

# Political and Military Challenges on the 70th Anniversary of Tibet's Annexation

**Shan-Son Kung**

Division of Chinese Politics, Military and Warfighting Concepts

## 1. News Highlights

On August 19, 2021, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held the “70th Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” in Tibet. Wang Yang, Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), went to the Potala Palace in Tibet to deliver a speech on behalf of the CCP and unveiled the “Building a Beautiful and Happy Tibet and Realizing the Dream of Great Revival” plaque inscribed by Chinese President Xi Jinping to create a harmonious, grand atmosphere for the celebration. Though such propaganda has its own political and military messages, it also reveals the challenges and hidden worries as discussed below.

## 2. Security Implications

### 2-1. Xi and Wang visited Tibet to emphasize legitimacy of CCP rulers

Prior to the celebration of the “70th liberation anniversary”, Xi made an early visit to Tibet from July 21-23 as warm up for the event. This was his first visit to Tibet since his inauguration as China’s president in 2012. Xi’s visit focused on promoting the Party’s “governing Tibet in the new era” policies formulated in September 2020, which emphasizes the legitimacy of the CCP leadership and calls for “continuous strengthening of all ethnic groups’ identification with the great motherland, the Chinese people, the culture, the CCP and socialism with Chinese characteristics”. He also inspected construction works such as railroads,

villages and temples as the propaganda materials for CCP achievements.<sup>1</sup>

At the 70th anniversary ceremony, Wang Yang's speech echoed the key points of Xi's visit and declared, "The peaceful liberation of Tibet in 1951 was a major victory for the Chinese people and the unification of the motherland...We expelled the imperialist forces, started the great democratic reform, ended the secularism and divine ruling power, and established a democratic regime for the people."<sup>2</sup> Other parts of his speech mentioned GDP from the past to present, average life expectancy as well as transportation construction, and more, in an attempt to reiterate the legitimacy of

the CCP's rule over Tibet.

## **2-2. Official CCP media highlight importance of military affairs in Tibet**

The first major category of recent Tibetan military news is about political warfare; from Tibetan locals joining the army to soldiers learning the army ideology that promotes the PLA spirit and patriotism. For example, on September 15, 2021, China's Ministry of Defense heavily publicized Xi's letter that encouraged the "model highland garrison battalion" and inspired faith and determination of the PLA to defend the country and the Tibetan border.<sup>3</sup>

1. "Xi Jinping Stressed During His Visit to Tibet That He Would Fully Implement CCP's Strategy for Governing Tibet in the New Era and Write A New Chapter of Long-term Stability and High-quality Development on the Snowy Plateau" , *People's Daily Online*, July 24, 2021. <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/32168440>.
2. Wang Yang, "Speech at the Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," *People's Daily Online*, Aug. 20, 2021. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0820/c1024-32200443.html>.
3. Lu Dongfang, "National Flag Flying in the 'First Village of Tibet Liberation,'" Ministry of Defense of China, August 19, 2021, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/education/2021-08/05/content\\_4891113.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/education/2021-08/05/content_4891113.htm). Wang Ensheng and Ma Sancheng, "A Report on a Special Warfare Brigade of the Tibet Theater Learning from President Xi's 'July 1 Speech' ," Ministry of Defense of China, August 19, 2021, [http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/education/2021-08/05/content\\_4891113.htm](http://www.mod.gov.cn/big5/education/2021-08/05/content_4891113.htm). He Yongmin and Zhu Yidan, "A Unit of Qinghai-Tibet Station in the Tibet Theater Utilizes Red Resources to Encourage Spirit Casting" , *China Military Net*, August 22, 2021, [http://www.81.cn/big5/yw/2021-08/22/content\\_10079508.htm](http://www.81.cn/big5/yw/2021-08/22/content_10079508.htm). "President Xi's letter of reply to all officers and soldiers of the Model Plateau Garrison Battalion aroused strong reactions throughout the army," Ministry of Defense of China, September 15, 2021.

The second category is information about the increasing PLA armament and training in the Tibetan Theater, such as the first public unveiling in Tibet of the “Hongjian-12” missile system that can target tanks, fixed fortifications and low-flying aircraft.<sup>4</sup> It’s also reported that a combined arms brigade in the Tibetan Theater conducted live fire exercises of various artillery guns in the south of the Nyenchen Tanglha Mountains range.<sup>5</sup>

These reports began to increase as the 70th anniversary of the “Tibet liberation” approached, exceeding the usual frequency of Tibet-related military news being reported. Only in July 2021 did Xinhua News Agency, an official Chinese media, suddenly disclose details of the 2020 Sino-Indian conflicts through a report honoring a fallen battalion commander.<sup>6</sup> CCTV, another government

media, deliberately publicized the full-time, full-area, multi-unit “Snow Mission-2021” exercise taking place in Tibet on August 26 as a provocative signal to India.<sup>7</sup> From the degree of publicity of recent military exercises in Tibet, we can see how China has attempted to promote patriotism and Tibetan defense as well as to warn India about the potential risk if it decides to confront China.

### 3. Trend Observation

#### 3-1. Sino-India border confrontation will not be resolved soon

The Tibetan locations visited by Xi in July all had military significance. On July 22, Xi first visited Nyingchi, a southeastern Tibetan city close to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and

4. Lai Jinhong, “Hongjian-12 anti-tank missiles deployed in Tibet for the first time, capable of shooting down helicopters,” *United Daily News*, July 26, 2021.

5. Liu Mengyuan, Li Shenglin and Xu Yong, “On a 4500m plateau! Combined Arms Brigade in Tibet Theater Organizes Live Fire Tests,” *China Military Net*, August 19, 2021.

6. “Chen Hongjun, a Hero Guarding the Country's Border: the Outstanding Representative of the Next-generation Soldiers”, *Xinhua Net*, July 17, 2021. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2021-07/17/c\\_1211245126.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2021-07/17/c_1211245126.htm).

7. “[Morning Defense News] ‘Snow Mission-2021’ Multi-Service Joint Warfare Exercise in Action”, *CCTV.com*, August 26, 2021. <https://tv.cctv.com/2021/08/26/VIDEZWN1anS8EQKdgOCtLCNs210826.shtml>.

was a major point of contention in the past Sino-Indian border conflict, so Xi's visit had a strong sense of declaration of sovereignty. Secondly, Xi took the Lhasa-Nyingchi Railway, the first electrified line in Tibet, to arrive in Lhasa. According to the Indian calculation, the old route would take 48 hours, while the new route from Chengdu, Sichuan, to Lhasa through Nyingchi now takes only 10 hours, which speeds up transportation of PLA personnel and supplies to Tibet significantly.<sup>8</sup> Xi's trip not only carried military meanings, but he was also sending a warning message to India as the Chinese leader in terms of the border conflicts.

In contrast to the progress of Sino-Indian talks on the border conflicts since 2020, such as the July 14, 2021, meeting of the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers in Dushanbe, the differences between the two sides remain significant.

Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar pointed out that the premise to lower tensions between the two countries is the withdrawal of Chinese troops, while Wang Yi on the Chinese side clearly refuted that "China won't take the responsibility". The disagreement continues to the current 12th round of Army Corps Commander-level talks between India and China on July 31. No final agreement has been reached to push for the withdrawal of Chinese troops from the eastern part of the Ladakh area along the actual control line in the western section of the Sino-Indian border.<sup>9</sup> Apart from asserting sovereignty, Xi's gestures and the official CCP media propaganda on the military buildup in Tibet are of limited help in truly resolving the border confrontation, which still needs to be negotiated intelligently through diplomatic means.

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8. Sunday Guardian, "Xi Tibet visit an expression of frustration, anxiety and arrogance," *Sunday Guardian Live*, July 24, 2021, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/xi-tibet-visit-expression-frustration-anxiety-arrogance>.

9. Mu Yao, "The 100-day talks ineffective, can China and India's 200,000 troops spend this summer in peace?" , *Hong Kong 01*, July 20, 2021, <https://reurl.cc/9rjX3Y>; "China and India hold 12th round of Corps Commander-level talks, no consensus on withdrawal of border troops" , *Central News Agency*, August 3, 2021. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aopl/202108030026.aspx>.

### **3-2. CCP' s Tibet governance is still condemned internationally**

The CCP's governance of Tibet has been the source of social backlash and international condemnation. Some foreign media reported that during Xi's latest visit to Tibet, the CCP authorities requested that the personal social media accounts of many lama monks and other religious figures be closed. This interference to religious freedom caused another round of criticism. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chargé d'affaires Atul Keshap recently met with Ngodup Dongchung, a representative of the Dalai Lama's Central Tibetan Administration, who revealed that "the US supports the religious freedom of the Tibetan people as well as preservation of their culture and language, and respects Dalai Lama's vision of equal rights for all".<sup>10</sup>

China's response has been tough

as always. In his speech at the "70th Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet", Wang Yang stated that "no external forces are qualified to dictate Tibetan affairs, and any attempt or ploy to split Tibet will end in failure." From the hardline speeches of the CCP leadership and the propaganda of national solidarity in various official media, it can be seen that they are mindful of whether the CCP, can establish the legitimacy and stability of its ruling as a "foreign regime" in Tibet. But due to the repeated Tibetan rebellions and the exile of the Central Tibetan Administration, the CCP has not been able to dispel this concern, but only try to convince people with the "people united" propaganda and political achievements. However, its hardline and disregard for human rights will continue to face international scrutiny and condemnation.

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10. "Xi Jinping's Tibet Trip Reveals Signs of Strong Repression, Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Forced to Close as Monks in Death Struggle" , *Radio Free Asia*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/tibet-08022021053058.html>; "US Chargé d'Affaires Meets Dalai Lama's Representatives, China Strongly Protests" , *Radio Free Asia*, August 12, 2021. <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/dalai-08122021040005.html>.