

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT IN CCP'S CONTROL STRATEGY IN TIBET

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The Tibetan Plateau is warming rapidly, leading to significant ecological changes and threatening water security for millions. This issue brief examines the impact of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) governance on Tibet's environment and the global environment. Rooted in Marxism-Leninism, the CCP's governance model prioritizes Party control, resulting in policies that often neglect environmental and global concerns. The CCP's development projects exacerbate these issues, causing habitat fragmentation and pollution. Social and cultural impacts include the erosion of Tibetan identity and traditional lifestyles. China's global initiatives, such as the One Belt One Road program, further extend its development model, financing coal projects while resisting zero-emissions initiatives. Despite pledges to combat climate change, China remains heavily reliant on coal. Effective global governance requires a realist approach, as the CCP's unilateral actions hinder collaborative efforts. Addressing these challenges necessitates sustainable development policies to protect Tibet's unique ecosystems and mitigate global emissions.

Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) governance structure and development model is based on Marxism-Leninism, which is articulated as socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹ Chinese President and General Secretary of the CCP, Xi Jinping, has repeatedly stated that Marxism is the ideological basis of the CCP.

For example, quoted by the State Council Information Office, he said: "We should review the fresh experience gained by the people under the leadership of the Party, constantly adapt Marxism to Chinese conditions and make contemporary Marxism shine brighter in China."²

In a speech celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the CCP, President Xi named the adaptation: “Only socialism can save China, and only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China.”³

Under this ideology, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is only to be led by an omnipotent vanguard party. Its rule is characterized by opaque authority structures, a lack of transparency, control over information, and an absence of other political and economic actors, such as intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, and independent multinational corporations. These factors severely limit the CCP’s ability to develop and deploy policy that functionally manages the globally significant Tibetan Plateau.

The Chinese theory of International Relations is controlled by the CCP and is thus also guided by Marxism-Leninism. The CCP worldview is hence constructed on a critical theory and is, as a result, fundamentally revisionist and competitive rather than cooperation-orientated. It is principally tasked to ensure the Party’s survival. Thus, maintaining omnipotent power over outcomes is paramount. Self-serving historical accounts of world history, with a penchant for traditional Chinese philosophy, are employed to justify the Party’s hold. The depiction of China as the gravitational center of world politics and a *China Dream* of remaking international rules and norms to better reflect Chinese experiences and preferences is pursued as it is believed that this will keep the Party in power. The result is policy that is portrayed as benign and altruistic but which is malignant and narcissistic.

Domestically, the theory and policies of the CCP are validated by the Party General Secretary through leader’s ‘thought’ that identifies ‘correct historical thinking.’⁴ The narrative for the

A consequence of socialism with Chinese characteristics is that the CCP cannot produce effective climate and environment policy as it will always prioritize the interests of the CCP elite vanguard party, exclude all other viewpoints, labeling them as ‘dangerous thought’, leaving the Tibetan Plateau, environment and international society vulnerable to the flaws in CCP governance.

Chinese people thus places the Party as the irreplaceable leader in the process of returning the Chinese civilization to its *destined* position as world leader, overcoming the *one hundred years of humiliation*. The people are encouraged to sacrifice dutifully to achieve the rejuvenation of the nation.⁵ Globally, however, a consequence of socialism with Chinese characteristics is that the CCP cannot produce effective climate and environment policy as it will always prioritize the interests of the CCP elite vanguard party, exclude all other viewpoints, labeling them *dangerous thought*, leaving the Tibetan Plateau, environment and international society vulnerable to the flaws in CCP governance.

Global Issues and the CCP Governance Model Outcomes

Global governance of issues such as the environment, health, or liberal trade may arguably only be successfully addressed through

transparency and cooperation by way of top-down trans-governmentalism and bottom-up subsidiarity. The censorship of information and oppression of alternative perspectives, fundamental to the CCP governance model, results in a lack of verifiable information about the situation in Tibet and an environmental threat to the global community. The manner in which the CCP blocks information to maintain its own power and the consequences were starkly displayed regarding the global issue of health. The COVID-19 pandemic, which may have been spreading through Wuhan from July 2019 as a result of a lab leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, could have been contained before it spread globally.⁶ The CCP governance structure, however, led to a global pandemic and 777 million people being infected, estimated deaths of more than 14.9 million people, and trillions of dollars in lost economic output, described as the worst economic crisis in a century, resulting

in increased inequality and severe personal and societal devastation.⁷

Starting in Wuhan, Hubei Province, the first cases were reported only in late 2019. It took three more months, until March 11, 2020, for the World Health Organization to declare a pandemic as the CCP blocked access and avoided cooperation.⁸ In Wuhan, doctor Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital, attempted to warn his colleagues and the public about a SARS-like virus but was reprimanded by local police for “... ‘making false comments’ that had ‘severely disturbed the social order’ ...” and was silenced by the CCP governance structure. Tragically, Li contracted COVID-19 and died in February 2020.⁹ His death highlights the dangers of suppressing information needed for the governance of global issues such as during public health crises and exposes the way CCP governance fails to take into account local specialist knowledge or the broad interests of the global society.

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Similar to global health, the issue of the global environment linked to Tibet is now subject to the dictates of the CCP governance model. In Tibet, as in Wuhan, those identified by the CCP as holding illegitimate—outside of correct historical thinking—*dangerous thought* that are perceived as threatening the Party’s rule are silenced, preventing any environmental issues from being made public as external actors are denied unimpeded access.¹⁰

The Effects of Warming

The Tibetan Plateau is warming. Numerous studies, even those funded by the CCP government, have measured temperature increases from the 1960s, estimated to be up to three times faster than the global average, and that this will have a significant impact on the region and the planet.¹¹ Labeled the ‘roof of the world’ and ‘the third pole’ because it

is the largest land mass above 4000 meters, the Tibetan Plateau impacts the atmosphere, biosphere, cryosphere and hydrosphere. The temperature increases lead to the melting of glaciers and permafrost, reduced snow cover, dynamic changes in the sizes of lakes, changes in vegetation productivity, and desertification. Combined, these create a fundamental change in the environment that threatens both ecological and human security. For example, in Tibet, the changes in precipitation patterns degrade grasslands, affecting biodiversity and the livelihoods of nomadic herders who depend on these ecosystems.

Beyond Tibet, over two billion people depend on freshwater from the Tibetan Plateau, which feeds into rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Ganges, Indus, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow.¹² The retreat of glaciers, in particular, and the overall effects of climate change threaten the water security and food production capacity of millions downstream.

CCP's Infrastructure Development and Resource Extraction

The development model of the CCP—socialist state-directed market capitalism—on the TP compounds the effects of rising temperatures, further destabilizing the region's fragile ecology.¹³ Intensive Han migration into Tibet, infrastructure development, and resource extraction activities in Tibet lead to habitat fragmentation, increased pollution, and environmental degradation.¹⁴ There are also legitimate concerns about significant environmental degradation due to problematic hydroelectric, geothermal, and mining projects. Most vocal are the Tibetan community in exile through groups such as Tibet Rights Collective, World Tibet Network News, or Tibet Nature Environmental Conservation Network, but there are also supporting publications by

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peer-reviewed publishers, such as Palgrave Macmillan's *Meltdown in Tibet* by Michael Buckley.¹⁵

For instance, the oldest project completed in 1991, the Yamdrok Hydropower Station, located near the Buddhist sacred Lake Yamdrok, raised concerns about potential disruptions to the lake's ecosystem; and the yet-to-be-completed projects, the Great Bend Dam and associated Red Flag Diversion Project have been described as “completely nuts.”¹⁶ Similarly, the Lianghekou Hydro-Photovoltaic Power Station and the Yangbajain Geothermal Field have been criticized for their environmental impacts, including habitat disruption and water pollution.¹⁷

Whilst there is not the same volume of research on the environmental impacts of CCP projects in Tibet as in more accessible regions due to the above-noted governance model, there is associated research on similar projects that

validate the concerns. In addition, the research identifies the high construction costs and resulting uncompetitive price of hydropower projects in Tibet, which may require mandatory government market share policies to promote consumption and, thus, construction.¹⁸ If the projects are environmentally destructive and uneconomic, Giordano and Wahal conclude they serve territorial control and geopolitical purposes, as discussed ahead.¹⁹

Social and Cultural Impacts

The CCP's goal of creating socialism with Chinese characteristics in Tibet results in increased control and assimilation, significantly changing the traditional Tibetan way of life. To maintain Party authority over Tibetan culture and religion, which has rejected the goal (see statement ahead), a broad policy of suppression has been in place since the 1950s, with this extreme violation of rights being regarded

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as cultural genocide by the international community.²⁰ On the 65th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day, Kashag stated:

“The Tibetan Buddhist culture which is based on core practice of love, compassion and altruism is pitted against violent and revolutionary struggle built on self-promotion by communist regime ... we reiterate that the PRC government must immediately cease its misguided policy of eradicating the Tibetan identity and culture ...”²¹

The promotion of socialist development and associated Han migration has resulted in demographic changes leading to reduced autonomy of Tibetans over employment, education, and social organization. With a justification of seeking development, Tibetan language, culture, and religion have been devalued, leading to a gradual erosion of Tibetan identity. The CCP's strive for socialism-with-Chinese-characteristics development goals has imposed CCP control over religious and cultural practices, restricting gatherings and interfering with religious leadership.²²

Urbanization has forced herders and villagers into urban centers, destroying traditional lifestyles. In order to implement CCP development policies, leaders like Chen Quanguo have intensified security in Tibet by establishing “grid-style social management” systems to control the movement of people.²³ Hence, the CCP governance model has resulted in environmental destruction and cultural genocide, with both of these having broader global governance consequences.

CCP Coal Usage, Energy Strategy, and Outcomes

China is investing in renewable energy, such as solar, wind, and hydropower. The 2023 United States Energy Information Administration's

report on China states: “In 2022, non-fossil fuels accounted for 49% of total installed electricity generation capacity, most of which came from hydroelectric (16%), solar (15%), and wind (14%).”²⁴ A core justification by the CCP for development in Tibet is to mitigate climate change by increasing the production of non-fossil fuel energy.²⁵ However, China is the world’s largest user of coal, both in terms of production and consumption.²⁶ It accounts for over 50 percent of global coal consumption and produces roughly 60 percent of its electricity from coal-fired power plants, as non-fossil power generation is sporadic.²⁷

Thus, despite global efforts to transition to cleaner energy sources, China remains heavily reliant on coal for its energy needs and is expanding its capacity. In 2023, China started construction of the highest number of new coal power plants in the world, nineteen times more than the rest of the world combined, at 70.2GW, reported as almost 100GW for 2024.²⁸ Chinese officials justify this expansion by citing the need for energy security and stability in the power grid, particularly during extreme weather events that strain renewable energy production, indicating a continuing need for coal-derived energy. The impact of the CCP development model on the global environment is stark. As Wang states: “Since China signed the Paris Agreement in 2015, it has accounted for 90 percent of all global growth in carbon emissions.”²⁹

In addition, China has been exporting its development model through its geostrategic One Belt One Road program. It is actively assisting states in building coal-fired power plants but has refused to provide funding for zero-emissions climate initiatives through the United Nations. Over the past two decades, Chinese companies and banks have played a significant role in financing and constructing coal power projects globally, particularly in developing countries in

Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe.³⁰ In September 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged at the United Nations General Assembly that China would stop building new coal-fired power projects abroad as part of its commitment to combating climate change. However, this pledge has been largely vacuous.³¹

At the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Baku, Azerbaijan, China reiterated its commitment to achieving carbon neutrality before 2060 but maintained its stance of making only voluntary contributions despite being the second-largest economy and the world’s largest emitter. While developed states agreed to triple their climate finance commitments to developing states, China resisted abandoning its developing-country status and the associated obligations.

Conclusion

The CCP’s policies in Tibet, driven by the goal of creating socialism with Chinese characteristics, have led to significant environmental, social, and cultural challenges. Given China’s governance and development model, it is not realistic to pursue liberal institutionalism and multilateralism alone. A realist approach may be more effective, as the CCP does not currently power-share in a collaborative global governance manner.

Instead, it establishes its own unilateral programs and multilateral forums and attempts to repurpose existing ones. When it does not get its way, it ignores them as *dangerous thought* threatening the Party’s rule, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The repressive policies rooted in historical territorial claims and the desire to maintain Party authority have resulted in the suppression of Tibetan culture and religion, environmental degradation, and the marginalization of Tibetan

communities. The environmental changes and cultural genocide in Tibet have broader geopolitical implications. Alterations in water flow from the plateau are leading to water imbalances, potentially increasing tensions among neighboring countries that rely on these transboundary rivers for their water supply. Addressing climate change issues in Tibet thus requires coordinated efforts to implement sustainable development policies that mitigate global greenhouse gas emissions and protect the region's unique and globally vital ecosystems rather than pursuing socialism with Chinese characteristics.

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Endnotes

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