

China builds railway into Tibet

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The Chinese government celebrated an engineering feat on July 1 as President Hu Jintao officiated at the departure of the first train from Beijing to the “roof of the world”—Tibet.

Prepared for over 40 years and costing 33 billion yuan (\$US4.1 billion), the Qinghai-Tibet railway line is the world’s highest. Its highest point is 5,072 metres from sea level—over 200 metres above the previous record holder—a Peruvian railway pass in the Andes.

For centuries, Tibet was one of the most isolated regions in the world, due to the enormous height of its terrain, which culminates in the Himalayas. It used to take weeks and months to enter the heartland of Tibet from China via land routes. With the construction of the new railway, Beijing is just 48 hours away.

Running from the western Chinese city of Xining, in Qinghai province, to Lhasa, the provincial capital of Tibet, the new railroad’s total length is 1,956 kilometres. The project, which involved 100,000 workers from 2001, entailed heroic human efforts to overcome the forces of nature.

About 550 kilometres of its tracks were built on frozen earth and 960 kilometres were laid at more than 4,000 metres above sea level, with oxygen levels at the highest section only 50-60 percent of those at sea level. The annual average temperature of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is below zero.

Trains using this line are specifically outfitted with oxygen facilities in order to prevent high-altitude sickness. Bridges were built to support tracks above unstable areas of permafrost. In order to stabilise track embankments, special pipes with cooling elements were sunk to keep the ground cold and solid. A seismological system is under construction to monitor possible earthquake impacts.

The world’s highest station is now at Tanggula Mountain—regarded by local Tibetans as “insurmountable even by eagles”. At 5,068 metres above sea level and 300 metres higher than Europe’s tallest mountain, Mont Blanc, the train station has no staff due to the harsh environment. It is operated by satellite and a long-distance monitoring system.

In an attempt to arouse patriotism, the Chinese president

declared in a televised speech that the railway was a “magnificent feat by the Chinese people”. In reality, it was made possible by international coordination of technology and engineering. The locomotives, which cost \$2 million each, are built by US General Electric for harsh conditions. The train cars are manufactured by a joint venture with Canada’s Bombardier and specially designed for cold and high altitude environments.

The chosen opening day for the railroad was July 1, timed for the 85th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in order to boost the Beijing regime. The government has promised the new railway will bring significant benefits to the Tibetan masses—perhaps the most impoverished in China. The railway is supposed to lift millions of people out of isolation, double Tibet’s tourist revenue by 2010 and lower transport costs of goods by 75 percent.

The truth is that the project, which cost more than Tibet’s gross domestic product (\$3.12 billion in 2003), is aimed at further opening up China’s vast inner west to the world capitalist market, while reinforcing Beijing’s control over the Himalayan province, enhancing its ability to rapidly deploy troops across the region.

The latter function is pointed not only at separatist or rebellious movements in Tibet but also China’s regional rival, India. The Chinese government is planning three extensions from the Tibet line to the east, west and south over the next decade. The southern train line will reach Yadong—a major trading town on the Chinese-Indian border and adjacent to Bhutan and Bangladesh. Days after the first train to Tibet, the governments in Beijing and New Delhi reopened the Nathu La Himalayan pass between the two countries, which had been closed since their border war in 1962. The pass is just 30 kilometres from Yadong.

For the Indian authorities, the Tibetan railway is a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it promises greater flows of an already burgeoning trade between the two countries; on the other hand, the two states are regional rivals, and the railroad will allow China to quickly dispatch troops to the border.

In the 1962 war, the Chinese side called a ceasefire within two months largely due to its fear that its lightly armed troops, along with logistical, transport and communication

problems, would have difficulties countering the reinforcement of Indian tanks and other heavy armaments. The new railway will give the Chinese military greater mobility and transport capacity.

Brahma Chellany of New Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research warned in the *Hindustan Times* on June 22 that the railway would intensify China's pressure on India by permitting it to "rapidly mobilise up to 12 divisions" and even transport long-range ballistic missiles.

"This strategic corridor arms China with multiple benefits: enhanced power-projection force capability; the option to step up direct military pressure against India; superior transport links with states that are part of the Indian security system (Nepal and Bhutan); improved potential to meddle in India's restive north-east; and the ability to dump goods in the Indian market via Chumbi and Nepal," Chellany wrote. "China would like to extend the Tibetan railway to Kathmandu even as it presently expends its road links with Nepal."

Economically, the Tibetan railway is part of Beijing's strategy to "go west", by trying to facilitate investment into regions such as Xinjiang or Inner Mongolia, link these areas by highways and railways to Central Asia and South Asia, and transfer their oil and mineral resources to the industrially-developed provinces in China's east.

Most of the benefits of the railway will go to the local elites connected with ruling party bosses, not ordinary people. Already, as with major construction projects elsewhere in rural China, many Tibetan farmers' homes were demolished to make way for the railway—with little compensation.

By intensifying market forces in Tibet, the railway will also accelerate the destruction of rural communal relations and widen the gap between rich and poor. These changes will exacerbate the social and ethnic tensions for which the Chinese regime has had no progressive solution since it occupied the region in the 1950s.

Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the 1911 revolution, first advocated building a railway into Tibet as part of his program to facilitate capitalist development throughout China. Pre-modern Tibet was ruled by a despotic Buddhist theocracy under the patronage of the Chinese Manchu dynasty.

Before 1949, the Kuomintang government maintained only a claim of sovereignty over Tibet, which was a protectorate under the influence of the British colonial regime in India. After India's independence in 1948 and China's 1949 revolution, Mao Zedong sent a peasant "red army" into Tibet to ensure its allegiance to Beijing.

Until land reform in 1950s, 700,000 of the population of 1.2 million were serfs bound to Buddhist temples and their

priests—lamas. Mao's land reform alienated the Dalai Lama, who in 1959 organised a rebellion that was soon crushed by Chinese forces. The Dalai fled to India and set up a government in exile. For decades, the Dalai Lama's movement has primarily served as a political instrument of Indian and US policy, instigating separatist activities in Tibet and thus exerting pressure on Beijing.

The Beijing Stalinist bureaucracy alienated the Tibetan masses by using the region mainly as a buffer against India and to exploit its natural resources. Beijing gave preferential treatment to Han Chinese immigrants and imposed other discriminatory measures against ordinary ethnic Tibetans. Having failed to lift the Tibetan masses out of poverty or allow them basic democratic rights, Mao set up a puppet Panchen Lama as a symbolic head of a so-called "autonomous" government.

Over the past two decades, the "market reform" program adopted by Beijing has offered no better future. In March 1989, when President Hu was the party boss of Tibet, he personally commanded a brutal suppression of an uprising in Lhasa. This brought him to the attention of the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping who designated Hu as a future heir. The crackdown in Lhasa anticipated the Tiananmen Square massacre three months later.

After decades of exile and seeing no prospect of setting up a state in Tibet, the Dalai Lama has in recent years adopted a conciliatory approach to Beijing, hoping to achieve a semi-autonomous status like that afforded to Hong Kong. Unlike many Tibetan protestors around the world who have condemned the railway, the Dalai tentatively commented that the project itself was "not a cause of concern" but its impact would depend on how it was used.

Despite its technical achievement, the railway cannot fundamentally improve the living conditions of the Tibetan people under the current social and economic framework. Rather, it is a tool of advancing the Beijing regime's economic and geopolitical interests.



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