

# SPECIAL no. 149 REPORT

## China's 2021 White Paper on Tibet: Implications for India's China Strategy

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# Abstract

**T**ibet is where India and China meet. It is through Tibet that China manages its relations with India, using the boundary dispute to keep New Delhi off-balance. India is also where the most revered Tibetan, the 14th Dalai Lama lives in exile. Having failed to negotiate his return, there is now a two-pronged effort by China to deal with the consequences of the Dalai Lama's passing and his possible reincarnation outside Tibet: to

manage the succession in its own favour, and to Sinicise Tibetan Buddhism. In the "new era" of Xi Jinping, Chinese policy continues to combine repression and development activities. Yet China has its own story to tell, often through the periodic government White Papers, the latest of which was issued on May 23. This report dissects that white paper.

*Cover: All photographs are from Getty Images. Clockwise from top right: Bill Wassman; Kristian Dowling; Volanthevist; Arun Sankar; maki\_shmaki; Lobsang Wangyal.*

# Introduction

The Chinese government is known to be fond of marking anniversaries. On 23 May, the 71<sup>st</sup> year since the signing of the 17-point agreement between Beijing and Lhasa,<sup>a</sup> it issued another White Paper on Tibet.<sup>1</sup> It is the third White Paper in the Xi Jinping era, the first having been released in 2015 and the second, in 2019. The themes of all three have been broadly similar: China helped the Tibetans free themselves from the yoke of a feudal-theocratic system and since then the Himalayan region has seen social and economic progress and development; there has always been political autonomy and religious freedom for the people of the region; and, it is the malicious forces, supported by the Dalai Lama and some elements in the West, who have sought to disrupt Tibet's progress.

The latest White Paper adds emphasis on the importance of maintaining a tight hold on the region, ensuring Chinese control over the selection of the next Dalai Lama, and emphasising border management and development. It underlines “managing religion in the Chinese context” and guiding “Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to socialist society”—in other words, Sincising Tibetan Buddhism. A day after the White Paper was issued, Wu Yingjie, the secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Tibet said that there was a need “to promote that Tibetan Buddhism has always been part of Chinese culture.”<sup>2</sup>

Attribution: Manoj Joshi, “China’s 2021 White Paper on Tibet: Implications for India’s China Strategy,” *ORF Special Report No. 149*, June 2021, Observer Research Foundation.

<sup>a</sup> The agreement, following the defeat of the Tibetan Army at Chamdo, sought to legalise the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

Contemporary Chinese policy sees itself building on Xi Jinping's 2013 observation at the National People's Congress: "To govern the country well we must first govern the frontiers well, and to govern the frontiers well we must first ensure stability in

Tibet."<sup>3</sup> Xi's hardline stamp on the Tibet policy is also visible through his directives at the various work conferences on Tibet.<sup>b</sup>

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b These conferences, held once every several years, seek to lay down the national agenda on particular issues.

# Tibet: A Brief History

**W**ith Tibet, as with its contentious borders, China conveniently changes the goalposts. Its claim in more recent years is that Tibet has been part of China “since ancient times”, around the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Yet Robert Barnett, an authority on Tibet notes that up until 2015, the Chinese government had insisted that “Tibet became part of China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and before that they had said it happened in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.”<sup>4</sup>

Tibet was first conquered by the Mongols, who also subjugated China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and many Mongol kings viewed Tibetan Lamas as religious preceptors more than vassals. The Ming Empire that succeeded the Mongols in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, left Tibet alone, but Tibetan religious leaders were welcomed at the court. At this time Tibet was dominated by independent Mongol Kings who patronised the Dalai Lama. Indeed, the fourth Dalai Lama was reincarnated in the family of a powerful

Mongol chief, Altan Khan. The next Dalai Lama, Ngwang Lobsang Gyatso, the Great Fifth (1617-1682), was both the religious and temporal ruler of the country. Historian Sam van Schaik has noted that although many modern Chinese historians have taken his “visit [to Beijing to meet the emperor] as marking the submission of the Dalai Lama’s government to China, such an interpretation is hardly borne out either by the Tibetan or Chinese records of the time.”<sup>5</sup>

Tibet came under the protection of the Qing Empire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In practice this meant that while the Qing assumed some control over Tibet’s foreign affairs and security, they had none over its internal affairs. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Qing control over Tibet was confined to the Chinese Amban or representative in Lhasa, and his military contingent.

Tibet declared independence in 1911 and was trying its best to remain independent when the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1950 announced its intention of "liberating" it. With a rag tag army, an insular government, and a disinterested India and Britain, Tibet had little choice. First, its army was defeated at Chamdo in eastern Tibet, an event which coincided with China's entry into the Korean War against the US. After the United Nations (UN) failed to take up their issue, the Tibetans had no option but to negotiate with China. They tried in vain to persuade the Chinese government to allow them full internal independence and to keep the People's Liberation Army (PLA) out of Tibet.

Eventually, the Seventeen-Point Agreement between the "People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet" was signed on 23 May 1951. It was, in essence, a document of Tibet's surrender. The latest White Paper (i.e., 23 May 2021) was issued on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the agreement. The preamble of the Agreement, which was itself signed in controversial circumstances,<sup>c</sup> declared

that Tibet had for long been part of China but over the last hundred years, "imperialist forces" penetrated China and Tibet and "carried out all kinds of deceptions and provocations." The "Local Government" had adopted an unpatriotic attitude, but with the founding of the PRC in 1949, Tibet would now "return to the big family of the motherland." Interestingly, the document does not refer to the CPC; rather, all references are to the "Central People's Government" and the PRC.<sup>6</sup> Having been signed under duress, legally the agreement meant little, but in practical terms it enabled China to occupy the rest of Tibet without recourse to force. There were promises made to maintain the political, social and cultural lives of the Tibetans, all of which were soon abandoned.<sup>7</sup>

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c There were a number of issues relating to the role played by Ngapoi Ngwang Jigme, the Dalai Lama's representative in Chamdo, and the leader of the team to negotiate with China.

# India's Stakes in Tibet

India's land borders with China today are essentially those between India and Tibet. In many ways, China's perspectives on India are shaped by its Tibet policy. China, as noted earlier, established its authority over Tibet in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it was only when the People's Republic of China had been born and had deployed the PLA that it assumed physical control of the area.

Besides a common border, parts of India share cultural linkages with Tibet. After all, until 1959, there was extensive trade and people-to-people contact between Tibet and the trans-Himalayan regions of India. One of the most sacred sites for Hindus—Mount Kailash and the Lake Manasarovar—are in Tibet. Indeed, for Tibetans, access to the outside world was far easier through India than China; Kolkata was the closest port to Lhasa. In the early years of Chinese occupation, the PLA depended on the Kolkata port to ship supplies for its forces.

The Tibetan elite tended to look at the outside world through India and in 1959, thousands of Tibetans came to India as refugees. Today India hosts the world's largest Tibetan diaspora of more than 75,000 people. It also hosts the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamshala, which functions like a government-in-exile for the Tibetan diaspora that comprises 60,000 or so living abroad, mainly in north America and Europe. It is also in Dharamshala where India has provided refuge to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama since 1959, and between 1999-2018, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, the head of the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism and many other *tulkus* (reincarnate lamas). Since then, India has emerged as a centre of Tibetan Buddhism, hosting all four biggest schools of the religion. According to Indian think tank, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, there are 225 monasteries and nunneries with over 30,000 monks and nuns across the country.<sup>8</sup>

Many of these monasteries are mirrors of institutions that originally flourished in Tibet itself. These have followers, not just in the traditional areas of the Himalayas, but overseas, too, and are often well-endowed.

From the outset, India sought to push China to give Tibet an autonomous status. Being aware that it could not challenge the Chinese occupation of Tibet, India's policy was to promote Tibet's autonomy so as to lessen the likelihood of having China as its neighbour. In 1954, India renounced the special rights it had in Tibet and recognised it as the "Tibet Region of China"; there was no reciprocal commitment from China with regard to the border between India and Tibet. This would have portentous consequences.<sup>9</sup> After the battle of Chamdo in 1950, China had already incorporated eastern Tibet into the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunan. In 1965, Tibet was rechristened "Tibet Autonomous Region" (TAR), which India formally recognised as being part of China in 2003.

Mao Zedong's fears that India wanted to weaken China's hold on Tibet was key in the Chinese decision to make war with India in 1962. John A. Garver has noted that Chinese studies of the 1962 war published in the 1990s were based on the belief, triggered by Mao himself in 1959, that India somehow wanted to weaken Chinese control over Tibet, or, in fact overthrow it.<sup>10</sup>

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# China Consolidates its Hold on Tibet

**F**ollowing the 1959 Tibetan Revolt and Mao's Cultural Revolution, China ruled the Tibetans with extreme repression—even cruelty. With the death of Mao and the collapse of the Cultural Revolution, successive Chinese leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Hu Yaobang sought to make amends for those decades of repression. China reached out to Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, who met Deng Xiaoping in early 1979. In the course of their conversations, the now paramount leader said that China was willing to discuss everything and that except for independence, “everything is negotiable.”<sup>11</sup>

Negotiations carried on throughout the 1980s but eventually collapsed. China's re-thinking had a role in this, as well as the fact that Indian intelligence agency R&AW—and possibly some intelligence agencies of other countries—did not want a reconciliation between China and the Tibetans. The coup de grâce of this first phase of talks was delivered when the PLA crushed the movement for democracy in China at the Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Gyalo, a resident of the West Bengal hill town of Kalimpong and who had also been at the forefront of the US Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) activities in Tibet in the 1950s and 1960s, continued to have contacts with China. Between 1979 and 2002, there were more than a dozen meetings between the Dalai Lama's representatives and the Chinese government. In 2002, Gyalo visited Tibet for the first time since beginning his negotiations with China. The process foundered, however, owing to the increasingly tough attitude of the Chinese government.

With reconciliation talks failing, Beijing embarked on what was called the “Western Development Campaign” aimed at ensuring that regions like Tibet and Xinjiang did not get left too far behind by the rapidly growing mainland. The campaign was launched by Jiang Zemin in 2000 and it pledged to build 35,000 km of roads, 4,000 km of railways, and dozens of new factories along with oil and gas pipelines.<sup>12</sup>

The campaign had many objectives. It sought to promote growth in areas that were being left behind as China was liberalising its economy, so as to ensure political stability in those regions. It was also aimed at exploiting the natural resources of the far western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang; and at promoting cultural consolidation by encouraging the movement of Han migrants to minority areas in Tibet and Xinjiang. There were three pipeline projects leading out of Tibet and Xinjiang and connecting Sichuan to Wuhan. Moreover, there was a “three-dimensional” infrastructure development plan for Xinjiang and Tibet, based on promoting rail, road, and air connectivity.

Perhaps the most ambitious project was the railway to link Golmud in Qinghai province to Lhasa in Tibet. In 2006, the 1,432-km Qinghai-Tibet Railway line traversing extremely forbidding terrain, some at an altitude of 4,000 m, became operational.<sup>13</sup> The Lhasa airport at Gonggar was built in the 1960s and upgraded in the mid-1990s, and other airports came up under the 10<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2000-2005) at Nyingchi, Ngari-Gunsa, Shigatse, and Chamdo.<sup>14</sup>

The sudden uprising in Tibet in March 2008, took China aback. The summer Olympics were scheduled to be held in Beijing in August of the same year and they became the rallying point of the protests against China’s repression of the Tibetans. It began in March with protests by monks and nuns and other Tibetans to commemorate the 49<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising. It then rapidly spread to monasteries across Tibet Autonomous Region, and, more significantly, to regions of Tibet that had been merged with Chinese provinces such as Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu. Protests also took place in India, Nepal, Australia, North America, and Europe where communities of Tibetan exiles lived.

China was perplexed. After all, they reasoned, they had transformed Tibet from a place which did not have industry to make even matchsticks to one which was now criss-crossed by highways, had modern houses and safe drinking water, and had more than 300 modern industrial enterprises.<sup>15</sup> They were convinced that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, had a hand in the protests. The Dalai Lama denied this and called for reconciliation between the Chinese and Tibetan people “through dialogue in the spirit of understanding and accommodation.”<sup>16</sup>

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Ironically, at this time in the mid-2000s, China was also engaged in dialogue with a Tibetan delegation now headed by Lodi Gyari, a senior aide of the Dalai Lama, and a number of Chinese and Tibetan leaders. The two sides managed to meet around 10 times between 2003 and 2010, even in 2008 when there were extensive Tibetan protests that March. In 2010, however, the meeting was stalled because of protests in Tibet. No dialogue has been held since.

The Tibetan uprising of 2008 persuaded the Chinese government to hasten the implementation of its Western Development Strategy. As part of this thrust, a new rail-line linking Xinjiang and Tibet was commissioned in 2011, reducing the distance between Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang and Lhasa by more than 1,000 km. In 2014, China completed the 33-km Xinguanjiao tunnel on the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. By 2019, according to *China Daily*, the Lhasa railway had been extended to Xigatse and the track-laying begun for the Lhasa-Nyingchi section in the densely forested and mountainous south-eastern Tibet.

By this time, the length of all expressways across Tibet totaled 97,800 km, and it had five airports linked to 38 cities in China. In 2012 the entire Western Highway (219) going through Aksai Chin was repaved for the first time in 50 years, and work was initiated in repaving and upgrading older highways and building new feeder roads and rail links.<sup>17</sup>

While Xinjiang has been working on a different story-line, the effort in Tibet was on winning over the population through development. In other words, in Xinjiang, Beijing has taken the path of repression, while in Tibet, the approach is still to win over the region through development, persuasion, and some political re-education.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), China has allotted some USD 30 billion, mainly in the transportation area. This will be used to build new expressways, upgrade existing roads, and enhance the quality of rural roads and rail services. In the previous 2016-2020 Plan there was a marked improvement in the transportation infrastructure; now China is readying to operate high-speed rail services in Tibet. Among the biggest achievements was the construction of a highway through what is the world's deepest canyon on the Yarlung Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river. This was part of a project to develop connectivity to the remote Medog county bordering India.<sup>18</sup>

In recent times, the Tibetan position in the dialogue with China has been defined by the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way Approach", which has sought genuine autonomy for Tibetans within the framework of the existing Chinese state and constitution.<sup>19</sup> This has had its roots in the early conversation between his brother Gyalo Thondup and Deng Xiaoping, where the Chinese leader had said that everything except independence was negotiable. In July 2008, at the request of China, the CTA had even spelt out what they meant by 'autonomy' and 'self-government'.<sup>20</sup>

In reality, though, China has not been interested in changing the status of Tibet. What they have been wanting is to persuade the Dalai Lama to find accommodation within their framework. Their 2009 White Paper, subtitled, "50 years of democratic reform in Tibet" made it clear that, in their view, all the talk of autonomy was only a cover for Tibetan independence—which is simply not acceptable to China. The White Paper had accused the "'Western anti-China forces' of trying to restrain, split and demonise China."<sup>21</sup> The 2008 protests in Tibet were followed by a tide of self-immolations in the 2011- 2013 period, many in Tibetan areas of Chinese provinces like Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai, and TAR itself. There were some incidents, too, in India and Nepal. China only hardened its stance. This coincided with the appointment of Xi Jinping, in late 2012, as General Secretary of the CPC and President of the People's Republic of China.

This inaugurated a new and more hardline approach to Tibet, laid out in the White Paper of 2015: China made it clear that it had no meeting ground with the exiled Tibetans.<sup>22</sup> It categorically denounced the "Middle Way", saying its intention was merely to "split China" and that greater autonomy for Tibet was "not up for discussion". The new nationalist leadership of Xi Jinping manifested itself when the White Paper became more insistent on the ancient connection between China and Tibet, that the latter had been part of China since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It cited the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the CPC which said that relations between the Dalai Lama and China could improve only if His Holiness publicly affirmed that Tibet "has been an integral part of China since antiquity," and abandoned "his stance on independence."

Addressing a conference on religions in April 2016, Xi Jinping said the government "would guide religions practiced in China to be compatible with socialism" and support the notion of Sinicising foreign faiths. This was in response to what China said were the new problems facing the country, including religious extremism, "and foreign forces infiltration in China through religions." Ostensibly this was about Christianity, but soon its impact was felt by the Muslims in Xinjiang; now the pressure is on Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>23</sup>

# Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama

**A**s the Dalai Lama has aged, a new factor has become pivotal: reincarnation. The Dalai Lama detailed his ideas on reincarnation in an essay in 2011.<sup>24</sup> He expressed his worries that the process of reincarnation could be hijacked by politics. On one hand, he wondered whether it was time that he did not reincarnate at all or do so as a woman. On the other, he expressed an interest in working out clear-cut guidelines to ensure that there “is no room for doubt or deception” in the process. This was aimed at China, who will attempt to “capture” any successor, an action that will almost certainly discredit the high office of the Dalai Lama. As the Dalai Lama said in his essay, the Chinese Communists “who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives”, leave alone the concept of *tulkus* (reincarnate lamas), should not meddle in the subject.

One problem for any reincarnation is that there is a 20-25-year gap before the lama is mature enough to play the political role that they will inevitably have to assume. This has proved to be a weak point of the Tibetan system in the past, and could well be so in contemporary times. For this reason, the Dalai Lama may choose another route which has its roots deep in Buddhism: the concept of “emanation” which he also wrote about in his 2011 essay. He noted, “It is possible for the Lama to appoint a successor who is either his disciple or someone young who is to be recognized as his emanation.” The Dalai Lama pointed to Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Tibetan master to explain that “reincarnation happens when someone takes rebirth after the predecessor’s passing away; emanation is when manifestations take place without the source’s passing away.”

Beijing's nightmare would be the reincarnation or emanation of the Dalai Lama somewhere within the Tibetan community in India, possibly even in Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. The town is not only associated with the Great Fifth, but also near the birthplace of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso, who was a Monpa and not Tibetan by ethnicity.

There is little doubt, though, that China will eventually appoint their own Dalai Lama, just as they did with the Panchen. However, the issue in the minds of not just the Tibetans but the international community, is credibility.

China believes that the final authority in appointing a high lama is theirs by history and custom. The Qianlong Emperor in the 18<sup>th</sup> century introduced a system of drawing lots from a Golden Urn to choose the high lamas. The rules had been established after a Qing army helped the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama re-establish his authority and extend Chinese authority over Nepal in 1720. According to the Manchu law, names of candidates for the top Lamas, including the Dalai and the Panchen were put in urns in temples in Lhasa and Beijing and a draw of lots decided the candidate. This practice was only fitfully carried out since there was little Qing influence in Tibet through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most high lamas, including the current Dalai Lama were installed without the Golden Urn process.

Remarkably, and somewhat strangely, the communist government has now sought to reinstitute this practice. As a Chinese White Paper of 1997 on the freedom of religious belief in China noted, "approval of the reincarnation of the Grand Living Buddhas by the central government is a religious ritual and historical convention of Tibetan Buddhism, and is the key to safeguarding the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism."<sup>25</sup> In May that year, Chinese authorities had negated the Dalai Lama's selection of six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, and installed Gyaincain Norbu in his place. Nyima and his family have not been seen again. In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs in China made it clear through a decree that reincarnations must be approved by the government or they would be deemed invalid.<sup>26</sup>

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Under Xi Jinping, China's policy towards its ethnic minorities has hardened considerably. The issue of Xinjiang has already become an international *cause célèbre*. As for Tibet, on one side, China continues to pour in money to promote development in the region; on the other, it is enhancing steps to Sinicise Tibetan Buddhism. Speaking at the Sixth Tibet Work Conference in August 2015, Xi called for efforts to promote “patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle and effectively manage monasteries in the long run, encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society.”<sup>27</sup> His speech to the Seventh Work Conference in 2020 carried a similar theme. Equally, it emphasised the need to ensure “national security and enduring peace and stability” for the improvement of people's lives, and the need to “solidify border defense and ensure frontier security.”<sup>28</sup>

China showcased the result of their massive political re-education campaign recently when they allowed “a tightly chaperoned” visit of a group of journalists to Tibet. A *Reuters* reporter noted that the most ubiquitous picture in houses, bedrooms, schools and religious institutions was that of Xi Jinping. Indeed, he said, when a monk in the historic Lhasa monastery of Jokhang was asked who his spiritual leader was, the monk named Xi. Photos of the Dalai Lama are now banned in Tibet.<sup>29</sup>

Security of the border of Tibet with India and Nepal has long been a significant concern for China. Within days of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress on 24 October 2017, one of the first news items put out by *Xinhua* was about a letter written by two sisters of a Tibetan herder family during the Party Congress to Chairman Xi, detailing their experiences in the border areas. Xi promptly replied, praising the girls and thanking them for their loyalty and the contribution they were making in safeguarding China's territory.<sup>30</sup>

That China is working along Xi's instructions to enhance border security is evident from its “model *Xiaokang* villages” programme. Since the 2017 Party Congress a programme has been unrolled to construct 628 model border defence villages in 21 border counties facing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh in a period of three years. These would be serviced by roads, power, and the Internet, and villagers would be provided a special subsidy. These *xiaokang* (moderately prosperous) villages serve two functions: to upgrade the physical quality of life of the border citizens, and to ensure border security.<sup>31</sup> Some such villages are also being constructed in disputed areas in Bhutan. There have been reports of the Chinese occupation of Doklam and the construction of Pangda village in the area.<sup>32</sup> More recently, there were reports of such villages being constructed in the disputed areas of northern Bhutan as well.<sup>33</sup>

# India's Changing Stance

Over the years, India has also stiffened its approach on Tibet. In 2008, when then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited China, the Joint Statement lacked the familiar Indian reiteration that “it recognized the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China.” It has not recurred in any joint statements since. In 2009, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s exile, the Indian government permitted him to visit Tawang, for the first time since 2003.

The Modi government policy has worked in two phases. The Tibetan Sikyong, Lobsang Sangay, who headed the Central Tibetan Administration until recently, was invited to the Prime Minister’s inauguration in 2014. The Dalai Lama, too, was invited to the Rashtrapati Bhavan and permitted to visit Tawang in 2017. During the Doklam crisis in 2017, the government had allowed Sangay to unfurl a Tibetan flag near Pangong Tso. In early 2018, however, the Modi government drew back

and changed its policy on the eve of the first informal summit in Wuhan in 2018. It had formally written to leaders and officials and advised them to avoid participating in the events marking the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s arrival in India. In fact, some events to be held in New Delhi were cancelled and a rally was shifted to Dharamshala.<sup>34</sup>

The policy took another turn in August 2020 when, in response to the PLA’s moves in eastern Ladakh, New Delhi decided to use the Special Frontier Force, comprising Tibetan refugees, to capture the heights in the south bank of the Pangong Tso and publicised the fact that Tibetans had been involved. India has no dearth of equally well-trained SF units, but choosing this force which is part of the external intelligence agency, R&AW, was intended to signal that Tibet remained an important element in the Sino-Indian equation.<sup>35</sup>



China's worry is a possible alignment of Indian and US policies on Tibet. In December 2020, the US passed a Tibetan Policy and Support Act which says that the succession of Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the Dalai Lama, is the final authority on his own reincarnation. Earlier in November 2020, the then Sikyong, or head of the CTA, Lobsang Sangay was invited for an official meeting to the White House—the first for a Tibetan official of his standing. The Biden Administration has not given any indication that it intends to change US policy towards China and Tibet.

Today there are voices in India which suggest that New Delhi must follow the same course and make it clear that the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is a religious matter which ought to be decided by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan community. So far India has decided not to get involved in the issue. In April 2021, journalist Sudhi Ranjan Sen reported that, “senior security officials in India, including the prime minister’s office have been involved in discussions about how New Delhi can influence the choice of the next Dalai Lama.”<sup>36</sup> As part of this, India convened five separate assemblies of senior monks from the different sects of Tibetan Buddhism with a view of shaping the narrative on the legitimacy of any successor of the Dalai Lama.

There have been some questions about that report, with one former official denying that anything of the sort happened.<sup>37</sup> In July this year, the Dalai Lama will turn 86; he has himself said in the past that he will begin thinking of succession when he is around 90.

From the Chinese point of view, a political shift on Tibet would be bad news. Especially since it has been accompanied by India’s continuing efforts to develop its border infrastructure along the Himalayas as this improves Indian military capacity in the mountain region. The developments in eastern Ladakh triggered by Chinese occupation of areas on the Indian side of the LAC have pushed India to enhance its military deployments along the LAC. More importantly, it has led to a larger shift in India’s defence posture, away from Pakistan, towards the north to face China. This has involved positioning two strike corps on the eastern and western parts of the LAC, implying that India would consider taking a war into Tibet, should that eventuality arise. There is also talk that this could be accompanied by India adopting a more forceful policy in support of the exiled Tibetans and the Dalai Lama.

# Conclusion

China's 2021 White Paper has laid down the guidelines “for governing Tibet in the new era”, which is essentially the Xi Jinping period. Not surprisingly, it leads off from the importance of the CPC's leadership and that of “Xi Jinping's strategy on governing the frontiers and ensuring the stability of Tibet.” Towards this end, the continuing tasks are to “strengthen ethnic unity,” build a prosperous Tibet, protect the environment, take into account the international and domestic situation, and “develop religions in a Chinese context.”<sup>38</sup>


These tasks have both internal and external policy implications for China. When it comes to frontiers, relations with India come to the fore, specifically the management of the boundary dispute and the LAC. So far, China has shown an inclination to manage both from a position of dominance. That is why the building of border infrastructure—which inevitably enhances the capabilities of the Indian military along the border areas—is generating stress for Beijing.

Associated with this is the larger Indian strategy of aligning itself with the United States. Despite the strained relations with India and the enduring Indian military challenge on the Tibet border, New Delhi does not quite figure as a villain in the White Papers, although there have been references to the activities of the Special Frontier Force (SFF). The villains are the Dalai Lama and “Western anti-China forces”—mostly code for the US. The 2021 White Paper refers to the motive of the Tibet Policy Act of 2002, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018, and the Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020—i.e., “to interfere in China's domestic affairs.”

There are two aspects to the domestic situation. The first is a larger social effort to transform the nature of minority religions in China. One aspect of this effort is in Xinjiang, where a large number of Muslims have been detained, presumably for what used to be called “thought reform” in the Maoist days. This is now becoming visible in the form of a massive political education campaign in Tibet that covers schools and monasteries. The CPC is clear that it will only tolerate religions that adopt “Chinese characteristics”, whether it is Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism.

A second aspect is dealing with the Tibetan exiles and the Dalai Lama. The phase of persuading the Dalai Lama to return to China seems to have ended, and the ideological battle is now shifting to the issue of reincarnation and succession of the Dalai Lama. Despite all the development efforts, Beijing has not been able to lessen the appeal and the authority of the Dalai Lama in Tibet, and so it is probably now banking on manipulating the succession to its

advantage. The Dalai Lama is equally determined to prevent a Chinese “capture” of the institution, just as it happened in the case of the Panchen Lama.

With its 4,000-km land border, India, too, has an interest in a stable and well-governed Tibet, even as its notions of stability and good governance are at sharp variance with those of Beijing. In China’s view, stability and security is based on being able to dominate India and Nepal. China’s larger regional ambitions relating to South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region preclude it from a relationship of equality with New Delhi. As for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exiles, Beijing’s unrelenting hostility leaves little room for any kind of compromise, clouding the future with more turbulence and uncertainty. 

“The 2021 White Paper outlines the tasks for China in Tibet: to strengthen ethnic unity, build a prosperous region, protect the environment, and develop religions in a Chinese context.”

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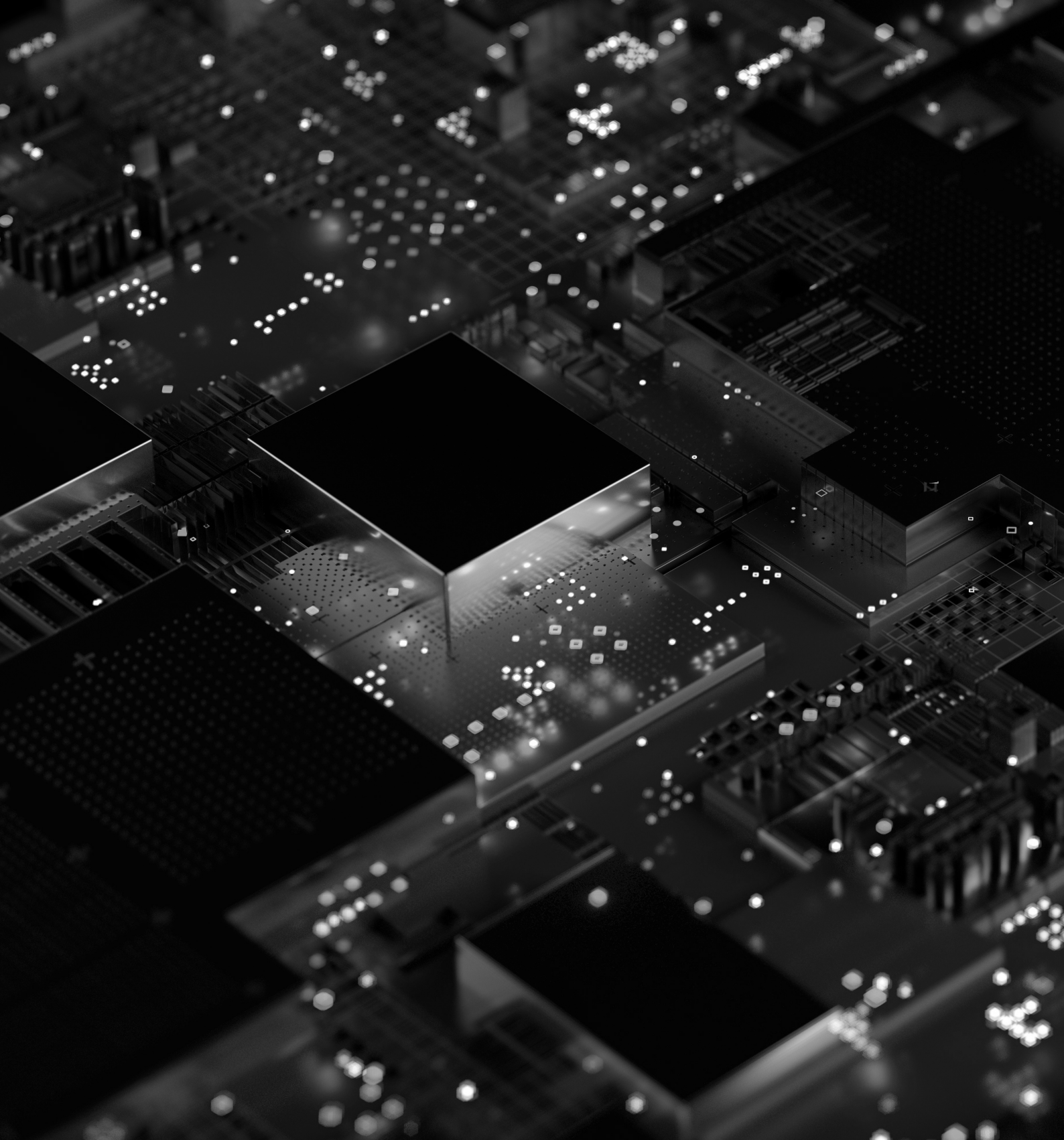
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