

PRC MINING IN TIBET – A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Given the enormous geostrategic and environmental importance of the Tibetan Plateau, what the People's Republic of China (PRC) does with Tibet's waters and its minerals does not concern the PRC only. It concerns the entire Himalayan region and their people, their security and ecological interests. Beyond the region, China's role in the global race for critical raw materials (CRM) cannot be overstated. It is already leading in the race and needs Tibet's rich resources to keep its lead. Going forward, Beijing is likely to expand mining activities on the Plateau, displacing and disempowering Tibetans, with far-reaching regional and global implications. In contrast with the PRC, the European Union (EU) is just catching up in the CRM race. Due to its internal fragmentation, the EU has failed to raise its concerns regarding PRC policies in Tibet, including its violations of human rights standards. To understand the implications of PRC mining operations, it is important to assess these through the lens of China's role in the race for CRM. It is also imperative to address China's narrative-shaping efforts concerning Tibet and its mining activities, versus the reality on the ground.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) dominates the global supply chains for critical raw materials (CRM) needed to produce green energy technologies, like solar modules and electric vehicle (EV) batteries. By dominating the mining, metallurgy and material science sectors, often referred to as the “three Ms”, China dominates much of the world's clean-tech supply chains.¹ Yet, while China dominates refining,

it faces its own supply vulnerabilities, reflecting the complexity of global dependencies. In order to keep its lead, the PRC needs Tibet's rich resources, including its lithium and copper. Going forward, Beijing is likely to expand mining activities on the Tibetan Plateau, displacing and disempowering the Tibetan people, polluting their rivers, land and air, with far-reaching regional and global implications.

In contrast with the PRC, the European Union (EU) is just catching up in the global CRM race. Burdened by its internal fragmentation, the bloc has struggled to manage its exposure to China. At present, the EU sources 90 percent of its solar modules from the PRC, and European-manufactured solar modules are heavily reliant on components imported from the PRC.² Overall, the bloc depends on China for 98 percent of its supply of rare earth elements (REE) and around 60 percent of its CRM.³ The geopolitical risks for Europe are clearly high. Alarmed by China's position at the center of global supply chains, Europe has started de-risking from China.

Due to member-states' divergent approaches to China, for decades the EU has failed to effectively raise its concerns regarding the PRC's policies in Tibet, including its violations of international human rights standards. To understand the implications of PRC mining operations on the Tibetan Plateau, it is important to assess these through the lens of China's role in the global race for CRM. It is also imperative to address China's narrative-shaping efforts concerning Tibet and its mining on the Plateau, versus the reality on the ground. With its discourse of "win-win" development based on an urban industrial model in Tibet, Beijing has projected a distorted image of

its intentions and has damaged the Plateau's fragile high-altitude ecosystem. In reality, PRC policies have displaced, rather than elevated Tibetans across the Plateau. Engaged in efforts to rethink its cooperation with China, the EU must consider the bigger implications of PRC operations in Tibet, and improve efforts to dismantle Beijing's false narratives.⁴

Inside the Race for Minerals

Encompassing around one-quarter of the land area of the PRC, with an average elevation over 4,000 meters above sea level, the Tibetan Plateau is the largest and highest mountain area in the world. The source of ten major Asian river systems and a crucial water source for China, the Plateau is also called "Asia's water tower".⁵ Yet, it is not only the source of major rivers sustaining millions of people, it is also a vast and till now untapped source of minerals. Over 126 minerals have been identified in Tibet, including some of the world's most significant deposits of uranium, chromite, lithium, borax, copper and iron.⁶ CRM are vital for the global energy transition and climate protection policies. Countries across the globe agree that the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change and build a fossil fuel-free economy is a shared challenge and must be a global priority. Yet, countries are also engaged in a tight race to secure reliable supplies of CRM that power clean energy technologies.

Lithium-ion batteries are considered a promising clean technology to replace the conventional fossil-fuel powered device, valuable in transport and electricity generation, the two sectors most responsible for emissions. The United Nations (UN) considers lithium-ion batteries the critical pillar in a fossil fuel-free economy.⁷ Lithium-ion batteries store energy in their cells, as opposed to generating energy by combusting fossil fuels in a gasoline and diesel engine, to power a car or provide electricity to a building. The use of these

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batteries in EVs has helped reduce emissions, but their impact can be amplified when the batteries are recharged only with renewable energy. Therefore, as the UN noted, there is a need for policies that aim at facilitating the uptake of the lithium-ion battery without compromising environmental impacts.⁸

As international headlines may suggest, in some technologies China is winning the CRM race as the dominant player in the CRM and REE market, and the West is losing.⁹ Yet, much lies behind the headlines, including the fact that state-backed Chinese companies' mining activities have been plagued with illegal activities and poor governance, causing significant environmental damage. The Business & Human Rights Resources Centre (BHRRC) identified 102 alleged abuses in 2021 and 2022 linked to Chinese mining interests spanning 18 countries. Abuses include indigenous rights violations, attacks against grassroots leaders, water pollution, ecosystem destruction and unsafe working conditions.¹⁰

By its very definition, mining is going to have an impact on the environment. While there has been progress in extractive technologies and environmental safeguards, research shows that Chinese companies often do not carry out adequate impact assessments or uphold safeguards, nor do they operate transparently and inclusively.¹¹ Lithium extraction is connected with high water contamination risks and for the PRC, Tibet counts as one of its lithium sources. While Beijing has justified its mining activities in Tibet with its goal to achieve carbon neutrality and clean energy transition, research suggests that it has been exploiting the land without consideration for the environment and ignoring the local knowledge of Tibetans who have lived on these lands for centuries.¹² China's mining in Tibet is fraught with human rights violations, environmental degradation, disrespect of cultural norms and social exclusion.

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In January 2024, China's Ministry of Natural Resources revealed the discovery of a huge lithium reserve of about 1 million tons in Nyagchu in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.¹³ In February the same year, China's Zijin Mining Group announced a major expansion at its Julong copper project in Tibet, upon receiving government approval.¹⁴ Once the expansion is completed, it will become China's largest single copper operation, with ore mining and processing volumes of more than 100 million tons a year. Research shows that the mining area's conditions are unfavorable, given that it is an extremely cold and oxygen-deficient area located 5,000 meters above sea level.¹⁵

According to the China Geological Survey, an institution of the PRC Ministry of Natural Resources, by 2025 China's lithium reserves have risen to 16.5 percent of the global total, up from 6 percent.¹⁶ China is now the second-largest holder of lithium, the institution claims. In reality, China recognized the strategic importance of CRM over two decades ago, and with consistent policies, subsidies, tax credits and investment it has secured itself a significant lead in the race, including in developing supply chains in lithium. Although it

has only about one-third of the world's rare earth reserves, China dominates global critical mineral supply chains, accounting for 60 percent of worldwide production and 85 percent of processing capacity.¹⁷ Beijing's efforts to expand mining operation across the globe were also facilitated by minerals-for-infrastructure deals under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), free of the compliance challenge with international environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards.¹⁸

Narrative vs. Reality

To continue leading in the CRM race and secure supplies, Beijing is likely to further increase its mining activities to exploit Tibet's minerals. At the same time, the PRC is likely to tighten its political control over Tibet, which it treats as an internal affair that allows no foreign interference.¹⁹ The PRC leadership has rejected meaningful conversations on the situation in Tibet with international partners, including the EU, while claiming that its development policies—just like its mining activities—respect the well-being of Tibetans.²⁰

For example, in 2020, PRC Foreign Ministry Spokesperson claimed that over the past decades, the Tibetan Autonomous Region has made historic

progress in economic, social, cultural and ecological fields, people in Tibet “wholeheartedly support” the policies of the central and local governments, and they help build a moderately prosperous society.²¹ In reality, China has exploited Tibet in the name of economic growth, forcibly assimilating Tibetans through repressive tactics, threatening to eradicate Tibetan identity.²² In response to growing pressure, the political leaders of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala, India, have urged Tibetans to understand and preserve their history, culture and language, in the face of growing efforts to “erase” their identity.²³

Beijing has built its development and modernization narrative around the idea that, unlike other superpowers, as it continues to grow, China will seek win-win solutions and pursue its peaceful rise while it focuses on poverty alleviation, food security and climate change mitigation. As such, Xi Jinping proposed that countries advance modernization that is “just and equitable, open and win-win, that puts people first and features diversity and inclusiveness, and that is eco-friendly and underpinned by peace and security”.²⁴

Beijing has used this same narrative in its cooperation with countries in the Global South, seeking to mobilize their support against the West and Western influence in the developing world. This approach to developing countries has echoed the message of “community with a shared future for mankind”, connecting their development ambitions and security to China's own goals. In building such a community, the goal is “to build an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world of lasting peace, universal security and shared prosperity”, the official discourse suggests.²⁵ This narrative lies at the heart of the “Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy”, the president's political ideology, projected as “China's solution to the question of what kind of world to build and how to build it”.²⁶ In terms of sustainability, Xi Jinping showcased his vision for a greener future at the

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UN biodiversity summit in Kunming in 2021, namely to build an ecological civilization, or a shared future for all life on Earth.²⁷ The slogan was first inserted into the party charter in 2017, suggesting that sustainable development was a key policy area for the leadership.²⁸

In line with these narrative-shaping efforts, Beijing has also strategically aligned its trade, investment and engagement strategies with resource-rich countries globally. State-backed Chinese companies have acquired copper, cobalt and lithium mining projects globally, beyond Tibet. Chinese state-backed mining and battery companies are behind much of Africa's lithium projects in countries such as Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mali.²⁹ In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, which supplies 70 percent of the world's cobalt, Chinese entities own or have a stake in nearly all of the country's mines, including 15 out of 17 cobalt mining operations in the country.³⁰

Closer to home, seizing control of Tibet's natural resources remains a priority for Beijing. And to extract these resources Chinese companies have recruited Tibetans, including herders and farmers, which it described as "rural surplus transfer" in the framework of "poverty alleviation through labor transfer". The idea behind this approach is that by facilitating the transition of workers in subsistence industries, such as farming and herding, into mining, the government can grow the mining industry while also providing jobs to those "left behind".³¹ The reality (vs. the narrative) is that by doing so, the government disrupts traditional Tibetan livelihoods and disempowers them.

Where is the EU?

"Lithium and rare earth metals will soon be more important than oil and gas," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen noted in her 2022 State of the European Union address.³² She projected awareness in Brussels that in order

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to stay relevant, when it comes to critical mineral supply chains the bloc must think geostrategically. This includes reducing its critical dependencies in general, and overreliance on China in particular. To reach its climate and sustainability goals while reducing geopolitical risks resulting from dependence on China, the EU needs to secure a stable supply of rare metals. In 2024, the EU launched the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) with broad objectives to enhance self-sufficiency by 2030.³³

Goals include increasing the EU's raw material extraction to at least 10 percent of its annual consumption, boosting processing capacity to 40 percent from the previous 0-20 percent, ensuring 15 percent of consumption through recycling, and limiting imports of any strategic raw material from a single third country to a maximum of 65 percent of annual consumption. Yet, there is a conflict of goals, namely between environmental standards and national and international climate protection policies, and CRM supply security.³⁴ For faster implementation of electromobility, and for the expansion of renewables and energy storage, European CRM mines are more necessary than ever, and would help lower emissions due to

stricter EU environmental regulations and shorter transport routes compared with CRM imports from Africa, Latin America and Asia.

When it comes to Tibet, the EU, one of China's most valuable trade partners, has struggled to effectively raise its concerns about the situation in Tibet with Beijing.³⁵ Europe's efforts have been shaped, at least partially, by Europe's overreliance on trade with the PRC, including its heavy dependence on imports of CRMs and REE from China.³⁶ Despite efforts to de-risk, Europe's reliance on China has continued to grow in recent years. EU imports from China reached 515.9 billion euro in 2023 and its exports to China amounted to 223.6 billion euro.³⁷ At times of geopolitical tension, namely the escalating battle with the West over control of CRM, Beijing is prone to leveraging this dependence.³⁸ In contrast, the EU has been unable to effectively leverage its collective economic weight in its ties with the PRC, discounting the fact that for China maintaining trade ties with Europe is essential.

Nonetheless, the European Parliament (EP) has been a crucial platform to advocate for Tibet and raise awareness of the PRC's policies. Over the decades, this advocacy has primarily focused on the promotion and respect of the human rights of Tibetans, including the right to preserve their identity and religious and cultural traditions. Most recently, in December 2023, the EP passed a resolution on the abduction of Tibetan children and forced assimilation practices through Chinese boarding schools in Tibet. The resolution called on EU member-states to demand that the Chinese government issue visas to European diplomats to visit boarding schools across Tibet and allow independent journalists and international observers into the region.³⁹

It is, however, noteworthy that given the nomadic nature of the Tibetan way of life and their religious beliefs and customs rooted in the respect

of the environment, environmental degradation is intimately linked to human rights. China's heavy-handed policies under the pretext of ecological preservation have been a deep source of concern for the people living across the Plateau. Thousands of Tibetan herders have been forced to move into new housing colonies and abandon their traditional way of life, despite the scientific consensus that indigenous stewardship and herd mobility are essential to the health of the land and helps mitigate climate change.⁴⁰ The EP, as well as other EU institutions, would greatly benefit from considering the intimate link between the environment and human rights in their advocacy work for Tibet, and raise these accordingly in their engagement with Beijing.

Reciprocity Must Go Both Ways

In light of its critical dependencies, the EU is rethinking its relations with China. It is key that in this process it addresses not only the lack of reciprocity in economic and trade relations with China, but also in their political engagement. The EU must stay focused on pursuing economic reciprocity in terms of market access, but also demand greater political reciprocity in order to ensure that Europeans have the same access to China – and Tibet – that Chinese entities and individuals already have across the EU. Improved reciprocity would allow getting a better picture of mining activities in Tibet, access that is currently denied. The lack of reciprocity violates fairness principles. Moving toward greater reciprocity is ultimately in China's own interest too, if it wants to keep benefiting from trade with Europe, particularly as its economic slowdown deepens. On its end, Europe must stay committed to building greater leverage to respond to China's unfair practices and lack of cooperation, and continue de-risking its economy.

Europe must also push back more effectively against Beijing's attempts to manipulate the

narrative on Tibet at the expense of the well-being of Tibetans and the environment. As one of the most environmentally strategic and sensitive regions in the world, what happens on the Tibetan Plateau does not stay on the Plateau; it concerns the global climate as well as the two billion people in Asia who depend on its rivers. Leaving false claims unaddressed comes at the expense of Europe's credibility and hurts its claims to champion fundamental freedoms globally. In a world where power projection matters more than alignment along shared values, the EU getting its act together is more important than ever. But this will need political courage, which member-states are still to demonstrate.

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