



Infrastructure Development in Tibet: An Overview

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Received: 14.11.2022; Revised: 28.11.2022; Accepted: 02.12.2022

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Abstract: During the last few decades China has applied its energy and resources to create a vast infrastructure network in the restive Tibet Autonomous Region. This includes a large network of roads, railways, airfields, habitat and associated logistic infrastructure. There is a concerted effort to develop dual use infrastructure to not only promote development but also to develop the capability to rapidly project the resources whenever required. This paper discusses the development in infrastructure built in Tibet in recent times.

Keywords: Infrastructure • Tibet • Xinxiang • Go West Policy • Western Region Development Strategy • Military • Logistics • Border Area Development

Introduction

Infrastructure has been a part of China's focus areas since its formation and a vital subset of the overall development and amalgamation of the under developed regions with the Chinese mainland. China launched its "Go West" campaign (Arvind Singh 2002) in late nineties as a part of the Western Region Development Strategy (WRDS) (Kong Tuan Yuen 2021) and kickstarted a process to balance east-west regional development, especially through infrastructure improvement in the underdeveloped areas of the West, which constitute about a quarter of the population and about three fifth of the land mass. Thereafter a lot of attention has been given towards infrastructure development in the region particularly in the remote and restive areas of Tibet and Xinxiang. Ever since Xi Jinping's tenure, China has further strengthened the infrastructure linkage of these regions not only with the Chinese mainland to the East but also ensured international connectivity from the region to neighbouring countries. (Kong Tuan Yuen 2021)

Existing Scenario

India and China share a 3488 km long boundary. There are unresolved boundary issues between India and China and the recent incidents of 2017 Dokhlam and 2020 Galwan highlight the unease. Overall, the Sino Indian friction points

are on the rise and the potential for a future conflict remains. (Kapil Mishra 2020) China also has growing security and economic interests in neighbouring countries in South and Central Asia. The area of Tibet and Xinjiang are the major regions of the Western Region. They are underdeveloped, consist of harsh desert and mountain terrain and account for a fourth of China's land mass. The regions border a total of eleven different countries, thus the importance for China. Considering Tibet, the rapid infrastructure development provides immense advantages to China.

Infrastructure Development

The rapid infrastructure development in Tibet by China has been in the form of construction of world class highways, railways, billeting, logistic, communication facilities, airports, and heliports. China believes that by improving the infrastructure in this region, by creating dual use facilities it can better amalgamate the region socially, culturally, and economically with the Chinese mainland. In addition, the infrastructure boosts tourism and creates better avenues for employment. It is to be noted that these dual use facilities enhance the border mgt posture and ease the logistics for the country. The combined network of railways, strategic highways, laterals, air ports, heli bases, communication facilities, border billeting and logistic installations as it exists form a robust

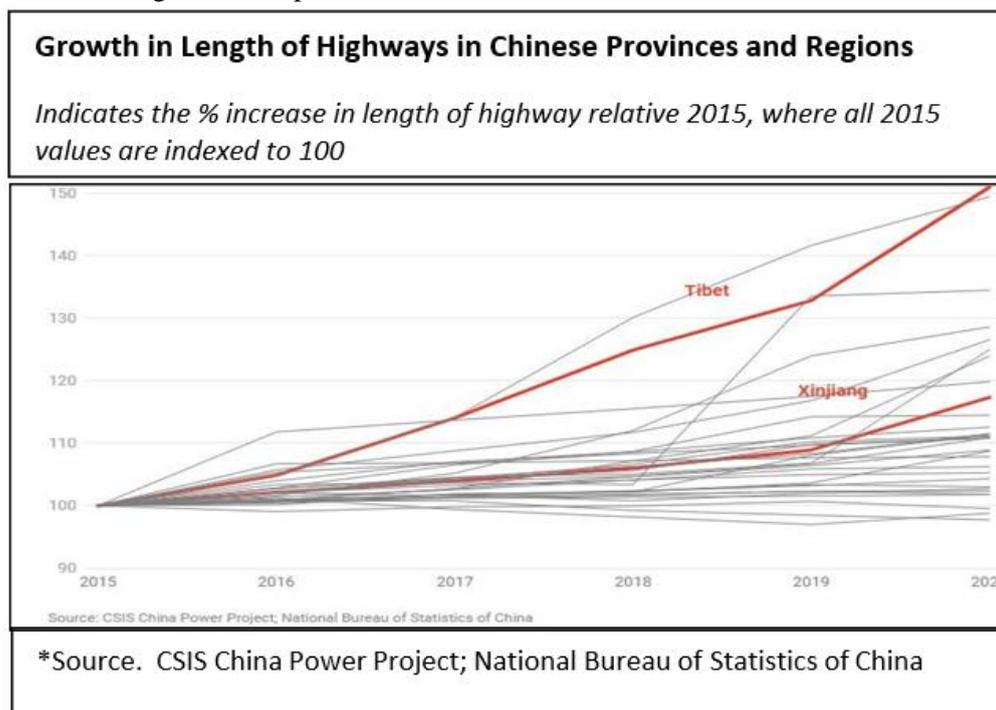


grid to facilitate coordinated and timely military and the logistics build up and significantly enhances the ability to rapidly move and deploy strategic and operational assets to the area.

Roads

Tibet has been the remote and restive region. The difficult terrain with sparse resources, poor connectivity, extreme high altitude, and cold climate region has historically been way backward than other regions in all parameters of

economic and social development. The country has taken serious steps to create world class highways in Tibet ever since its Go West Campaign 1999. Tibet's highway system grew 51 per cent between 2015 and 2020 (Fig 1) -- from 7,840 km to 11,820 km--faster than the growth rate of any other province, (CSIS Mar 2022). The total road network in Tibet in 1959 was only 7,300 km which by 2021 has increased to 1,18,800 km. (Suyash Desai, Nov 2021)



***Fig. 1: Growth in Length of Highways in Chinese Provinces and Regions**

Railways

Despite Tibet being a high altitude, inhospitable and sparsely populated region China has an ambitious plan to connect it by rail to the mainland. In year 2006 Tibet's first rail line, the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (QTR) was inaugurated. An engineering marvel with regions beyond 4000 meters in altitude and made over regions of permafrost it demonstrates the seriousness with which China wants to address its border regions.

The QTR now has since been expanded. Till 2020 Tibet still had only about 800 km of railway. In 2021, China opened Tibet's first high-speed rail line connecting the regional

capital Lhasa with Nyingchi (CSIS Mar 2022). QTR besides being the lifeline of Tibet provides immense capability to easily move logistics and resources into Tibet (Suyash Desai, Nov 2021) China Brief Volume: 21 Issue: 22 Nov 2021 lists the quantified road and rail development in Tibet wherein it clearly emerges that considerable emphasis has now been given on infrastructure development in Tibet.

Air Power

China has rapidly developed its air infrastructure in Tibet and Xinxiang. New airports and heliports are being constructed or upgraded on a priority basis in order to augment and support the land forces. Most of them will be civilian or



dual- use facilities. China has identified 37 airports and heliports within Tibet and Xinjiang that have been newly constructed or upgraded since 2017 (CSIS Mar 2022). Upgrades to all five existing airports in Tibet are on in addition four new airports are under progress, out of which three airports namely Lhuntse, Ngari Burang, and Shigatse Tingri are less than sixty km from the China-India border. (The Economic Times, Mar 2022). In addition, a network of helipads has been built near border areas to enhance their operational activities in the border areas.

Infrastructure Focus in Tibet in 14th Plan

The 14th five Year Plan of China from 2021 to 2025, outlines the plan for National Social and Economic Development and Long-Range Objectives for year 2035. It is the first five-year period after China achieved its first centennial objective of establishing a well-off society. The Article XI of the Part Three of the document i.e **Build a modern infrastructure system** lays

emphasis on the acceleration of the construction of new infrastructure, establishing as a transportation powerhouse strengthen the construction of strategic backbone corridors out of Xinjiang and into Tibet. Certain other infrastructure and strategic focus areas in Tibet (CSET May 2021) are illustrated in Table 1.

Discussion

The inhospitable extreme cold Tibetan plateau is sparsely populated with limited resources. Till the recent times it lacked the communication and logistic facilities and was thus a logistic nightmare to China in case it was required to muster its resources to the western sector. However, the recent infrastructure development and perspective focus on these areas has changed it all. Development of all-weather highways near border, network of railways in Tibet and Xinxiang, creation of airfields and bases, creation of border villages and habitat and creation of a robust communication network has thus tamed the geography for good.

Table 1: Infrastructure and Strategic Focus Areas in Tibet (CSET 2021)

Transportation powerhouse construction projects	Construct the Sichuan-Tibet Railway, promote the preliminary work of the Shigatse-Jiji 1 and Hotan-Shigatse railways, open up the G219 and G331 highways along the border, and upgrade the G318 line of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway.
High-speed rail	Construct the Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high-speedrailway network
Normal-speed rail	Promote the construction of interconnected railways to surrounding areas. Construct the Ya'an to Nyingchi phase of the Sichuan Tibet Railway line. Undertake work on the Hotan - Shigatse and Gyirong-Shigatse (Bordering China-Nepal) railway lines.
Highways strategic backbone corridors	With respect to Strategic Backbone Corridors, among others it specifically identifies the opening of G219 and G331 highways along the border and to upgrade G318 portion of the Sichuan-Tibet Highway. Aims to construct and refit 25,000 km of expressway mileage.
Logistic Hubs	Promote the construction of about 120 national logisticshubs.
Border villages	Improve infrastructure and citizen facilities in all border villages, create about 200 new villages, and achieve universal coverage of electricity, road access, communications, radio, postal services and television in border villages.
Border airports	Build about 20 general border airports.
Promote interconnectivity and interoperability of infrastructure as part of BRI	Promote the four-in-one connection of land, sea, sky, andcyber.



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