

## CREATING ‘FACTS ON THE MOUNTAINS’: CHINA’S GRAY ZONE PLAYBOOK IN THE HIMALAYAS

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*China’s policy in the Himalayas represents a calculated and systematic application of the gray zone strategy previously honed in its maritime territorial disputes. Rather than relying solely on direct military action, Beijing employs a military-civil fusion model to reshape the strategic landscape along the border. Central to this effort is an aggressive infrastructure push—building roads, railways, airfields, and strategically placed border villages—that alters the region’s logistical and demographic realities. These developments serve to establish de facto control without crossing the threshold of open conflict, gradually shifting the status quo in China’s favor. This strategy challenges India’s long-standing geographic and temporal advantages by imposing a slow, persistent pressure across the frontier. This issue brief examines the core elements of China’s Himalayan strategy and its implications, highlighting how Beijing’s calculated actions are redefining the security dynamics of the region through means that remain just below the level of conventional warfare.*

China’s adoption of a more coercive policy in the Himalayan region—mirroring its tactics in maritime domains—is becoming increasingly evident. This approach has been marked by a series of confrontations with India, including the 2017 Doklam crisis, a major military clash in the Western Sector in 2020, and a subsequent confrontation in the Eastern Sector in 2022.

While China’s actions are increasingly visible, the

specific methods it employs are only just beginning to be systematically studied. Beijing’s strategy goes beyond simple military power projection, relying instead on a comprehensive, military-civil fusion approach to gradually alter the status quo. This is achieved through a combination of infrastructure projects, the creation of new administrative zones, and the construction of new, populated villages in contested areas. This method draws directly from the playbook used in the South

China Sea, revealing a consistent pattern in China's approach to territorial disputes. This essay aims to elucidate key components of this multifaceted strategy in the Himalayan context.

## China's Military Modernization and Gray Zone Tactics

It is widely acknowledged that China's military has modernized at a remarkable pace over the past two decades. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Ground Force has undergone a significant transformation, particularly since the large-scale military reforms initiated in 2015. The Ground Force has evolved from a regionally focused territorial defense force into a more mobile and agile force.<sup>1</sup>

To achieve this, the organizational structure has shifted towards combined arms brigades, dismantling the traditional "division-regiment" system and transitioning to a "group army-brigade-battalion" framework.<sup>2</sup> As a result, the combined arms brigade, capable of conducting independent operations, has become the fundamental operational unit of the PLA Ground Force.<sup>3</sup>

It is a self-contained, modular operational unit. This modularity is intended to facilitate "task organization"—the flexible combination of subordinate units according to the mission—thereby enhancing the ability to respond to a wide range of contingencies.<sup>4</sup> A typical combined arms brigade organically integrates all essential elements—combat, combat support, and logistics support—within its own structure. Furthermore, there has been a notable improvement in power projection capabilities, as evidenced by the enhancement of various equipment, including helicopters and highly mobile armored vehicles. The formation of combined arms brigades has qualitatively transformed mobility of the PLA Army. This shift was not merely about updating vehicles; it marked the construction of the very foundation needed to implement a new military doctrine.

First, it represents a dramatic improvement in strategic mobility. The ZBL-08 wheeled armored vehicle family,

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now fully integrated into the medium combined arms brigades, can maximally leverage China's extensive modern highway network. This allows medium brigades to deploy over long distances at speeds far exceeding those of traditional tracked units, which were heavily reliant on railway transport. This has endowed the army with the capability to rapidly concentrate its forces in response to sudden contingencies that may arise in any region of the vast country.

Second, the PLA has acquired tactical mobility in extreme environments, symbolized by the development and deployment of the ZTQ-15 light tank. Weighing approximately 33 to 36 tons, this tank is equipped with a powerful 1,000-horsepower engine. It boasts of an excellent power-to-weight ratio, making it highly maneuverable in high-altitude and rugged terrain.

Third, the PLA has achieved three-dimensional mobility. Air assault units, integrated into light combined arms brigades, routinely conduct joint training with the attack and transport helicopters of the army's aviation units. This has given the army the ability to execute previously impossible tactics, such as "vertical envelopment," by bypassing ground obstacles

and inserting troops into weakly defended enemy positions to secure key objectives. This development marks a revolutionary shift, elevating operational capability from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional space.

These advances in mobility constitute the physical prerequisites for the army's transformation into a force capable of "all-domain mobile operations." Only by equipping the new structure of the combined arms brigade with next-generation platforms can its full potential be realized.

Another critical aspect of China's security policy is its use of gray zone tactics. China has focused on creating advantageous situations by employing not only its regular military but also a combination of paramilitary forces and various non-military means. These actions are particularly conspicuous in the maritime domain. In the South China Sea, for instance, China has systematically engaged in land reclamation and construction on islands, the establishment of new

administrative units, infrastructure development, and the stationing of military garrisons.<sup>5</sup> Through these gray zone tactics, China has not only enhanced its power projection but also strengthened its physical presence, thereby increasing its control over the islands and waters in the region.

## China's Actions in the Himalayan Region

China is executing a systematic, dual-front strategy to strengthen its presence in the Himalayas. This playbook creates irreversible "facts on the ground" by leveraging civilian infrastructure and populations as instruments of state power. Following the 2017 military standoff at Doklam and further spurred by the deadly 2020 clashes in the Galwan Valley, China initiated an unprecedented infrastructure campaign to re-engineer the Himalayan frontier.<sup>6</sup> This is not a routine developmental upgrade but a deliberate, state-directed effort to overcome the region's unforgiving terrain and establish permanent military superiority over India. The goal is to create a comprehensive, multi-modal logistics network that enables the PLA to rapidly deploy and sustain larger forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

A comprehensive transportation system has been steadily developed, with highways as its backbone and coordinated development of railways, aviation, and pipeline transport. China is upgrading key national highways that run parallel to the LAC, such as the G-219 and G-318, to handle faster and heavier military traffic. The construction of strategic tunnels like the Bayul Tunnel, and major bridges for critical arteries like the Chengdu-Lhasa railway, are designed to create resilient, year-round supply lines.<sup>7</sup> These projects drastically reduce the time needed to move troops and heavy equipment from mainland China to the frontier, eroding India's traditional advantages in logistics and early warning.

According to a white paper on China's governance of Tibet, by the beginning of 2022, the total length of highways opened to traffic exceeded 121,400 kilometers, of which 1,105 kilometers were high-grade

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highways. This has formed a road network covering almost the entire region, with 20 national highways as its framework, supported by 36 provincial highways, border roads, and rural roads. The operating length of railways is reported to have increased from 701 kilometers in 2012 to 1,359 kilometers in 2022.<sup>8</sup>

The expansion of air power capabilities is also remarkable. Analysis of satellite imagery since 2017 has identified at least 37 airports and heliports in Tibet and Xinjiang that have been newly built or significantly upgraded. All five of Tibet's existing airports, which are designated for both civilian and military use, have undergone major enhancements, including new runways, hangars, and terminals. More critically, China is constructing four new airports in Tibet, with three of them—Lhuntse, Ngari-Burang, and Shigatse Tingri—strategically positioned less than 60 kilometers from the Indian border, filling vast gaps where no air facilities previously existed. This network is augmented by at least five new heliports in Tibet, which are crucial for providing the PLA with tactical mobility in rugged mountain valleys inaccessible to fixed-wing aircraft or ground transport. In Xinjiang, the major dual-use airport at Hotan, roughly 240 km from the LAC, has not only received a new runway but also an upgraded surface-to-air missile (SAM) complex, significantly boosting air defense capabilities in the theater.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, this infrastructure blitz is creating a hardened, proactive, and sustainable military posture for the PLA. The network is built for synergy and redundancy: airfields support ground troops, roads and railways feed the airfields and forward positions, and tunnels ensure these arteries remain open. This represents a fundamental shift from a reactive, seasonal presence to a permanent one, capable of supporting high-intensity operations for extended periods and fundamentally altering the strategic balance along the border. In the Western Theater Command, which oversees the Himalayan frontier, the PLA has significantly improved its force deployment capabilities. The ZTQ-15 light tank is considered a potential game-changer in this theater. Weighing approximately 33 tons, it is equipped with a powerful

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1,000-horsepower engine and an oxygen supply system for the crew, enabling superior mobility in the thin air of high-altitude environments.

Another important pillar of this strategy is the construction of “Xiaokang” villages in key border areas, many in disputed territory.<sup>10</sup> Officially framed as poverty alleviation, this program is a tool for strategic demographic engineering, involving the coercive relocation of Tibetan nomads and the settlement of loyal Han Chinese populations. The Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region formulated the “Plan for the Construction of Model Villages for a Moderately Prosperous Society in Border Areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2017–2020)” to advance the development of new villages.

In August 2020, the Seventh Central Work Forum on Tibet was convened, during which General Secretary Xi Jinping made the following observation: It is imperative to fortify the construction of border regions and implement targeted support policies to assist border residents in enhancing their production and living conditions, thereby addressing their concerns.<sup>11</sup> By establishing these “settled populations,” Beijing aims to create a quasi-legal pretext for its territorial claims under past bilateral agreements. While specific details of plans after 2021 remain unclear, the government has since released the more comprehensive “Territorial Spatial Plan of the Tibet Autonomous Region (2021–2035).” This document articulates a clear commitment to promoting holistic development throughout the border regions. Recognizing the strategic importance of these efforts, the central government has also issued directives supporting them. It mandates to “adhere to the principle of giving equal importance to consolidating and developing border areas, and support the coordinated development of village and town construction, infrastructure, public services, unique industries, and ecological protection in border areas to ensure that people’s living standards

continue to improve and that border defense and border security are maintained.”<sup>12</sup>

These villages are not passive settlements but are actively integrated into China’s border defense through the “local-military co-construction” model.<sup>13</sup> This transforms residents into “guardians of the sacred land”. Villagers and local militias conduct joint patrols with the PLA, creating a dense surveillance and defense network where “a village is a fortress”<sup>14</sup>. This tactic places civilians on the front line, creating a classic gray-zone dilemma for India. Any action against these patrols can be framed as an attack on unarmed citizens, complicating India’s response and allowing China to incrementally alter the status quo below the threshold of conventional conflict. This model is legally codified in China’s 2022 Land Border Law.

### Japan’s Role for the Stability of Himalayan Security

Amid evolving geopolitical dynamics along the LAC, India is bolstering its national security by enhancing its capacity for the rapid, all-weather deployment of large military formations to the Himalayan frontier. Japan has emerged as a crucial partner, providing Official Development Assistance (ODA) for strategic infrastructure projects that align with its ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ vision and India’s ‘Act East’ Policy.

A primary example is the Japanese-funded Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge.<sup>15</sup> Designed with dual civilian and military applications, the bridge will drastically reduce travel times, enhancing logistical efficiency for the swift redeployment of forces to strategic sectors. Critically, it provides a vital alternative route that bypasses the vulnerable Siliguri Corridor, known as the ‘Chicken’s Neck’, thereby mitigating a significant logistical constraint and increasing India’s operational flexibility.

Beyond this single project, Japan’s support extends to the broader North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project (NERNCIP), which upgrades hundreds of kilometers of critical highways. Collectively, this Japanese-backed infrastructure development is

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a key component of India's dual-pronged strategy to strengthen its defense posture while fostering the economic integration of its northeastern region.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, China's policy in the Himalayas represents a calculated and systematic application of the gray zone strategy previously honed in its maritime territorial disputes. This approach is not predicated on military force alone but on a sophisticated military-civil fusion model designed to create irreversible "facts on the ground." Through the dual levers of a comprehensive infrastructure blitz—encompassing highways, railways, and a network of airfields—and the strategic construction of populated border villages, Beijing is fundamentally altering the logistical and demographic landscape of the frontier.

The modernization of the People's Liberation Army, particularly the development of highly mobile combined arms brigades, provides the hard power foundation that underpins this strategy, enabling rapid force projection and sustained operations. This multifaceted campaign is steadily eroding India's traditional geographic and temporal advantages, presenting a persistent challenge that operates just below the threshold of conventional armed conflict.

The implications of this strategy extend beyond the immediate Sino-Indian rivalry, signaling a consistent pattern in China's approach to asserting its territorial claims that challenges regional stability. Consequently, the response to this pressure is also evolving, as exemplified by the strengthening strategic partnership between India and Japan.

Japanese investment in critical infrastructure within India's northeastern region, such as the Dhubri-Phulbari Bridge and the North East Road Network Connectivity Improvement Project, is more than a developmental initiative. It is a direct strategic countermeasure aimed at bolstering India's logistical capacity and enhancing its military readiness. This collaboration underscores a shared commitment to the

'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' vision, demonstrating that countering China's integrated coercion requires an equally integrated, cooperative approach that weds economic development with security imperatives to maintain a stable balance of power.

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This issue brief is a part of the ISDP's Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs research project titled 'Climate Crisis in Tibet'.

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