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Title: Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Border Minorities in China’s Foreign Relations with South Asia

Abstract:

This paper will take a closer look at how China’s government deals with border minorities in the foreign relations with its neighboring South Asian states. To secure its periphery, China has been known to push its neighbors to support border security in going repressively against these refugee populations which could potentially threaten China's domestic peace by seceding from the Chinese republic. This paper is going to highlight the roles of the Tibetan and Uighur minorities in the relations of China with adjacent states in South Asia. For the Tibetan minority, the paper will analyze Sino-Nepalese as well as Sino-Indian relations in that regard; concerning the Uighur minority, Sino-Pakistani relations will be highlighted. These case studies promise to be interesting also because of the range of relationships between China and these countries, Pakistan being a relatively close ally, Nepal a buffer state in which China and India compete for power, and India being at least a competitor state, if not arch-enemy—given still existing border disputes. India and Nepal house the first and second largest Tibetan refugee populations worldwide, respectively, while only a small Uighur population lives in Pakistan. Expected results should show the relative importance of border minorities and therefore, Chinese domestic politics in foreign relations with the selected cases.

Keywords: China; India; Pakistan; Nepal; Tibetan Refugees; Uighurs.
Between a Rock and a Hard Place:
Border Minorities in China’s Foreign Relations with South Asia

by Bibek Chand & Lukas K. Danner

Introduction

Most attention concerning China’s borders has recently focused on the East and South China Seas. These maritime borders are justified more or less entirely on the basis of Chinese historical maps and sources, making it a contentious issue. As all of these islands are uninhabited, ethnic consideration in terms of belonging to Chinese territory are not considered in these cases which are often taken up by the media. Not less important are the other borders of China. Though the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has settled most of its borders in the last decades, there are still some disputes and vulnerabilities in existence. Very noticeable is China’s vulnerability when it comes to the two westernmost border areas, i.e., those of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), short Tibet or Xizang, and Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), short Xinjiang or Chinese Turkestan. In these two cases, minorities play a very important role in justifying the belonging to inherently Chinese territory (though it plays an equally important role in separatists’ arguments pro-self-determination). As borders are permeable, these ethnicities are not exclusively on PRC territory but also spread across China’s neighboring states. This paper will take a closer look at what role border minorities play in the PRC’s relations with selected South Asian states. Object of analysis will be the ties with Pakistan—a rather close ally of China, India—a neighbor often associated with an arch-enmity between the two, and Nepal—a rather neutral South Asian neighbor of China. The analysis of the former relations will focus more on the role of the Uighur population of Xinjiang, whereas
the analyses of the latter two relations will emphasize the relevance of Tibetan refugees present in the respective South Asian country.

**General Border Policy**

China has taken a very strict interpretation of sovereignty ever since it joined (though forcibly) the Westphalian Western-dominated world order, which is reflected in its general border policy. The country had to undergo the so-called ‘Century of Humiliation’ at the hands of the Western Great Powers and Japan, starting with the First Opium War in 1839 and lasting until the end of World War Two with the end of Japanese occupation of vast parts of China in 1945. Remnants of this era of semi-colonization of parts of China were present until Hong Kong and Macao were eventually given back to the PRC at the turn of the millennium. It does not come as a surprise that in consequence, China took a rather strict enforcement and understanding of sovereignty and, therefore, its borders. After all, the Western understanding of sovereignty evolved in reaction to both World Wars: World War One brought about the right to self-determination of peoples which splintered many pan-ethnic empires such as Austria-Hungary (more immediately after the Great War) or the British Empire (with a couple of decades’ lag); World War Two brought about the responsibility of the international community to protect human rights even if it is within other states’ territories, i.e., universally valid international human rights and the ‘responsibility to protect.’

The PRC understands itself as having rightfully inherited a pan-ethnic empire from the last dynasty of the Chinese empire, the Manchu-led Great Qing.¹ That especially applies to the borders the Chinese empire had in its greatest expansion under the High Qing, including parts it does not currently hold anymore such as Outer Mongolia, South Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh), certain islands

¹ The Republic of China, led by Sun Yat-sen, had first established this, which the Communists took over in 1949, basically without change.
and maritime territory in the East and South China Seas, as well as parts of Manchuria and Siberia now held by the Russian Federation. Taiwan does not really belong to this list as the international community largely accepts that \textit{de jure} Taiwan is part of China with the exception of about two dozen states that have official relations with the Republic of China or Taiwan.\textsuperscript{2} This is another feature of China’s strong hold on borders: whichever nation intends to have official relations with the PRC needs to pledge that it is not going to interfere with internal affairs of the PRC and, therefore, that nation needs to accept that Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, etc. are unchangeably integral parts of China. Of course, this has to do with the fact that so many different ethnicities live on China’s territory which otherwise might claim the right to self-determination and found their own nation. That goes especially for Tibet and Xinjiang, whereas Inner Mongolia might join the Republic of (Outer) Mongolia, for example. In essence, China does not subscribe to the right to self-determination of peoples in order to keep Tibet, Xinjiang, or Inner Mongolia in the realm. In order to enforce this in a Westphalian world order that evolved to respect self-determination, it uses access to its huge market of 1.3 billion-plus as a reward for nations that intend to have official relations with the PRC and therefore, also want to trade with it.

Related to this non-subscription to the right to self-determination of peoples, China does not fancy the Western understanding of individual human rights all that much. Rather, the government tries to emphasize that it likes to put a premium on ‘social’ human rights, or ‘the greater good.’ No doubt that the PRC has experienced unprecedented growth in economic and military power over the last few decades starting with the late 1970s and the slow opening-up of China to capitalism. The lack of attention to respecting individual human rights has emerged as a constituent part of the PRC’s adamancy in enforcing its borders which otherwise would likely not hold.

\textsuperscript{2} Though, \textit{de facto}, Taiwan enjoys independence from the mainland.
So, in essence, China takes a standard, Realist understanding of its national interest: China intends to survive as a nation-state and this tops the list of priorities in terms of national interest. Softening on self-determination of peoples or individual human rights would mean the breaking-apart of the unified PRC that the CCP perceives and would therefore, not be in the national interest of the country. Hence, the current standing of China’s take on international law as it pertains to its border policy remains rather contentious.

The main ‘problem’ for the Chinese government is located in the fact that the western territories of Xinjiang and Tibet are intricately associated with minority groups, i.e., the Uighurs and Tibetans. These would be perfect candidates for the right of self-determination of peoples as they have a clear-cut territory in which they have their own culture, language, history, religion, etc., all of which are differentiable from the Han-Chinese—though they shared historical memories. Also, China’s economy, busy life, dynamism, and strength is located on the eastern seaboard in such megacities as Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and the provinces that surround them with dozens more megacities which are hardly readily known to those outside of China. So, in many ways, China feels exposed at its western flank, which it counters with the so-called ‘Empty Fortress’ strategy as Andrew Scobell et al. (2014, xii-xiii) write:

“China’s response to the complex challenges on its western borders during the past two decades has been to adopt an “Empty Fortress” strategy. Legendary in the annals of Chinese history, the Empty Fortress stratagem refers to a skillful ploy to feign strength to an adversary when one is in fact extremely weak. Chinese leaders recognize that the country’s westernmost regions are poorly defended and vulnerable to internal dissent and external threats. China’s defense posture is heavily skewed toward the east, where the wealthiest and most heavily populated areas are located. But Beijing refuses to abandon the west, grant its independence, or cede large tracts of territory to its neighbors. On the contrary, China has boldly projected an image of considerable strength in Central and South Asia to mask serious frailty. Beijing’s strategy is exemplified by its promotion of the SCO, which, despite outward appearances of potency and activism, remains a loose collection of states incapable of resolute collective diplomatic, military, or economic action.”
China’s gravest internal security threat emanates from ethnic Uighur resistance in the western province of Xinjiang. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—as just mentioned by Scobell et al. above—was one move in many to make China’s western border more secure by bringing in China’s neighbors and, potentially, exerting pressure on them to cooperate what concerns the integral belonging of Xinjiang to China, as a report of the Human Rights Watch (2005, 23) amply documents:

“China has also been very active in enrolling the support of its Central Asian neighbors in the crackdown against Uighur ethno-nationalist aspirations. It is the driving force behind the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security body composed of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan set up in 1996 (Uzbekistan joined in 2001). The SCO was established in part to address Chinese concerns about a number of small Uighur political and opposition movements that, in the first years of independence for the former Soviet republics, set up organizations in the region, giving Uighur exiles a much closer base for their operations than the previous generation of activists, who had been based in Turkey and, later, Germany. Under pressure from Beijing, since 1996 these Central Asian countries have effectively silenced independent Uighur organizations on their soil and on several occasions have repatriated refugees in response to requests by China. Some of those repatriated refugees were executed upon their return.”

Besides the pressure China has been exerting in Central Asia and what concerns the Uighur border minority, the same is true for South Asian neighboring states and the Tibetan border minority which will be further illuminated in the cases below. In general, though, China desires stability at its borders as any unrest in neighboring states is feared to spill over into the Chinese border regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, causing secessionists to be emboldened by examples elsewhere. This is why the Arab Spring was largely kept out of Chinese media through concerted state efforts. The current British exit from the EU is not particularly favorably looked upon by the Chinese government in terms of fearing a similar process of secession from its border provinces. In the same vein goes the fact that “China has developed a more neutral position on the Indo-Pakistani dispute over Kashmir
over the past decade in part because China believes that the dispute could have implications for ethnic-religious unrest in China, especially in Tibet or Xinjiang. In this context, the ascendance of Taliban forces in either Pakistan or Afghanistan is clearly not in China’s interest’’ (Pamidi 2012, 84).

More generally, the fact that border minorities play a big role when it comes to securing China’s western borders show that domestic factors do play a very large role for China—even in international relations with neighboring states. This is important to point out since many theories in International Relations think of relations between states as being dominated by international or systemic factors rather than including also domestic factors, most notably the dominating theories of neo-realism and neo-liberalism.3 Applied to the situation of foreign relations of China with its South Asian neighbors and the role of border minorities within these relations, this essentially boils down to the following, as Scobell et al. (2014, 62) write:

“Beijing’s foremost security concerns are domestic and continuing unrest in western China and ethnic separatist forces are very worrisome. Initially, these concerns focused on Tibet, with India viewed as the main supporter of Tibetan separatism. Since the 1959 Tibetan revolt, Tibetan Buddhism’s spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, along with the Tibetan Government-in-Exile have both been headquartered in India. A Pakistan allied with China is a useful reminder to India that if it foments unrest in Tibet, it must also keep one eye on its western flank. China also views Pakistan in the context of providing support for Uighur separatists in Xinjiang.”

Similarly, the 2015 Chinese white paper on military strategy states that “China faces a formidable task to maintain political security and social stability. Separatist forces for ‘East Turkistan independence’ and ‘Tibet independence’ have inflicted serious damage, particularly with escalating violent terrorist activities by ‘East Turkistan independence’ forces” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China 2015).

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3 See Waltz (1979) for an exemplary work on neo-realism, and Keohane & Nye (1975?) for neo-liberalism.
Insofar as this paper focuses on the role of border minorities in the relations of China with its South Asian neighbors, particularly Pakistan, India, and Nepal, it will take a neo-classical realist approach insofar as it believes that domestic factors can be intricately important to foreign policy and international relations of China.

**Pakistan**

Sino-Pakistani relations have been particularly improved over the past few decades, not least because the increased friendship made sense strategically for China. Following the 1962 war between India and China over their still unresolved border dispute, the enmity between the two was hammered in stone, if it was not already before that. Along the lines of the age-old balance-of-power rule in international relations, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” closer Sino-Pakistani relations made logical sense to China’s power-balancing strategy against India. Though, India is generally thought of as the natural regional power of South Asia due to its predominant geographic, economic, and demographic size, Pakistan is certainly next in line at that—considering it also has weaponized its nuclear power capability. Insofar as China’s relations with India are bad, its relations with Pakistan is relatively good because of the mutual security concerns regarding India. Still, the perception of the supposed close ally is mixed in China: “While China has been very successful in (...) cultivating its ongoing friendship with Pakistan, all these countries are nevertheless perceived in threatening terms by China: as breeding grounds for Islamic radicals, sympathetic foreign bases of support for separatist forces in Xinjiang” (Scobell et al. 2015, xii).

Not all is beer and skittles with the two strategic partners. Concerning unresolved borders, China and Pakistan are also in disagreement. Shortly after the demise of British India and the founding of the majority-Muslim Pakistan and majority-Hindu India, the conflict over Kashmir erupted, i.e., whether it was to be part of Pakistan or India—bordering both. While the two South
Asian neighbors were at odds, China quietly annexed the Aksai Chin region of northeastern Kashmir and has been administering it as inherently Chinese territory until the present. If Kashmir were to join Pakistan as a resolution of this Indo-Pakistani dispute, Sino-Pakistani relations might worsen over it although this is certainly not an imminent concern for the two.

More recently, China has taken issue with Pakistan in relation to its Xinjiang region (of which Aksai Chin is a part) which is inhabited by a Muslim majority (ca. 46 percent Uighur, 6.5 percent Kazakh, 4.5 percent Hui—all of which are Muslim by religion) and which shares a border with (the half of Kashmir that is occupied by) Pakistan: There was friction because of Pakistani support of Islamic fundamentalism, or at least not rigorous intervention against it. It had come to China’s attention that Uighur separatists were training on Pakistani territory. These Uighur fundamentalists have been fighting for an independent East Turkestan for centuries, in the past few hundred years for example during the mid- to late-nineteenth century against the Manchu-led Qing dynasty in many uprisings, and against the Republic of China in which warlords effectively held control over what is now Xinjiang.

In the past few years, Uighur separatists have used a terrorist strategy to make their cause public, attacking the Chinese population not just in Xinjiang but increasingly also in the eastern metropolises of the PRC. On March 1, 2014, Uighur separatists killed thirty-three and wounded at least 130 others with knives in a “crowded train station (…) in the southwestern city of Kunming. Targets in the past have usually been police, paramilitary barracks and other symbols of Chinese government authority, and attacks have mainly been staged inside Xinjiang” (Page and Yap 2014). In late April 2014, “three people were killed and 79 were injured in a combination bomb and knife

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4 This is compared to a ca. 41 percent local Han-Chinese population with experienced great influx into the region in the past few decades under a government-directed ‘sinicization’ strategy. Though, as far as the Muslim religion goes, Haider suggests that “Islamic ideology does not significantly serve to rally the Uighurs to the side of the Pakistanis or in opposition to the Han Chinese” (2005).
assault on a train station in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang province. Then, [in early May 2014], four terrorists wielding knives attacked Guangzhou Railway Station, injuring six individuals” (Keck 2014). Since it found out that many of the violent “Chinese Uighur separatists [had been] receiving sanctuary and training on Pakistani territory” (Curtis 2016, 86), China has been exerting pressure on its neighbor, obviously meant toward “ensuring Chinese internal security by stifling connections between Uighurs in Xinjiang and radical Islamists in Pakistan” (Scobell, Ratner, and Beckley 2014, 63). It has also been reported that the East Turkestan independence movement “[(ETIM)] enjoyed close relations with a number of jihadi groups in mainland Pakistan” (Acharya et al. 2010).

“While it is unclear which percentage of Uighur separatists are affiliated with Al-Qaeda, terrorism expert Walid Phares testified before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in 2009 that jihadists make up about 5 percent to 10 percent of the Uighur Movement. He has also noted the presence of a ‘jihadi web’ in Pakistan that includes Uighur extremists.”

(Pamidi 2012, 83)

Uighurs are a very small minority in Pakistan—only about 3,000 people strong. “In the late 1940s, thousands of Uighurs emigrated to Pakistan, fearing Chinese repression” (Rahman 2005). Though, there has been a history of Uighur separatists training on Pakistani territory: “In the 1980s,

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5 Many attacks have taken place before the recent ones mentioned: “The 1990s were a particularly violent period in Xinjiang. The Chinese Government claims that between 1990 and 2001 Uighur separatists carried out approximately 200 attacks that killed 162 people. The episodes included bombings, assassinations, attacks on government buildings, and more. While these statistics may be somewhat exaggerated, they are roughly consistent with data collected independently by scholar Gardiner Bovingdon, suggesting that the 1990s was a decade of growing ethnic unrest in Xinjiang” (Scobell et al. 2015, 63). “In July 2009, ethnic violence broke out in Urumqi (…). The Chinese government blamed the violence primarily on Uighur exiles, but Pakistani radical influence was also cited as contributing to the violence. More recent attacks in Xinjiang in late July 2011 (…) prompted Chinese criticisms of Pakistan for failing to crack down on the training of Uighur separatists in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. (…) Local Chinese authorities in Xinjiang charged that the person who conducted the July attacks in Kashgar had received training in Pakistan. The accusations were repeated in the China Daily newspaper. Pakistani political leader Mushahid Hussain acknowledged (…) that another attack similar to the one in Kashgar would have serious implications for China-Pakistan ties” (Pamidi 2012, 83f.).

6 See Sun (2009).
hundreds of Uighurs crossed into Pakistan, enrolled in madrassas, and, with Chinese government training and arms, fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Upon returning to Xinjiang via Pakistan, some joined violent Uighur nationalist groups” (Scobell et al. 2015, 63). Nevertheless, following Chinese pressure, Pakistan has managed to implement some counterterrorist actions against the Uighur separatists:

“In 2003, Pakistani forces killed Hasan Mahsum, the founder of the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which the Chinese government had identified as the most threatening Uighur terrorist group. China and Pakistan have signed agreements on information sharing, joint counterterrorism drills, and extradition of terrorist suspects. (...) Some experts believe rising unrest in Xinjiang will increase China-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation and perhaps even spur China to commit significant resources to bolster Pakistani political stability. (...) While some individuals targeting China have trained in Pakistan, China’s strategy aims to decouple Uighurs from other terrorist organizations rather than wage a wider war on terror.”

(Scobell et al. 2015, 63ff.)

Though, as much as the Uighur separatism problem of the Chinese government leads to much cooperation, it often comes only as China exerts considerable pressure on the Pakistani government:

“Over the past 20 years, China has often severed links with Pakistan by periodically curtailing border trade, closing the Karakoram highway, and erecting security fences along the border to insulate Xinjiang from Islamists in Pakistan. According to Ahmad Farqui, the Chinese government employs these measures ‘to send a strong signal to the government of Pakistan that China would not hesitate to freeze the close ties between the two neighbors if Pakistan did not stop its backing for Islamic militants.’ In 1995, for example, China and Pakistan agreed to upgrade the Karakoram highway to facilitate regional trade. Yet, China displayed visible hesitancy in implementing the agreement. Describing Beijing’s stance, Ahmed Rashid wrote ‘Beijing’s reluctance stems from the fact that the proposed road would run across Xinjiang and the Chinese fear that the route would increase the traffic in fundamentalism.’ Chinese analysts openly doubt the commitment and capabilities of Pakistan’s security forces, even accusing them of warning Uighur groups to disperse prior to raids.”

(Scobell et al. 2014, 64f.)
In the early 2000s—also as a reaction to 9/11—“Chinese diplomats told their ally Pakistan to use its influence with the Taliban to stop training Uighurs in their military bases, and to hand over suspects who had taken refuge in Pakistan itself” (Tyler 2004, 243). In response, “Pakistan has boasted that it has eliminated Uighur ‘terrorists’ in its northern areas” (Human Rights Watch 2005, 24). Moreover, counterterrorist efforts against the Uighurs are said to “have included closing Uighur settlements in Pakistan, arresting and deporting Uighurs, and killing alleged Uighur terrorists” (Haider 2005, 524). These pressures come usually pin-pointed from the Chinese side in particular instances: “Rather than encouraging Islamabad to adopt a comprehensive approach toward countering terrorism, Chinese leaders have used their relationships with Pakistani military officials, and with the Islamist political parties, to persuade them to discourage attacks on Chinese interests” (Pamidi 2012, 85). Though, this strategy of China of ‘going easy’ on Pakistan via occasional pressure without demanding a more comprehensive counterterrorism policy by Pakistan may have undergone change, as Curtis (2016, 87) suggests:

“China feels increasingly compelled to pressure Pakistan to adopt more responsible counterterrorism policies, Beijing dropped its resistance to banning the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD – a front organization for the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, responsible for the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai) in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in December 2008. Before then, China had vetoed UNSC resolutions seeking to ban the JuD.”

All in all, as Scobell et al. put it, “[t]he threat posed by Uighur separatism is just as likely to drive China and Pakistan apart as to push them together” (2015, 64f.). To be fair, it needs to be said

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7 More specifically, what had happened was that “in December 2000, Mullah Omar gave his personal assurances to China's ambassador to Pakistan, Lu Shulin, that the Taliban would not support Uighur separatists” (Karrar 2010).
8 See also Pamidi (2012, 83ff.).
that Pakistan has not actively promoted Uighur separatism in China: “Despite its self-anointed status as a champion of the rights of Muslim minorities, Pakistan has never taken up the issue of the rights of the Uighurs in China” (Fair and Watson 2015). As a whole, “Chinese officials are increasingly connecting the level of terrorist activity in Pakistan to instability in western China” (Pamidi 2012, 84).

India

China’s relationship with India is one that is contentious and fraught with numerous intertwined issues. Along with China, India is Asia’s other emerging giant. Despite cordial relations during the early years of the Cold War, Sino-Indian relations remain competitive given the emergence of distrust since the limited border war the two Asian powers fought in 1962. Although the 1962 Sino-Indian War was the defining moment that charted the course for contentious relations between the two neighbors, a major underlying cause existed before the conflict: the presence of a large Tibetan diaspora coupled with India’s granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile.

Following the formal incorporation of Tibet into the PRC in 1951 and the failed Tibetan uprising of 1959, the Dalai Lama along with the Tibetan civilian government fled to India (Mukherjee 2015, 193). The hill town of Dharamshala in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh was to emerge as the base for the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan administration. The then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s granting of political asylum to the Dalai Lama along with over 80,000 Tibetan refugees emerged as an early source of contention between India and China, as both states sought to establish themselves as the prominent Asian power (MacPherson, Bentz, & Ghoso, 2008). India continued the policy of welcoming Tibetan refugees; between 1986 and 1996, over

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9 The PRC administration continues to argue that the Dalai Lama is a separatist.
25,000 Tibetan refugees settled in India (Marwah and Soni, 2010, 264). Furthermore, the Tibetan diaspora in India would continue to form an inherent aspect of China’s policies towards India, especially in regards to the settlement of border contestation between the two powers.

An important aspect to note is the colonial legacy of Britain and its impact on geopolitics in the region. The British Indian administration sought to create a buffer zone as a second line of geographic defense of its colony from the Qing Empire in the north. As Soni and Marwah (2011, 288-289) note:

“The Lhasa Convention of 1904, signed by the British and the Tibetans, put the seal of British overlordship over Tibet. The Simla Convention followed the Lhasa Convention in 1914 that laid out the McMahon Line defining both the Indo-Tibetan border, and the division of Tibet into ‘Outer Tibet’ (which lies along the border with India and now known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region) and ‘Inner Tibet’ (the present day Sichuan, Yunnan and Qinghai provinces of China). The Simla Convention resulted in the acknowledgement of China’s sovereignty over Inner Tibet, but only suzerain control over Outer Tibet with British India retaining trading and extra-territorial rights in this part of Tibet.”

The British Indian administration treated the erstwhile Tibetan government as an independent and sovereign political body, a rather contentious issue for the PRC. The Simla Agreement was not recognized by the PRC after the acquirement of Tibet, asserting that Tibet never had the political right to act as an independent state under Qing suzerainty (Bhattacharya 2007, 214). After 1959, the emergent political dynamic between India and China could be characterized by competitive geopolitical aspirations, a fact that was exacerbated by the granting of asylum in India for a large Tibetan diaspora and the Dalai Lama. Thus, the presence of a large Tibetan diaspora in India added to China’s foreign policy towards its southern neighbor and its strategic maneuvering, particularly in using the Tibetan issue as a premise for geopolitical gain.

India continues to support the Tibetan refugee population spread in over 35 settlements throughout the country (Soni and Marwah (2011, 265). Hosting the largest Tibetan diaspora in the world along with the Dalai Lama and the government-in-exile has had grave implications for Sino-
Indian relations. The Chinese administration has wedded its resentment of the granting of political asylum to the Dalai Lama with its geopolitical interests in the region. To better consolidate its hold on Tibet and Xinjiang, the PRC constructed a major road through the Aksai Chin, an area claimed by India as part of the 1914 Simla Agreement (Singh 2012, 142). Given the contention that emerged out of the Tibetan Uprising of 1959, the PRC linked the presence of the Tibetan diaspora and the Dalai Lama in India to claim Aksai Chin and the Indian administered state of Arunachal Pradesh. Calling it a part of greater Tibet due to its heavy Tibetan influenced culture, Arunachal Pradesh continues to remain a prominent thorn (perhaps, the most prominent one) in relations between India and China.

Apart from the contention association with Tibetans in India, Sino-Indian ties are more prominently tied to their border disputes. Although claimed by India, the Aksai Chin region is administered by China since the building of the highway in the 1950s. As for Arunachal Pradesh, China claims it as a part of Greater Tibet, while India considers it to be an integral part of the Indian Union. Despite the fact that the dispute stemmed back to India’s independence in 1947, it became prominent since the 1962 War between the two states. It reached a critical point in 1986; known as the Sumdurong Chu incident, it was characterized by massive military mobilization on the Sino-Indian border along the McMahon Line which delineates the border between China and India (Singh 2012, 149). Arunachal Pradesh has emerged as a major source of contention between the two states. Particularly for China, the region is a strategic playground from which to pressure India. It has done so through numerous incursions into the region. Since 2004, the People’s Liberation Army has instituted aggressive patrolling in the region, followed by incursions into Arunachal Pradesh on an annual basis ever since (Singh 2012, 150).

China’s geopolitical interests in South Asia coupled with its grave concerns regarding India’s benevolence towards the Dalai Lama allows the Chinese administration to effectively tie its
geostrategic interests with the Tibetan problem. The Indian acquiescence to the Tibetan government-in-exile can effectively be used by the Chinese administration for domestic political support in order to make its claims in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. To further bolster its rhetoric, the Chinese administration has repeatedly denied visas to citizens of India from the state of Arunachal Pradesh. It included a senior member of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Ganesh Koyu, whose Chinese visa application was denied despite him being a part of the 107 bureaucrats visiting China for official reasons (“China Issuing ‘Invalid’ Stapled Visas to Arunachal Pradesh Residents,” 2011). Additionally, Indian citizens from the state are given staple visas for China, an act that further consolidates its claims for Arunachal Pradesh. Using vague similarities of the populaces of Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, the Chinese administration has long sought to challenge India’s strategic space in the region through appeal of border minority affinities although the general sentiment amongst Arunachalis seem to favor India (Deka, 2010).

For the case of India, border minorities tied into China’s foreign policy towards that country. Albeit not as explicit as is the case for Nepal, which will be elaborated in the succeeding section, the presence of Tibetans or Tibetan influenced populations in India’s border states play a significant role in China’s security concerns regarding stability in the TAR. The presence of the Dalai Lama and over 100,000 Tibetan refugees has become intertwined with China’s concerns with India’s subsequent economic and military rise. The need for rhetoric at home for claiming what is rightfully theirs, China appeals to the idea of Greater Tibet, of which parts of Kashmir and the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh are constituent areas. Nevertheless, the resent emanating from the political asylum for the Dalai Lama has exacerbated Chinese claims of Indian administered regions. Furthermore, presence of populations along the border that showcase heavy Tibetan influence are used as proof that these areas belonged to historical Tibet. Nevertheless, the influence of border minorities in India that share commonalities with Chinese citizens across the border cannot be
analyzed in isolation. Sino-Indian relations are tantamount to attempts at carving out their respective spheres of influence and constraining each other’s strategic space. Border minorities have been effectively used to do that just that; China uses this pretext for larger strategic gains but the refugees form but one factor out of many of this geostrategic competition between the two Asian giants.

Nepal

The Sino-Nepal relationship extends beyond just relations with the current PRC. Nepal shared extensive historic ties with Tibet, particularly in the realms trade and the arts (Sahu 2015, 197). The incorporation of Tibet into the PRC did not meet with extensive resentment from the Nepalese state, which established diplomatic ties with its giant northern neighbor in 1955 (Sahu 2015, 200). Being a small state sandwiched in between two competing major powers, Nepal has often had to chart its foreign policy based on meticulous balancing between the two, a fact that is demonstrated in its recent handling of the Tibetan refugee populace within its borders.

Following the failed Tibetan Uprising of 1959, Nepal emerged as the second largest host of Tibetan refugees, trailing India. At present, over 20,000 Tibetan refugees reside in Nepal (Sahu 2015, 201). China’s foreign policy towards Nepal emphasizes and recognizes the presence of the Tibetan refugees in Nepal and its implications for domestic stability, particularly in the TAR. The destabilizing potential of the Tibetan diaspora was already established by China, following the CIA funded operation in the 1960s using Khampa rebels based in the northern Nepalese region of Mustang (Buddha’s Warriors, 2011). The United States’ attempts at rapprochement with the PRC led to its withdrawal of support for the Khampa rebels. Ultimately, the rebels disbanded in 1974 due to cutting off of CIA funds and extensive appeals by the Dalai Lama to lay down arms. It was apparent that the presence of a large ethnic minority outside of the PRC’s borders could be a source
of contention within its own borders, given the precarious situation Beijing continues to face in the TAR.

The PRC’s relationship with Nepal remains less problematic than the latter’s engagement with its southern neighbor. Regardless, China’s inherent interest lay in securing its southern border. Nepal shares a contiguous border with the TAR and China seeks to stabilize the province by fostering stability in its neighboring state. The logic of China’s Nepal policy is rooted in the fact that a stable and secure Nepal could contribute in stabilizing the TAR as well (Reeves 2012, 525; Dabhade and Pant 2004, 159). Additionally, Nepal and Tibet share historical links, a fact that China seeks to capitalize on but also fears could be a source of instability in the TAR. China’s peculiar concern regarding the Tibetan diaspora in Nepal is the inability of the PRC to directly control the Tibetan refugee populace outside of its borders. The PRC’s hands-off policy regarding Nepal’s domestic affairs contributed greatly to establishment of goodwill amongst the populace but the internal political dynamics in Nepal significantly impacted the country’s relationship with its two neighbors. As a small state situated in between rival regional powers, Nepal has had to consider a precarious balancing act when it comes to its foreign policy.

Despite China’s hands-off policy towards Nepal, the internal political developments in Nepal opened up avenues for China to constrain the Tibetan refugee populace. From 2002 to 2005, the Nepalese monarch King Gyanendra gradually constrained multiparty democracy that was in place since 1990; it culminated into a full-blown royal coup on 1 February, 2005 (Hutt 2005, 112). Given India’s traditional support for Nepal’s democratic political parties, the new royal government sought to consolidate its authority by appeasing China. The new royal government shut down two offices that dealt with the Tibetan diaspora in Nepal: the Representative of Hid Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Refugee Welfare Office in Kathmandu (“Nepalese Government Shuts Down the Dalai Lama’s Office,” 2005; Thapliyal 2007, 84). For China, the change in Nepal’s internal political
system allowed it to extend its influence in regards to the Tibetan refugee populace. While for the Nepalese monarch, the Chinese support was essential to prop up legitimacy and counter India’s support for the democratic forces. The critical juncture in the form of the royal coup in Nepal allowed China to formally exert pressure on Kathmandu – a marriage of convenience that both sides could gain from.

The Chinese engagement in Nepal pertaining to the Tibetan diaspora has become extensive over time. As the Nepalese monarchy ended in 2008 with the ushering of a republican system, another critical development was taking place in the TAR. During the commemoration of the Tibetan Uprising of 1959 in 2008, massive demonstrations erupted in TAR culminating in a strong coercive reaction from Beijing, as the Olympics were to be held in the PRC later that year (Odgaard and Nielsen 2014, 545). Despite the change in the structure of domestic politics in Nepal, China pressed with its concerns regarding the Tibetan diaspora in Nepal. The 2008 Tibetan protests further convinced China the need to exert influence on Nepal to constrain the maneuverability of the Tibetan populace.

Apart from the closing of the two offices of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, the other area of extensive Chinese influence has been in stemming the flow of Tibetans fleeing into Nepal from TAR into India. From 1991 to 2008, an average of about 2,200 Tibetans would cross the border annually into Nepal; that number dropped significantly in the post-2008 period, numbering about 171 in 2013 (Demick, 2015). Chinese security officials are also speculated to make routine travels to Nepal from China to prevent movement of Tibetans from across the border (Reeves 2012, 527). In conjunction, the Nepalese police force has actively sought to curb movement of Tibetans into Nepal, apprehending them and returning them if found within Nepalese territory (Krakauer, 2011). Further constraints have been instituted for the Tibetans in Nepal despite the
domestic political upheaval, which includes banning of public celebration of the birthday of the Dalai Lama as well as display of large portraits of the Lama. Furthermore,

As the Nepalese government seeks greater investment from the PRC for its underdeveloped economy, concessions have been made in the form of further control of the Tibetan refugee population. Given the routine protests against the Chinese government by Tibetan groups in Kathmandu, China made an investment of $10 million for purchasing riot shields and batons for the Nepali police force, a move characterized by Beijing’s attempt at curbing anti-China activities in Nepal through its own state structures (Reeves 2012, 527). Coupled with constraining the Tibetan populace, the PRC has heavily invested in Nepal’s infrastructure as well to extend its influence in its tiny neighbor. India’s influence over Nepal has long had a monopoly due to the two states’ sociopolitical and economic affinities. That predominance was particularly shaken in 2015, when Nepal accused India of supporting a blockade initiated by groups in the Terai who were dissatisfied with the new Nepalese constitution (Tiezzi, 2016). This development in regional dynamics between India and Nepal allowed a strategic opening for the latter to look towards China for possible measures of ameliorating the impact of the border blockade. In essence, China’s policy towards Nepal viz-a-vis the Tibetans is conducted not just exclusively for constraining the group. The fact is clear that China seeks stability in the TAR through greater engagement with Nepal but not just through constraining the maneuverability of the Tibetan refugee populace. The Chinese government has significantly increased investment in Nepal as part of its policy towards Tibetan refugees but also to constrain India’s predominance in the country.

Unlike its engagement with India in regards to border minorities, China’s relations with Nepal are much more amicable. China’s emphasis on economic engagement with political ends fits the need for Nepal to attract more investment, particularly in infrastructure. China has extended loans for extending connectivity with Nepal as a larger strategy of gaining goodwill in the country.
The PRC has specifically invested in repairing and reopening Araniko and Syaphrubesi-Rasuwasghadi highways damaged by the April 2015 earthquake along with the construction of Nepal’s second international airport in Pokhara (Basnet, 2016). Similarly, the Chinese government is currently widening the Ring Road that encircles Kathmandu. In return, the Nepalese government has sought to curb the activities and rights of the Tibetan refugees while at the same time attempting to balance India’s preponderance in the country.

Unlike India where the Tibetan refugees do not figure prominently due to the overshadowing by geostrategic rivalries, the refugee populace maintains a prominent role in the PRC’s policy towards Nepal. In India, the refugee populace forms a part of China’s larger geostrategic concerns regarding that country. In the case of Nepal, the refugee issue drives the Chinese government to extend economic linkages in order to keep a lid on that community. At the same time, Chinese overtures to Nepal also showcase the PRC’s geostrategic concerns. Providing economic aid much needed in Nepal, the PRC is indirectly extending control over the Tibetan populace while at the same time uses this pretext to perhaps, undermine the traditionally Indian geostrategic upper-hand in Nepal.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of Sino-South Asian relations vis-à-vis the role of minorities therein reveals a mixed picture, though, there are more similarities than differences among the cases. Interestingly, though Pakistan is often portrayed as one of the closest allies of China in South Asia, concerning minorities in Sino-Pakistani relations there is considerable amount of friction and disagreement. Similar throughout the cases, minorities are often a soft spot for the PRC’s border policy and, therefore, the PRC does tend to pressure its South Asian neighbors to abide by its ‘One China’ policy prerequisite that they agreed to by having official relations with China. Often, that is then
materialized in a rather harsh behavior of the South Asian host state toward Uighurs and Tibetans, respectively. It is apparent in the cases of Pakistan and Nepal, which have successively opted for policies that incrementally pressurize Uighur and Tibetan populaces respectively residing within their borders. India, though, stands out as a counterweight to China in that regard—mostly siding with the Tibetans—which is in line with the traditional balance-of-power understanding in international relations. Nevertheless, the presence of what China claims to be its ethnic minorities in its neighboring South Asian states do factor in its engagement with them albeit in different extents and geopolitical contexts.
References


