WHAT CHINA DOES NOT SAY ON TIBET'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITION

by
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Chinese authorities say a great deal about the environmental challenges on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau. But the official narrative omits critical elements, not least the scale of degradation, regional risks, and the political uses of environmental policy. This article explores what is left unsaid in China's environmental discourse on Tibet, and why these silences matter for the neighborhood and the world.

Growing Environmental Consciousness

Chinese authorities acknowledge major environmental challenges on the plateau, including glacial retreat, permafrost weakening, and biodiversity loss. A 2019 report by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) recognized the plateau as one of the world's worst affected areas for climate change. In 2023 Beijing passed a new law to protect the region, addressing harmful practices like mining and promoting better monitoring of conditions and risks. In the same year, the government's new policy statement on Tibet gave a central place to discussion of the environment.

There has been consistent media coverage of all these new laws and policies. And green action is reported with great enthusiasm. For example, China's leading official newspaper, the People's Daily, celebrated the success of a major project to reforest the mountains north and south of Lhasa. Grassroots efforts and physical challenges were closely described, as was the new level of environmental consciousness the workers achieve. This successful re-greening of Lhasa's environs was said to showcase the Party's ability to combine economic growth with environmental policy.

Yet much remains unsaid. Such reforestation projects are certainly successful, and the size and complexity of Tibet's reforested areas have grown in recent decades. But the uncertainties regarding long-term benefits of such projects are greater than officially acknowledged. And for all the new laws that are passed, we might be right to ask how rigorously will they be enforced?

Silence on Climate Change Impact

There is certainly silence on the frightening scale of climate change's impact. Chinese media emphasizes positive action rather than alarming transformations. But personal accounts published in overseas media by experienced experts are unsettling. For instance, one Chinese geologist who has travelled to the plateau since the 1980s describes the shocking pace of glacial and permafrost melt, desertification of grazing territories and the decline in water availability.

The reticence extends to how the plateau's changing hydrology threatens downstream nations. The UN predicts increased disasters from ice collapse, glacial lake growth and floods. Just this summer a dreadful event occurred on the Tibet-Nepal border when the Donglin Tsangpo river in Tibet surged due to frozen terrain falling into the water. The flood swept across the border killing dozens and wrecking infrastructure downriver in Nepal. Poor cross-border data sharing meant Nepal had little forewarning. So, while it is acknowledged that the ice is melting and lakes are swelling, the risks for others are less readily discussed.

The Damming Debate

China is also coy over how new hydropower projects on rivers flowing from Tibet into South Asia upset the region's hydrology. Great disquiet has met plans for the world's biggest dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo (the Brahmaputra in India's Assam). Official Chinese coverage of this emphasizes progress towards carbon neutrality, dismisses talk of environmental problems or of water being weaponized, and underlines China's prioritization of cross-border water cooperation. But such reassurances are belied by existing frictions between China and Southeast Asia over joint management of the Lancang-Mekong river system, and claims that China's upstream activity has seriously disrupted the Mekong through variable water and sediment flow. According to a Stimson Center report, China has been slow to properly share data with its neighbors. The recent Nepal flood was also linked to problems in data sharing.

There is great regional anxiety about damming rivers in the seismic Himalayan region. Reservoir-induced seismicity is where the massive concentration of water in a dam creates novel stress on pre-existing fractures and faults in an earthquake zone. The 1967 Koyanagar earthquake in Maharashtra, India, has been ascribed to the Koyna Dam reservoir and some have made similar claims about the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Therefore, despite Chinese claims of careful research into the seismology of damming the Brahmaputra, concerns persist. Of course, the more obvious worry is that dams in the Himalayan region might be hit by earthquakes with terrifying results for those downstream. Earthquakes can cause landslides to collapse into reservoirs causing destructive waves. Quakes might also undermine the integrity of a dam or even outright dam failure. All could pose a terrible threat to those downriver.

Political Benefits

Chinese communications also avoid explicit discussion of the political benefits which environmental policy on the Tibet-Qinghai plateau can bring. These fall into three distinct categories: Sinicization, authoritarian governance and border security.

The Communist Party of China's claim to be fostering 'ecological progress' on the plateau occludes how such policies contribute to the dilution of Tibetan identity. Many charge that the green agenda disguises Tibet's exploitation. But there is also a case that environmental policies involve curtailing traditional lifestyles on the plateau. To be sure, many recognize that human activity damages Tibet's environment, for instance, grazing at ever higher heights and ever longer seasons. But Chinese policy seems premised on interfering with Tibetan traditions. Beijing's 2018 White Paper on the Tibet-Qinghai plateau's environment highlighted problematic farmers and herders and devoted a whole chapter to, 'A Developing Culture that Values Ecological Awareness', implying that local people need instruction in environmental stewardship.' Human Rights Watch has castigated the relocation of Tibetan villages in the name of ecological protection and in which Tibetan nomads or farmers are essentially transformed overnight into semi-urban dwellers. The 'Grasslands Law', allowing government to limit herding to 'protect, develop and make rational use of grasslands' reveals how the autonomy of traditional communities is stripped away. And this approach has continued despite a new international consensus that indigenous people are the best guardians of the environment. Accusations of Sinicization are buttressed by a wider context in which children's access to Tibetan language education is limited in order to advance the cultural assimilation of the whole Tibetan region. The cultural erasure that is seen in Tibet, and other minority zones of the PRC, appears to be facilitated by the green agenda.

Another unspoken benefit of environmental policy on the plateau is that it allows Beijing to extend its authoritarian governance. Critics claim that Beijing enforces its environmental policies across China fiercely, fining, and even imprisoning, regular people who fail to adhere to bans on urban coal burning and crushing protests against the closure of polluting industries. The metaphor of Beijing's 'green fist' certainly resonates for those who recall the ferocity of Zero Covid and the One-Child-Policy, etc. Furthermore, it is charged that the Chinese government uses the green agenda to consolidate its political control with a vast surveillance system rolled out in the wake of environmental initiatives, such as recycling programs in Shanghai. And minority areas like Tibet and Xinjiang are deemed particularly susceptible to such instrumental use of green policies. This green authoritarianism also sees China seeking to control the discourse on environmentalism in Tibet. It has locked up high-profile campaigners on green issues as their independent criticism of official policy carries an implied critique of Chinese authority per se.

The final political element of Beijing's environmental policies relates to the consolidation of sensitive border areas, a major security concern in the Himalayan region. This is not an entirely unspoken point for Beijing, but while often mentioned in passing, the full import is rarely developed. One unmentionable fact is that border security often carries an environmental cost. China has been very effective in building up its military logistics on the Sino-Indian border to service

either a short campaign or the sustained maintenance of forward deployed troops in harsh conditions in the event of a prolonged stand-off with India.

One recent study highlighted how Indian efforts to match this development encountered a legal challenge. The Indian Supreme Court disallowed the widening of feeder roads to support remote deployment, arguing that national security needed balancing against environmental concerns. Beijing's contrasting easy merger of security and environmental issues was indicated just recently when Premier Li Qiang, touring Tibet, announced the construction of the great dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river and urged all Tibetans to promote ecology and boost development in the border areas. The relocation of Tibetan populations, often justified on environmental grounds, has also been linked occasionally to border security by Chinese officials.

So while there is a rich discourse coming out of China on climate change action in the regionally and globally vital Tibet-Qinghai plateau, what is unsaid remains hugely important. From the scale of the difficulties that are emerging and the speed at which things are changing, to the justified concern that China's neighbors have about water to the less savory political aspects of China's green agenda, it is right to interrogate Beijing's approach. Nonetheless, responsibilities go both ways and those on the southern side of the Himalayas must remember how they too impact the environment to the north. For example, recent research demonstrates how 'black carbon' emissions from South Asia settle on glaciers in Tibet and speeds up their melting. Given the importance of the region to all sides, actors in South Asia are right to demand more transparency from China on Tibet's environment. But such demands will carry more force if framed by a sense of mutual responsibility.

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