



Centre for Air Power Studies

Extension of Tibet's Rail Line: Implications for Tibet and India

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The Global Times, a state-run newspaper reported that Golmud to Lhasa railway line's extension to Shigatse will start operating formally from August of this year. The railway line from Golmud in Qinghai province to Tibet's capital Lhasa first came into operation in 2006. The extension of railway line from Lhasa to Shigatse covering 253 km with 13 stations at the altitude ranging from 3600 to 4000 meters is the largest investment project in Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in the 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015). The trains will run at an average of 120 kilometres per hour. It is interesting to note that Shigatse located south-west of TAR is a traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, who is a revered spiritual leader of Tibet.

For Tibetans in exile and Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) based in Dharamsala the new rail line would serve Chinese interest far more than Tibetans. Lhasa witnessed drastic demographic shift after the introduction of Golmud to Lhasa railway Line back in 2006 which fully justifies Tibetans' fear of the same consequences in Shigatse. It is well known that after Lhasa was linked to rest of China via railway, it led to massive influx of Han Chinese migrants into Lhasa making Tibetans minority in Tibet's capital city. In addition a report published by the Economist says that over 7.5 million passengers rode the railway from Golmud to Lhasa in 2013 alone which is more than entire population of Tibet itself.¹

Dharamsala-based Central Tibetan Administration expressed with great concern that the railway network will enhance the massive movement of Chinese migrants into Tibet which would threaten of Tibetans' distinct cultural identity through forced assimilation. The Chinese railway has also facilitated spurt of Chinese mining companies and influx of workers to exploit

Tibet's rich natural resources. Due to reckless and rampant exploitation of Tibet's resources by mining companies, the ecological balance of the fragile Tibetan Plateau is exposed to severe risks of disaster. The massive influx of Chinese migrants has also led to illegal land grabs by Chinese businessmen and authorities. Moreover Central Tibetan Administration maintains that cultural assimilation and environmental destruction are two major causes behind Tibetans immolating themselves.²

Although China claims that new rail link would boost economic development of the western part of the TAR region but multiple utility of the rail link is not hard to guess. The crucial role the new rail link would play in transportation of minerals comes to the fore. In fact a manager of a mineral company based in Lhasa has mentioned in People's Daily that new rail link would accelerate transportation of mineral products, which can only be moved through highways that often risk being cut off during rainy season or vehicles overturning. For China the train to Shigatse would serve three basic purposes; firstly, swift transportation of minerals to the mainland China; secondly, to attract more tourists; and thirdly, to strengthen its position on its borders with India by improving infrastructure which would enable rapid movement of troops and armament.³

Besides, People's daily, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party also carried a report about China's plans to extend by 2020 a railroad on the high trans-Himalayan plateau of Tibet to the borders of India, Bhutan and Nepal. Yang Yulin, deputy head of the railway administration in Tibet said that during the 13th Five-Year Plan, two additional rail lines would be added from Shigatse-one to Yadong, a point near the Indian and Bhutanese borders and other to Jilong, an area near the border with Nepal during 2016-2020.⁴ Construction of another railway line from Lhasa to Nyingchi in the east will start soon.

The new rail link to Shigatse and its further extension to Jilong and Yadong during the 13th Five Year Plan (2016-2020) and another railway link from Lhasa to Nyingchi have serious implications for India. An expert on India, working for the Shanghai Institutes for International

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Studies mentioned that India will be apprehensive of the Lhasa-Shigatse rail link as it is very close to the disputed area referring to Arunachal Pradesh. He added that the Indians have lately been working on adding infrastructure in the South Tibet Region (Arunachal Pradesh) in order to strengthen control.⁵

China's announcement of new railway lines coincided with India's drive to forge closer ties with its smaller neighbours. Since the formation of new BJP government at the centre there has been resurgence of India's policy towards its neighbours, it began with Narendra Modi's invitation to all the SAARC leaders to his swearing-in ceremony followed by making first foreign trip to Bhutan and the recent visit of Foreign minister Sushma Swaraj and Narendra Modi to Nepal. India has been taking various initiatives to reach out to its neighbours and is consolidating its influence over neighbours and clearly signalling that India's neighbours are a priority in its foreign policy.

While China's railway network is inching towards Sino-Indian border, India's road and railway networks near its border with China continues to be in a very dismal state. A report by Parliament Standing Committee on Defence 2013-2014 mentioned that only 18 all weather roads have been completed so far out of 73. Only one out of 27 roads to be constructed by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police has been completed and construction of 14 strategic railway lines that were to be laid near the border have registered 'nil achievement'.⁶ The railway lines would play vital role in facilitating swift movement of forces and armaments in the vicinity of India-China border. Introduction of railway networks would definitely enhance China's activities in these areas. It is crucial to note that Shigatse which is linked to mainland China by railway is located close to Sikkim border and over and above that the railway line connecting Lhasa to Nyingchi Prefecture covering 254 km is also on the cards. It is worrying for India as Nyingchi is located at the north of the McMahon Line, the nearest area to the border and improved border infrastructure amidst unresolved border between India and China has serious security implications. India should act fast to balance China's moves. Improvement of border infrastructures should be given due preference.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ “Chinese Railway Line Threatens Tibet’s Cultural Identity”, <http://www.thetibetpost.com/en/news/tibet/4145-chinese-railway-line-threatens-tibets-cultural-identity>, 25 July 2014, accessed on 28 July 2014.

² Ibid

³ Claude Arpi, “A Chinese Train to Sikkim? For what?” <http://claudearpi.blogspot.in/>, 25 July 2014, accessed on 28 July 2014.

⁴ “China Plans Extension of Railroad to India Through Tibet”, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/26/world/asia/china-plans-extension-of-railroad-to-india-through-tibet.html?_r=0#, 25 July 2014, accessed on 29 July 2014.

⁵ Claude Arpi, n. 3

⁶ Sudha Ramachandran, “India’s Worrying Border Infrastructure Deficit”, *The Diplomat*, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/indias-worrying-border-infrastructure-deficit>, 19 June 2014, accessed on 31 July 2014.