

India must counter China in Tibet

Written by Dolma Tsering
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The border standoff between India and China on June 15 was the most aggressive clash between the two nations since the Doklam crisis in 2017. The recent confrontation not only brought the conflict to one of its highest levels in the past 50 years, but the Chinese incursion into the Galwan Valley was also on Indian territory that had not yet seen any Chinese incursions, much to the alarm of Indian national security circles.

The confrontation killed 20 Indian soldiers and India, in response to the attack, banned about 50 Chinese smartphone apps, infuriating the Chinese government.

Although both sides have agreed on de-escalation and dialogue, the border standoff once again highlights the importance of discussion about the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategy in Tibet and its implications for India.

India and China are likely to face each other in worse standoffs in the future, and India needs to prepare for an escalation from China.

First, it is important to understand China's Tibet policy from the perspective of its regional ethnic autonomy system. For Tibet, it has two key objectives: "leap forward development" and "long-term stability."

Stability is the higher goal, and development is the means to achieve it.

Although official policy documents only started mentioning policies of "development and stability" in the 1990s, China already followed these objectives during former Chinese leader Mao Zedong's (毛泽东) rule — there has been no change in this particular policy under his successors.

That the construction, public management, party organization and transportation sectors since the 1950s have consistently accounted for more than 50 percent of Tibet's annual GDP, even though the local economy largely depends on agriculture and animal husbandry, indicates

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which strategy China is pursuing in Tibet: Through massive investments, it aims to suppress the Tibetan resistance movement and establish a buffer zone between India and China in the Himalayas.

Besides the suppression of the movement, China's security imperatives in Tibet also include pushing back on "imperialist influence" and "Western" interference in support of Tibet.

However, despite the Chinese military's massive presence in the region, Tibetans have continued to resist the Chinese leadership.

Mass protests and cases of self-immolations in the wake of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were embarrassing for China.

The resistance movement continues to challenge the legitimacy of Chinese rule in Tibet, calls for Tibet's independence and denounces China's human rights violations in the region.

Its suppression is at the heart of the CCP's imperative to maintain sovereignty over all territories under its control and to stay in power in Beijing. Geostrategically, Tibet and Xinjiang still serve as a buffer zone that protects Han Chinese majority areas from external interference.

Hence, the idea of "imperialist interference" in Tibet is still as relevant to the strategists in Beijing as it was in the 1950s, but who the "imperialists" are has changed over time, based on geopolitics.

First, in the 1940s, it was British India, then it was India and the Soviet Union, and now it is India, the US and European countries that support Tibet.

The issue "embarrasses" China on various global platforms, and it has therefore tightened its grip.

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Geopolitical strategist George Friedman in 2008 argued that “the Chinese see Tibet as a matter of fundamental national security, and they view pro-Tibetan agitation in the West as an attempt to strike at the heart of Chinese national security.”

China has since established an advanced transportation and communications system as part of a strategic development that enables Beijing to track every single movement in Tibet.

Moreover, China last year accelerated building “border defense villages” as part of an effort to “curb illegal entry and exit.”

China’s recent infrastructure development in Tibet is unprecedented.

Its latest incursion on Indian territory, which occurred high in the Himalayas and close to Indian defensive infrastructure, was made possible by that development.

Another Chinese objective is to install China-friendly governments in Bhutan and Nepal to counter India’s influence in the Himalayas.

George Ginsberg and Michael Mathos, in their book *Communist China and Tibet*, write that Mao once said: “He who holds Tibet dominates the Himalayan piedmont, he who dominates the Himalayan piedmont threatens the Indian subcontinent, and he who threatens the Indian subcontinent may well have all of South Asia within his reach, and with that, all of Asia.”

Soon after the annexation of Tibet, Beijing, instead of aggressively reaching for Bhutan and Nepal, quickly established diplomatic relationships with the two countries to keep them out of India’s reach.

Starting in the 1980s, China has accelerated programs of economic development.

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Through various initiatives, such as the “reform and opening-up” policy, the “Great Western Development Strategy” and, most recently, the Belt and Road Initiative, China aims to establish an economic corridor with Tibet’s southern neighbors and strengthen its position in the Himalayas.

In China’s strategy, Tibet has evolved from being a “backdoor” that should be kept closed to being its “gateway to South Asia.” This evolution highlights China’s confidence on the Tibet issue.

As far as India is concerned, it is time for New Delhi to reassess the issue and its role in the China-India border disputes.

India’s acceptance of Beijing’s territorial claim on Tibet has emboldened China to further encroach on territories, leading to the latest standoff with India.

China in 2003 started calling the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh “South Tibet,” after India, under then-Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had formally recognized the “Tibet Autonomous Region” as part of China.

Under pressure from Beijing and its troops at its border, India has since further distanced itself from taking any stand on the Tibet issue.

If India further aligns its positions on issues in the region with those of China, it will lead to more border scimmages.

China is least interested in resolving the border dispute and is waiting for the right time for stepping up to the next level of escalation, possibly when a successor to the 14th Dalai Lama is needed.

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For now, China is unlikely to escalate the situation further, beyond the level seen in the Galwan Valley, as it might lead to a war. China has to fight on two fronts: with India and with the Tibetan resistance movement.

Once China has successfully suppressed the resistance movement in Tibet, it will likely not hesitate any longer and reach for territories beyond the border with India. New Delhi might then realize that it does not hold any bargaining power with China.

Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in the idea of China as the "middle kingdom."

It is high time for India to reassess the dynamics at its border with Tibet and its relations with Beijing.

India must also understand the Tibet issue in a wider context of Beijing's hegemonic aspirations.

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