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TIBET AS A STRATEGIC FACTOR IN CHINA'S DEVELOPMENT AND PERIPHERY POLICY

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Abstract

Tibet occupies a distinctive position in China's political, economic and strategic framework. Its geographical location along China's southwestern frontier, its proximity to India and Nepal, its distinctive ethnic and cultural characteristics, and its ecological significance have made Tibet an important component of China's national development and security policy. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Beijing has pursued a combination of political integration, regional autonomy, economic modernization, infrastructure development and security measures in Tibet. The establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965 institutionalized Tibet within China's regional administrative structure, while the Western Development Strategy, adopted in 1999 and implemented from 2000, provided a new framework for integrating Tibet into China's wider economic development programme. The strategy



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emphasized infrastructure, transportation, resource development, ecological protection and economic integration. At the same time, it has been interpreted critically as a mechanism for strengthening state control and consolidating China's strategic periphery. This article examines the historical evolution of China's Tibet policy, the role of the Western Development Strategy and the relationship between development and periphery security. It argues that China's Tibet policy cannot be understood exclusively as an economic development programme. Rather, development has been closely linked with political integration, territorial consolidation and strategic security. The article further examines the significance of Tibet in China's relations with India and Nepal and concludes that the continuing tension between development, security and Tibetan identity remains a major challenge for China's periphery policy.

Keywords: Tibet, China, Tibet Autonomous Region, Western Development Strategy, Periphery Security, China-India Relations, China-Nepal Relations, Development Policy

Introduction

Tibet occupies an exceptional position in the political geography of the People's Republic of China. As a vast high-altitude region situated along China's southwestern frontier, Tibet is important not only because of its geographical location but also because of its distinctive ethnic, cultural and religious characteristics. The nature of Tibet's historical relationship with China and its contemporary status as the Tibet Autonomous Region have generated specific administrative and political policies from the Chinese central government since the 1950s. The adoption of the Western Development Strategy at the beginning of the twenty-first century gave a new dimension



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to these policies by linking the development of Tibet with China's broader strategy for its western regions. (Norbu, 2001; van Schaik, 2012)

The Chinese leadership has consistently emphasized economic development, modernization, poverty reduction and improvement in living standards as important objectives of its Tibet policy. According to the official development narrative contained in the source, Tibet has experienced significant economic and social transformation since 1949. Economic output, rural income, life expectancy, infrastructure and tourism have expanded considerably. (Norbu, 2001)

However, Tibet also constitutes a sensitive strategic frontier. Its location adjacent to India and Nepal means that developments within Tibet have implications for China's external relations and national security. Consequently, Tibet has been incorporated into China's broader conception of periphery security. The source argues that China's policy combines the security of the internal periphery through minority and regional autonomy policies with the security of the external periphery through relations with neighbouring countries, particularly India and Nepal.

The central argument of this article is that **development and security are closely interconnected in China's Tibet policy**. The Western Development Strategy represents not simply an economic programme but also an instrument of political integration and strategic consolidation.

Historical Evolution of China's Tibet Policy

The significance of Tibet for Chinese statecraft has deep historical roots. Concerns regarding frontier security can be traced to the early Chinese dynasties, while the Qing period witnessed the development of more systematic mechanisms for managing China's frontier regions. During the



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early Qing period, the imperial government frequently relied upon relationships with local elites rather than imposing direct administrative rule. In Tibet, the relationship between political authority and the Tibetan Buddhist clergy became an important component of governance. (Haarh, 2003; Norbu, 2001)

The nineteenth century witnessed a major transformation in China's approach to its frontier regions. The increasing pressure of Western imperialism encouraged the Qing government to move towards stronger territorial integration. Modern mapping, census practices and administrative institutions were increasingly used to define and consolidate frontier territories. In the case of Tibet, however, the process of direct incorporation developed differently because of the geopolitical competition involving Britain, Russia and China. (Haarh, 2003)

The emergence of the Great Game further increased Tibet's strategic importance. British India regarded Tibet as a buffer between British and Russian interests in Asia. The British expedition to Tibet in 1904 and subsequent diplomatic arrangements demonstrated the importance attached to Tibet as a frontier region. Tibet therefore became an important element in the security calculations of the major powers operating in the Himalayan region. (Haarh, 2003)

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist leadership placed particular emphasis on territorial integration. The Seventeen-Point Agreement was signed in 1951, followed by the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1965. The Chinese state simultaneously developed a minority policy based on ethnic classification and regional autonomy. The source argues that these institutional mechanisms were designed not simply to address cultural identity but also to consolidate China's control over its frontier regions. (Norbu, 2001)



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The Chinese system differed significantly from the Soviet federal model. Rather than recognizing a constitutional right of secession, China developed a system of regional ethnic autonomy within a unitary state. The concept of *minzu* incorporated nationality, ethnicity and nation within a broader understanding of the Chinese nation. Consequently, ethnic minorities were treated principally as cultural communities within the Chinese state rather than as separate political nations.

Tibet and the Western Development Strategy

The economic reforms initiated after 1978 transformed China's development priorities. Rapid economic growth was concentrated initially in the eastern and coastal regions, resulting in significant disparities between the prosperous eastern provinces and the relatively underdeveloped western regions. In response, the Chinese leadership introduced the Western Development Strategy, commonly referred to as *Xibu Da Kaifa*, in 1999 and began implementing it in 2000. (Tian, 2004)

The strategy was officially intended to reduce regional inequalities and accelerate the development of China's western regions. However, the source suggests that economic considerations were closely associated with concerns regarding political stability in ethnic minority regions. The strategy thus reflected a broader Chinese security logic in which instability within the country could create vulnerabilities to external pressures.

The Western Development Strategy involved large-scale infrastructure investment. Roads, railways, airports, energy projects and communication networks were developed across western China. Between 2000 and 2012, numerous major infrastructure projects were undertaken, with



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substantial public investment directed towards transportation and economic development. (Tian, 2004)

Tibet was one of the most strategically significant beneficiaries of this policy. The Qinghai–Tibet Railway became a major symbol of China’s development programme. Completed in 2006, it connected Tibet more closely with the Chinese mainland and significantly improved transportation accessibility. The railway was subsequently extended towards Shigatse, while further connectivity towards areas near the India–China border was contemplated. (Tian, 2004)

The development of roads and airfields similarly strengthened Tibet’s physical connectivity. The source records substantial expansion of the road network and the development of several airports in the region. Such infrastructure has economic significance because it facilitates trade, tourism and mobility; simultaneously, it has strategic significance because improved connectivity strengthens the administrative and logistical capacity of the state in a sensitive frontier region.

Development, Infrastructure and Political Integration

China’s development policy in Tibet has involved extensive financial transfers and administrative support. According to the source, the central government provided substantial financial assistance to Tibet over several decades. Between 1952 and 2013, the source reports central financial subsidies of 544.6 billion yuan. A system of “paired assistance” was also established under which central institutions and provincial governments supported particular areas of Tibet. (Norbu, 2001; Tian, 2004)



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From the Chinese government's perspective, these measures demonstrate the commitment of the central government to Tibet's modernization. The regional autonomy system is also presented as providing Tibet with powers relating to legislation, language, culture, education and fiscal administration. Since the establishment of the TAR, regional legislative institutions have adopted numerous local laws and regulations.

Infrastructure development has transformed the economic landscape of Tibet. Electricity generation has expanded, transportation networks have improved, and telecommunications infrastructure has reached increasingly remote areas. The source notes the expansion of road connectivity, railway services, airports, optical fibre networks, telephone services and internet access. (Tian, 2004)

The Chinese development narrative therefore emphasizes a transition from geographical isolation to economic integration. Tourism has also become an important component of the regional economy. According to the source, Tibet received substantial numbers of domestic and international tourists and hosted international forums and cultural events.

Nevertheless, development has also generated critical debates concerning its social and political consequences. The source identifies migration, resource extraction, ecological transformation and the changing socioeconomic position of Tibetans as important issues. It argues that the benefits of development have not necessarily been distributed equally and that state-owned enterprises and development projects have often required skilled labour.



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Thus, economic modernization can simultaneously promote material development and strengthen political integration. This dual character is central to understanding the Western Development Strategy in Tibet.

Strategic and Security Significance of Tibet

Tibet's strategic importance derives primarily from its geographical location. It occupies a substantial portion of China's territory and forms an important part of the country's southwestern frontier. Its proximity to India and Nepal makes it particularly significant in China's national security calculations. (Norbu, 2001)

The source explicitly conceptualizes Tibet as a strategic rather than merely cultural issue. It argues that Tibet has historically represented a vulnerable periphery for China and that the consolidation of the Tibetan region has therefore been associated with the security of the Chinese state as a whole.

The relationship between the security of the core and the security of the periphery is an important element of Chinese strategic thinking. Historically, China has attempted to secure its frontier regions through combinations of defence, development, political administration and population settlement. In the contemporary period, economic development has become an increasingly important instrument of this strategy. (Bhattacharya, 2011; Norbu, 2001)

The Western Development Strategy reflects this approach. Infrastructure construction facilitates economic activity but also improves the state's capacity to administer and secure remote regions. The Qinghai–Tibet Railway is a prominent example. Its economic significance lies in connecting



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Tibet to national markets, while its strategic importance arises from its contribution to mobility and logistical connectivity. (Tian, 2004)

The source also identifies military deployment as an important dimension of China's Tibet policy. Infrastructure, military presence and administrative integration therefore operate together within a broader framework of frontier security.

Resource Extraction and Ecological Dimensions

Tibet's development strategy has also been connected with the exploitation and transportation of natural resources. The improvement of railway and road connectivity has facilitated the movement of agricultural products, minerals and other resources between Tibet and other parts of China. The source reports that the Qinghai–Tibet Railway transported substantial quantities of Tibetan products after its opening. (Tian, 2004)

At the same time, Tibet has enormous ecological significance. The Tibetan Plateau is an important ecological region of Asia and is associated with major river systems that support populations far beyond the plateau itself. China consequently describes Tibet as an important ecological security barrier and has incorporated environmental protection into its development policies. (Jones, 2021)

One major policy initiative was the “Returning Grazing Land to Grassland” programme. The policy was designed to address concerns about grassland degradation, desertification and ecological deterioration. However, restrictions on pastoral activities have also had socioeconomic consequences for nomadic communities. According to the critical perspective presented in the



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source, relocation and restrictions on grazing have contributed to changes in traditional livelihoods and social structures. (Jones, 2021)

The ecological dimension therefore reveals an important contradiction. Environmental protection may be necessary for the sustainability of the Tibetan Plateau, but policies implemented without adequate local participation can affect traditional livelihoods. Sustainable development in Tibet consequently requires a balance between ecological conservation, economic modernization and community interests.

Tibet, India and Nepal in China's Periphery Strategy

Tibet's strategic significance extends beyond China's domestic politics. It is closely connected with China's relations with India and Nepal. The Himalayan frontier makes Tibet an important factor in China's South Asian policy. (Bhattacharya, 2011; Norbu, 2001)

India-China relations have historically been affected by the question of Tibet. The 1954 India-China Agreement concerning trade and intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India was important in establishing China's position regarding Tibet and in restructuring the previous arrangements inherited from the British period. The source interprets the agreement as contributing to China's consolidation of its position in Tibet. (Norbu, 2001)

China's policy towards Nepal has also increasingly been linked with Tibetan security. Nepal hosts a significant Tibetan refugee population, and China has consequently sought assurances from successive Nepalese governments regarding the "One China" principle and the prevention of activities that Beijing considers hostile to Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. (Bhattacharya, 2011)



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The source argues that China became increasingly proactive in Nepal after political developments in the country and the Tibetan unrest of 2008. Beijing's concerns included the possibility that instability in Nepal could provide opportunities for political activities associated with Tibetan refugees. Consequently, China strengthened its diplomatic and security engagement with Nepal. The connection between Tibet, India and Nepal demonstrates the dual character of China's periphery strategy. Internally, China seeks to consolidate political and economic control over Tibet; externally, it seeks stable relations with neighbouring states to ensure that its Tibetan frontier remains secure.

Tibet and China's Periphery Strategy

The concept of periphery strategy provides a useful framework for understanding China's Tibet policy. According to the source, periphery security has two dimensions: **internal periphery security**, reflected in minority policy and regional autonomy, and **external periphery security**, reflected in China's policies towards India, Nepal and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. (Bhattacharya, 2011)

This strategy is rooted in the assumption that the security of China's political core depends upon the stability of its frontier regions. The historical pattern involved defence, economic development and migration. In the post-1949 period, these mechanisms were supplemented by ethnic classification, regional autonomy and socialist integration. After the economic reforms, development became a particularly important instrument of peripheral consolidation. (Bhattacharya, 2011; Norbu, 2001)



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The Western Development Strategy can therefore be viewed as an updated version of a long-standing frontier strategy. Its major components include infrastructure development, economic modernization, resource utilization, ecological management, population movement and security measures. (Tian, 2004)

The source identifies six broad dimensions of the Western Development Strategy in Tibet: **Hanization, infrastructure development, resource extraction, military deployment, ecological protection and repression.** (Tian, 2004; Norbu, 2001)

From the Chinese government's perspective, these policies are intended to promote modernization, reduce poverty, improve infrastructure and maintain national unity. From a critical perspective, however, the same policies may strengthen state control while failing to address questions of cultural and political identity.

This produces a fundamental contradiction. Economic development can increase material prosperity and integrate Tibet into the Chinese economy, but it cannot automatically resolve demands concerning identity, religion, language and cultural autonomy.

Development versus Identity: The Continuing Tibetan Question

One of the central tensions in China's Tibet policy is the difference between economic development and political-cultural aspirations. China emphasizes modernization, poverty alleviation and infrastructure development. Tibetan political representatives and critics, however, have placed greater emphasis on cultural, religious and linguistic rights. (Giersch, 2008; Norbu, 2001)



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The concept of “genuine autonomy” has consequently become an important point of disagreement. According to the source, the Tibetan demand for genuine autonomy is associated with the protection of cultural and religious rights, whereas the Chinese leadership has viewed the concept with suspicion because of its possible implications for territorial sovereignty and political control. (Norbu, 2001)

This disagreement demonstrates that the Tibet issue is not simply a question of economic backwardness. Even substantial economic investment cannot eliminate political questions concerning identity and autonomy.

China’s security-centred approach has therefore produced both achievements and limitations. It has strengthened infrastructure, expanded economic connectivity and enhanced state capacity. At the same time, the continued emphasis on sovereignty and security has made it difficult to address the cultural and political dimensions of Tibetan identity. (Giersch, 2008; Norbu, 2001)

The source concludes that because Beijing primarily treats Tibet as a strategic and security issue, responses to Tibetan demands have tended to be security-oriented rather than identity-oriented.

Conclusion

Tibet represents a complex intersection of development, political integration, ethnic governance and strategic security in contemporary China. Since the establishment of the PRC, China has adopted a combination of political incorporation, regional autonomy, economic development, infrastructure expansion and security measures to consolidate its authority over Tibet. (Norbu, 2001; Tian, 2004)



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The Western Development Strategy introduced a new stage in this process. By connecting Tibet with China's wider western development programme, Beijing sought simultaneously to reduce regional disparities, stimulate economic growth, improve infrastructure and strengthen the integration of the southwestern frontier. The Qinghai-Tibet Railway, road networks, airports, telecommunications and energy projects demonstrate the scale of this transformation. (Tian, 2004) However, the significance of Tibet extends beyond economic development. Its geographical proximity to India and Nepal, its ecological importance and its role in China's territorial conception make it a critical component of China's periphery strategy. The source demonstrates that China's approach combines internal measures concerning ethnic and regional governance with external policies towards neighbouring states. (Bhattacharya, 2011; Norbu, 2001)

The major challenge remains the relationship between **development and identity**. Material development can improve living standards, but it cannot by itself resolve questions of cultural identity, religious freedom, language and political autonomy. The continuing Tibetan question therefore demonstrates the limitations of a purely development-centred approach to political integration. (Giersch, 2008; Norbu, 2001)

Ultimately, Tibet should be understood as both a development region and a strategic frontier. China's Tibet policy reflects the long-standing principle that the security of the national core is closely connected with the security and integration of its peripheral territories. The Western Development Strategy represents the contemporary expression of this principle, combining economic modernization with political and strategic objectives. The future stability of Tibet will consequently depend not only upon economic development but also upon how successfully China



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reconciles national integration with the cultural and political aspirations of the Tibetan population.

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