

Climate Crisis in Tibet – Part V

Population Politics of Tibet: What Does It Mean to Social and Environmental Conditions?

Webinar Report

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Institute for Security & Development Policy

Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA)

ABOUT ISDP

The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.

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LIST OF SPEAKERS



Dr. Jarmila Ptáčková is a research fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. With a background in China Studies, she has conducted extensive field research among Tibetan pastoralist communities. Her work focuses on the socio-political impacts of China's territorialization policies, including sedentarization, urbanization, and ecological programs in the Tibetan plateau.



Dr. Anton Harder is an international historian specializing in China-India relations, particularly during the early Cold War period. He teaches at the London School of Economics and has published widely on the historical dimensions of Chinese foreign policy.



Mr. Kalpit A. Mankikar is a China Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, India, working in the Strategic Studies Program. With an MA in China Studies from the London School of Economics, he has co-edited several volumes and contributes regular commentary on China's domestic politics and regional strategy.



Dr. Carol McGranahan is a Professor of Anthropology and History at the University of Colorado, USA. She has conducted decades of research on the Tibetan diaspora, exile politics, and population displacement. She has authored influential books and articles on Tibetan resistance and Chinese state-building.

Moderator



Dr. Jagannath Panda is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA) at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), Sweden. Dr. Panda is also a Professor at the Department of Regional and Global Studies at the University of Warsaw; and a Senior Fellow at The Hague Center for Strategic Studies in the Netherlands. As a senior expert on China, East Asia, and Indo-Pacific affairs, Prof. Panda has testified to the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission at the US Congress on 'China and South Asia'. He is the Series Editor for Routledge Studies on Think Asia.

DISCUSSION

This webinar, organized by the SCSA-IPA at the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP), was held on September 4, 2025, as the fifth in a series on the 'Climate Crisis in Tibet'. This series seeks to address China's long-term strategy for Tibet and its implications for social and environmental conditions. In this session, discussants examined Beijing's comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach aimed at fully integrating Tibet into the Chinese nation-state, marked by intensified urbanization, displacement, and assimilation policies.

The current trajectory prioritizes urbanization and assimilation, gradually reducing Tibetans to one among many

ethnic groups within urban municipalities, where no group retains distinct rights. As a result, many Tibetans are being displaced and relocated to frontier settlements or high-density concrete housing. Further, the Chinese authorities have tightened their grip on Tibetans' lives through intensive surveillance, border control, and restrictions on movement.

Tibetan farmers, removed from traditional lands and practices, find themselves reduced to wage laborers, disconnected from their historical relationship with the environment. Between 2000 and 2025, an estimated 930,000 rural Tibetans were displaced due to a variety of reasons, ranging from large-



scale infrastructure works to government policies designed to end nomadic pastoral lifestyles. In this same period, 3.36 million rural Tibetans—roughly half of the entire population—were impacted by policies requiring them to rebuild their houses or abandon nomadic life, even if not formally relocated. The loss of traditional livelihoods has created a widespread dependency on state subsidies. Some Tibetans have experienced multiple relocations across this period. Most notably, 76 percent of these relocations have occurred since 2016 under Xi Jinping’s leadership, indicating a significant escalation of Beijing’s control efforts. The displacement of Tibetans from nomadic pastoral lifestyles is especially problematic as it increases urbanization across Tibet, as well as energy needs and consumption.

Concurrently, Tibetans face cultural erasure. Despite the official “Bilingual Education Policy,” Mandarin Chinese is increasingly dominant in schools, with Han Chinese teachers, many of whom do not speak Tibetan, serving as the primary educators. Tibetan language instruction is being systematically reduced. State-run boarding schools further remove children from their families, communities, and cultural context, reinforcing efforts to assimilate Tibetan youth into Han norms and identity. Beijing’s policies aim to subjugate Tibetan Buddhism by promoting cultural assimilation and suppressing Tibetan identity under the guise of modernization.

In response to these policies, on July 12, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden signed the Resolve Tibet Act, affirming that China’s actions are systematically suppressing Tibetans’ ability to maintain their cultural identity and traditional way of life. The Act reaffirms U.S. support for the human rights of Tibetans and the preservation of their unique linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. In sum, Beijing’s population politics support its high-modernist development approach, which privileges modernization and industrialization over indigenous rights and environmental protection.

As the fifth installment in ISDP’s Climate Crisis in Tibet series, the webinar sought to address the following key questions:

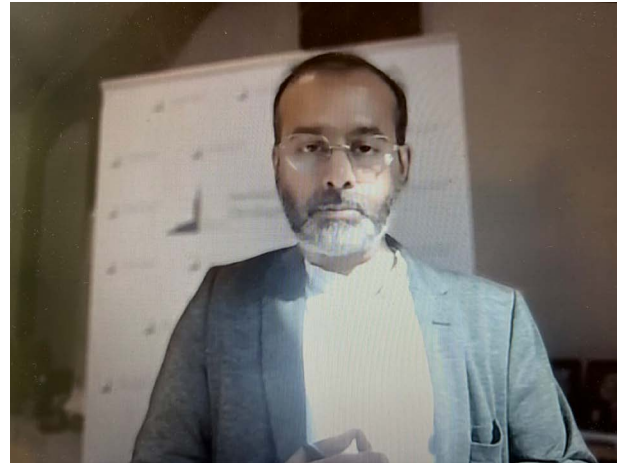
- What are the main goals behind China’s population and urbanization policies in Tibet, and how do they reflect broader state interests in national integration and territorial control?
- How have infrastructure developments facilitated demographic shifts in Tibet, and what are the social and cultural consequences of increased Han migration into the region?
- To what extent can the relocation of Tibetan villagers and the erosion of nomadic pastoral lifestyles be seen as forced assimilation rather than development or modernization?
- How does the reduction of Tibetan language instruction and the rise of state-run boarding schools’ impact

intergenerational cultural transmission and identity formation among Tibetan youth?

- How are the Tibetan people coping? Has there been any pushback or is there little recourse?
- What are the environmental consequences of China's policies and how are they connected to broader patterns of displacement and urbanization?

Dr. Jagannath Panda opened the session by situating Tibet as a frontline region where population politics intersects with climate and security issues. He emphasized the importance of examining China's urbanization and migration policies in Tibet and their consequences for the environment, society, and regional stability. To begin the discussion, he posed several key questions:

- What are the main goals behind China's population and urbanization policies in Tibet?
- Should these policies be interpreted as part of China's broader strategy to integrate Tibet with the rest of the country, or as a move to consolidate territorial control?
- What are the social and cultural consequences of these policies, particularly in light of large-scale Han migration into Tibetan regions?
- How do infrastructure developments and demographic shifts associated with Han migration affect Tibetan society and culture?



Population politics intersect with climate and security issues on the Tibetan Plateau. It is important to examine China's urbanization and migration policies in Tibet and their consequences for the environment, society, and regional stability.

– Jagannath Panda

Dr. Jarmila Ptáčková described China's sedentarization and urbanization programs as central tools of territorial control. Although officially presented as initiatives for poverty alleviation and ecological restoration, she argued that their deeper purpose is to secure control over land and access to natural resources. Most recently, large-scale developments have been aimed at facilitating border fortification and social control over the Tibetan population. Pastoralists, portrayed as obstacles to such control, have been displaced through sedentarization and resettlement.

While early efforts targeted only some households, after 2008, these policies expanded to the wider Tibetan population to enable tighter control. Dr. Ptáčková noted that the uprooting of pastoralists in particular, disrupted social and cultural networks, causing new economic and social vulnerabilities, and resulted in many households becoming dependent on state subsidies. Family planning policies and compulsory education further reduced available household labor, undermining rural economic security.

In the 2010s, cooperative herding and farming were promoted to address labor shortages and environmental concerns, later institutionalized through the 2018 law on specialized cooperatives and the 2021 rural revitalization program. Large-scale cooperatives and the "one village, one industry" model promoted mass production of produce, such as organic yak



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and sheep meat, but often marginalized local leaders. After the pandemic, food security goals accelerated agricultural industrialization, increasing central control over animal husbandry and farming. While official reports claim ecological and economic benefits, evidence from informants suggests these policies risk further impoverishment, long-term food insecurity, and degradation of grasslands, particularly in conjunction with China's efforts to divert water from the Tibetan plateau to other arid regions.



Han and Hui migration into Tibet continues a long historical pattern of state-led settlement to secure frontiers, much as in Xinjiang and Manchuria in earlier decades.

— Anton Harder

locals, tightening surveillance, reinforcing territorial claims, and projecting China's developmental model to both domestic and cross-border audiences.

These villages, often located in disputed areas with India, Nepal, or Bhutan, function in ways comparable to China's creation of infrastructure in the South and East China Seas. Harder stressed that Han and Hui migration into Tibet continues a long historical pattern of state-led settlement to secure frontiers, much as in Xinjiang and Manchuria in earlier decades. He cautioned, however, against assuming urbanization automatically increases state control, pointing to historical moments such as the 1959 uprising and 2008 protests, which both erupted in urban centers. He suggested that concentrated urban spaces may also provide sites for resistance, complicating the narrative that urbanization is primarily a tool of population control.

Dr. Anton Harder provided a historical overview of Tibet's role in China's domestic and foreign policy, particularly as it relates to China-India relations. Dr. Harder began by recalling how the PLA's entry into Tibet in 1949–50 created a sudden food crisis, linking this to contemporary policies where food security is again a central concern. He noted that urbanization, pastoralist resettlement, and especially the construction of new border villages served multiple purposes, including the provision of services for

Mr. Kalpit A. Mankikar framed his remarks around two themes: poverty alleviation and border security. He noted that Xi Jinping's visits to Tibet highlight the dual narrative of development and territorial consolidation. While Beijing frames displacement as an ecological and poverty alleviation measure, in practice many Tibetans are moved to areas where traditional livelihoods are impossible. Local programs re-skill them for construction, textiles, or leather processing, raising concerns they are treated mainly as cheap labor.

Turning to border security, Mr. Mankikar noted the creation of hundreds of Xiaokang (小康), or "well-off," villages along the border with India. While promoted as development projects to modernize local infrastructure, these villages also serve strategic ends, with many facilities designed for potential military use.

He noted that many Tibetans resettled into these villages have been mobilized for security tasks, with official reports confirming their participation in "mass defense units" charged with intelligence gathering, territorial defense, and the maintenance of social order. These units suggest that resettlement and urbanization are used not only for assimilation but also to integrate local populations into border security.



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Professor Carole McGranahan drew on her decades of research to frame the discussion through the twin lenses of empire and exile. She emphasized that Chinese policies in Tibet are fundamentally about control, rooted in both military conquest and settler colonialism. Providing the historical background to the relationship, she recalled that Chinese road-building in the 1950s enabled PLA entry into Tibet, with subsequent infrastructure projects consistently resulting in more dispossession of local Tibetans.

McGranahan noted that Chinese “development” has always been paired with Tibetan dispossession, whether through borders redrawn and renamed, civilian Han migration after major infrastructure projects, or the creation of residential boarding schools that now house nearly a million Tibetan children separated from families and immersed in Chinese-language education. She stressed that education, like dams and roads, must be seen as infrastructure of control.

She also highlighted how the exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959 created a global diaspora, shaping Tibetan identity beyond the plateau and emphasized that his presence and absence remain central to Tibetan identity and politics. Finally, she explained that Tibet’s natural resources and strategic location mean that Chinese actions in Tibet reverberate across South and Southeast Asia.



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Q&A

After the initial presentations, **Dr. Jagannath Panda** moderated a Q&A session, inviting panelists to explore to what extent the relocation of Tibetan villages and erosion of nomadic life constitute forced assimilation rather than modernization. He also raised questions about the impact of reduced Tibetan language instruction on future generations and the environmental consequences of China's displacement and urbanization policies.

Dr. Ptáčková argued that current policies in Tibet represent the culmination of 75 years of Chinese control since the PLA's entry. China now has full territorial control, enabling deeper social and economic restructuring. While agreeing with **Dr. Harder** that population control is only one of several aims of the

CCP's sedentarisation and urbanization policies in Tibet, she maintained that the securitization of the population is nonetheless central, since controlling land and resources ultimately requires controlling the people.

She observed that, by presenting these policies as economic "modernization," the Chinese state initially obscured the policies' deeper cultural and social impacts, leaving Tibetan leaders unprepared for the transformations that followed. She also discussed the policy parallels applied to other minority groups such as Uyghurs or Mongol, particularly mandarin-language policies, which has resulted in cultural erosion and intergenerational divides.

Expanding on this theme, **Dr. Harder** examined whether relocation and the erosion of nomadic pastoralism in Tibet

reflect assimilation or modernization, arguing the two are inseparable. Drawing on historical patterns of Chinese state expansion over nomads, he suggested current policies repeat this logic by settling populations while promoting industrialization. Urban resettlement serves both economic modernization and cultural assimilation goals, with the CCP defining modernization as cultural standardization. He echoed **Dr. Ptáčková** assimilation concerns by noting policy parallels toward other local dialects like Shanghainese and Cantonese amid nationwide a “Mandarinization” program.


Mr. Mankikar examined the environmental implications of China’s planned hydroelectric dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River. While officially framed as a green, carbon-neutral project supporting China’s climate goals, he noted unanswered questions about displacement and loss of sacred Tibetan sites, as well as altered river flows affecting India’s northeast and seismic risks in an earthquake-prone region. Beyond the dam, he highlighted growing debate in Delhi about China’s weather modification experiments, which Chinese sources themselves have openly acknowledged since 2020. **Mr. Mankikar** observed that China’s border Xiaokang villages are mirrored by India’s “Vibrant Villages Program,” though Delhi’s program remains behind Beijing’s in scale and pace.

Dr. McGranahan situated nomadic resettlement within two decades of

scholarship on forced assimilation and urbanization, stressing that it must be understood in the context of China’s authoritarian, socialist-capitalist state. She noted how Tibetans, unlike many other ethnic minority groups, once maintained their own state and international relations, yet are now confined within categories imposed by the PRC. Policies of relocation, resource access, and surveillance undermine Tibetan social and cultural practices. Still, Tibetans adapt through small acts of resistance and cultural continuity, like protests, community building in cities like Chengdu, and everyday practices such as dance.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- China's population policies in Tibet—sedentarization, urbanization, and cooperative farming—are framed as development but also function as tools of state control and assimilation.
- Urbanization and border villages serve dual purposes: improving services while entrenching China's military presence at the border regions. This advances territorial claims, and increases the risk of military escalation with neighboring countries.
- The erosion of Tibetan language, religion, and livelihoods illustrates how modernization is paired with cultural dispossession.
- Major hydropower projects, such as the proposed Yarlung Tsangpo "Super-Dam," pose grave ecological and cultural risks, including displacement, seismic hazards, and destruction of sacred sites.
- Comparisons with Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia show similar patterns of securitization and assimilation, albeit with locally adapted methods.
- Despite state repression, Tibetan communities continue to exercise resilience, maintaining cultural practices through language, religion and tradition, while also forging new spaces for identity in exile and urban environments.



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