



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

How China's 13th Five Year Plan impacted its Tibet policy

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The fifth plenary of the 19th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee meeting, which took place Oct. 26 to 29, 2020, started the process of formulating the 14th Five Year Plan (which will cover 2021 to 2025). This report looks at the 13th Five Year Plan (13th FYP) as it relates to Tibet and how it has shaped Chinese policies toward the Tibetan people. The five-year plans are an integral part of Chinese governance strategy, as they lay out the plans for economic and social development for the period. The plans also indicate national strategies and governmental priorities.

When China began the 13th Plan (which covered the years 2016 to 2020), it set the objective of building a “moderately prosperous society” in all respects. Poverty alleviation was a major area of focus. In their quest to fulfill the goal of eradicating poverty by 2020, especially in Tibetan areas, the authorities have sought to relocate thousands of herders, taking them away from their traditional nomadic way of life.¹

The 13th FYP was the first plan period with Xi Jinping as the Chinese Communist Party general secretary, and it was therefore shaped in order to serve his particular agenda.

Targeting communities like the Tibetans who are considered “minorities,” China said “the acceleration of the development of ethnic minorities and ethnic regions will be placed in a more prominent strategic position, to make up for the shortcomings in the development of ethnic minorities and ethnic regions, protect the legitimate rights and interests of ethnic minorities, enhance the well-being of all ethnic groups, and enhance ethnic unity.”²

Stepping up struggle against “Dalai Lama Clique” and “ethnic separatist activities”

As much as the plan was about social and economic development, the political objectives were never hidden, particularly in relation to Tibet.

In 2016, the Chinese government outlined the following objectives in its “Goals and main tasks of Tibet during the 13th Five-Year Plan,” which states: “The guiding ideology for national economic and social development is: hold high the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, thoroughly implement the spirit of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Plenary Sessions of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and the 6th Central Tibet Work Forum.”³

¹ Tibetan herders get used to their new lives as China tackles poverty, South China Morning Post, October 30, 2020, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/tibetan-herders-used-lives-china-092749151.html>

² The 13th Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Development of Minority Areas and Minorities with Less Population, State Council, December 24, 2016 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2017/content_5168430.htm

³ Goals and main tasks of Tibet during the 13th Five-Year Plan, State Council Information Office, January 28, 2016 <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/2015/33681/33685/Document/1466784/1466784.htm>

This goal was more clearly outlined in the tasks enumerated in the same document and included reference to “fighting against the 14th Dalai Lama clique” as well as cracking down on “separatists” and strengthening control over the monasteries. It said:

“Fully implement the party's ethnic policy, promote exchanges and integration of people of all ethnic groups, and create a model area for ethnic unity. Fully implement the party's basic policy on religious work and manage religious affairs in accordance with the law. Implement the beneficial policies for both the monks and monasteries, and improve the public services of monasteries. Adhere to the rule of law, active governance, and comprehensive governance, and improve the working mechanism of joint prevention and control of the party, government, military, police and civilians. Adhere to the principle of fighting against the 14th Dalai Lama clique, having strict precautions and strictly crack down on all types of separatist and sabotage activities. Continue to deepen ten measures for stability maintenance. Strengthen food and drug supervision, strengthen supervision and inspection in key areas such as road traffic, fire safety, forest fire prevention, and special facilities, and safeguard the safety of people's lives and property.”

The objectives of strengthening the fight against “ethnic separatist activities,” “religious extremist activities,” and “hostile forces” were also highlighted in another plan document.⁴

The main 13th FYP document, titled "Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China," had references to Tibet in terms of development programs in the following areas: construction of a transportation network, development of ethnic regions, and promoting the development and opening up of border areas.⁵

Among broad objectives for border areas, the 13th FYP said it will ensure that Tibet “becomes a major channel for opening up into South Asia.” Under support for the development of special regions, it said, “We will increase support for Tibet and the Tibetan ethnic areas in the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu, and Qinghai.” The 13th FYP also included “The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau” as part of its efforts towards “strategic ecological security based on the two ecological shields and three ecological belts.” Also included is the construction of “large reservoirs,” including the Lhalo reservoir in Tibet. This dam has become controversial on account of its impact to downstream countries, particularly India.⁶

Among other references to Tibet in the 13th FYP include “hydropower and infrastructure projects in Tibet” and “Tibet classes and Xinjiang classes in the interior.” It also mentions, “Tibetan areas in the four provinces to hold high school classes in Tibetan areas within the province.”⁷

Political Agenda in the guise of development

Although economic development is supposed to be the main element of the 13th FYP, from the activities undertaken in Tibetan areas it is clear that China has prioritized its own political goals.

China’s broader efforts to control Tibet have been implemented by replacing loyalty to the Dalai Lama with allegiance to the CCP, leading to fears of the evisceration of Tibetan national and religious identity. The tightening of control relating to the reincarnation system, which is at the heart of Tibetan Buddhist belief, emerges from the official imperative to assert its authority over the institution of the Dalai Lama.

⁴ 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, 2016, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/policyrelease_8233/201612/P020191101482242850325.pdf

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Why India should be worried about China’s Lhalo dam, Live Mint, Oct 18, 2016, <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/u143w6gzzfwkQs3t1wBu30/Why-India-should-be-worried-about-Chinas-Lhalo-dam.html>

⁷ The 13th Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Development of Minority Areas and Minorities with Less Population, State Council, December 24, 2016 http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2017/content_5168430.htm

Overall, during this plan period there was a consolidation of the political control process. In 2018, significant structural reforms were announced that placed the United Front Work Department in charge of policy areas like religious affairs and “ethnic minorities” that have outsized impact on life in Tibet.

In many monasteries and nunneries high-tech surveillance was installed, with the ever-present watchful eye of the state on all religious activity.

According to one Tibetan account: “The surveillance covers everything. For instance, any trace of financial transaction from monasteries in Tibet to [the] outside world, such as the exile Tibetan community and Dalai Lama, or exiled head lama of those monasteries in Tibet, the ages of monks, limitation of monastic population, movements of monks. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are supposed to be the institutions which actively develop and train more talented people in religion and Buddhism, but now the situation has changed, and the talents that are being developed are those of ‘patriotism,’ which means reliable to the Party, and those who have made contributions to ‘social stability’ and work on behalf of Party government. On the surface, what is happening looks like a chaotic imposition of communism on Tibetan Buddhism, but in fact this is actually a threat to the entire survival of Tibetans and Tibet.”⁸

As a case in point, in 2016 the authorities began the process of controlling and reducing the activities of the Larung Gar Buddhist academy in in Serthar (Chinese: Seda), in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan. Its size was reduced through mass demolitions of buildings and evictions of monks and nuns. In 2017, cadres were appointed to take over management of Larung Gar and in 2018 real-name registration began to be imposed on visitors.

Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism

The 13th FYP implemented a systematic and sinister campaign to ‘sinicize’ Tibetan Buddhism for political purposes; in essence, it’s an acknowledgement of the PRC’s deeply assimilationist agenda in Tibet.

Xi Jinping drew attention to this objective in his April 2016 speech at the National Religious Work Conference, in which he asserted that religious groups should “merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture, abide by Chinese laws and regulations, and devote themselves to China’s reform and opening up drive and socialist modernization in order to contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation.”⁹

In 2017 Zhang Yijong, the Executive Deputy Head of the United Front Work Department, further advanced the sinicization campaign when he asserted during a press conference on the sidelines of the 19th Party Congress that Tibetan Buddhism is a special religion “born in our ancient China” and that “It’s a Chinese religion. It didn’t come in from the outside.”¹⁰

Expanding Party control in rural areas

During this plan period, repressive measures strengthening the reach of the Party state into people’s lives have been expanded across Tibet as part of efforts to replace loyalty to the Dalai Lama with compliance to CCP

⁸ Sinicization poses new threats to the survival of Tibetan Buddhist culture and values in Tibet, International Campaign for Tibet, July 12, 2019 <https://savetibet.org/sinicization-poses-new-threats-to-the-survival-of-tibetan-buddhist-culture-and-values-in-tibet/>

⁹ Xi calls for improved religious work, Xinhua, April 24, 2016 http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/24/content_38312410.htm

¹⁰ China says no excuses for foreign officials meeting Dalai Lama, October 21, 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-congress-tibet/china-says-no-excuses-for-foreign-officials-meeting-dalai-lama-idUSKBN1CQ057>

policies. For example, training camps were organized in 2018 “focusing on strengthening the political leadership and capacity building of grassroots party members.”¹¹

Use of counter-terrorism measures to control people

China passed its first comprehensive counterterrorism legislation in 2015. In 2016, it adopted a revised version, introduced further extra-judicial measures, aimed at reinforcing the powers of local police and Party officials to impose restrictive measures and use violence against individuals without accountability. The sweeping measures introduced in the new counter terrorism law were focused less on preventing terror and more on the elimination of dissent and on the enforcement of compliance with Communist Party policies.

Despite the absence of any violent insurgency in Tibet, the Chinese government imposed counter terrorism measures, including large-scale military drills and intensified border security and training exercises for troops. The measures also included training and installation of police stations in Buddhist monasteries, and to the characterization of Tibetan self-immolation protests as terrorism. The Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace laureate, has been accused by the Chinese government of inciting “hatred, terror, and extremist action” and encouraging the self-immolations.¹²

By conflating the expression of distinct religious and ethnic identities with ‘separatism,’ the Chinese government is using counter-terrorism as a justification to crackdown on even mild expressions of religious identity and culture. The new counter-terrorism law formalized what was already an established policy and practice and provided a framework to adopt further forms of control such as the grid management system.¹³

National Parks and Ecological Civilization

During the 13th FYP there was also an emphasis on Xi Jinping’s “ecological civilization,” which included the strategic importance of the Tibetan plateau and the announcement of a national park system on the plateau. According to plan documents for Qinghai province, the trial of the Three Rivers Source Region (San jiang yuan) National Park system in the Yulshul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture would be completed during the 13th FYP. A media report says Zhu Chunquan, China representative of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and also a member of the advisory committee providing input on the development of China’s budding national park system, has said that plans to create this unified national park system is likely to be revealed later this year. The report added that China plans to complete 10 national parks by the end of 2020.¹⁴

¹¹ Millions of Chinese students to be sent to “minority areas”; China doubles down on Tibet control during anniversary period, International Campaign for Tibet, April 15, 2019 <https://savetibet.org/millions-of-chinese-students-to-be-sent-to-minority-areas-china-doubles-down-on-tibet-control-during-anniversary-period/>

¹² Dalai Lama, followers inciting self-immolations by Tibetans, Economic Times, March 7, 2016 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/dalai-lama-followers-inciting-self-immolations-by-tibetans-reports/articleshow/51286765.cms>

¹³ China's New Counter-Terrorism Law: Implications and dangers for Tibetans and Uyghurs, A joint report by the International Campaign for Tibet and FIDH, November 2016 <https://www.savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FIDH-ICT-Chinas-new-counter-terrorism-law-Implications-and-Dangers-for-Tibetans-and-Uyghurs-15-11-2016-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁴ China Moves Ahead With New National Park System, September 3, 2020 <https://earth.org/china-national-park-system/>

The term ecological civilization also reflects the Party's use of opaque language to characterize their land use policies as conservation of the environment, despite the devastating impact for instance of massive dams and mining projects on the fragile high-altitude ecosystem of the Tibetan plateau.¹⁵

Tibet projects under the 13th FYP impacting Nepal and India

According to Chinese state media, among the projects in Tibetan areas that were to be undertaken during the 13th FYP period were the Construction of the Himalaya Economic Cooperation Belt and the Kyirong Cross-border Economic Cooperation Zone. The Himalayan Economic Cooperation Belt or the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor has been proposed amongst China, Nepal and India. India has been an unwilling partner in this project.¹⁶

Kyirong is a town on the Tibetan border with Nepal. China signed an agreement with Nepal in 2017 on Cross-border Economic Cooperation Zone and during Xi Jinping's Nepal visit in October 2019 this issue was raised. China has been using economic incentives to bring Nepal under its sphere of influence, particularly on issues relating to Tibet.¹⁷

Just as the sixth Tibet Work Forum proceedings were an integral part of the formulation of the 13th Five Year Plan on Tibetan-related issue, it can be assumed that the seventh Tibet Work Forum proceedings will likewise be reflected in the 14th Five Year Plan. The seventh Tibet Work Forum, which was held in Beijing from Aug. 28 to 29, 2020 and presided over by Xi Jinping, indicated the Chinese leadership's decision to continue its policy of absolute control and assimilation in Tibet. (<https://savetibet.org/tibets-importance-seen-at-major-meeting-promising-more-repression/>)

Chinese state media reported that Xi laid out a "strategy of governing Tibet in the new era" that includes "Sinicization" of Tibetan Buddhism and improving the ability of Chinese Communist Party organizations and members at all levels "to deal with major struggles and prevent major risks." There was considerable emphasis on ensuring "national security" and "ethnic solidarity."

If we go by state media reports about the 14th Five Year Plan, then it will continue with its political agenda along with the economic development plans. At the conclusion of the CCP's 5th plenary on Oct. 29, Xinhua reported that the 14th Five Year Plan will be implemented in a way that causes "the core socialist values" to be "embraced by the people." It added that with the 14th FYP, "The influence of the Chinese culture will be increased, and the Chinese nation's cohesiveness will be further strengthened."¹⁸

The plenary adopted the party's proposals for the formulation of the 14th Five-Year Plan, and the plan itself will be approved sometime next year.



¹⁵ Damming Tibet's rivers: how hydropower on the plateau is carving up Tibet's landscape, International Campaign for Tibet, May 2019 <https://savetibet.org/damming-tibets-rivers-how-hydropower-on-the-plateau-is-carving-up-tibets-landscape-2/>

¹⁶ Trans-Himalayan economic corridor: Nepal as a gateway, February 10, 2017 <https://www.orfonline.org/research/trans-himalayan-economic-corridor-nepal-as-a-gateway/>

¹⁷ White paper: Democratic Reform in Tibet, China Daily, March 28, 2019 https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201903/28/WS5c9c0869a3104842260b2f7e_9.html

¹⁸ China proposes development targets for 14th Five-Year Plan period, Xinhua, October 29, 2020 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/29/c_139476451.htm

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