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Geopolitics in the Himalayas: Towards a British strategy

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New geostrategic thinking for a more competitive age

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Foreword

With the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), international interest has grown in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, particularly the South and East China seas which straddle the 'Royal Route' connecting both ends of Eurasia. This interest has been further piqued by the PRC's bellicosity towards Taiwan and compounded by the fact that the Chinese have built a series of artificial islands replete with military facilities on low tide elevations throughout the South China Sea and expanded the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). As the United States (US) has sought to push back against Chinese revisionism, interest has grown in the risk of escalation.

What has been less-well observed is the intensification of geopolitical competition in the Himalayan region. Often considered distant, peripheral and largely impenetrable, this area marks the northern frontier of the Indo-Pacific. From land grabs in Bhutan and the leveraging of water flows along key rivers in the Himalayas, to preventing sanctuary for Tibetans and others, the PRC has applied significant pressure. So just as Chinese power expands around the Indo-Pacific rimlands, it has also pushed down through the world's highest mountain range.

The Council on Geostrategy considered the situation ripe for further investigation. The result – this Policy Paper – is the first comprehensive geopolitical study of the Himalayan region to be undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) for some time.

Britain may no longer be the Himalayan powerbroker it was during the age of empire, but it has residual interests in the region – a region which cannot be ignored in the context of the Indo-Pacific 'tilt'. As His Majesty's (HM) Government seeks to turn that tilt into a lasting reality, it ought to widen its Indo-Pacific focus to incorporate the geopolitics of the Himalayas.

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Executive summary

- The United Kingdom's (UK) interests in the Himalayan region are not what they once were. However, attempts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to change the geopolitics of the region demands British attention.
- The PRC is altering facts on the ground in Bhutan by building villages and infrastructure inside Bhutanese territory.
- Likewise, in Nepal, Chinese interference has grown more pronounced in recent years, resulting in harsh policies towards Tibetan refugees.
- In its border disputes with India, the PRC has also leveraged its control over the upper reaches of the River Brahmaputra, most notably during the 2017 Doklam standoff.
- This activity is similar to Chinese efforts in the South China Sea, where the CCP has built artificial islands on low tide elevations to establish de facto geopolitical control.
- As His Majesty's (HM) Government 'refreshes' the Integrated Review it should begin to broaden the so-called 'tilt' towards a more systematic Indo-Pacific posture which covers the region's maritime and terrestrial theatres. The Himalayas region deserves more focus, and a British Himalayas Strategy could even be considered. If adopted, it would do well to:
 1. **Support Bhutan's territorial integrity:** The UK, in concert with like-minded partners in the region, should closely monitor PRC construction inside Bhutanese territory and condemn further incursions in multilateral fora and through joint statements.
 2. **Counter PRC influence in Nepal and support further democratisation there:** The UK should explore ways of enhancing bilateral trade with Nepal and continue sending



aid to the country to balance against the PRC's economic leverage over Nepal. Efforts to support Nepal's democratic transition should continue as should engagement with like-minded members of Nepalese civil society.

- 3. Deepen cooperation with India:** The Integrated Review already notes the strength of this relationship and expresses a desire to further enhance it. However, India should be seen as more than a trading partner and its security concerns along its border with the PRC should not be treated as a mere bilateral issue. India's own security concerns will also become more important to Britain as it seeks to strengthen bilateral ties with New Delhi.
- 4. Encourage greater cooperation over transboundary rivers:** Through the World Bank and alongside other countries, the UK has previously supported the South Asia Water Initiative which aimed to enhance knowledge, technical and policy capacity, and trust amongst countries involved in managing the Himalayan river system. Efforts of this kind should be supported.
- 5. Promote the wellbeing of Tibetan refugees in Nepal:** British officials in Kathmandu should use their presence to closely monitor the wellbeing of Tibetan refugees in Nepal, particularly their ability to express themselves culturally and religiously. They should monitor developments on the PRC border closely and also urge the Nepalese government to grant further protections for Tibetan refugees.
- 6. Stand up for Tibetans:** HM Government has repeatedly reaffirmed its concern about human rights in Tibet. Therefore, Britain should continue raising such concerns, through, amongst other bodies, the UN and its Universal Periodic Review process, as well as counter Beijing's attempts to interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama.



1.0 Introduction

In June 1965, Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, declared that ‘Britain’s frontiers are on the Himalayas.’¹ Speaking at the Nehru Exhibition, he went on to state that ‘India and her neighbours...are now at the crossroads of the world’ and signalled his continuing support for New Delhi, which had recently emerged from a bruising conflict along its northern border with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

The 1962 Sino-Indian War remains relevant today as the conflict’s territorial outcomes, in terms of de facto control, has remained virtually intact since. On the eastern front, India retained control of the North-East Frontier Agency covering what is now called Arunachal Pradesh, most of which Beijing claims as South Tibet. Meanwhile, in the west, Beijing was able to consolidate its control over Aksai Chin, which India regards as part of the union territory of Ladakh. It is in this western section, in the Galwan Valley, where both countries’ militaries clashed in 2020 which resulted in the first loss of life along the border since 1975.² While the territorial disagreements between the eastern and western sectors are, geographically, relatively small, they are significant. This is partially a result of the proximity of the borders of Bangladesh, Bhutan, the PRC, and Nepal, which leave India with a narrow stretch of land – the Siliguri Corridor (the so-called ‘Chicken’s Neck’) – connecting its northeastern states with the rest of the country. Fears that the corridor could be cut off in a future Chinese-Indian conflict are no doubt fueled by New Delhi’s losses 60 years ago.

The annexation of Tibet in 1950-1951 and, eight years later, the quashing of the territory’s remaining autonomy following the Tibetan Uprising, are also historical events of huge contemporary relevance. Not only did the former push the frontiers of the PRC, and in turn the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), to India’s borders, but it also gave Beijing control over Tibet’s rivers. The latter also sparked an exodus of

¹ Patrick Keatley, ‘Premier pledges support for India’, *The Guardian*, 11/06/1965, p. 1.

² Precise figures for the total number of deaths which resulted from hand-to-hand combat on 15th June 2020 are unavailable. Although India has confirmed that it had lost 20 soldiers, the PRC has not been so forthcoming. Earlier in 2021, the People’s Liberation Army’s Daily reported that 4 Chinese soldiers had died. However, American intelligence has estimated that Beijing’s fatalities range from 20 to 30. See: Steven Lee Myers, ‘China Acknowledges 4 Deaths in Last Year’s Border Clash With India’, *The New York Times*, 19/02/2021, <https://nyti.ms/3SDL6hq> (checked: 31/10/2022).



Tibetans to both India and Nepal. The sanctuary provided to these Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-exile in Dharamshala, has caused friction in Chinese-Indian relations ever since. Beijing has on occasions linked the actions of the Dalai Lama to border negotiations, and regularly accuses India of challenging 'One China' by wielding the 'Tibet Card'.³

Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from 1943 to 1976, is reported to have said that Tibet was the palm of the PRC's hand with Bhutan, Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, and Arunachal Pradesh representing its five fingers.⁴ While touching all five of these territories, this Policy Paper focuses on Bhutan and Nepal as well as the River Brahmaputra (known in Tibet as the Yarlung Tsangpo and in Bangladesh as the Jamuna) which runs through Arunachal Pradesh. It highlights how, decades on from the reign of Mao, the PRC is exerting greater control over the region and reshaping its geopolitics in three specific areas. Despite the perception that the towering mountains of the Himalayas, with their vast swathes of remote and hostile terrain, render a static environment, this is far from the case; rather, the region is the site of intensifying geopolitical confrontation.

The first section of this Policy Paper discusses Beijing's village and infrastructure building in Bhutanese territory and the regional tensions this has generated, most notably between the Indian and Chinese troops stationed in Doklam in 2017. The paper then goes on to discuss the mistrust between the PRC and India over developments along the River Yarlung Tsangpo, as well as how the PRC has exploited its upper riparian status⁵ and Indian fears about Beijing's future intentions. The growth in Chinese influence over Nepal and its effect on Tibetan refugees, both their ability to cross the border and the suppression they have experienced at the hands of the Nepalese authorities, is then investigated. Finally, the paper concludes by reviewing the UK's interests in the broader Indo-Pacific – as outlined in His Majesty's (HM) Government's Integrated Review from March

³ Ivan Lidarev, 'The Tibet factor in the China-India territorial dispute', Jagannath Panda (ed.), *India and China in Asia: Between Equilibrium and Equations* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 120-136.

⁴ Tsewang Dorji, 'A Geo-strategic Importance of Tibet: China's "Palm and Five-Fingers Strategy"', Tibet Policy Institute, 02/07/2020, <https://bit.ly/3D2wdij> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁵ An upper riparian state in one which can control the flow of a transboundary river system to another state downstream. Therefore, in terms of the River Yarlung Tsangpo (and River Brahmaputra), the PRC is the upper-most riparian while India is both an upper and lower riparian in relation to the PRC and Bangladesh, respectively.

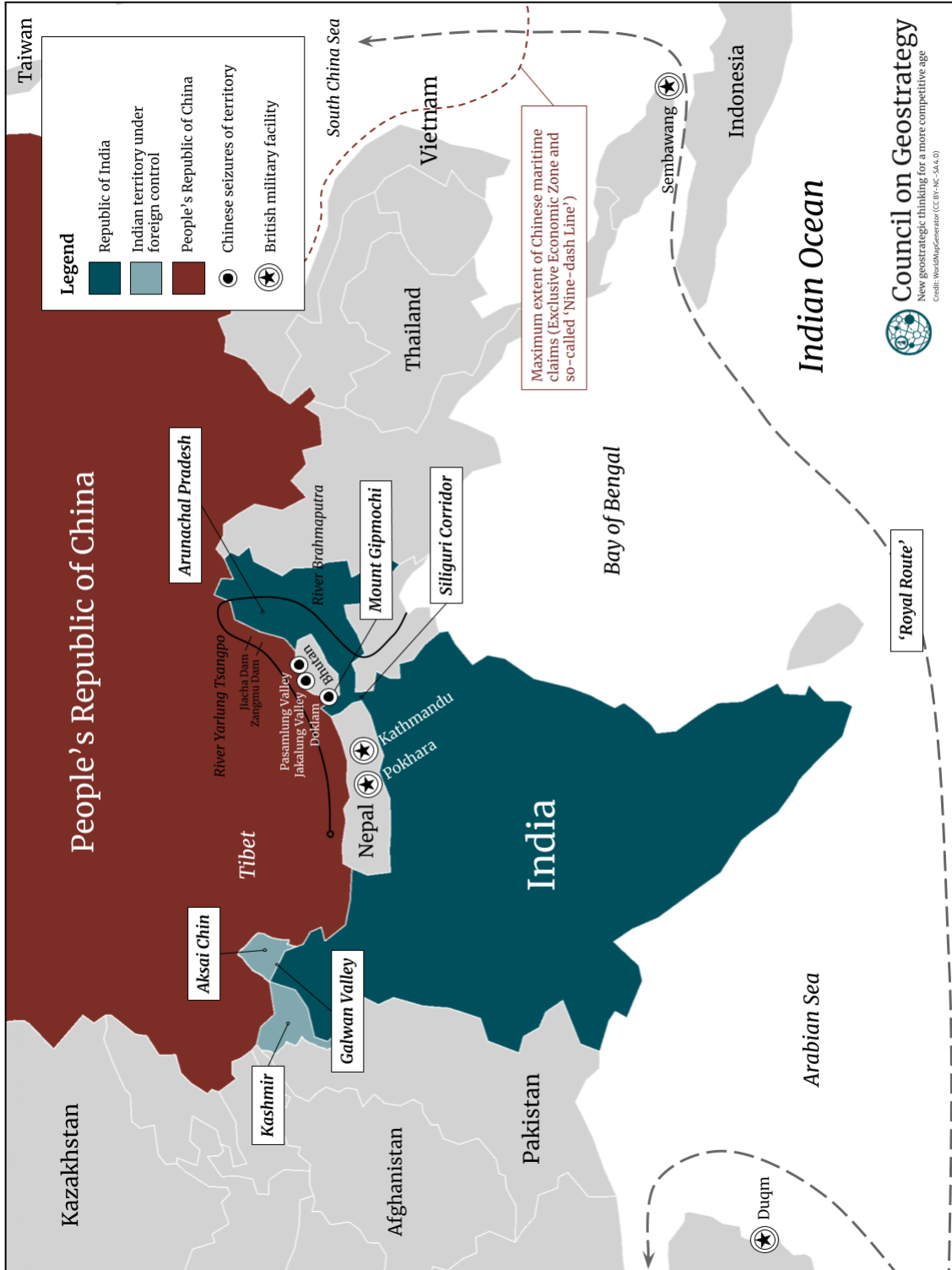


2021 – and how these might be affected by the intensifying geopolitics of the Himalayan region.⁶

⁶ ‘Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy’, Cabinet Office, 07/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/37DZx3n> (checked: 31/10/2022).



Map 1: The Himalayas region in relation to the Indo-Pacific



2.0 Redrawing borders in the Himalayas

Territorial disputes between Bhutan and the PRC over their 470-kilometre-long border have been subject to negotiations for decades. However, in recent years Beijing has, contrary to bilateral agreements, enhanced efforts which seek to permanently alter the facts on the ground. This not only violates Bhutan's sovereignty but also alarms India which has security interests in the territory. In 2017, these tensions came to a head with a 73-day standoff between the region's two greatest powers. Furthermore, this behaviour demonstrates the PRC's growing willingness to assert itself beyond its borders and act decisively to alter the status-quo in its favour as it has done elsewhere, for example in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait.

As Map 1 shows, traditionally, the PRC has claimed two separate areas of Bhutan along the northern border, namely the Jakarlung and Pasamlung valleys, which together equal 500 square kilometres. In addition, on the western side of Bhutan, the PRC lays claim to 269 square kilometres which notably includes Doklam. The disagreement over this latter area stems from Beijing's assertion that the PRC-Bhutan-India trijunction point is located at Mount Gipmochi while Thimphu argues that it is where it currently is, further northwards at Batang La.

New Delhi sides with Bhutan on the demarcation of the border. This is because of the Doklam plateau's proximity to India's crucial Siliguri Corridor. If the PRC were to establish a military presence as far south as Mount Gipmochi, it would give the PLA access to the Jampheri ridge which slopes down into the Bhutanese foothills and towards the corridor.⁷ Indian analysts are anxious that with Doklam, Beijing could more easily choke off India's northeastern states during a potential conflict between the PRC and India.⁸ Such concerns are only heightened by the PRC's ongoing efforts to build roads and military infrastructure in this part of Bhutan (see Box 1).

⁷ Ankit Panda, 'The Political Geography of the India-China Crisis at Doklam', *The Diplomat*, 13/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/3D99UrU> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸ Ankit Panda, 'Geography's Curse: India's Vulnerable "Chicken's Neck"', *The Diplomat*, 08/11/2013, <https://bit.ly/3DqY6Cm> (checked: 31/10/2022).



Box 1: Building military infrastructure in Doklam

Beijing is building infrastructure inside Bhutan, some of which could serve military purposes. Such activities have already led to a tense standoff between Chinese and Indian forces in Doklam in 2017. Yet, since this incident, the PRC appears to be continuing, if not accelerating, its efforts.

In mid-June 2017, PLA engineers began extending a road, which originally ended at Dok La, in the direction of the Jampheri ridge. Two days later, according to New Delhi, Indian forces, in coordination with the Bhutanese Government, intervened to stop this construction.⁹ A standoff ensued which, after more than two months, ended when India announced that its troops were 'disengaging'.¹⁰

Despite this de-escalation, satellite images, from 2017 and 2019, respectively, published by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, indicate that the PRC continued with road building in Doklam alongside an extensive network of small military facilities, defensive fighting positions, and helicopter landing pads. While the authors of the corresponding report note that no heavy weapons have been observed in the area, Beijing has 'from a military standpoint...made excellent use of the terrain in sitting their installations.'¹¹

Further to this, in 2022, *Reuters* published more satellite images of Chinese settlements in western Bhutan's disputed areas, including Doklam. Its report claims that the PRC has built more than 200 structures, alongside new roads, across six sites in the area, with construction accelerating in 2021.¹² According to one expert and an Indian defence source, as well as giving Beijing better control over the surrounding areas, the new settlements could be potentially used to establish security-focused installations.¹³

Due to Chinese military engineering and long standing ties with Bhutan, India plays an active role in trying to preserve the status quo. The India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, which was updated in 2017,

⁹ Ankit Panda, 'What's Driving the India-China Standoff at Doklam?', *The Diplomat*, 18/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/3FbTMbM> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹⁰ 'China claims victory over India in Himalayan border row', *British Broadcasting Corporation*, <https://bbc.in/3DrVFQg> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹¹ Richard M. Rossow, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. and Kriti Upadhyaya, 'A Frozen Line in the Himalayas', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 21/08/2020, <https://bit.ly/3DtHMRG> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹² Devjyot Ghoshal, Anand Katakam and Aditi Bhandari, 'China steps up construction along disputed Bhutan border', *Reuters*, 12/01/2022, <https://tmsnrt.rs/3D2Rglf> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹³ *Ibid.*



commits both countries to ‘cooperate closely with each other on issues relating to their national interests, and not allow the use of their territories for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other.’¹⁴ Further to this, India claims that it reached an agreement with the PRC, in 2012, to resolve boundary disagreements at the trijunction through consultations, not unilateral action. However, during the 2017 Doklam standoff, Beijing’s deputy chief of mission in New Delhi disputed this.¹⁵

Despite the continued lack of formal diplomatic relations between Bhutan and the PRC, both countries have held direct border talks since 1984. In the 1990s, Beijing proposed a land swap in which it offered to forgo claims to the areas on the northern border in exchange for the smaller western territory. For its own interests, and the interests of India, Bhutan declined.¹⁶ However, by the end of the decade, a less controversial agreement on the ‘Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity Along the Sino-Bhutanese Border Areas’ was signed. In this agreement, the PRC promised to respect the ‘independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Bhutan’ and, together with Thimphu, agreed ‘that prior to the ultimate solution of the boundary issues, peace and tranquillity along the border should be maintained.’ It also promised to uphold ‘the status quo of the boundary prior to March 1959’, and ‘not to resort to unilateral action to alter the status quo of the border.’¹⁷

These words have not, however, been honoured. While rounds of talks have continued (to date 24 have been held), they have been held against a background of coercion as the PRC has attempted to impose its control over these areas. It should be noted that Bhutan is not alone in facing such incursions. In 2021, the Nepalese Government commissioned a report, subsequently leaked to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), on incursions in its northwestern district of Humla.

¹⁴ Statement by Official Spokesperson on the signing of the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty, February 8, 2007’, Ministry of External Affairs of India, 08/02/2007, <https://bit.ly/3gvD7p3> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹⁵ Devirupa Mitra, ‘China Disputes Indian Version of 2012 Understanding on Border Tri-junction’, *The Wire*, 03/08/2017, <https://bit.ly/3SxNMgl> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹⁶ Medha Bisht, ‘Sino-Bhutan Boundary Negotiations: Complexities of the “Package Deal”’, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 19/01/2010, <https://bit.ly/3D1Pr8e> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹⁷ For the full text of the agreement see the appendix of Thierry Mathou, ‘Bhutan-China Relations: Toward a New Step in Himalayan Politics’, Karma Ura and Sonam Kinga (eds.), *The Spider and the Piglet (Proceedings of the First International Seminar on Bhutan Studies)* (Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2004), pp. 390-92.

This report alleged that, on the Nepalese side of the border, the PRC had fenced around a border pillar and was attempting to construct a canal and road. It also noted surveillance of religious activities in Lalungjong, located near Mount Kailash which is a major pilgrimage site for Buddhists, by PRC security forces as well as restrictions on Nepalese grazers.¹⁸ Such reports come on the back of other allegations of other illegal incursions across Nepal's northern border with the PRC in recent years.¹⁹ However, the PRC's efforts to establish control over parts of Bhutan are far more extensive as it has established entire new villages (see Box 2).

Box 2: Settling Chinese citizens in Bhutan

On 28th October 2017, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, replied to a letter from herders in the Tibet Autonomous Region's (TAR) southern Lhunze County in which he urged them to 'set down roots in the border area, safeguard the Chinese territory and develop their hometown.'²⁰ The message followed the announcement of a scheme by TAR authorities, named the 'Plan for the Construction of Well-off Villages in Border Areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region', to build 628 villages along Tibet's border.²¹

While grander in scale, such activities are not new. In fact, in late 1995, a local CCP official went further by encouraging four Tibetan nomads to permanently settle on land in Bhutan's northern valley of the Beyul.²² In recent years, in line with the CCP's broader border plans, the settling of PRC citizens to disputed areas in Bhutan has increased as the PRC builds new villages there.

In late 2020, Indian media picked up on a Twitter post made by a Chinese state media official regarding a new settlement named Pangda inside Bhutan's borders.²³ The tweet was promptly deleted and the

¹⁸ Michael Bristow, 'China encroaching along Nepal border - report', *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 08/02/2022, <https://bbc.in/3TzRN5o> (checked: 31/10/2022).

¹⁹ Santosh Sharma Poudel, 'Has China Encroached into Nepali Territory in Humla District?', *The Diplomat*, 26/09/2021, <https://bit.ly/3Te95UG> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²⁰ '时间轴：习近平与西藏的发展' ['Timeline: Xi Jinping and Tibet's development'], *新华社 [Xinhua]*, 28/03/2019, <https://bit.ly/3sqidui> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²¹ Suyash Desai, 'China's Next Generation Infrastructure Development in Tibet: Implications for India', *The Jamestown Foundation*, 14/01/2022, <https://bit.ly/3Di4evA> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²² Robert Barnett, 'China Is Using Tibetans as Agents of Empire in the Himalayas', *Foreign Policy*, 28/07/2021, <https://bit.ly/3DqNyTP> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²³ See: Vishnu Som, 'Exclusive: Satellite Images Hint At Renewed China Threat In Doklam', *New Delhi Television Limited*, 22/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3FbbPyL> (checked: 31/10/2022).

construction of the village was denied by the Bhutanese Government. However, satellite images, taken by Maxar Technologies, confirm the existence of new houses and a road along the River Torsa in western Bhutan, near the Doklam plateau.²⁴

Subsequent work, by a team led by Robert Barnett, Founder of the Modern Tibetan Studies Programme at Columbia University, has shone light on several far more extensive settlements in northern Bhutan. In October 2016, the PRC began building roads in the Beyul which was followed the next year by the construction of a communication base station. Since then, a new village in the area, called Gyalaphug, has seen its population grow to between one and two hundred people.²⁵ Additional infrastructure was also constructed, including a small hydropower station, two CCP administrative centres, a disaster relief warehouse, as well as a series of security outposts. Their report also notes the construction of another village in the Beyul, called Dermalung, and another in the nearby Menchuma Valley.²⁶

To complicate matters further, the PRC has recently made additional territorial demands. In June 2020, Beijing laid claim to the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, 740 square kilometres of territory in eastern Bhutan, after Thimphu proposed developing the area. While Chinese officials have maintained that the PRC-Bhutan border had never been delimited, Bhutan has argued that the sanctuary had never been part of previous boundary talks.²⁷

It is in this context that the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Bhutan and the PRC in October 2021, which establishes a Three-Step Roadmap to help to expedite boundary negotiations, needs to be seen.²⁸ It is likely that the unilateral actions mentioned above are intended to force the Bhutanese Government to

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Robert Barnett, 'China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country's Territory', *Foreign Policy*, 07/05/2021, <https://bit.ly/3VRlv7v> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Anbarasan Ethirajan, 'Why Bhutan's Sakteng wildlife sanctuary is disputed by China', *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 25/11/2020, <https://bbc.in/3SL24dP> (checked: 31/10/2022).

²⁸ The full text of the Roadmap has not been published, but for separate press releases from Bhutan and the PRC, see: 'Press Release', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan, 14/11/2021, <https://bit.ly/3TxR7NF> (checked: 31/10/2022) and '中国与不丹签署关于加快中不边界谈判三步走路线图谅解备忘录' ['China and Bhutan Sign MoU on a Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiation'], 中华人民共和国外交部 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 15/10/2021, <https://bit.ly/3SxTaA5> (checked: 31/10/2022).



agree to a deal as well as complicate relations between them and New Delhi.



3.0 Leveraging water flows through the Himalayas

Indian anxieties over India's shared rivers with the PRC are longstanding. Tensions revolve around Beijing's potential ability to control how much (or how little) water flows downstream, as well as its ability to give or deny water flow data. Broader Chinese-Indian tensions, and the PRC's preference for protecting its sovereignty over transparency, compound such concerns. The issue demonstrates the PRC's willingness to ignore international norms and leverage a practical problem for political purposes, in this case as a tool in the wider territorial dispute with India.

Both the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, with ice fields containing the largest reserve of freshwater outside the polar regions, are known as the Third Pole, which are the source of ten major river systems which sustain the livelihoods of over 1.9 billion people across Asia.²⁹ Yet this abundance belies growing concerns of water scarcity. Looking forward to 2050, the UK Ministry of Defence notes the potential for water shortages for countries in South and East Asia as a result of population and economic growth, as well as climate change.³⁰

The PRC is no exception. The country's water resources are also unevenly distributed with 84% of them located in the south where 53% of the population resides. This leaves the remaining half of the population in the north with only 16%.³¹ When this is combined with the country's ever-increasing demand for water to consume, use in agricultural and industrial production, and generate electricity, it is little wonder that speculation of a looming Chinese water crisis has emerged.³²

The River Brahmaputra currently serves, and could in the future further serve, the PRC's water needs. For the first 700 miles of its

²⁹ For more on the Third Pole, see: 'About', The Third Pole, undated, <https://bit.ly/3W7WIw2> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³⁰ 'Global Strategic Trends – The Future Starts Today', Ministry of Defence, 02/11/2018, <https://bit.ly/3gDMDqj>, pp. 167–168 and 175–176 (checked: 31/10/2022).

³¹ 'North South Divide', China Water Risk, undated, <https://bit.ly/3TOSAPn> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³² Charles Parton, 'China's Looming Water Crisis', China Dialogue, 17/04/2018, <https://bit.ly/3eYBOP0> (checked: 31/10/2022).

journey southward, the river flows through the South Tibet Valley, where it is called the River Yarlung Tsangpo. Before it reaches India it turns southwards, gushing through the world's deepest canyon known as the Great Bend. Upon entering India, it becomes the Brahmaputra, and immediately serves the needs of the country's northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam, until it reaches Bangladesh (where it is known as the River Jamuna) flows into the Bay of Bengal.³³

Tensions over this river, however, are not simply a question of two sides equally competing for resources. As the upper riparian, the PRC has the advantage of being able to use the water flow of the River Yarlung Tsangpo before it reaches India, which must deal with any negative consequences arising from such activity.

A longstanding concern of India has been the potential reduction of water flows brought about by the PRC's ongoing dam building on the river (see Box 3). This is compounded by the spectre, however remote it may actually be, that the River Yarlung Tsangpo will be diverted northwards.³⁴ Similar fears regarding the Mekong, which flows through the PRC into Southeast Asia, have proved to be warranted; new data shows that for six months in 2019, Chinese dams along the river held back more water than usual as countries downstream suffered a wet season drought.³⁵

Box 3: Disrupting with dams

The PRC's vast dam building along the River Yarlung Tsangpo is continuing to raise fears in India about Beijing's ability to disrupt the river's flow downstream. In November 2020 the CCP confirmed, in its outline for the 14th Five-Year Plan, its ambitions to implement 'hydropower development in

³³ The river has other names, for example as it enters Arunachal Pradesh it is called the Siang. However, for the sake of simplicity this report will refer to the part of the river in Tibet as the River Yarlung Tsangpo and the part in India as the River Brahmaputra.

³⁴ Gao Baiyu, 'New concerns for transboundary rivers as China discusses diversion', *The Third Pole*, 14/01/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Ud3ezS> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³⁵ Bryan Eyler, Regan Kwan and Courtney Weatherby, 'How China Turned Off the Tap on the Mekong River', *Stimson*, 13/04/2020, <https://bit.ly/3VYeVfq> (checked: 31/10/2022).

the lower reaches of the River Yarlung Tsangpo' as part of efforts to assure the country's supply of energy.³⁶

This announcement came on the back of over a decade of developments along the river's middle sections. The building of the Zangmu Dam, located in Gyaca County, began in 2010 and became fully operational in October 2015. During this period, a further three dams were proposed, in the State Council of the PRC's 2013 energy plan, at nearby sites in Jiacha, Jiexu and Dagu, the first of which was completed in 2020, while the others remain under construction.³⁷

The most recent announcement has sparked fresh concerns about the PRC damming the Great Bend where the water drops over 2,000 metres. Speaking after the publication of the 14th Five-Year Plan, the President of PowerChina, whose company signed a strategic cooperation agreement on the plan with the TAR, spoke of a historic opportunity for the Chinese hydropower industry'.³⁸ His mention of developing 60 million kilowatt hours (kWh) of hydropower on the lower reaches of the River Yarlung Tsangpo offered a 'glimpse into the huge scale of the project proposed'.³⁹

In an attempt to allay fears, Beijing has long insisted that its dams along the River Yarlung Tsangpo are 'run-of-river', meaning that they do not divert water – a point acknowledged by New Delhi.⁴⁰ However, regardless of their function, the River Brahmaputra's dependence on water from upstream, unlike that of the Mekong, is questionable. As a result of the barrier formed by the Himalayas, the River Brahmaputra amasses substantially more water from rainfall – mostly during the monsoon season – in India than it does in Tibet, which sits in the mountain ranges' rain shadow. This reality is regularly

³⁶ '中共中央关于制定国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议' ['Suggestions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Vision for 2035'], 中华人民共和国政府 [Government of the People's Republic of China], 03/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3VTJjxT> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³⁷ Ananth Krishnan, 'China gives go-ahead for three new Brahmaputra dams', *The Hindu*, 30/01/2013 (updated: 17/11/2021), <https://bit.ly/3TR33Kj> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³⁸ Shan Jie and Lin Xiaoyi, 'China to build historic Yarlung Zangbo River hydropower project in Tibet', *Global Times*, 29/11/2020, <https://bit.ly/3D3n2yB> (checked: 31/10/2022).

³⁹ 'China's plans for gigantic Brahmaputra dam strains relations with India further', *The Third Pole*, 04/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3FexMwF> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴⁰ 'Reports of construction of a Dam on Brahmaputra River by China', Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, 14/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/3spRs9b> (checked: 31/10/2022).

mentioned by those cautioning against alarmism in India.⁴¹ However, those who are less sanguine, including Ramaswamy R. Iyer, India's former Secretary for Water Resources, argue that the River Brahmaputra's dependency on the PRC grows during the leaner months and that even a 10% diversion of its flow 'could have serious consequences'.⁴² This is not to mention concerns about the downstream ecological effects of such developments.⁴³

Conversely, too much water flowing in from the PRC is also a worry. Brahma Chellaney, author of *Water, Peace, and War: Confronting the Global Water Crisis*, and one of the most prominent voices in India warning of the PRC's ability to turn upstream dams into a political weapon, has warned that 'an upper riparian can cause serious flooding downriver by releasing massive quantities of water from dams'. He also noted the upper riparians' ability to deny critical hydrological data to India (see Box 4).⁴⁴ India is particularly concerned about this given the devastation brought about by flash floods which hit Arunachal Pradesh in 2000. This incident was caused by the collapse of a natural dam, formed by a previous landslide, on the River Yarlung Tsangpo and resulted in at least 30 deaths and left 50,000 people homeless.⁴⁵ In the medium-term, the event was a catalyst for establishing a hydrological data-sharing agreement which, alongside the establishment of expert-level dialogues in 2006, represents the extent of Chinese-Indian cooperation over the river.

Box 4: Denying data downstream

The sharing of regular and reliable hydrological data is key to managing any transboundary water system, especially in regions which experience annual monsoons. It is for this reason that, in 2002, India signed a Memorandum of

⁴¹ Nilanjan Ghosh, 'The Brahmaputra: floated myths and flouted realities', *The Third Pole*, 18/12/2017, <https://bit.ly/3D2a18u> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴² Ramaswamy R Iyer, 'India-China-Brahmaputra: Suggestions for an Approach', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28/02/2015, <https://bit.ly/3DrNxiB> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴³ Tongam Rina, 'The muddy Siang: what is happening?', *The Third Pole*, 13/12/2017, <https://bit.ly/3snxULM> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴⁴ Brahma Chellaney, *Water, peace, and war: confronting the global water crisis* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), pp. 176-181.

⁴⁵ 'Chinese dam breach caused northeast floods: AFP', *Agence France-Presse via Rediff*, 10/07/2000, <https://bit.ly/3TOyHYF> (checked: 31/10/2022).



Understanding with the PRC to obtain hydrological information. This agreement has been renewed on three further occasions and provides New Delhi, from three hydrological stations along the River Yarlung Tsangpo River, twice daily information (during the agreed reporting period) on water levels, discharge and rainfall, all to be used for flood forecasting and warning purposes.⁴⁶ The agreement was subsequently renewed, and in 2013 both sides agreed to extend the period of reporting by moving forward the starting date from 1st June to 15th May, while the end date remained 15th October.⁴⁷ Despite over a decade of cooperation, the 2017 Doklam standoff saw the deal become temporarily unstuck with what appeared to be an attempt by the PRC to weaponise the data.

During this period of tension, India reported that it had not received the hydrological data for the River Yarlung Tsangpo since 15th May. In September, a month after India went public about the problem, Chinese authorities attributed the missing data to technical problems caused by the upgrading and renovating of monitoring stations. However, a BBC investigation revealed that, during this same period, the PRC was sharing this data with Bangladesh.⁴⁸

While Beijing has not officially linked the denial of data to the events in Doklam, observers have noted further evidence which points to the PRC acting deliberately. This includes the promotion of voices by Chinese state media linking the PRC's cooperation with India to a withdrawal from Doklam⁴⁹ as well as the fact that data sharing resumed shortly before a relationship resetting summit between both countries' leaders in 2018.⁵⁰

This politicisation could 'set a worrisome precedent'.⁵¹ Moreover, although data sharing has resumed to date, and no further violations of the Memorandum of Understanding have taken place, the episode heightens mistrust about Beijing's intentions vis-à-vis the River Yarlung Tsangpo. As

⁴⁶ 'India-China cooperation', Ministry of Jal Shakti, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, no date, <https://bit.ly/3SA7Y1h> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴⁷ 'Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Water Resources, the Republic of India and the Ministry of Water Resources, the People's Republic of China on Strengthening Cooperation on Trans-border Rivers', Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, 23/11/2013, <https://bit.ly/3FjW9JD> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴⁸ Navin Singh Khadka, 'China and India water "dispute" after border stand-off', *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 18/09/2017, <https://bbc.in/3TPBMZf> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁴⁹ Zhao Yusha, 'China has to halt river data sharing as India infringes on sovereignty: expert', *Global Times*, 20/08/2017, <https://bit.ly/3VXAI6R> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁵⁰ Selina Ho, Qian Neng and Yan Yifei, 'The Role of Ideas in the China-India Water Dispute', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12:2 (2019), pp. 263-294.

⁵¹ Joel Wuthnow, 'Did China use water as a weapon in the Doklam standoff?', *War on the Rocks*, 04/11/2017, <https://bit.ly/3sLI549> (checked: 31/10/2022).



one officer from India's Ministry of Water Resources told the BBC: 'This is a worrying sign and it also shows their [the PRC's] intention.'⁵²

It is due to this lack of any bilateral water sharing or management accords that India's concerns, warranted or not, persist. The River Brahmaputra itself is 'woefully underinstitutionalised'.⁵³ Moreover, Beijing's lack of transparency over its seemingly endless dam building along the upper length of the river has only further fostered feelings in India that their northern neighbour's actions are far from benign.

The PRC's stance here is broadly in line with its general approach to transboundary river management which prioritises its own sovereignty. For example, the PRC was one of three countries to vote against the 1997 United Nations (UN) Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which emphasises the responsibilities of upper riparian states.⁵⁴ However, Beijing's limited cooperation with India is also a consequence of its desire to 'use water as a bargaining tool in bilateral relations', particularly during border talks.⁵⁵

After assessing Beijing's general approach, a 2010 taskforce report produced by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses argued that: 'it is foolhardy to expect China to adhere to international principles of good neighbourliness towards the riparian nations in the region.'⁵⁶ This wariness is still to be found, a decade on, amongst Indian scholars, journalists, and politicians. Despite repeated reassurances about the run-of-the-river nature of these projects, a recent report by Indian parliamentarians expressed apprehension about the storage abilities of dams on the River Yarlung Tsangpo, their effect on the River Brahmaputra's daily flows, and by extension, 'India's endeavours to

⁵² Navin Singh Khadka, 'China and India water "dispute" after border stand-off', British Broadcasting Corporation, 18/09/2017, <https://bbc.in/3TPBMZf> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁵³ Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye and Nilanthi Samaranayake, 'Brahmaputra: A conflict-prone river takes a step backwards', *War on the Rocks*, 23/12/2020, <https://bit.ly/3f2rDZU> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁵⁴ 'Convention on Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses', United Nations, 21/05/1997, <https://bit.ly/3D5QF2a> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁵⁵ Lei Xie and Jia Shaofeng, *China's International Transboundary Rivers Politics, Security and Diplomacy of Shared Water Resources* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 114-132.

⁵⁶ 'Water Security for India: The External Dynamics', Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 22/12/2012, <https://bit.ly/3DoDFWT> (checked: 31/10/2022), p. 49.



tap the region's water resources.⁵⁷

And yet, despite all the speculation about a conflict caused by tensions over the River Brahmaputra, concerns regarding water have not sparked a clash between India and the PRC. In fact, the rhetoric from both sides has been de-escalatory. In response to Chinese reassurances, India's leaders have avoided making sensational responses and in the past have repeated such assurances to their own public.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the increasing demands on the River Brahmaputra, its lack of institutionalisation, and the border dispute which the river is tied up with will likely make the river a source of tension across the Himalayas in the years ahead.

⁵⁷ 'Flood Management in the Country including International Water Treaties in the field of Water Resource Management with particular reference to Treaty/Agreement entered into with China, Pakistan And Bhutan', Ministry of Jal Shakti, Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation, 08/2021, <https://bit.ly/3N1Rei9> (checked: 31/10/2022), p. 75.

⁵⁸ Selina Ho, 'The China–India Water Dispute: The Potential for Escalation', *Indo-Pacific Perspectives*, 16/06/2021, <https://bit.ly/3N50GRJ> (checked: 31/10/2022) and Sebastian Biba, 'Desecuritisation in China's Behaviour towards Its Transboundary Rivers: the Mekong River, the Brahmaputra River, and the Irtys and Ili Rivers', *Journal of Contemporary China Studies*, 23:85 (2014).



4.0 Preventing sanctuary over the Himalayas

In recent decades, the PRC has stemmed the flow of Tibetan refugees crossing the Himalayas into Nepal. This has been achieved through a combination of increased internal suppression and monitoring within the TAR as well as enhanced border control measures on the Chinese side. However, there have also been reports, from several human rights groups, of the Nepalese authorities facilitating these efforts through joint monitoring of the border and forced returns (refoulement).⁵⁹ Additionally, in recent decades Beijing has successfully pressured Nepal to suppress Tibetan and pro-Tibet activities inside its own borders. These longstanding issues are a stark example of how growing PRC influence within smaller nations can result in the undermining of human rights and their active support for Beijing's 'One China' principle.

Nepal's Tibetan predicament began when the first wave of refugees crossed the border after the 1959 Tibet Uprising. Some of those who settled in Nepal used, with United States (US) Government assistance, the country as a base to launch covert operations into Tibet.⁶⁰ Despite the programme formally ending nearly fifty years ago in 1974, its legacy lingers. As recently noted by Dinesh Bhattarai, a senior former Nepalese diplomat: 'China is concerned about the possible plays by Western powers on the Tibet issue from Nepali soil'.⁶¹

The presence of Tibetan refugees sustains and advances efforts to bring the Tibetan issue to international communities attention. Not only could new arrivals potentially provide information about the human rights situation in Tibet, but their act of seeking refuge is in itself a strong repudiation of Chinese rule there. Like many authoritarian regimes, the CCP is keen to silence critics beyond its

⁵⁹ From the early 2000s the International Campaign for Tibet produced regular reports on these problems as part of their 'Dangerous Crossing' series, see: 'Reports', International Campaign for Tibet, undated, <https://bit.ly/3gHZ7gr> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁶⁰ For a comprehensive account of US support for Tibet during the early Cold War, see: John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999).

⁶¹ Dinesh Bhattarai, 'Seize the moment', *My Republica*, 19/06/2018, <https://bit.ly/3DEFFdT> (checked: 31/10/2022).

borders.⁶² This is particularly true when dissidents or diaspora communities bring into question Beijing's 'One China' principle.

Therefore, it is little surprise that periods of unrest in Tibet, which have been met by Chinese repression, have been followed by efforts to secure the PRC–Nepal border (see Box 5). Following uprisings in the late 1980s, pressure from the PRC, and the growing number of new arrivals, Nepal initiated a strict border-control policy. In 1989, the Nepalese Government made clear that it would no longer accept or recognise new Tibetan refugees, meaning that future arrivals would not be given an official documented status or have the right to remain in Nepal.⁶³ The subsequent gentleman's agreement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which allowed arriving Tibetans to transit through Nepal to India, has since been compromised on numerous occasions. Similarly, following the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, Beijing has successfully reduced border crossings. While several thousand Tibetan refugees arrived annually in Nepal during the early 2000s, this has been reduced significantly since 2008. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, in 2019 only 18 Tibetans successfully fled to Nepal.⁶⁴ Over this period, Tibetans inside Nepal, have also faced increasing restrictions and surveillance from the Nepalese authorities.

Box 5: Preventing crossings and the refoulement of refugees

The PRC's ability to reduce the number of Tibetans arriving in Nepal can be attributed to both its vast network of surveillance and repression inside the TAR and its patrolling of the PRC–Nepal border.⁶⁵ Infamously, in 2006, video

⁶² For a full explanation of the PRC's attempts to silence dissents in exile, which Freedom House describes as being part of 'the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world', see: 'China: Transnational Repression Origin Country Case Study', Freedom House, 02/02/2021, <https://bit.ly/3TP08S8> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁶³ 'Tibet's Stateless Nationals: Tibetan Refugees in Nepal', Tibet Justice Centre, 28/08/2002, <https://bit.ly/3Uayak3> (checked: 31/10/2022), pp. 38–40. For more reports like this, see: 'TJC Publications', Tibet Justice Centre, undated, <https://bit.ly/3sIBMxU> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁶⁴ 'New China–Nepal agreements could deny Tibetans freedom', International Campaign for Tibet, 11/02/2020, <https://bit.ly/3f9zoxe> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁶⁵ Adrian Zenz, 'China's Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data', The Jamestown Foundation, 12/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/3TDYZof> (checked: 31/10/2022) and 'China: Alarming New Surveillance, Security in Tibet', Human Rights Watch, 20/03/2018, <https://bit.ly/3TWG9kO> (checked: 31/10/2022).



footage emerged of the People's Armed Police (PAP) force shooting and killing a young nun, Kelsang Namtso, as she attempted to flee across the Nangpa Pass with a group of fellow Tibetans.⁶⁶ According to Human Rights Watch, since 2008, efforts to seal the border have been enhanced with the stationing of PAP border defence posts at critical locations, such as mountain passages into Nepal, in addition to the presence of plain clothed Chinese security agents several kilometres inside Nepal's territory.⁶⁷

Beijing has also sought assistance from its neighbour. In 2009, Nepal's Home Ministry announced that it had agreed to establish several security bases, manned with units from the Nepalese Armed Police Force (APF), along its border with the PRC.⁶⁸ Then, in August 2010, a 13-point security agreement was established between both countries within which the PRC had assured Nepal of its 'full support to enhance capacity building' and 'train Nepali security personnel to be deployed across the northern border'.⁶⁹ In the months and years which followed, this agreement was backed up with a series of training sessions and funding packages for the APF and security officials. The PRC's presence on the Nepalese border has since then continued to grow. In July 2017, both countries agreed to establish a joint action centre in Nepal's northwestern Rasuwa District to aid border security cooperation.⁷⁰

Another consequence of growing Chinese–Nepalese border cooperation in recent years has been the signing of the Boundary Management System agreement in 2019 following Xi's state visit. The agreement's stipulation that both sides return 'persons found while crossing [the] border illegally' within seven days has further raised fears of refoulement.⁷¹

The returning of Tibetans refugees crossing the border to Chinese authorities would not only be a clear violation of the gentleman's agreement

⁶⁶ 'Refugee Report: Dangerous Crossing - 2006 Update', International Campaign for Tibet, 12/02/2007, <https://bit.ly/3feZK0d> (checked: 31/10/2022), pp. 5-15.

⁶⁷ 'Under China's Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal', Human Rights Watch, 01/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/3ssYHgJ> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Under China's Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal', Human Rights Watch, 01/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/3ssYHgJ> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁰ 'Nepal, China to establish joint action centre', *My Republica*, 08/07/2017, <https://bit.ly/3SELWtW> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷¹ 'New China–Nepal agreements could deny Tibetans freedom', International Campaign for Tibet, 11/02/2020, <https://bit.ly/3f9zoxe> (checked: 31/10/2022).

with the UNHCR, but also contravenes the UN Torture Convention to which Nepal has acceded.⁷² The Government of Nepal promised to adhere to international norms following the backlash from the deportation of 18 Tibetan refugees from Kathmandu in 2003.⁷³ In this case, Beijing appears to have applied pressure at the highest levels of the Nepalese Government until, in the words of Nepal's then Foreign Ministry Secretary, 'we could not resist it'.⁷⁴ Since then, two further reports of refoulement emerged in 2007 and 2010 and interviews conducted by Human Rights Watch suggest that such practices could be routine.⁷⁵ In September 2019, six Tibetans, who had crossed into northwestern Nepal on foot from Tibet's Purang County, were handed over to the Chinese authorities. Eyewitnesses described how the handcuffed refugees pleaded with the Nepalese police escorting them.⁷⁶

These developments have occurred alongside growing Chinese influence inside Nepal, particularly during recent periods when the country has been led by Nepal's communist parties. Over the past two decades, Beijing's diplomatic presence in its smaller neighbour has grown in tandem with its aid and investments there, including in major infrastructure projects.⁷⁷ In 2017, Nepal joined the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative and by 2021, Chinese state media was able to boast that the PRC, for the sixth consecutive year, had committed the largest share of foreign direct investment received by Nepal.⁷⁸ While there is no explicit *quid pro quo*, throughout this period Kathmandu has promised to uphold the PRC's territorial integrity. Indeed, in a Joint Statement released following a state visit by Xi, Nepal reaffirmed its 'firm

⁷² Article 3 states, 'No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture', see: 'Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment', United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 10/12/1984, <https://bit.ly/3DzUfDd> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷³ 'Nepal adopts new policy of protection for Tibetan refugees', International Campaign for Tibet, 26/08/2003, <https://bit.ly/3Fw3llF> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁴ 'Tibetan Refugee Deportation: Post-Mortem', Wikileaks, 05/06/2003, <https://bit.ly/3FfYHs4> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁵ 'Under China's Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal', Human Rights Watch, 01/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/3ssYHgJ> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁶ Kunsang Tenzin, 'Nepal Deports 6 Tibetan Asylum Seekers to China', *Radio Free Asia*, 09/09/2019, <https://bit.ly/3zkcGsW> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁷ 'Chinese investments in Nepal', Gateway House, 16/09/2016, <https://bit.ly/3W1hL39> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁷⁸ '中国连续6年成为尼泊尔最大外资来源国' ['China remains largest source of FDI for Nepal for 6 consecutive years'], *新华社 [Xinhua]*, 21/07/2021, <https://bit.ly/3gFiHu3> (checked: 31/10/2022).



commitment to [the] One China policy...and the determination on not allowing any anti-China activities on its soil' (see Box 6).⁷⁹

Box 6: Suppressing 'anti-China' activities

Nepali authorities have suppressed both assistance to and the political and religious activities of Tibetans in Nepal, in addition to increasing surveillance over refugees, actions which seem to have been done at the behest of Beijing.

The recent authorisation for a public event celebrating the Dalai Lama's birthday, despite being limited to two hours, was a break from precedent. Since 2002, events marking this holy occasion have been cancelled and cracked down upon. In that year, Sher Bahadur Deuba, then serving his second term as prime minister, confirmed to Michael Malinowski, then US Ambassador to Nepal, that Chinese pressure was behind the shift in policy.⁸⁰ Likewise, similar dynamics with Beijing played out when, in 2005, the Nepalese authorities ordered the closure of the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Office in Kathmandu. Nepal's Consul in Lhasa described such decisions as 'not by choice but by compulsion'.⁸¹

On occasions, the PRC has made its demands public. During the 2008 Tibetan Uprising, the Zheng Xianglin, then Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, called for 'severe penal actions against those involved in anti-China activities in Nepal' amongst similar demands throughout the period of unrest, in which 8,350 arrests of Tibetans refugees were made.⁸² Most recently, in anticipation of Xi's 2019 state visit, Nepali security forces detained approximately 25 Tibetan refugees and pro-Tibet Nepalese citizens. One of those arrested included a teenage girl wearing a 'Free Tibet' t-shirt. A 65-year-old woman carrying a bag with Tibetan lettering on it was also taken into custody.⁸³

All of this has developed in an environment in which CCP security agents have worked with Nepalese authorities to monitor and police the local Tibetan community. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, such

⁷⁹ 'Joint Statement Between Nepal and the People's Republic of China', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal, 13/11/2019, <https://bit.ly/3D8hUJC> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁰ 'Chinese Pressure Stifles Tibetans in Nepal', Wikileaks, 01/10/2002, <https://bit.ly/3Np6cz6> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸¹ Elisabeth I. Millard, 'Nepal's Man in Tibet Discusses Refugee, Arms and Flood Issues', Wikileaks, 19/12/2005, <https://bit.ly/3D9Bs04> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸² 'Appeasing China: Restricting the Rights of Tibetans in Nepal', Human Rights Watch, 23/07/2008, <https://bit.ly/3Ugot3R> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸³ Bhrikuti Rai, 'Nepali citizens detained during Xi Jinping's visit for Tibetan signage on clothes', *The Kathmandu Post*, 17/09/2019, <https://bit.ly/3TDWQld> (checked: 31/10/2022).



activities increased following a 2010 intelligence-sharing agreement between both countries.⁸⁴ Amongst human rights groups, there were fears that the Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters, signed by Nepal and China in 2019, would enhance this suppression further as the agreement allows Beijing to tell Nepalese authorities to keep those they accuse of committing crimes in China under surveillance.⁸⁵

According to one former Nepalese Government chief secretary, when it comes to Tibetan refugees in Nepal ‘the level of pressure from [the PRC] is great, and often not seen...[the relationship is] completely unequal.’⁸⁶ Documents from *Wikileaks* also reveal that high-level Nepalese officials, in conversations with American diplomats, have frequently cited Chinese pressure as the reason for actions against Tibetans. Speaking to *Radio Free Asia* in 2022 Vijay Karna, Nepal’s former Ambassador to Denmark, attributed his country’s continued refusal to give Tibetan refugees official documentation to pressure from the CCP.⁸⁷

These last remarks came on the back of a trip to Nepal by Uzra Zeya, the US Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights. During this visit, she met with Deuba, Prime Minister of Nepal, who re-took office in July 2021. Nepal’s new leader appears to be striking a finer balance between Beijing and Washington than his communist predecessors. For example, the Nepalese parliament has finally ratified a US grant worth US\$500 million (£434 million) in the face of Chinese opposition.⁸⁸ Such developments may explain the recent easing of restrictions on Tibetan refugees in Nepal which allowed them to celebrate the Dalai Lama’s birthday in July.⁸⁹ Whether this trend is

⁸⁴ Thubten Sangyal, ‘Buddhist Site Closely Watched’, *Radio Free Asia*, 11/10/2012, <https://bit.ly/3f6wbOZ> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁵ ‘New China-Nepal agreements could deny Tibetans freedom’, International Campaign for Tibet, 11/02/2020, <https://bit.ly/3f9zoxe> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁶ ‘Under China’s Shadow: Mistreatment of Tibetans in Nepal’, Human Rights Watch, 01/09/2014, <https://bit.ly/3ssYHgJ> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁷ Lobsang Gelek, ‘Top U.S. diplomat for Tibetan affairs visits refugees in Nepal’, *Radio Free Asia*, 25/05/2022, <https://bit.ly/3FbtFLD> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁸ ‘US envoy nominee: Nepal ratified MCC despite China’s “disinformation campaign”’, *The Kathmandu Post*, 15/07/2022, <https://bit.ly/3gESoE6> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁸⁹ Sangyal Kunchok, ‘Tibetans skirt tight Chinese surveillance to mark the Dalai Lama’s 87th birthday’, *Radio Free Asia*, 06/07/2022, <https://bit.ly/3TVkUji> (checked: 31/10/2022).



sustained and other issues relating to Tibetan refugees are resolved remains to be seen.

5.0 Conclusion

Today, Britain's frontiers may no longer rest in the Himalayas in the way Wilson could claim even as late as 1965. Besides its military facilities in Pokhara and Kathmandu in Nepal to recruit and train personnel for the Brigade of Gurkhas, the UK no longer has any direct interests in the Himalayas. Instead, HM Government has focused on the maritime rimlands of the emerging Indo-Pacific theatre to the south and south-east. The Integrated Review of March 2021 confirmed that the UK would 'tilt' towards these areas, particularly to enhance relations with pivotal states such as Australia, India, Japan, and Vietnam, and to uphold an open international order.

Part of this drive is geoeconomic: the Indo-Pacific has become the dynamo of the international economy, responsible for the majority of global economic growth, and British companies are increasingly looking to export their products to the region using new bilateral treaties and plurilateral frameworks such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). But geopolitical considerations have also taken root in the minds of British strategists, particularly when the leading revisionist in the Indo-Pacific – the PRC – has acquired the material power and political capacity to disrupt the wider regional order and threaten the maritime communication lines on which the UK depends.⁹⁰ It was, in part, for this reason that the Integrated Review described the Indo-Pacific as 'the crucible for many of the most pressing global challenges'.⁹¹

Undoubtedly, Britain's 'tilt' to the maritime rimlands of the Indo-Pacific makes economic and strategic sense. But to overlook the geopolitics of the region's terrestrial northern frontier would be a mistake. For as this Policy Paper documents, of all the powers – great and small – in the Himalayas, it is Chinese activities, both in terms of their manner and their desired outcomes, which attempt to undermine, and reshape, regional dynamics. The PRC is deploying the same

⁹⁰ 'National Maritime Security Strategy', HM Government, 15/08/2022, <https://bit.ly/3WeUkn8> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁹¹ 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 07/03/2021, <https://bit.ly/37DZx3n> (checked: 31/10/2022).



stealthy ‘grey zone’ tactics along its most southwestern terrestrial frontier as it has in the South and East China seas.

Just as it has built artificial islands on low tide elevations in the South China Sea to establish de facto control, the PRC has altered facts on the ground in Bhutan by building villages and infrastructure inside Bhutanese territory. Meanwhile, in Nepal, Chinese interference has grown more pronounced in recent years, resulting in harsh policies towards Tibetan refugees. And in its border disputes with India, the PRC has leveraged its control over the River Yarlung Tsangpo, most notably during the 2017 Doklam standoff, to threaten downstream.

Of all these developments, it is PRC pressure on India’s northern frontier which is the most worrying given that both countries possess nuclear weapons. Despite Indian perseverance in the face of Chinese expansion, it is not unthinkable that a particularly pronounced push by the PRC in the Himalayas could escalate into a broader confrontation in the Indo-Pacific, drawing in terrestrial and maritime theatres, as well as outside powers. Under these circumstances, the UK, like other countries, would be seriously affected – economically and strategically.

This does not mean that HM Government, with other pressing interests, not least in the Euro-Atlantic, should attempt to position the UK as the Himalayan powerbroker it was prior to the mid-twentieth century. Britain could, nevertheless, work more proactively with India, as well as Japan, Australia and other countries with interests in the maintenance of a free and open Indo-Pacific order, to dissuade and deter geopolitical revisionism. The UK should, at the very least, stand up for those Himalayan countries which have experienced infringements of their territorial integrity, while encouraging others to do the same.

5.1 Policy recommendations

As HM Government ‘refreshes’ the Integrated Review it should begin to broaden the so-called ‘tilt’ towards a more systematic Indo-Pacific posture which covers the maritime and terrestrial theatres of the region. A British Himalayas Strategy could even be considered, as part of a broader enhancement of Britain’s growing Indo-Pacific approach. It would do well to include the following elements:



5.1.1 Support Bhutan's territorial integrity

The UK, in concert with like-minded partners in the region, should closely monitor PRC construction inside Bhutanese territory and condemn further incursions in multilateral fora and through joint statements. These efforts should emphasise to Beijing that border negotiations between the PRC-Bhutan must be conducted without such coercive behaviour.

5.1.2 Counter PRC influence in Nepal and support further democratisation

The UK should explore ways of enhancing bilateral trade with Nepal and continue sending aid to the country to balance against the PRC's economic leverage over Nepal. Efforts to support Nepal's democratic transition, through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and other Foreign Office initiatives, should continue as should engagement with like-minded members of Nepalese civil society.

5.1.3 Deepen cooperation with India

The Integrated Review already notes the strength of this relationship and expresses a desire to further enhance it. However, India should be seen as more than a trading partner and its security concerns along its border with the PRC should not be treated as a mere bilateral issue. India's own security concerns will also become more important to Britain as it seeks to strengthen bilateral ties with New Delhi and as India leans towards working more closely with British partners, such as the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and AUKUS, to counterbalance the PRC. This sets the scene for potentially deeper relations.

5.1.4 Encourage greater cooperation over transboundary rivers

Through the World Bank and alongside other countries, the UK has previously supported the South Asia Water Initiative which aimed to enhance knowledge, technical and policy capacity, and trust amongst



countries involved in managing the Himalayan river system.⁹² Efforts of this kind should be supported. Above all, upper riparians should be encouraged to be transparent and to take into account the needs of lower riparians when using transboundary river systems.

5.1.5 Promote the wellbeing of Tibetan refugees in Nepal

British officials in Kathmandu should use their presence to closely monitor the wellbeing of Tibetan refugees in Nepal, particularly their ability to express themselves culturally and religiously. They should monitor developments on the PRC border closely and also urge the Nepalese government to grant further protections for Tibetan refugees.

5.1.6 Stand up for Tibetans

HM Government has repeatedly reaffirmed its concern about human rights in Tibet.⁹³ Therefore, Britain should continue raising such concerns, through, amongst other bodies, the UN and its Universal Periodic Review process, as well as counter Beijing's attempts to interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama. Keeping in mind Britain's long standing relationship with Tibet before the founding of the PRC, the UK should encourage Beijing to grant greater, and meaningful, autonomy for the Tibetans.

⁹² 'South Asia Water Initiative', The World Bank, undated, <https://bit.ly/3Wbl8op> (checked: 31/10/2022).

⁹³ 'China: Labour Programme in Tibet – Volume 681: debated on Wednesday 7 October 2020', Hansard, 07/10/2020, <https://bit.ly/3Nn4mi2> (checked: 31/10/2022).



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