



Gray-zone expansionism: China's strategic use of roads and railways in Tibet under Jinping

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Abstract

This paper examines China's infrastructure expansion in the Tibet Autonomous Region as a strategic instrument of gray-zone statecraft. While officially framed as development and modernization, the construction of roads, railways, airports, and digital networks serves dual purposes—facilitating economic integration while enabling military readiness and coercive control. Projects such as the Qinghai–Tibet Railway and the Sichuan–Tibet Railway enhance logistical mobility near contested borders, particularly the Line of Actual Control with India. Simultaneously, digital surveillance systems and demographic engineering through Han migration reinforce Beijing's authority and dilute Tibetan cultural identity. These developments allow China to incrementally alter facts on the ground, assert sovereignty, and project influence without triggering open conflict. By blurring the line between civilian infrastructure and strategic assets, China's approach in Tibet exemplifies a sophisticated gray-zone tactic that reshapes regional dynamics under the guise of peaceful progress.

Keywords: Infrastructure expansion, facilitating economic, Qinghai–Tibet, railways, airports, China

Introduction

In 1959, the road network in Tibet was 7,300 km (CGTN March 25, 2019; cited in Desai:1), however China has increased the road connectivity to 118,800 km by the year, accounting to 4.93 km per day since 1959 (State Council of the PRC, May 2021). Infrastructure development was necessary and invested heavily in, by the CPC since 1951. Despite the considerable investment made by the central leadership in enhancing Tibet's infrastructure and connectivity, it is noteworthy that the pace and magnitude of these endeavours have truly accelerated only since 1999, when China initiated its "Go West" campaign as part of the broader western development strategy (China.org.in January 17, 2005).

During the implementation of the 10th and 11th Five-Year Plans, China allocated RMB 31.2 billion (US\$4.2 billion) and RMB 137.8 billion (US\$21 billion) respectively to undertake 117 and 188 key infrastructure and development projects in Tibet (Tibet.cn, December 3, 2015). Under the 11th FiveYear plan, the central government promoted the collaboration between Chinese municipalities and enterprises in extending assistance to Tibetan cities and counties through the implementation of the 101 Aid Program (State Council Bulletin, March 14, 2006 cited in Desai). The focus on the development of infrastructure in Tibet has persisted under General Secretary Xi Jinping. In the 2020 Work Symposium, xi stressed the importance of advancing and constructing numerous significant

infrastructures and public-service facilities along the Sichuan-Tibet railway line and other roads, as well as establishing additional unity lines and happiness roads (both within and connecting the region). This was identified as one of the five endeavours aimed at enhancing the well-being of the populace and fostering a sense of unity among them (Court.gov.cn, August 30, 2020).

It is reported that under 14th Five-Year Plan (FYP), China's objective is to allocate a budget of more than RMB 190 billion (equivalent to approximately \$30 billion) towards infrastructure undertakings in Tibet from 2021 to 2025 (Xinhua, March 6 2021). The regional transportation department affirms that, by 2025, Tibet will surpass a total of 1300 km in expressways and encompass an extensive network of over 120,000 km in highways (Xinhua, March 6 cited in Desai 2021:11).

The 14th FYP encompasses various endeavors in Tibet, including the Ya'an to Nyingchi section of the Sichuan Tibet Railway line, preliminary efforts for the Hotan-Shigatse and Gyirong-Shigatse (China-Nepal border) railway lines, as well as the establishment of the Chengdu-Wuhan-Shanghai high-speed railway network (Gov.cn, March 13). Additionally, the plan highlights the enhancement of the national highways G219 and G318, both of which run parallel to the China-India border in close proximity to Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh (Gov.cn, March 13).

Tibet's Roadway and Railroad Network

Table 4: The table elucidates the current and concluded road and railroad undertakings in Tibet by China. It encompasses the national highways and railroads that interconnect China Proper with Tibet, Tibet with Xinjiang, and the intra-province network.

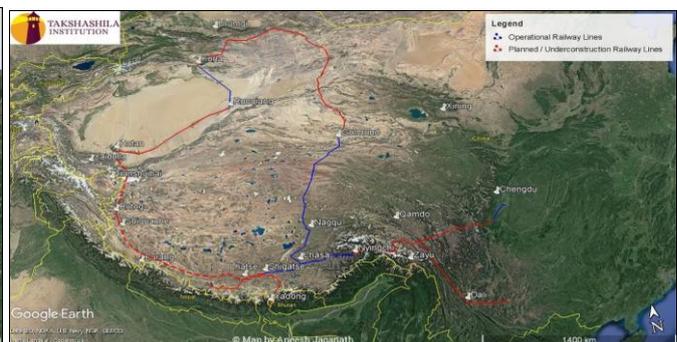
Project Description	Project Details
Roadways	
National Highway G6/ G109	G109 connects Beijing to Lhasa. The G6 is the portion that connects Lhasa to Xining in Qinghai. The construction for the 1,897 km Xining-Lhasa stretch began in February 2018 [2].
National Highway G219 / G564	G219 connects Xinjiang to Tibet. It originates from Yecheng in Xinjiang and terminates at Lhatse in Tibet. The road was constructed in 1957, however, under 13th FYP, China started upgrading it. G564 will emerge from G219 and will reach Purang near the China-IndiaNepal tri-junction. It will pass between Mansarovar and Rakshas lake.
National Highway	The 14th FYP discusses the extension of G318. G318 connects Shanghai to Tibet through Chengdu in Sichuan. It

G318	then enters Nepal near Zhangmu near the China-Tibet border. The road passes through Nyingchi, close to the China-India border near Arunachal Pradesh, and a feeder road originating from G318 also reaches opposite Tawang near Cono county.
National Highway G317	G317 originates in Chengdu, Sichuan and runs parallel to G318 through Chamdo and Nagqu before meeting G109- which meets G318 at Lhasa.
National Highway G 580	G580 is currently under construction, and on completion, will connect Ashu to Kangxiwar through Hotan. It would be completed by 2022.
Other Important Highways	G315 (East-west highway connecting Qinghai and Xinjiang); G314 (connecting Urumqi and Khunjerab Pass); G216 (linking northern Xinjiang to Kyirong County in Tibet by meeting G218 near Hejing county in Xinjiang).
Other Important Roads/Provincial Highways/Feeder roads	Pei-Metok Highway (Nyingchi to Mehtok), Lhasa-Nagqu highway, Nagqu-Ngari Ali Highway, Bome to Medok Highway, Qiongjie to Cona Highway, Bayi-Manling Highway, G214 Kunming-Lhasa Highway and more.
Railroads	
Sichuan-Tibet Line	Divided into three sections: 1) Chengdu to Ya'an Section (140 km): Opened in December 2018 2) Lhasa to Nyingchi Section (435 km): Opened in June 2021 3) Ya'an to Nyingchi Section (1, 011 km): Estimated to finish by 2030.
Qinghai-Tibet line	The construction began in 2001 and was completed by 2006. This line was further extended up to Shigatse in 2014. The only railway that connects China proper to Tibet.
Shigatse-Yadong Extension	The Lhasa-Shigatse line will be further extended from Shigatse to Yadong County. Yadong County is the last county on the
China-India border near Sikkim and adjacent to India's Nathu la pass.	
Shigatse GyirongKatmandu (Nepal)	To be completed by 2022.
South Xinjiang-Tibet Loop	Hotan-Shigatse line (825 km – inaugurated construction in August 2025) largely follows G219 route – unknown if it would enter Aksai Chin region like the highway, Hotan-Ruoqiang line (Xinjiang – under construction), Ruoqiang-Korla Section of the Golmund Korla line (in operation since 2014) and Gomund-Lhasa Section of the Qinghai-Tibet line (in operation since 2006). Together, these lines form the Tibet-South Xinjiang loop connecting most major cities in the region.
Other Important lines	Yunnan-Tibet line (still planned); Dunhuang-Golmud Railway (opened in 2019).

Source: Compiled from multiple sources including the TAR Government Work Reports from 2009-2021 by Desai (2021)



Map 1: Tibet's Road Network [1]



Map 2: Tibet's Railway Network

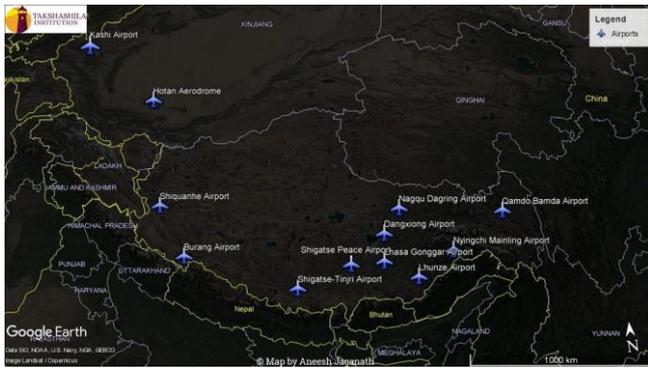
Moreover, the 14th Five Year Plan (FYP) also outlines China's intention to develop the ChengduChongqing "world-class" airport cluster and expand Chongqing Jiangbei International Airport (Gov.cn, March 13). The FYP indicates that China will augment its civilian transport

airport portfolio by 30 additional facilities, yet the specific locations of these establishments are not disclosed. Notably, the construction of these 30 airports will supplement the 12 currently operational or under construction airports in Tibet and the South Xinjiang region.

Table 5: Airports in Tibet

Sr no	Airports/Airfields/Airbases	Province	Status	Nature
1	Lhasa Gonggar Airport	Lhasa, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
2	Shigatse Peace Airport	Shigatse, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use*
3	Nyingchi Mainling Airport	Nyingchi, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
4	Qamdo Bamda Airport	Baxoi, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
5	Nagqu Dagrang Airport	Nagqu, Tibet	Functional	Dual-use
6	Dangxiong Airfield	Damxung County, Lhasa City, Tibet	Unknown	Unknown
7	Shiquanhe Airport	Ngari Gunsu, Tibet	Functional	Dual use
8	Hotan Aerodrome	South Xinjiang Region, Xinjiang	Functional	Dual-use
9	Kashi Airport	Kashgar, South Xinjiang Region, Xinjiang	Functional	Dual-use
10	Shigatse-Tinjri Airport	Tingri County, Shigatse, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown
11	Lhunze Airport	Lhunze Country, Shannan, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown
12	Burang Airport	Burang Town, Ngari, Tibet	Under construction	Unknown

Source: Compiled from multiple sources from the Chinese and Indian internet by Desai 2021.



Map 3: Map by Aneesh Jaganath, Researcher at The Takshashila Institution cited in Desai (2021 :15)

Suyash Desai has provided an analysis of the improved infrastructure that China has developed over the last two decades. This infrastructure serves to facilitate the swift and effortless mobilization of the Chinese armed forces in order to counter any potential threats from India. Desai has given an example to support his argument by discussing the Sichuan-Tibet railway, which establishes a direct connection between Chengdu and Lhasa. Chengdu, along with Chongqing, plays host to the 77th Group Army of the PLA, which is expected to be one of the first units to mobilize in the event of a conflict escalation with India, following the Tibet and Xinjiang Military Districts. At present, the average travel time from Chengdu to Lhasa, utilizing the existing road and railway network, is approximately forty hours or more. However, once the railway project is completed, this journey will be reduced to a mere fifteen hours, greatly expediting the mobilization efforts. This is a clear demonstration of the PLA's increasing ability to mobilize its forces, thanks to China's improved connectivity both within and around Tibet. As shown in table 4, multiple road and railroad lines are currently under construction to connect Tibet internally, as well as to link Tibet with mainland China and the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Once these rail and railroad networks are fully established within the next 1015 years, they will significantly enhance the mobilization capabilities of the PLA, the People's Armed Police (PAP), the border defense forces, and the militia in the event of a border contingency with India.

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China has persistently engaged in the construction of an extensive network of infrastructure projects in Tibet, encompassing the development of roads, railroads, and airports, all possessing the ability for dual utilization. This fusion of civil infrastructure advancement, with its dual-use qualities, and the recent enhancement of military capabilities has significantly bolstered China's strategic positioning along the border shared with India.

The implementation of the construction campaign is intended to be a component of an initiative instigated by President Xi Jinping in 2017 with the aim to strengthen the Tibetan borderlands. Under this initiative, numerous "exemplary prosperous border defense villages" are expected to be established in 21 border counties within the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). President Xi himself has persistently encouraged pastoral families in Tibet to settle in the border area and assume the role of guardians of Chinese territory. During his inaugural visit to TAR in July 2021, xi inspected one such Tibetan border town in close proximity

to Arunachal Pradesh, as well as the Lhasa-Nyingchi bullet train, which commenced operations in late June 2021 and purportedly terminates just a few kilometers away from the Indian border. Several months later, in October of the same year, China enacted an unprecedented land border law ^[1]. Effective from 1 January 2022, this law establishes a legal foundation for China's ambitious border project in Tibet.

Antara Ghosal Singh argues that unlike in the past where China sees "Tibet solely through the prism of sovereignty and territorial integrity", China view Tibet as a "main getaway into economic hinterland of South Asia" (Singh 2022:1). She claims that the prioritization of Tibet's economic development through reforms, including participation in foreign trade, was emphasized during the three Central Tibet Work Symposiums held in 1980, 1984, and 1994. However, due to social unrest in Tibet after the mid-1980s, particularly evident in numerous protests regarding Tibet's sovereignty, the plan to integrate Tibet with its neighbouring regions had to be postponed. The implementation of the strategy of large-scale development in China's western region, initiated by the Central Economic Work Conference in November 1999, provided a boost for the idea of opening up Tibet, as advocated by Beijing. Subsequently, China formally became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2001. The Fourth Tibet Work Forum, held in the same year, emphasized the urgency of expediting reforms in Tibet.

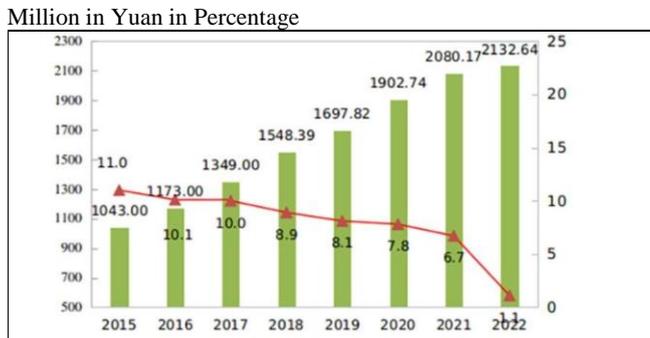
In the aftermath of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese leadership placed great emphasis on the political and security aspects of the Tibet border in order to assert their rightful control and foster a sense of national identity. In the present-day geopolitical landscape, the economic value of the Tibetan borders has assumed a much greater significance for China. The advancement of cross-border trade between Tibet and India, either directly or by means of intermediaries, the establishment of sub-regional economic cooperation, and the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia seem to have emerged as key priorities for China.

In the contemporary epoch, Singh argues Tibet holds three fundamental obligations: 1) accomplishing a significant advancement in its development and aiding China in attaining the objective of becoming an outstanding modern socialist country in all aspects during the second centenary; 2) broadening the extent of China's reform and opening up from the coastal regions to the internal regions under the Belt and Road Initiative or any other designated appellation, thus invigorating domestic demand. This would offer a more expansive ambit for the enduring ascension of China; and 3) function as a security provider to ensure Chinese ingress to Indian markets and the Indian Ocean region, thus ameliorating its predicament vis-a-vis the Strait of Malacca and reinforcing its economic and energy security in light of the challenging naval blockade in its south-eastern vicinity (Singh 2022:35).

For economists who heavily rely on GDP growth figures as a means to gauge the state of the economy, it can be quite easy to be led astray when confronted with statistics that boast remarkable economic growth in Tibet. In the year 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), China released a White Paper titled "Successful Practice of Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet". However, this document disregarded the actual ground reality and made a

rather astonishing assertion, suggesting that Tibet was currently experiencing a period of unparalleled prosperity. In terms of the state of Tibet's economy, the White Paper boldly claimed that the region's GDP had skyrocketed from a meager 327 million Yuan in the year 1965 to a staggering 92.08 billion Yuan (equivalent to \$14.5 billion) in 2014, signifying a remarkable 281-fold increase.

Gross Domestic Product of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2015-2022)



Source: Bureau of Statistics, Tibet Autonomous Region (2023)

According to the National Bureau of Statistics Tibet Survey Team, as reported by the Tibet Autonomous Region Statistics Bureau, it has been determined that the annual regional gross product (GDP) for the year 2022 reached a substantial total of 213.264 billion yuan, signifying a noteworthy increase of 1.1% when compared to the previous year's figures of 2021,

In the present-day situation in Tibet, the growth rate is significantly inflated due to the infusion of an immense amount of financial resources into the region. According to official data released by the Chinese government, a sum of 542.343 billion Yuan was allocated for the sustenance of Tibet's economy from the year 1952 to 2013 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2015). Nevertheless, accepting these assertions at face value raises numerous unresolved inquiries. Should we assume that the Tibetans are indeed beneficiaries of these substantial financial contributions, living in a period of unparalleled prosperity, it still fails to address or assuage the palpable and widespread discontentment and animosity that exists towards China's governance over Tibet. Moreover, the most surprising revelation is that China presently expends disproportionately exorbitant sums of money in the realm of maintaining internal security, rather than prioritizing the safeguarding of its increasingly contentious border disputes with neighbouring nations (Asia.Nekkei.com, Aug 29:2022)

Integration and ethnic consolidation is significant in the narrative of China as a united, multi-ethnic nation. In China's nation-building efforts, they have been flexible in its application and made all efforts to employ different policies to different local conditions. So, an important aspect of the strategy is a distinction made between the Han majority area and the ethnic minority areas (Wang 2017:153-7). The CPC was more cautious when imposing its reform in the minority regions. Its approach was designed not to infringe upon its socialist principle that upheld the concept of popular voluntarism. Instead of imposing changes, the CPC opted for a strategy of "active persuasion" and cooperation with traditional elites, referred

to as the patriotic ethnic upper strata" (Wu 2019:3). This approach was to ensure that reforms were conducted in a manner that was respectful of the existing structures and beliefs.

The Chinese policy towards TAR was realistic and imaginative, likely based on the United Front strategy. However, their approach to ethnic Tibet, that was outside of the Tibetan government's effective control, was flawed due to its rigid legality and lack of realism. Ethnic Tibetans living in China were treated as Chinese, regardless of their cultural identity or distance from Lhasa. This disregard for the actual situation and cultural identity of the Tibetans, was a fundamental flaw in Chinese policy (Norbu 2001:215). This fundamental flaw was one of the key causes of the revolt in Lhasa in 1959. The policy should have taken into account the social reality that these Eastern Tibetans behaved and identified as Tibetans. Not including them in the 17-point agreement due to this legalistic distinction, had an important political and legal implication, including the revolt as discussed.

After PLA's early military success and establishment of a legal framework for the incorporation of Tibet with the signing of the seventeen-point agreement (Norbu 2001:179), the Chinese government enacted a set of policies to strengthen the Tibetan economy to accommodate the difference between Tibet and the rest of China. Deng Xiaoping's policies of economic reform and liberalization pursued a particularly lenient policy in Tibet. Yet they were not able to acquire greater support or consent of the Tibetans to their rule of Tibet. Tibetans revolted against their rule in 1987,1989 Schwartz 1994, 186; Karmel 1996;) and 2008.

So, Beijing's large investment and development programs, as discussed above, were intended to reduce economic inequality and integrate the Tibetans into the national economy. Under these strategic development policies and plans, Tibet has experienced an undeniable overall economic development, but such developmental experiences were marred by Tibetan's sense of relative deprivation. The influx of Chinese after 1984, when Tibet was opened for the Han migrants to participate in the project of development (Yeh 2014 :7: Smith 1996:636) was another factor in their dissatisfaction. Smith argues that the policies under Deng Xiaoping was that "CPC would judge the success of its Tibet policy on whether Tibet was economically developed – without regard to who was doing the developing or who were the beneficiaries" (Smith 1996:637)

The increasing Chinese migration in Tibet is viewed as 'Other' encroaching upon Tibetan's share of development. It is this non-absolute relative gain and the perception of loss, through which Tibetans negotiate their experience of the Chinese developmental project. Moreover, most of developmental investments were concentrated in few key areas, such as those with relatively stable prior economic base, population density and nearer to the transportation routes, which institutionally prioritises the urban sectors, whereas almost over 85 percent of the Tibetan population lives in the rural communities (Fischer 2008). The policies like WDP despite its national character, when implemented into Tibetan areas had its Tibetan specific ethnic-characteristics, where the development concerns took the backseat and the 'national security' and 'stability' concerns becomes a key factor of consideration (Cooke 2003:4). This developmental policy presupposes the desired

developmental model for Tibetans along the Han (Chinese) lines and thereby denied Tibetans alternative forms of modernisation in congruence with their historical experience. Cooke, specifically in the context of the WDP, argues that “social transformation” of the Tibetans resulted in their marginalisation and the dilution of their cultural identity (Cooke 2003:1-13). The same can be argued with regard to most of the economic integration policies in the post-Mao era.

Dawa Norbu (2001:347) argued that the fundamental objective of these reforms and development was neither “liberation” nor progress of Tibet, but rather strategic developments. China’s economic development policies were clearly aimed at achieving social stability, national security and gain international support for their control over Tibet (As cited in Tsering 2017: 1). Although dating back to the turn of the century, Norbu’s assessments appear to hold their ground. Many other analysts (Carlson 2004; Dreyer 2012) have also argued that China’s fundamental objective for reforms and developments in Tibet is strategic, to ease integration, assimilation and reduce differences between Tibet and mainland China. Yeh postulates these economic developments as part of the state’s territorialization (Yeh 2014).

So, China has made a transition from a foundation rooted in ideology and security, as promoted by Mao, to one centered around economic achievement as a means of establishing legitimacy. This does not diminish the importance of security or strategic considerations, but rather emphasizes economic progress as the primary driver for revitalizing and consolidating the Communist Party of China’s authority, while fostering a sense of national identity among Tibetans aligned with a robust and contemporary nation-state.

Conclusion

China’s expansive infrastructure development in Tibet is far more than a campaign for modernization—it is a deliberate and calculated maneuver within the realm of gray-zone strategy. Gray-zone tactics operate in the ambiguous space between peace and war, where coercion is subtle, incremental, and often disguised as benign development. In Tibet, this strategy is executed through a vast network of roads, railways, airports, and digital systems that serve both civilian and military functions, allowing Beijing to consolidate control, project power, and reshape regional dynamics without triggering direct confrontation.

At the heart of this dual-purpose approach is the transformation of Tibet’s transportation grid. The Qinghai–Tibet Railway, the Lhasa–Nyingchi high-speed line, and the under-construction Sichuan–Tibet Railway are not merely feats of engineering—they are strategic arteries designed to enable rapid deployment of troops and equipment to sensitive border areas. These railways run perilously close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India, giving China a logistical edge in any potential conflict scenario. Similarly, the expansion of highways such as the G219 and G318, which traverse disputed territories like Aksai Chin and skirt the Indian border, reflects a calculated effort to normalize Chinese presence in contested zones.

Beyond transportation, China’s infrastructure push includes the construction of airports, helipads, and smart surveillance systems. The plan to build 59 airports and over 300 helipads in Tibet by 2035 is framed as a boost to regional connectivity and tourism, but their strategic placement and

specifications suggest readiness for military airlift operations. Meanwhile, digital infrastructure—such as facial recognition networks and data monitoring systems—extends Beijing’s ability to suppress dissent and enforce ideological conformity, further embedding state authority into the daily lives of Tibetans.

This infrastructure also serves as a tool of coercive diplomacy. Mega-dams on the Yarlung Tsangpo River, which flows into India and Bangladesh, give China leverage over downstream water security. By controlling the flow and timing of water releases, Beijing can exert pressure on its neighbors without firing a shot. Similarly, the development of trade corridors and rail links to South Asia signals an intent to reshape regional economic dependencies, subtly sidelining Indian influence.

In essence, China’s infrastructure in Tibet is a textbook example of gray-zone strategy—ambiguous in intent, incremental in execution, and coercive in effect. It allows Beijing to alter facts on the ground, assert sovereignty, and extend strategic depth under the guise of peaceful development. Roads and railways become instruments of power, not just progress. Airports and tunnels serve as both gateways and garrisons. Surveillance networks double as tools of modernization and control.

As the Himalayas become increasingly militarized and contested, understanding the dual-purpose nature of China’s infrastructure is critical. It reveals a broader pattern of statecraft where development is inseparable from dominance, and where the line between civilian and military is deliberately blurred. In Tibet, concrete and steel are not just building blocks of connectivity—they are the scaffolding of strategic influence.

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