



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Forced Assimilation in Tibet and Erased History in China's 14th Five-Year Plan on Tibet

<https://savetibet.org/forced-assimilation-in-tibet-and-erased-history-in-chinas-14th-five-year-plan-on-tibet>

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China's 14th Five-Year Plan in Tibet targets forced assimilation of Tibetans and gateway to South Asia

This year China's 14th five-year plan enters its final year of implementation (having begun in 2021). An analysis of the projects in Tibet shows that under the pretext of improving the lives of the Tibetan people, the plan is more aimed at fulfilling a two-pronged political objective: aggressively assimilate Tibetans into the Chinese society and use Tibet as a springboard for China's further ambitions in South Asia.

The 19th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee started the process of formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan in October 2020, which was officially endorsed by the National People's Congress (NPC) on [March 11, 2021. Chinese state media reported](#) that with the 14th Five-Year Plan, "The influence of the Chinese culture will be increased, and the Chinese nation's cohesiveness will be further strengthened."

Chinese state media reported that there [will be an investment of 601.5 billion yuan](#) (about 94.3 billion US dollars) in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. [In 2022, China said it will invest 140.4 billion yuan \(about \\$22 billion\)](#) in major projects mainly used for 181 projects, including construction of railway, highway, airport, tourism, and border trade logistics. These are dual objective projects, superficially appearing to have developmental impact, but designed more towards meeting Chinese leader Xi Jinping's political objective.

Tibetans assimilated as pomegranate seeds

Assimilation of Tibetans has been [one of the main focus of Xi Jinping, the other being securitization of Tibet](#), and the 14th five-year plan is being used to further this objective.

In November 2021, the Chinese Communist Party laid out the theoretical basis to this when it adopted a resolution on "[Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century](#)" that outlined "a correct and uniquely Chinese path to dealing with ethnic affairs, and made fostering a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation the main task in its work related to ethnic affairs." In simple terms, for the Tibetan people this has meant the reconstitution of Tibet and Tibetans as an integrated part of the Chinese identity. This November 2021 CCP resolution's importance lies in the fact that it (only the third such resolutions since CCP was founded in 1921) [enshrined Xi Jinping's position in the Party pantheon](#) alongside Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

Xi has used the metaphor of pomegranate seeds to outline his approach. During a [Politburo study session on December 9, 2024, Xi reiterated](#), “We should continue to deepen efforts on ethnic unity and progress, actively build an integrated social structure and community environment, and promote the unity of all ethnic groups – like pomegranate seeds tightly held together”. This use of pomegranate seeds by Xi as metaphor for “ethnic unity” was particularly applied to Tibetans [during his visit to the northeastern Tibetan region of Kangtsa \(Gangcha\) County of Tsonub \(Haibei\) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai in June 2021](#). Talking to Tibetans in Homchu (Shaliuhe) township there, [Chinese state media reported that](#) “Xi stressed that the Chinese nation is closely united like the seeds of a pomegranate. “We are all members of the community of the Chinese nation”.

Similarly, Xinhua carried a report headlined, [“Xi Focus: United like pomegranate seeds -- Tibet tells stories of ethnic unity”](#) in May 2022 reminding Tibetans that “Xi Jinping has stressed on many occasions that the Chinese nation is closely united like the seeds of a pomegranate.

The US Defense Department also analyzed it as such with regard to Tibet by saying in [2024 annual report to Congress on “Military and security developments involving the People’s Republic of China”](#) released on December 18, 2024, saying, “In more sparsely populated Tibet, Beijing has accelerated its efforts at assimilating the local population into PRC society.”

Domestic and Red Tourism - Vehicles to speed enforced assimilation

In order to implement the forced assimilation policy, the 14th five-year plan’s focus on tourism is being used in Tibet to establish a new normal where Tibetans are subtly made to change their perception of “Chinese” from the “other” to being one of them. Through this, the Chinese authorities hope to make forced assimilation the new norm in Tibet. In January 2022, the Chinese authorities released a “Comprehensive Tourism Development Plan” for TAR, which established that “tourism development has become an important vehicle” for promoting ethnic “integration.” This strategy includes encouraging mass Chinese-speaking tourists to visit different parts of Tibet; including in rural areas, and indirectly making the local Tibetans to embrace Chinese language, culture and way of life and to normalize this in the Tibetan society. The TAR plan is in line with the [“Opinions on Implementing a Plan to Promote Exchanges and Integration among Ethnic Groups through Tourism”](#), issued in June 2022, jointly by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, and the National Development and Reform Commission.

According to Chinese state media, the TAR [allocated a total of 20.16 billion yuan](#) (2.83 billion in dollars) for cultural and tourism infrastructure between 2021 and 2024, purportedly for the benefit of the Tibetans. China says that in 2023, [the TAR saw 55.17 million tourists, in 2022 it received 30 million tourists](#), while in 2021, there were 41.5 million.

However, the Chinese authorities have not indicated how many of these were foreign tourists. Therefore, given the prevailing restrictions on foreign visitors to Tibet leading to selectively opening Tibet for tourists from abroad, the vast majority of these tourists would be from within the People’s Republic of China. This would mean that the Chinese authorities invested in flooding different parts of Tibet with Chinese-speaking tourists. The political and social impact to the Tibetan society is far greater than the short-term economic benefit these tourists provide to the local Tibetans. Firstly, even if we go by the data provided by the Chinese government itself, in 2023 alone, around 15 times more predominantly [Chinese tourists \(55 million\) were in different parts](#) of TAR over different times than the [local population size \(3.6 million as per PRC’s 2020 census\)](#). This puts great stress on the fragile local ecology and limited infrastructure. Secondly, the “incentive” of receiving “tourist dollars” is accompanied by immersion courses for the local Tibetans in the Chinese language and way of life.

This is mandated by [Xi Jinping's diktat that the Chinese](#) language “should be comprehensively popularized in border regions.” Eventually, these could lead to Tibetans losing their unique identity and further, identify themselves as Chinese. Such a massive presence of Chinese-speaking tourists in suburban and rural Tibet is encouraging a Chinese-language dominated environment in a traditional Tibetan society.

As Judith Hertog, a US-based writer and photographer working on a book about Tibet, puts it in [her article, “How Tourism Trapped Tibet” in Foreign Policy on January 24, 2025](#), “After decades of trying to subsume this once independent country through force, Beijing may finally have found a way to effectively make Tibet an inseparable part of the Chinese nation: by turning it into a tourist destination.”

The reason for restricting foreign tourists also has a security angle. A Chinese foreign policy expert and professor at Cornell University, Allen Carlson, analyzed why the Chinese government is promoting “domestic tourism” as opposed to opening Tibet to the outside world. In [an interview to the Singapore based Chinese-language newspaper Lianhe Zaobao published in 2023](#), he said, “Beijing's primary concern for Tibet is security, not economic development. He noted that economic development serving the security interests of Tibet is encouraged by the authorities, while economic activities that may pose a threat to security are not promoted. While foreigners have the potential to bring significant sources of income to Tibet, they may also bring in perspectives that differ from the official Chinese narrative.”

In recent years, the Chinese authorities have been creating a narrative of opening up more to the international community. In [November, they announced that visitors from 38 countries will enjoy visa exemptions](#) to enter China and stay for no more than 30 days for business, tourism, family visit, exchange and transit purposes. However, this does not in any way loosen the restrictions for travel to not just the Tibet Autonomous Region, but to almost all Tibetan areas. Foreign travelers to the TAR continue to need the mandatory permit in advance while various restrictions are being imposed on foreigners trying to enter those Tibetan areas where such permits are not needed.

Shaping China's educated acquiescence approach on Tibet

An additional reason for promoting more Chinese tourists to visit Tibetan areas is to cultivate a community of educated Chinese who will stand by the Communist narrative on Tibet, for now and into the future, what China scholar [Elizabeth Perry terms “educated acquiescence.”](#) This is because Tibet has increasingly attracted the educated Chinese society, including the elites, who see it as a trendy and fashionable destination. The authorities are seizing upon this fad to provide political propaganda. In the process, the authorities lure the educated community to its side while discouraging independent thinking on Tibetan history, as a case in point. They attempt to do this by enrapturing the educated Chinese with exoticness of Tibet presenting it in “the Chinese popular imagination as the spiritual and ecological heart of the country” [as an article in Foreign Policy](#) puts it.

Red Tourism creating new narrative of Chinese Tibet

China has said during the 14th five-year plan, [it will “promote the innovative development](#) of Red tourism.” [Red tourism is an initiative of the CCP that encourages the populace](#) to visit locations with historical significance to the CCP. It promotes nationalistic thinking through encouraging tourism to areas supposedly [connected to the CCP and thus contributing to the state-approved historical narrative.](#)

It is only in the border regions of eastern Tibet where there were some connections to the Communist Party, particularly in the course of the Long March. But the Chinese authorities are now attempting to create a non-existing broader revised Tibetan history with Chinese Communism even in places that do not have a historical connection. Red Tourism is aggressively being promoted in many Tibetan areas.

In its 2022 tourism development plan for TAR, the Chinese authorities categorically state the political objective that “tourism development to create an important channel to carry out patriotic education.” In January 2024, China launched a “Red Tourism Guide” for the TAR that “aims to use red stories to develop “red links” and guide the public to ignite patriotic enthusiasm, establish ideals and beliefs, and embark on a red journey.” One Chinese media report [on “red tourism” in TAR in fact clearly outlines the political objectives behind it by saying](#) “Visit these historical holy sites in Tibet, pay tribute to the footsteps of our ancestors, and take a red journey that will not forget your original aspirations.”

Red Tourism is being used in assimilation of Tibetans through a unified “Chinese” identity. Accordingly, the Chinese authorities have identified several sites in Tibetan areas as being “red tourism scenic spots” encouraging Chinese-speaking visitors to these areas and in the process, promote a sense of “Chinese” among the local Tibetans.

Red Tourism is also targeted towards the younger generation. China’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, the National Women’s Association and the China Customs Commission, has jointly unveiled a comprehensive “Action Plan for Cultivating New Talented Generation in the Era through Red Tourism 2023-2025”.

Among the places [listed under Red Tourism are the Lhasa Martyrs Cemetery](#) for those who died in the “peaceful liberation”. But the political objective is clearly laid out as “a national patriotism education demonstration base, a patriotism education base in the Tibet Autonomous Region, and a national defense education base.” The list also includes the “anti-British historical site” in Gyantse commemorating the 1904 invasion of Tibet even though Communist China was nowhere in sight then.

Tibet seen as key to confronting India in South Asia

The Chinese leadership sees Tibet as a key factor in implementing its political objectives in South Asia: expanding its economic and political influence while containing and replacing Indian dominance in the region. China perceives significant security threats along the long-contested border with India, commonly known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and wants to ensure its supremacy on the issue. As the Washington, DC based think tank [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#), says in a report on “How Is China Expanding its Infrastructure to Project Power Along its Western Borders”, [“these perceived threats have compelled China to invest heavily”](#) in TAR’s infrastructure in military and dual-use air facilities.

Accordingly, much focus of the 14th Five-Year plan is on infrastructure development along the lengthy Tibetan border with India, Nepal, and Bhutan while maintaining the pretext that these are to improve the life of the Tibetan people. China is particularly planning to replace Indian influence in South Asia, particularly in Nepal and Bhutan, two countries that have traditionally been friendly with it. It has already made headway in other countries in the region like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. Even the narrative is such as to preempt any voicing of concern by countries in South Asia. This is clear

from the line taken by a Chinese researcher who told a Bhutanese scholar, [“China tries to convince the small South Asian states that it is a benign power without hegemonic aspirations”](#).

An analysis of China’s agenda for South Asia published by the [Foreign Affairs Committee of the United States House of Representatives in 2022](#) says, “In South Asia, the PRC aims to expand its economic activity and influence, enhance its strategic presence, secure overland energy routes to avoid maritime chokepoints, and check India's rise through strategic encirclement.”

The Australian Strategic Policy Institute carried a report in 2023, “India and China’s rivalry is reshaping South Asia” that says, “For China, greater [influence in South Asia supports domestic and foreign policy goals](#), specifically protecting access to world markets via the Indian Ocean region’s important global maritime routes.

Chinese state media announced in March 2021 that China plans to spend over yuan [190 billion \(approximately \\$30 billion\) on infrastructure projects in](#) TAR during the plan period. Most of these are close to the Indian border in Tibet.

At a [December 2024 politburo study session](#), Xi stressed the need for CCP leadership over all aspects of border area governance and demanded all Party organizations in border areas align with Beijing consistently. Comprehending Tibet’s strategic location in Asia, China’s outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan says, “...we will support Tibet in building an important corridor that opens to South Asia.”

This Chinese “opening” to South Asia has predominantly military and strategic objective with trade relations as one of the vehicles to achieve that goal. Take the case of Shigatse, a place close to the Indian border, whose airport has undergone renovation, rail connectivity is being established from there to Nepal and into neighboring Xinjiang (known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan) and the strategic road along the border is being upgraded.

As [China analyst based in India, Jayadev Ranade sees significance in the focus](#) to “make Shigatse a hub connecting Tibet with South Asia.” Shigatse is close to the Indian border and he feels this will “augment the PLA’s capacity to rapidly transport troops, military cargo and hardware into Tibet thereby sharpening the threat to the LAC’s middle sector especially Sikkim and Yadong.”

The [Institute for Security and Development Policy, a Stockholm-based think tank, outlined China’s ambitions in South Asia](#) saying, [“Beijing remains committed to advancing its geopolitical, economic, and security interests, using a mix of soft and hard power tools.”](#)

Driving the narrative of the South Asian communities to align with the Chinese government position has also been a focus during this plan period. Since 2023, using the opportunity of opening after the pandemic, the Chinese authorities have been permitting conducted tours in Tibet for social media influencers from India, Nepal, Pakistan, and even from Bhutan, to produce videos about life in Tibet. These videos are made publicly available. Also, the Chinese government orchestrated tours to Tibet for selected foreign diplomats, primarily from developing countries, to encourage them to conform to its prescribed narrative on Tibet, [representatives from Pakistan and Nepal were included in 2023](#).

Similarly, the Chinese authorities have come up with academic sounding conferences like the [“China-Tibet “Rim of the Himalayas” International Cooperation Forum”](#) aimed particularly at wooing the South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, while excluding India.

Dual Use Air, Road, and Rail Networks

This objective is supported by the nature of investments being made in Tibetan areas during the 14th Five Year-Plan period. In 2022, [the Chinese authorities announced the investment of 140.4 billion yuan](#) (about \$22 billion) in TAR, which include the construction of railway, highway, airport, and border trade logistics. [In 2023, Chinese state media said](#) TAR will undertake 191 key projects with an investment of more than 143 billion yuan (\$21 billion) “for key infrastructure projects, characteristic industries, ecological civilization, border-area consolidation.”

According to the [New Delhi based research organization Centre for Land Warfare Studies](#), these expansions of road, rail and air connectivity, which can be used both by the civil and the military, connect many of the major military centers and airports. It further says adjoining the new airports are the terminals for roads and rail networks, “with underground shelters and military air defense units, in proximity.”

The US-based think tank [Jamestown Foundations](#) highlighted the military significance of the Chinese infrastructural build up in TAR along the Indian border saying, “The improved infrastructure that China has built over the last two decades makes mobilization of the armed forces to counter India relatively faster and easier. For instance, the Sichuan-Tibet railway connects Chengdu to Lhasa. Chengdu and the adjacent municipality of Chongqing host the PLA’s 77th Group Army, which would be one of the first units to mobilize after the Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts in the event of an escalation of conflict with India.”

Air Expansion projects airpower into India

During the 14th five-year plan, China plans to upgrade the five existing airports ([all five are military and civilian dual-use facilities](#)) in TAR while building new ones in Dingri, Lhuntse and Purang (all located close to the south-west borders). [Chinese state media](#) have said the cost of the three new airports is expected to exceed 13.6 billion yuan (about \$2.09 billion).

China’s “General Aviation Development Plan of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2021-2035)” says that during this period, [the four existing transport airports](#) in Nyingtri (Menling), Chamdo (Pangda), Ngari (Gunsu), and Shigatse (Peace) will be transformed into general aviation services, and the three new transport airports in Dingri, Lhuntse, and Purang will be built for general aviation functions.

The new airports in Dingri, Lhuntse and Purang are close to the Indian border and according to a report by the Washington, DC based think tank [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) they [have military strategic importance](#) saying they “fill large gaps along the Indian border where there were previously no airports. If PLA Air Force (PLAAF) units are based at these airports, China will gain several new nodes along the border from which to project airpower into India.”

The same report says that China will build 14 new “general airports” in the following places in TAR: Sernyi (Seni) and Sog in Nagchu; Tsamdha (Zanda), Shentsa (Shenzha), Rutok, and Gertse (Gaize) in Ngari; Dromo (Yadong), Kyirong and Saga in Shigatse; Tsona (Cuona) in Lhoka; Zayul and Pome (Bome) in Nyingtri, Kharo (Karuo) and Markham (Mangkam) in Chamdo.

Outside of the TAR, the Chinese authorities have planned to establish airports in Serchen (Gonghe) Qinghai Lake Airport in Tsoilho (Hainan) Prefecture, and Malho (Huangnan) Airport, both in Qinghai province.

Upgrading road connectivity along Indian border

During this plan period, China plans to enhance the existing road network in TAR to strengthen what it [calls the “strategic backbone corridors”](#). The Chinese authorities have said they will “intensify the construction of strategic trunk corridors with improved access to Xinjiang and Tibet, the central and western regions, and regions along the coast, rivers, and border areas.” The [TAR transportation department states that by 2025](#), TAR [will exceed 1300 km of expressways, and have over 120,000 km](#) in highways total.

The highways include Xining to Lhasa (G109), Chengdu to Lhasa (G318), Kunming to Lhasa, and from Yecheng to Lhatse (G219). The latter two runs parallel to the strategic Indian and Nepalese borders. In the 14th Five-Year Plan, TAR has allocated an investment of 16.98 billion yuan for the quality improvement and transformation of G318 and G109 and the new extension of G219. Analyst [Ranade says upgrading the G219](#) and G318 highways will further strengthen China’s defense border infrastructure targeting India.

Expanding rail connectivity along the southern border and to Nepal

The 14th Five-Year Plan hopes to extend rail connections in Tibet close to the Indian border, including start the extension to Nepal “to serve the major national strategies.”

[Xi Jinping pointed out that we](#) must adhere to maintaining national security and social stability as the bottom-line requirement for border governance.

Together these perceived threats have compelled China to invest heavily in upgrading the two regions’ infrastructure. [New and upgraded airports promise](#) to bring an influx of new business activity and tourism to areas previously disconnected from China’s main commercial and political centers. New roads and [rail aim to do the same and facilitate easier movement of people within the regions](#). At the same time, investments in military and dual-use air facilities afford the PLA a growing menu of options for projecting airpower within the region. New ground infrastructure is likewise rendering remote areas significantly more accessible for Chinese military and security forces, allowing them to project power more easily within Tibet and Xinjiang and potentially into neighboring countries.

The planned railway line between the Tibetan town of Shigatse and Nepal’s capital Kathmandu is one such project that will have dual use purpose for the Chinese. The line is planned to enter Nepal through the Kyirong border on the Tibetan side. Chinese state media have said the first phase of feasibility study was completed in January 2024 and that the overall feasibility study will be completed in 2026.

Trains central to Chinese domination in South Asia

Explaining the significance of the planned rail connectivity along the Indian border, Qian Feng, [director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University](#) told the Chinese state media in June 2021, “[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.”

Prior to the 14th five-year plan, there were only three rail lines in Tibet: the Golmud-Lhasa line which opened in 2006 and the Lhasa–Shigatse line that started in 2014. In 2021, the Lhasa–Nyingtri line started its operations.

China has said [that during this plan](#) period it will strengthen the rail connections all along the southern border, along India, Bhutan, and Nepal. Accordingly, it will extend the train connection from Shigatse up along the Western Tibetan border towards Xinjiang (known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan), [built the Yunnan-Tibet Railway \(both Pome-Rawok section and Rawok-Gyalthang section\), and the Kyirong Port Railway](#). The Shigatse to Kyirong section is hoped to be completed at the end of the plan period. The plan also includes extending the line from [Shigatse to Dromo \(Yadong\)](#) County. Dromo is the closest county along the Indian border in Sikkim.

In this plan period, [China intends to extend the Lhasa to Nyingtri line \(one of a number of railway projects approved by China's economic planning body\)](#) with a total investment of about 200 billion yuan (\$32.7 billion) to Chengdu to make it Chengdu-Lhasa line. Nyingtri is strategically located close to the border with India (around 10 miles distance). When completed, it will connect Tibet onto China's rail network. Indicating this line's strategic importance, Xi Jinping, said in 2020, [“It is crucially important for the country to safeguard national unity, enhance ethnic solidarity and consolidate stability in border areas.”](#)

Promising economic incentives to Nepal

Nepal is seen as a crucial country in China's ambitions in South Asia, particularly to counter and contain Indian influence in the region. Accordingly, China has expanded its charm offensives in Nepal, using both economic incentives and political outreach.

Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli was invited to visit China in December 2024, interestingly before his visit to India, which has been the tradition for new prime ministers. During PM Oli's visit the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\) cooperation framework was signed](#) that China had proposed and Nepal initially agreed to in 2017 but implementation of which had lagged.

The [signing which was to happen on December 3](#) was delayed due to disagreements over terminology to be used in the draft. Nepal did not want the term “grant” in the financial cooperation modality. Following further discussions, [both sides agreed to](#) use the term “aid assistance financing.”

Hinting at Nepal trying to protect itself from Indian influence, China used the opportunity of Nepali Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli's visit to Beijing in [December 2024, to insert the following in the joint statement](#): “China firmly supports Nepal in upholding its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and respects and supports Nepal's independent choice of political and social system, and development path that suit its national conditions.”

Taking advantage of Nepal's economic condition, the Chinese authorities have been dangling the carrot of economic incentives and in the process pulling Nepal into its Belt and Road orbit.

China also sees an opportunity in Nepal as the birthplace of the Buddha to aid it in its religious diplomacy with Buddhist countries, yet another field of competition with India. Over the years the Chinese Government has launched international initiatives, including the World Buddhist Forum, as a way to achieve this objective. [An analyst in Nepal also connects this Chinese plan to legitimize its rule over Tibet](#). Referring to Chinese “unparalleled interest in Lumbini”, the birthplace of the Buddha, [Siddhartha Thapa, wrote in The Kathmandu Post](#), “The political opportunity Lumbini provides China is

also substantive. Above all, China's ambitious plans in Lumbini are aimed at providing leadership to the development of Lumbini to establish China as the natural and undisputed leader of the Buddhist world. China's insecurity is natural, as it was only after the then US President, Richard Nixon, visited Beijing in 1972 that America's shadow war in the Tibetan plateau against China's invasion of Tibet came to an end. Not only is China most serious about its hand in selecting the next Dalai Lama, but with the development of Lumbini, China aims to control the narrative of Buddhism, which it hopes will put the lid on the Tibetan issue with a lasting solution that no longer challenges China's national security."

Accordingly, different initiatives have been launched during the 14th five-year plan period to strengthen Chinese influence in Nepal. Understanding how tourism is critical to Nepal's economy, China embarked on a "[tourism diplomacy as soft power tool](#)" and announced [on June 27, 2024, during the 16th round of the Nepal-China diplomatic consultation mechanism meeting in Kathmandu, that it will declare 2025 as 'Visit Nepal Year in China'](#). Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, [Chen Song, told the Kathmandu Post that they will promote Nepal "through a series of activities](#), more cultural exchange programmes, more attractive packages and more flights". However, the tourism industry in Nepal is wondering what this will result in.

It is ironical (and hints at racial discrimination) that while China is using the promise of more Chinese tourists to expand its sphere of influence in Nepal, the Tibetan people who share a long border with Nepal and who have been historically contributing to its lucrative spiritual tourism infrastructure, have virtually been banned from travelling to Nepal. [In the post 1959 period, only a handful of Tibetans from Tibet, at best, have been able to travel to Nepal legally. In the 1980s](#) and going into the 2000s, Tibetans started escaping across Nepal's border, [at one time over 3,000 did so annually. But in recent years the numbers have dwindled to only a handful primarily due to the Chinese stringent border controls. According to CTA officials, in 2021, only four Tibetans were able to come out while five had arrived in 2020.](#) The numbers did not improve much, [with 10 arrivals in 2022 and 15 in 2023.](#) The Chinese government has tightened its control imposing stricter border controls. One can only assume that even if China permits more Chinese tourists to visit Nepal, the Tibetans in Tibet will not be included and subjected to another set of discriminatory rules.

Asserting Indirect influence in Bhutan

Bhutan's very close relations with India and with its history of strong spiritual and cultural connection to Tibet, the Chinese authorities have always been looking for ways to get an inroad into the country. The Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet engendered fear and concern in Bhutan. Therefore, until the 1970s, the Chinese authorities could not make much headway with the Bhutanese authorities showing no interest in any direct interaction. It was India that was dealing with China and the outside world on behalf of Bhutan.

Since the 1980s, China has been trying to offer the possibility of resolving the disputes on Bhutan's border with Tibet as an incentive to establish a bilateral relationship. [China lays claim to around 495 square kilometers](#) (191 sq miles) in northcentral Bhutan and 269 sq km (104 sq miles) in western Bhutan. Since 2020, it has claimed another 740 sq km (286 sq miles) in eastern Bhutan.

Beginning in 1984, there have been 25 rounds of boundary talks between Bhutan and China, the last one being held in October 2023.

China is also trying to use its charm offensive to influence the Bhutanese people's perception through appearing to be supporting Bhutanese aspiration for a more visible global role, away from India.

Chinese government [mouthpiece Global Times carried an article in 2021](#) headlined, “How Bhutanese seek national security via independence pursuit; what China could do to help” wherein the blame was laid on India. It said, “[Experts on border studies said that some people in Bhutan feel that](#) India's “embrace” is becoming “suffocating and controlling” as Bhutan's national defense, energy and economy are tightly under their neighbor's grasp.”

No less than China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi conveyed the message implying that China wants direct ties and supports Bhutan's move to distance itself from India. [During Wang's meeting with visiting Bhutanese Foreign Minister Tandin Dorjee in 2023, he told him](#), “China will continue to stand firmly on the side of developing countries, shoulder its due international responsibilities, act on true multilateralism, support greater democracy in international relations, and oppose all hegemonic and bullying practices.” [Chinese state media quoted Wang as even suggesting formal diplomatic ties to the Bhutanese Foreign Minister, “China is ready to conclude boundary negotiations and establish diplomatic relations with](#) Bhutan as soon as possible.”

China has also been trying to use the possibility of increased Chinese tourists in Bhutan as an incentive. While only a handful of Chinese tourists visited Bhutan going back some decades, today China is among the larger source markets for Bhutanese tourism, according to the Tourism Council of Bhutan. The Bhutanese [media outlet, Kuensel reported in 2016](#), “China made it to the top five major markets for the first time in 2010, with an increase of about 30 percent in arrivals from 2009.”

In 2018, Chinese state media China Daily commissioned an article by a Bhutanese writer with the enticing headline, “[Tourism can bring China-Bhutan closer](#)”. The article concluded, “I believe that the concept of BRI put forward by China will certainly enhance connectivity and help tourism globally. Therefore, tourism is a common aspiration of China and Bhutan and will be one of the bedrocks to build strong economic and cultural bond in making Sino-Bhutan relations stronger.” It may not be a coincidence that a Bhutanese is being used to bring a reference to China's interest in having Bhutan be a part of its Belt & Road Initiative. This article appeared some days after a rare visit to Bhutan by [Chinese vice foreign minister Kong Xuanyou](#) during which he invited Bhutan to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and share its “development dividend”.

Concerning tourism, [China was among the top 10 source markets](#) for tourism in Bhutan in 2023. From the denial of permission for Bhutanese to enter Tibet in the past, even for pilgrimages, the Chinese authorities today are encouraging Bhutanese to visit with Tibet-based tour groups permitted to announce tours such as “[12 Days Tibet and Bhutan Scenic and Cultural Discovery Tour](#).” Bhutanese social media influencers have also started [coming out with YouTube videos](#) about visits to holy sites in Tibet.

Hydropower station to challenge India

The 14th Five-Year Plan had outlined hydropower development in the lower reaches of the Yarlung Tsangpo (River) which flows along the Indian border in Tibet and eventually flows into India. Accordingly, in December 2024, China announced its approval of such a dam. Observers however said this is “[stoking concerns about displacement](#)” of communities in Tibet and environmental impacts downstream in India and Bangladesh.” Two weeks prior to China's announcement, ICT came out [with a detailed report on](#) how hydropower and dam projects are increasingly leading to massive human rights violations and environmental damage in Tibet. Since Asia's largest rivers originate in the Tibetan plateau, the construction of hydroelectric dams in Tibet also threatens the water supply, livelihoods and health of up to 1.8 billion people across China, South and Southeast Asia.

“India and Bangladesh are concerned that the dam would change the river’s natural flow, which could disrupt access to water for agriculture, drinking and other essential human needs,” Neeraj Singh Manhas, an expert on transboundary rivers and water security in south [Asia told the Financial Times](#).

In a formal reaction, [Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman Randhir Jaiswal](#) said on Jan 3, 2025 that as a “lower riparian state with established user rights to the waters of the river, we have consistently expressed, through expert-level as well as diplomatic channels, our views and concerns to the Chinese side over mega projects...”

Conclusion

Although we have not been able to find a direct attribution of this reference, [Mao Zedong is believed to have laid out China’s ambitions in South Asia](#) by saying during the early 1950s that Tibet is the palm with Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and NEFA (former name of Arunachal Pradesh) as its five fingers and they need to be liberated.

In [1954 the Chinese government published a school book called “A Brief History of Modern China”](#), which included a map showing the territories allegedly taken by “imperialist powers” between 1840 and 1919, and included Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and the entire Northeast India.

The Chinese authorities have said that the objectives of the 14th Five-Year Plan period include, the anti-secession struggle will firmly grasp the overall initiative, the sense of community of the Chinese nation will be deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, new progress will be made in the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism, and economic development will maintain a good momentum. Ultimately, whatever the Chinese authorities have been working on in Tibet in this 14th Five-Year Plan period is more to “serve the major national strategies” than for the welfare of the Tibetan people.

Investments and projects in TAR under the 14th Five Year Plan

INVESTMENTS

601.5 billion RMB (about 94.3 billion US dollars) mainly used for 181 projects, including construction of railway, highway, airport, tourism, and border trade logistics

20.16 billion yuan (2.8 billion in dollars) for cultural and tourism infrastructure

RMB 190 billion (approximately \$30 billion) on infrastructure projects in TAR most of which are close to the Indian border

13.6 billion RMB (about \$2.09 billion) for new airports and upgrade of existing ones

200 billion yuan (\$32.7 billion) to extend the rail route from Nyingtri to Chengdu to make it Chengdu-Lhasa line

Projects

AIRPORTS

The four existing transport airports in Nyingtri (Menling), Chamdo (Pangda), Ngari (Gunsu), and Shigatse (Peace) will be transformed into general aviation services

Three new airports to be located in Lhunze county, Dingri county and Burang county

Start construction of 14 new “general airports” in Sernyi (Seni) and Sog in Nagchu; Tsamdha (Zanda), Shentsa (Shenzha), Rutok, and Gertse (Gaize) in Ngari; Dromo (Yadong), Kyirong and Saga in Shigatse; Tsona (Cuona) in Lhoka; Zayul and Pome (Bome) in Nyingtri, Kharo (Karuo) and Markham (Mangkam) in Chamdo

RAILROADS

Extend the Lhasa to Nyingtri line to Chengdu

Extend the Lhasa to Shigatse rail route up along the Western Tibetan border towards Xinjiang (known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan) and also to Kyirong at the Nepal border

Built [the Yunnan-Tibet Railway](#) (both Pome-Rawok section and Rawok-Gyalthang section)

Train route from [Shigatse to Dromo \(Yadong\)](#) County adjacent to Sikkim and the Indian border



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