

WATER AND WORSHIP: CHINA'S ASYMETRIC WARFARE IN TIBET

MS MANSHA RAJNI KANT



CENJOWS

WATER AND WORSHIP: CHINA'S ASYMETRIC WARFARE IN TIBET



Mansha Rajni Kant is an undergraduate student of History at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi.

Abstract

India-China tensions are often viewed through the lens of border standoffs, military incursions, and economic rivalry. However, two largely overlooked fronts are emerging as silent but potent theatres of conflict: the Sinicisation of Tibetan culture and the militarisation of transboundary rivers originating from the Tibetan plateau.¹ This raises the central question: in what ways does China's dual control over Tibetan culture and rivers redefine India's strategic vulnerabilities. This paper argues that these two seemingly disparate processes are strategically interlinked. China's suppression of Tibetan identity through linguistic assimilation, religious control, systematic and ideological surveillance has enabled expansive hydrological engineering.² These two fronts form a coordinated asymmetric strategy aimed at consolidating territorial control, exerting regional leverage, leading to the gradual diminishing of India's spiritual, ecological and geopolitical influence. Recognising and responding to these fronts is imperative for India's long - term strategic posture.

Introduction

The India-China conflict is often assessed through military standoffs such as Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020). However, beneath these visible clashes lies a slower, more insidious set of strategies that operate far from the battlefield. This paper examines two such silent fronts: (1) the Sinicisation of Tibet, (2) the militarisation of transboundary waters.

These are not separate units but interdependent components of a unified Chinese approach. The PRC's (People's Republic of China) cultural assimilation policies in Tibet that are enforced through the suppression of Tibetan language, regulation of monastic life and pervasive surveillance are designed to eliminate local resistance to state-led megaprojects. Moreover, China's hydropower expansion and river diversion plans on various transboundary rivers weaponise Tibet's geography, allowing Beijing to influence the security and economy of lower riparian nations.³

In the Tibetan autonomous region (TAR), small acts of religious devotion are treated as threats to 'national unity'. These acts invite swift repression such as arrests, indefinite detention and patriotic re-education. Chen Quanguo's security architecture in Tibet represents a Frankenstein assemblage of control mechanisms. These mechanisms include the double-linked household management system, integrated facial recognition, AI-driven analytics and neighbourhood informants, creating an ecosystem of fear.⁴ By dismantling the cultural and spiritual institutions that have historically anchored Tibetan identity, Beijing clears the political ground for massive hydrological projects. With the population subdued and external scrutiny limited, mega dams and diversion schemes, such as the Medog dam or the western route of the South-North water diversion project, can proceed without significant domestic opposition.⁵ Cultural annihilation paves the way for hydrological conquest that in turn, weaponises the erasure of culture, forging a calculated form of asymmetric warfare aimed at bleeding India's spiritual influence and ecological sovereignty.

The Cultural Front: Sinicisation of Tibet

State-run boarding schools and preschools deliberately located hundreds of kilometres from home. These schools are currently educating over 78% of Tibetan children. The language of instruction is primarily in Mandarin, with the Tibetan

language relegated to a marginal or symbolic status.⁶ Reports indicate that even Tibetan language classes are delivered in Mandarin, eroding fluency. This language shift is paired with a curriculum that emphasises loyalty to the CCP (Communist Party of China) and dismisses Tibetan historical narratives.⁷

Monastic education has been curtailed, with minors barred from religious life. Monasteries such as Larung Gar and Yachen Gar have faced mass evictions, demolitions and the installation of CCP cadres as administrative overseers.⁸ Beijing's most elaborately engineered puppet is its manipulation of Tibetan religious succession, crafted to speak the language of faith while serving the interests of state power. Beijing's claim to the authority to appoint the 15th Dalai Lama replicates its installation of a state-backed Panchen Lama in 1995.⁹ This looming succession battle carries profound geopolitical stakes, as India hosts both the Tibetan government - in - exile and the current Dalai Lama at the very heart of a confrontation that blends spiritual legitimacy with strategic rivalry. The urbanisation, resettlement and surveillance campaigns, termed as "poverty alleviation" and "rural revitalization" under which 930,000 rural Tibetans are to be relocated by 2025 into urban settlements dominated by Han migrants.¹⁰ These areas are under dense surveillance grids, facial recognition coverage and AI monitoring. The "double - linked household" system encourages families to inform on one another, creating an environment where political dissent is near impossible.¹¹

Since the 1950s, Chinese state discourse has portrayed Tibet as a peripheral state occupied by barbarians that must be modernised through the material and moral superiority of Han civilisation. This language of "civilising the frontier", repeatedly invoked in state propaganda and echoed in CCP development white papers, frames Tibetan traditions, nomadic life, and monastic education as obstacles to progress. State-sponsored media increasingly present Tibetan culture as depoliticised folklore, stripping away historical references to autonomy. Religious festivals are curated for tourism and propaganda, while expressions of loyalty to Tibetan nationalism are criminalised as "separatism".¹²

Despite vast hydropower investments, Tibet today remains a net importer of electricity from Sichuan and Qinghai. The plateau's terrain and climate make large-scale generation costly and inefficient, with significant transmission losses. Much of the

electricity produced by Tibetan dams is exported eastward to industrial centres, while local Tibetan settlements continue to face energy shortages and seasonal outages.¹³ The Chinese state thus bears enormous financial costs in maintaining projects that bring little benefit to Tibetans themselves. Economically, these ventures create a paradox of an over-engineered landscape that drains national resources and exacerbates regional inequality.

Water Militarisation

The Yarlung Tsangpo, originating in the Angsi Glacier in western Tibet, flows east across the plateau before flowing through the great bend, into Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang and eventually joins the Brahmaputra.¹⁴ This river system is critical to the water, food, and maritime trade security of millions in India and Bangladesh.

China has already built major dams on the YarLung Tsangpo, including the Zangmu Dam (510 MW) and the Gyatsa Dam. The Medong Dam is still in the planning stages with a projected capacity of 60,000 MW.¹⁵ If completed, it would be the largest hydropower project in the world. Beijing's strategic location as an upper riparian state gives it the ability to regulate flows entering India. Another aspect that makes this project particularly perilous is its location along the eastern Himalayan syntaxis, one of the most seismically volatile zones on the planet. The enormous weight of a 60,000 MW reservoir could induce artificial seismicity, triggering landslides and flash floods that would devastate Arunachal Pradesh and Assam within hours. The Medog site offers no downstream buffer valleys, raising the possibility of catastrophic cascading floods during dam failure or mismanagement. There are concerns that Beijing will slow the flow of the water during the dry season or release it suddenly during peak rainfall. The western route of the South-North water diversion project stands as Beijing's most audacious and potentially ruinous experiment.¹⁶ The route would cross highly unstable, earthquake-prone terrain. Experts have raised concerns regarding the large-scale tunnelling, especially if coupled with the proposed use of Peaceful Nuclear Explosions (PNEs).¹⁷ This action could trigger earthquakes, landslides and long-term environmental damage in the lower riparian states. For India, the threat is not only about reduced water availability but also the potential for catastrophic flooding. For China, this is a strategic lever over two lower riparian countries without any formal water - sharing agreement to limit its actions.

Cultural control as Infrastructure Facilitation

Currently, in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), cultural assimilation is more than an ideological project; it is a prerequisite for large - scale infrastructure deployment. The suppression of Tibetan culture and religious institutions systematically removes the capacity for organised resistance to the development initiatives imposed by the PRC. The state restructured the local socio- political landscape into one defined by dependency, fragmentation and surveillance saturation, ultimately creating conditions under which hydrological megaprojects can advance unchallenged.¹⁸

The strategic logic is straightforward - collective action is less plausible when communities are deprived of their linguistic cohesion, spiritual leadership and independent civic networks. Opposition to environmental issues, which in the Tibetan historical context was often grounded in spiritual ethics and customary rights, is reclassified as political subversion. This reframing is deliberate as it allows the state to portray its projects as apolitical instruments of “poverty alleviation” and “national development”.¹⁹

The absence of a legitimate counter - narrative within the affected population ensures that projects such as the Medog Dam or the Western route diversion plan are shielded from local resistance, regardless of their ecological or cultural costs.²⁰

This fusion of cultural erasure and hydrological control produces a mutually reinforcing strategy. By consolidating authority over the Tibetan plateau through cultural domination, Beijing secures an obedient territorial base by weaponising its rivers, its projects that internal control outward as a form of transboundary coercion. For India, the result is a dual vulnerability. The dismantling of a cultural and spiritual buffer on one side, and the rise of an ecological pressure point on the other.

Implications for India

Historically, India has approached Tibet primarily through a humanitarian lens, focusing on the preservation of cultural and religious traditions in exile. However, in light of China's accelerating program of cultural erasure, the aforementioned policies transform Tibet into a direct security variable in India's strategic environment. The stakes are further elevated by Beijing's insistence on unilaterally controlling the succession of the 15th Dalai Lama.²¹ By imposing a state sanctioned reincarnation,

China seeks not only to rewrite the spiritual core of Tibetan Buddhism but also to delegitimize the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamshala. Any contestation of this claim will inevitably spill into bilateral diplomacy, provoking economic retaliation, heightened border pressure and Beijing's attempts to further isolate India regionally through what economic scholars have termed the "Dalai Lama effect".

Beyond the religious aspect, Tibet functions as a strategic buffer between India and China. The dismantling of Tibetan identity erodes this buffer in two ways. First, by weakening the cultural and political ties that historically linked Tibet to India's civilizational sphere. Second, by embedding Han-centric governance structures that enable the PLA to integrate Tibet more tightly into China's strategic infrastructure grid.

The militarisation of Tibet's rivers introduces a second layer of vulnerability for India. The Brahmaputra basin is subject to upstream manipulation through dams such as Zangmu, Gyatsa and the proposed Medog Dam. The Medog Dam in particular, the threat is not confined to reduced water availability but extends to catastrophic flood risk, environmental destabilisation, and strategic blackmail. There is speculation that China may divert water from the Yarlung Tsangpo basin to the arid northern and central regions of the country. More destabilising is the proposed western route of the South - North Water Diversion Project, which will channel the waters of the Brahmaputra toward China's drought-prone northern plains.²² Such projects are instruments of hydro-political leverage. By controlling the timing and volume of river flows, Beijing can unilaterally influence agricultural productivity, disaster risk and energy of lower riparian states.

India's exposure is magnified by the absence of a bilateral water-sharing treaty. India and China have no legally binding framework on the Brahmaputra. The hydrological data provided by Beijing is limited, which leaves India dependent on unilateral disclosures that can be withheld for strategic reasons. India is accelerating its own dam regulation projects in Arunachal Pradesh, partly in light of China's upstream activities.²³ In the Indus basin, China's involvement in hydropower projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Pok) embeds Beijing directly in a disputed region and strengthens Pakistan's bargaining position in water-related disputes.²⁴ Altogether, these practices create a hydrological environment in which India is permanently downstream and perpetually disadvantaged.

For Indian diplomacy, this twin - front dilemma collapses the boundary between the internal and external dimensions of Tibet.

Implications and the way ahead

This paper contends that India's response to the pressures emerging from Tibet requires moving beyond policy frameworks that treat culture, religion and rivers as discrete domains. India's approach to the issue has been one of caution. Yet Beijing's efforts to assert control over the reincarnation process leave little room for continued ambiguity. Any future succession dispute will likely have repercussions beyond the religious sphere. Preparing for this scenario by building international understanding around the principle of religious autonomy helps to reduce the risk of India standing alone when the issue becomes unavoidable.

There is a tendency to treat developments inside Tibet as internal Chinese matters. Policies that weaken the Tibetan language, religion, historical agency and strip the population of community structures make them less capable of mobilising against disruptive infrastructure projects. An acknowledgement of this relationship would help in portraying cultural repression as a driver of environmental risk with regional consequences.

The manipulation of the Brahmaputra and Indus River projects Tibet's internal subjugation outward. The absence of a formal water – sharing arrangement with China leaves India reliant on partial data and ad hoc disclosures. Various measures can be taken up, such as investments in flood forecasting, diversifying water and energy planning to reduce over – reliance on a single river system, institutionalising regular hydrological assessments within India's national security and disaster planning frameworks and integrating satellite-based monitoring of reservoir levels and construction activity upstream. Such measures do not resolve the asymmetry in China's upper riparian position; however, it mitigates the space for disruption and coercive language. India's most important consequence is that it can no longer support Tibetan autonomy and fight against Chinese water projects separately. Any claim of cultural legitimacy, such as endorsing a legitimate Dalai Lama, may provoke hydrological retaliation. The fusion of these fronts thus creates a twofold trap for Indian diplomacy, shrinking manoeuvrability across both cultural and ecological spheres.

Conclusion

China's efforts in Tibet reveal that hydrological control and cultural repression are components of a single asymmetric plan rather than independent policies.

The legitimacy of the Tibetan government in exile that India hosts is in jeopardy due to the Dalai Lama succession crisis, and the expansion of Chinese dam construction poses a threat to water militarisation along its northern and northeastern borders. Acknowledging the interdependence of these pressures is the first step in crafting a strategic security capable of meeting Beijing's twin silent fronts.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

ENDNOTES

¹ Human Rights Watch. Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds: China's Forced Relocation of Rural Tibetans. New York: HRW, May 22, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>

² Central Tibetan Administration. "Tibetan Schoolchildren Lose Fluency in Native Language as Schools Switch to Mandarin." Tibet.net, May 2024. <https://tibet.net/tibetan-schoolchildren-lose-fluency-in-native-language-as-schools-switch-to-mandarin/>.

³ Tibet Policy Institute. "Brahmaputra River: An Eternal Conflict between India and China." Tibet Policy, July 15, 2021. <https://tibetpolicy.net/brahmaputra-river-an-eternal-conflict-between-india-and-china/>

⁴ Human Rights Watch. "China: 1,000 Evictions at Tibetan Buddhist Centres." September 14, 2016. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/14/china-1000-evictions-tibetan-buddhist-centers>.

-
- ⁵ Macartney, Jane. "China Planning Nuclear Blasts to Build a Giant Hydro Project." *The Telegraph*, October 8, 2001. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/1371345/China-planning-nuclear-blasts-to-build-giant-hydro-project.html>
- ⁶ Human Rights Watch. *Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds: China's Forced Relocation of Rural Tibetans*. New York: HRW, May 22, 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>
- ⁷ Central Tibetan Administration, "Tibetan Schoolchildren Lose Fluency in Native Language as Schools Switch to Mandarin," *Tibet.net*, May 2024. <https://tibet.net/tibetan-schoolchildren-lose-fluency-in-native-language-as-schools-switch-to-mandarin>
- ⁸ Human Rights Watch, "China: 1,000 Evictions at Tibetan Buddhist Centres," September 14, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/14/china-1000-evictions-tibetan-buddhist-centers>
- ⁹ Dalai Lama Reveals Succession Plan: How Will the Next Buddhist Spiritual Leader Be Selected?" *Times of India*, March 9, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/dalai-lama-reveals-succession-plan-how-will-the-next-buddhist-spiritual-leader-be-selected-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow>
- ¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds* (2024) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>
- ¹¹ Chun Han Wong, "China Pushes Tibetans to Assimilate with Mandarin-Language Schools," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/tibet-dalai-lama-china-schools-4733d519>
- ¹² Human Rights Watch, *Educate the Masses to Change Their Minds* (2024) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/05/22/educate-masses-change-their-minds/chinas-forced-relocation-rural-tibetans>
- ¹³ Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Hong Kong, Macau, Tibet, and Xinjiang), 2023. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/>
- ¹⁴ Central Tibetan Administration, "Glimpses on History of Tibet," *Tibet.net*, <https://tibet.net/about-tibet/glimpses-on-history-of-tibet>
- ¹⁵ China Not Reducing Height of Dam on Brahmaputra, Says Intelligence Report," *India Today*, June 19, 2011, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-not-reducing-height-of-dam-on-brahmaputra-says-intelligence-report-135952-2011-06-19>
- ¹⁶ Radio Free Asia, "China Approves Mega Dam Construction in Tibet," December 27, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/tibet/2024/12/27/tibet-china-approves-mega-dam-construction>
- ¹⁷ Jane Macartney, "China Planning Nuclear Blasts to Build Giant Hydro Project," *The Telegraph*, October 8, 2001, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/1371345/China-planning-nuclear-blasts-to-build-giant-hydro-project.html>
- ¹⁸ Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF), "Karot Hydropower Plant," World Bank PPI Database, <https://ppi.worldbank.org/en/snapshots/project/karot-hydropower-plant-9030>

-
- ¹⁹ Dalai Lama Reveals Succession Plan: How Will the Next Buddhist Spiritual Leader Be Selected?" *Times of India*, March 9, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/dalai-lama-reveals-succession-plan-how-will-the-next-buddhist-spiritual-leader-be-selected-all-you-need-to-know/articleshow/122201025.cms>
- ²⁰ Jane Macartney, "China Planning Nuclear Blasts to Build Giant Hydro Project," *The Telegraph*, October 8, 2001, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/1371345/China-planning-nuclear-blasts-to-build-giant-hydro-project.html>
- ²¹ India Today. "China's Brahmaputra Dam Flurry Is India's Worry | From the India Today Archives (2025)." *India Today*, July 21, 2025. <https://www.indiatoday.in/amp/india-today-insight/story/chinas-brahmaputra-dam-flurry-is-indias-worry-from-the-india-today-archives-2025-2759006-2025-07-21>
- ²² Surya P. Subedi, *Hydro-Diplomacy in South Asia: The Brahmaputra Basin* (London: Routledge, 2021)
- ²³ Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF), "Karot Hydropower Plant," World Bank PPI Database, <https://ppi.worldbank.org/en/snapshots/project/karot-hydropower-plant-9030>
- ²⁴ Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF), "Karot Hydropower Plant," World Bank PPI Database, <https://ppi.worldbank.org/en/snapshots/project/karot-hydropower-plant-9030>