

TIBET'S CLIMATE CRISIS: THE JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE

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Japan has increasingly advocated for Tibetan human rights, often linking environmental vulnerability to cultural preservation. While Japan maintains a robust environmental diplomacy and has regularly engaged China on broader climate issues, Tokyo's Tibet policy remains traditionally constrained due to the political sensitivity of Beijing's sovereignty claims in the region. This issue brief examines Japan's nuanced approach to the escalating climate issues in Tibet, considering the region's critical ecological role as the "roof of the world" and source of major Asian rivers. It outlines how extensive Chinese infrastructure development in the region in conjunction with increasing militarization has severely impacted Tibet's fragile environment, threatened the downstream nations and raised global climate security concerns. The research argues that Japan's cautiously crafted Tibet policy seeks to balance the region's environmental and human rights concerns with the complex strategic realities of the Sino-Japanese relationship, while favoring multilateral avenues for future engagement over Tibet's climate crisis.

Tibet's Vulnerability and its Security Implications

Tibetan culture has been largely defined by its distinct geography, high altitude and unique ecology. Referred to as the "the roof of the world" (*zamling sayi yangthok*), the Tibetan plateau is also the source of major transborder rivers that serve as the lifeline of several economies in South and Southeast Asia,

such as the Yellow River (*Machu*), Yangtze (*Drichu*), Brahmaputra (*Yarlung Tsangpo*), Indus (*Senge Khabab*), and Mekong (*Dzachu*). Given the ecological sensitiveness of the region, development projects and industrial activities devoid of environmentally conscious policymaking threaten climate, economic, and human security not only in Asia but also have implications for the wider Indo-Pacific.

While post-Mao Chinese development activities in Tibet since 1980s under the Tibet Work Forums have been aimed at developing the region economically and connecting the plateau to the rest of the nation, they have largely proved to be detrimental to the ecology of the region. For instance, even before launch of multiple infrastructure projects, massive deforestation in Tibet had resulted in consistent loss of forest cover from 25 million hectares in 1959 to 13.6 million hectares in 1985.¹ The 62 Aid Projects between 1994 and 2000 in Tibet were aimed at boosting the scope and scale of infrastructure investment through an allocated budget of RMB 4.86 billion. The projects were not only aimed at improving agriculture, transport, energy, communications but also damming rivers, promoting flood control and irrigation such as through the Manla Water Conservancy Hub. However, despite concerns over altered water flow and potential impact on local hydrology, neither environmental impact assessments nor mitigation strategies were explicitly stated in the official documents.

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In 2001, China State Council’s Information Office launched the fourth Tibet White Paper titled “Tibet’s March Toward Modernization” elucidating the need for development in Tibet while countering the Dalai Lama’s claims regarding degradation of ecology and culture of the region. Subsequent large-scale connectivity projects such as the 2001 project for Qinghai-Tibet railway from Golmud to Lhasa costing about USD 3.7 billion became a subject of study given the degradation of permafrost at high altitudes, release of greenhouse gases, destruction of wildlife habitat and soil erosion. Despite that, the railway line was later extended through the Lhasa-Xigaze rail project in 2014 costing about USD 2 billion.

The following years saw accelerated expansion of Tibet’s infrastructure alongside continuous militarization of the ecologically fragile region.² For instance, the 2021 Lhasa-Xigaze railway project through high-relief mountains raised concerns of landslides, soil contamination, and destruction of the natural ecosystem of the transborder Brahmaputra river. However, international concerns were raised after the launch of the 2015 Zangmu Dam on Brahmaputra with an installed capacity of 510 MW, threatening downstream nations with altered flow of the river, heavy sedimentation, decreased water quality, and altered water availability.³ Subsequent dam projects on the Brahmaputra continue to raise geopolitical and climate risks for neighboring nations such as Bangladesh and India with possible flooding of border areas and weaponization of water by China.⁴

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Tibetan plateau. The first nuclear weapon in Tibet's Northern Amdo was reportedly transferred there in 1971 by China. Two decades later, Chinese nuclear stockpile had multiplied manifold including in Tibet. The region is also known to possess large uranium deposits, resulting in extensive activities in the region ranging from uranium mining, dumping of nuclear waste, and transportation of nuclear material via trains.⁵ These activities have also caused deforestation, contamination of groundwater, downstream floods by siltation etc.⁶

While the complex dynamic of Japan-China relations has been the key factor guiding Japanese position on Tibet's crises, the plateau is recognized by Japan as part of China like most other Indo-Pacific players such as the U.S., European Union, India, Australia, among others. Each of these nations has developed different approaches to the issue of human rights and climate security in Tibet. The Japanese approach to Tibet has been focused largely on the two major issues of environmental degradation and human rights as a result of China's development policies and securitization of Tibet, even though it does not explicitly arise in any of the climate security frameworks for Japan-China cooperation.

Japan-China Relations and Tokyo's Foreign Policy toward Tibet

Japan's commitment to combat climate change and environmental protection has gained international visibility through its domestic initiatives like the 1993 Basic Environment Law as well as its international cooperative efforts like the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and advocacy for the 2015 Paris Agreement. These initiatives underline the Japanese outlook of interdependent and interconnected ecosystems that have global impacts irrespective of the localized nature of environmental degradation. Thus, Japan has actively shared several multilateral platforms

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with China for environmental cooperation such as the 2008 joint statement on the climate change issue, Japan-China high-level people-to-people and cultural exchange dialogue following the establishment of the Sino-Japan Friendship Center for Environmental Protection and Japan-China Comprehensive Forum on Environmental Cooperation for joint action by government, private sector and NGOs. While these mechanisms do not specifically discuss Tibet due to its political sensitivity, they have allowed Tokyo to engage with Beijing over common environmental concerns that require joint or global action.

Of the two scientific experiments launched by China in 1979 and 1997 in the Tibetan plateau, the latter in 1997 called TIPEX was conducted by Tokyo and Beijing jointly to establish a plateau-wide observing system for supporting China's national projects such as the Qinghai-Xizang railway and flood control across the Yangtze River valley. The Japanese ODA White Paper 2002 also mentioned grant aid in 1999 to Tibet under a project for support of materials and equipment for protection of livestock in winter in Guoluo Tibet Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province (USD 3.45 million).⁷ Then

between 2005 and 2009, the JICA/Tibet Project between Japan and China was a larger scale study focusing on meteorological operations for disaster prevention and reduction.⁸

However, increasing attention to China's power assertion in the Indo-Pacific, securitization of Xinjiang and Tibet, and the impacts on human security have raised global concerns, including by Japan. For instance, Japan joined 14 other nations in October 2014 to issue a joint statement at the United Nations General Assembly about human rights violation in Tibet. The statement does not directly address Tibet's climate crisis but emphasizes the attack on Tibet's cultural and religious identity and thus alludes to Tibet's environmental vulnerability as it is closely tied to the region's livelihood. Moreover, highlighting human rights issue points to the critical space human-environment interaction holds in preserving Tibetan heritage for local communities.

Buddhism has been the key connector between Japan, Tibet and the Dalai Lama's abode in

Dharamshala, India. Japan was the first nation the Dalai Lama visited after his 1967 exile from China, and has revisited over 25 times since. The domestic sentiment⁹ in Japan has been in favor of restoration of Tibet's freedom, human rights, self-determination and China-Tibet peaceful dialogue on the lines of the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way Policy". Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had been active in his advocacy for rights of Tibetans. In 2008, ahead of the Beijing Olympics and amid reports of self-immolation by Tibetans and ongoing oppression of local communities by the Chinese government, he stated: "Japan has engaged in diplomacy around Asia to spread universal values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law, so we want to make efforts to secure the human rights of people in Tibet."¹⁰ He again raised the issue of Tibetan human rights in 2012 during the Dalai Lama's visit to Tokyo and ongoing Japan-China dispute over the Senkaku Islands,¹¹ "I swear I will do everything in my power to change the situation in Tibet where human rights are being suppressed."¹²

Abe is also credited with establishing the world's biggest parliamentary support group with 93 parliamentarians spanning various political parties through the establishment of the All Party Japanese Parliamentary Support Group of Tibet which interacted with Dr. Lobsang Sangay of the Central Tibetan Administration, during his successive Japan visits since 2012.¹³ With an intensifying strategic rivalry between Japan and China, Abe's successors have also maintained this position on Tibet's human rights issue. In 2021, Japan made human rights an important part of its diplomacy and appointed former Defense Minister Gen Nakatani as special adviser on human rights to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The following year, Tokyo was among the nations, including the United States, Australia, Britain, and Canada, to diplomatically boycott the Beijing Olympics citing China's human rights violations.¹⁴

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Overall, Japan's Tibet policy must be observed carefully to uncover how far Japan is willing to commit to the Tibetan cause. One, a sympathetic and supportive Japanese policy stance towards Tibet does not indicate an anti-China stance or indicate any change in Japan's recognition of Tibet as a part of China. In fact, Japan supports Tibetan human rights and freedom as a result of peaceful dialogue but there have been no official meetings and official dialogues between senior leadership in Japan with Tibetan leaders, especially in the post-Abe Japanese administrations. Two, unlike the U.S. that passed the U.S. Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020, Japan has not yet followed up with passing a similar law, thus falling short of committing to political action to back the Tibet rhetoric. Three, while Japanese infrastructure developments and Official Development Assistance in India's Himalayan states¹⁵ including the areas that house Tibetans in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh (such as the 2020 project of JPY 30 million) have addressed needs of the local communities and Tibetan refugees, Japan has been careful to avoid mentioning its support to Tibetan communities or any foreign aid to the Tibetan cause in India. Finally, Japan has maintained a continuity in its engagement with China over transparency but exercised caution over its language in addressing sensitive issues of human rights in Xinjiang, Hong Kong or Tibet even when the U.S. has begun using terms like "genocide" to address concerns.¹⁶

Japan's Evolving Stance Toward Tibet's Crises

The January 2025 earthquake on the Tibetan Plateau that caused massive damage to the region's human life, ecology and security, led to widespread concern as well as condolences including from Japan.¹⁷ There is very limited information on how rapid ecological destruction and infrastructure development in the region has

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attributed to the recent natural disasters in the area.¹⁸ For instance, immediately following the earthquake, China's Ministry of Water Resources announced that the natural disaster had not impacted any dams or reservoirs in Tibet.¹⁹ However, a week later, the Chinese authorities reported damage to five of 14 hydropower dams, resulting in emptying of three of the dams and evacuation of over 1,000 people from six downstream villages.²⁰ The January earthquake demonstrated the increasing vulnerability of Tibet as well as the risks of unprecedented construction in an ecologically sensitive region.

Japan has recently stepped up its diplomatic support to Tibet, most crucial of which has been the launch of the Japan Parliamentary Support Group for Tibet comprising Japanese lawmakers in 2024. While the U.S. and Europe have hosted meetings since 1994 to discuss the condition of ethnic minorities in China, Japan announced its first such meeting to be held in Tokyo in June 2025. The meeting agenda has been announced to garner support for Tibet among 26 nations and would be addressed by the Dalai Lama virtually.²¹

However, its climate advocacy focused on Tibet has been extremely limited, as has been Japanese governmental and non-governmental organizations' access to the region. Japan's environmental diplomacy with China has been focused on mutually beneficial cooperation in areas of climate change and transboundary pollution, aligning with its broader commitment to global environmental agreements. Tokyo's direct engagement on specific environmental concerns within Tibet has been less apparent and is immensely dampened by the political sensitivities surrounding China's sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau.

Given Japan's traditional and continued stance on Tibet being an internal matter of China, a significant challenge for Japan in responding to the region's climate crisis is navigating the delicate balance between expressing concerns over critical environmental conditions or their global ramifications and respecting China's territorial sovereignty. Any action perceived as interference in China's internal affairs could potentially strain the broader bilateral relationship, which holds considerable importance for Japan's economic and strategic interests in Asia as well as the wider Indo-Pacific. However, the increasing global awareness of the global implications of Tibet's critical environmental situation, as well as Japan's growing emphasis on human rights in its foreign policy, suggest a potential for a more active and direct engagement in the future. Leveraging multilateral platforms and supporting international initiatives could provide effective avenues for Japan to contribute to addressing this critical environmental and geopolitical challenge.

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