aug. 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2019/08/10/china-s-focus-on-rasu-wagadhi-kerung-puts-tatopani-khasa-border-in-the-shadows>.

²⁵⁶ Documented by International Campaign for Tibet, 'Dangerous Crossing' in 2007: <https://savetibet.org/new-report-documents-dangerous-flight-into-exile-for-tibetans/> and in the documentary 'Murder In The Snow', BBC2, 2008, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0056dvc>

²⁵⁷ 'China may misuse MLAT against Tibetan refugees', The Himalayan Times, 14 October 2019, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/china-may-misuse-mlat-against-tibetan-refugees/>

²⁵⁸ According to the Nepal-China Joint Statement of September 2023, "The two sides agreed to undertake joint inspection of China-Nepal boundary. The two sides agreed to bring into force the Agreement Between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Nepal on the Boundary Management System as soon as possible. The two sides agreed to continue consultations on the Protocol between the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Home Affairs of Nepal on the Establishment of Boundary Contact System at Three Levels, so as to elevate the level of border management and cooperation between the two countries." Ibid.

²⁵⁹ First Post (Indian media source), 4 September 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h23pFO2FDsQ>

²⁶⁰ A copy of the report by the Nepalese government, which has not been published, was shared with the BBC. Report, 8 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60288007>

²⁶¹ Beech, Hannah, and Bhadra Sharma. "China's New Great Wall Casts a Shadow on Nepal." The New York Times, 12 Oct. 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/10/12/world/asia/china-nepal-borders.html>.

²⁶² Mulmi, Amish Raj. "Understanding the Modern Nepal-China Border." Kathmandu Post, 13 June 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2019/06/13/understanding-the-modern-nepal-china-border>.

²⁶³ Shneiderman, Sara B. 'Himalayan border citizens: Sovereignty and mobility in the Nepal - Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China border zone'. *Political Geography* 35 (2013) 25e36, <https://shneiderman-commons.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2017/07/Himalayan-border-citizens.pdf>.

²⁶⁴ Giri, Anil. "After a Brief Pause, Chinese Authorities Allow Humla Residents to Reenter Tibet." *Kathmandu Post*, 10 June 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2019/06/10/after-a-brief-pause-chinese-authorities-allow-humla-residents-to-reenter-tibet>.

²⁶⁵ Amish Raj Mulmi points out that 'blurred citizenship' arrangements are not uniform across Nepal's northern borders in practice. "For example, Mustang locals cannot go across and work; although the closest Chinese town to the border is less than the requisite 30 km distance, the closing down of the Mustang border halted any such possibility. On the other hand, Rasuwa locals work up to a year in Gyirong, while those from Humla can work in Taklakot for six months." Amish Raj Mulmi, *ibid*.

²⁶⁶ Sah, Bal Krishna. "China 2023 Map Leaves Out New Map of Nepal." *The Himalayan Times*, 1 Sept. 2023, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/china-2023-map-leaves-out-new-map-of-nepal>.

²⁶⁷ See section on border disputes, p 33, 'Nepal-India Cross Border Relations in the Contemporary Context', Centre for Social Inclusion and Federalism, editors Vijay Kant Karna, Arpan Gelal, 2022.

²⁶⁸ "Nepal Objects to India-China Trade Pact via Lipu Lekh Pass." *The Economic Times*, 9 June 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nepal-objects-to-india-china-trade-pact-via-lipu-lekh-pass/articleshow/47604908.cms>. The 370-square-kilometre strip of land has been under Indian administration for a long time, but Nepal argues that it should be Nepalese territory, as defined by a treaty signed with the British East India Company in 1815. See Nayak, Sohini. "India and Nepal's Kalapani Border Dispute: An Explainer." *Observer Research Foundation*, 24 May 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-and-nepals-kalapani-border-dispute-an-explainer-65354>. Also "Limpiyadhura, Kalapani, Lipulekh Dispute." *The Kathmandu Post*, 4 June 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/06/04/limpiyadhura-kalapani-lipulekh-dispute> and Indian outlet *Drishti*: "India-Nepal Border Dispute." *Drishti IAS*, 23 May 2020, https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-news-analysis/india-nepal-border-dispute/print_manually.

²⁶⁹ 'Nepal-India Cross Border Relations in the Contemporary Context', CESIF Research Series, Editors: Vijay Kant Karna, Arpan Gelal, 2022, p. 33.

²⁷⁰ Strip maps covering 98 per cent of the India-Nepal boundary have been jointly finalised by the two countries, Union minister of state for external affairs V Muraleedharan told Nepalese Parliament in 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/strip-maps-covering-98-of-india-nepal-boundary-jointly-finalised-by-two-countries-government/articleshow/69963362.cms>. The Nepalese thinktank Centre for Social Inclusion and Federalism added that most of the current issues (apart from Kalapani and Susta) arise due to border pillars being swept away by the floods.

²⁷¹ 'Lizi Port to Boost China-Nepal Trade, Xizang Autonomous Region's Opening-Up: Experts.' *Global Times*, 12 Nov. 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1301715.shtml>. More such border posts are planned. The China-Nepal Joint statement of 26 September 2023 included the following: "The Chinese side agreed to work for the early reopening of eligible traditional China-Nepal border trade points. The two sides agreed to maintain communication for the opening of Chentang-Kimathanka, Riwu-Olangchungola ports at an early date." <https://mofa.gov.np/joint-statement-between-the-peoples-republic-of-china-and-nepal/>

²⁷² The Third Pole points out this sum is equal to total government revenues for Nepal in 2018.

²⁷³ "Nepalese Government Approves China Rail Link." *International Railway Journal*, 15 July 2024, <https://www.railjournal.com/infrastructure/nepalese-government-approves-china-rail-link/>.

²⁷⁴ Ramesh Bhushal, Nepal Editor for the Third Pole: "Nepal, China Take Step Towards One of World's Toughest Railways." *The Third Pole*, 7 Sept. 2022, <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/regional-cooperation/nepal-china-take-step-towards-one-of-worlds-toughest-railways/>.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁷⁶ Chinese social media network QQ, 13 August 2022, cited by The Third Pole, as above.

²⁷⁷ Searle, Michael P., et al. "Defining the Himalayan Main Central Thrust in Nepal." *Journal of the Geological Society*, vol. 165, no. 2, 2008, pp. 523–534. <https://doi.org/10.1144/0016-76492007-081>.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁷⁹ "China should offer more generous aid to Nepal amid Sino-Indian border dispute", *Global Times*, 14 August 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1061315.shtml>

²⁸⁰ See International Campaign for Tibet series of reports on developments in Nepal, 'Dangerous Crossings', <https://savetibet.org/tag/dangerous-crossing/>

²⁸¹ Obituary of Chungpo Tsering by Tenzin Dorjee: "Chungpo Tsering: Artist, Activist, Storyteller, Dreamer." *Tibetan Review*, 21 Jan. 2024, <https://www.tibetanreview.net/chungpo-tsering-artist-activist-storyteller-dreamer/>.

²⁸² Mulmi, Amish Raj. *All Roads Lead North*. Hurst, 2021.

²⁸³ Nepalese analyst Amish Raj Mulmi observed, "There's an old Nepali adage on its geographical position everyone loves to spout: that it is a yam between the two boulders, of India and China. With the MCC, a third boulder, represented by Uncle Sam, has now come to sandwich the yam." Amish Raj Mulmi, 'The yam between three boulders: How both US and Chinese diplomacy foundered in Nepal amid controversy over a development grant', 7 April 2022, <https://www.himalmag.com/himal-briefs-yam-between-three-boulders-nepal-2022/>

²⁸⁴ "Silk Roadster." GK Today Nepal, 1 Aug. 2023, <https://www.gktoday.in/silk-roadster/>.

²⁸⁵ Cited by International Campaign for Tibet, 11 November 2019, <https://savetibet.org/concerns-rise-about-tibetans-status-in-nepal-as-chinese-leader-xi-jinping-prepares-to-visit/>. 'A blueprint for consolidating power: China exports Xi Jinping Thought to Nepal, Kathmandu Post, 24 September 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/09/24/a-blueprint-for-consolidating-power-china-exports-xi-jinping-thought-to-nepal/>

²⁸⁶ Xinhua, 15 July 2017. The article reported that the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) had granted approval to China's Tibet Airlines to conduct four flights a day on the Chengdu-Kathmandu route, from July 20 (2017). Once the Tibet Airlines starts China-Nepal flights, it will be the fifth Chinese airline entering into the Nepali market.

²⁸⁷ Bogati, Subindra. 'How China's delivery entices Nepal'. Hard News, India, 17 August 2017.

²⁸⁸ Jayadeva Ranade, 'China Unveiled: Insights into Chinese Strategic Thinking', 2013, New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt. Cited by Aakriti Vinayak, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi in 'Opening Doors Southwards: China's Increasing Presence in Nepal', 24 August 2017, at: <https://icsdelhiblogs.wordpress.com/2017/08/24/opening-doors-southwards-chinas-increasing-presence-in-nepal/>

²⁸⁹ People's Daily in English, 14 February 2017.

²⁹⁰ INHURAD International stated its website at: [http://inhuredinternational.org/source/](http://inhuredinternational.org/source/Sharing%20News%20on%20Vital%20Registration%20of%20Tibetan%20Refugees%20-website.pdf) Sharing%20News%20on%20Vital%20Registration%20of%20Tibetan%20Refugees%20-website.pdf: "During our outreach and legal aid program, INHURED received overwhelming complains about administrative hurdles faced by Tibetan Refugees in obtaining the certificates. After receiving numerous cases, we lodged complaint at National Human Rights Commission." The NGO also reported that: "With the assistance from the commission, we have been able to receive a written letter from the Government reiterating rights of Tibetan refugees to obtain vital registration certificates. This will be applicable to all Tibetan refugees residing in Nepal," the letter further stated. There is no further news about this letter and its outcome.

²⁹¹ "Nepalese Journalists Pushed to Avoid Reporting on China, Tibet." VOA News, 29 June 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/south-central-asia_nepalese-journalists-pushed-avoid-reporting-china-tibet/6170822.html.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Reporters Without Borders. "Under Chinese Pressure, Nepal Sanctions Three Journalists Over Dalai Lama Story." Reporters Without Borders, 17 May 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/under-chinese-pressure-nepal-sanctions-three-journalists-over-dalai-lama-story>.

²⁹⁴ Journalists spoke to the Kathmandu Post on condition of anonymity because they feared reprisals. "Three Journalists Face Probe Over Publishing Dalai Lama News." The Kathmandu Post, 13 May 2019, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2019/05/12/three-journalists-face-probe-over-publishing-dalai-lama-news>.

²⁹⁵ "Samajbadi Party Suspends Its Lawmaker for Taking Part in Event Related to Free Tibet Movement." Republica, 25 June 2019, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/samajbadi-party-suspends-its-lawmaker-for-taking-part-in-event-related-to-free-tibet-movement/>. Sources in Nepal said the party had come under strong pressure from China

²⁹⁶ Chronology in International Campaign for Tibet, 'Dangerous Crossing 2011', https://savetibet.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Dangerous_Crossings_2011.pdf

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

²⁹⁸ See Garver, John. 'China-India rivalry in Nepal: The clash over Chinese arms sales', Asian Survey, 31 (10): 961-962, 1991. Also Rose, Leo. 'India's Foreign Relations: Reassessing basic policies', India briefing for Asia Society, Boulder, Co., Westview Press, 1990.

²⁹⁹ Himalayan Times, Nepal, 8 December 2016, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/nepal-telecom-china-telecom-ink-pact-deliver-ip-service-nepal>

³⁰⁰ Walton, Greg. Turquoise Roof, 'Spyware-as-a-service: What the i-Soon files reveal about China's targeting of the Tibetan diaspora', 18 April 2024, <https://turquoiseroof.org/spyware-as-a-service-what-the-i-soon-files-reveal-about-chinas-targeting-of-the-tibetan-diaspora/>

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Turquoise Roof, *ibid.*

³⁰³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community. 5 Feb. 2024, p. 31, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

³⁰⁴ Walton, Greg. 'A Long Shadow: The Expansion and Export of China's Digital Repression Model in Tibet, Impacts and Recommendations', April 2025, <https://turquoiseroof.org/a-long-shadow-the-expansion-and-export-of-chinas-digital-repression-model-in-tibet/>

³⁰⁵ Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD). "Report Reveals Chinese Transnational Repression Spreading Fear and Disempowering Exiled Tibetans." Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 5 Feb. 2024, <https://tchrd.org/report-reveals-chinese-transnational-repression-spreading-fear-and-disempowering-exiled-tibetans/>.

³⁰⁶ A Tibetan in Belgium told TCHRD: "[At a protest outside the Chinese Embassy in Brussels] there are also some high-tech rotating cameras, used to take images of Tibetan protesters who would then be refused visas if they ever applied to visit their families in Tibet. It's a similar situation at the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands."

³⁰⁷ TCHRD states: "Going into exile tends to entail a stage of economic precarity – the cost of organising one's border crossing and journey to a safe destination, but also the administrative and living costs when settling into a new country where one may not have the right to work immediately. For this reason, while they wait for their new situation to stabilise, exiled Tibetans often rely on money sent by their relatives back in Tibet. By closing this avenue, Chinese authorities seek to impoverish and disempower exiled Tibetans."

³⁰⁸ Walton, Greg. 'A Long Shadow: The Expansion and Export of China's Digital Repression Model in Tibet, Impacts and Recommendations', April 2025, <https://turquoiseroof.org/a-long-shadow-the-expansion-and-export-of-chinas-digital-repression-model-in-tibet/>



The Dalai Lama during opening prayers on the Day of Miracles at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala on 14 March 2025. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL