

## COMMENT 219 - Beijing's expansionism in the Himalayas

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[‘China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country’s Territory’](#) is the title of a report by Robert Barnett, an eminent scholar on modern Tibetan history and politics. The report regarded an official visit by Chinese authorities to the new village of Gyalaphug (*Jieluobu*<sup>1</sup>), ‘key to the settlement of the Beyul (*Baiyu*) [within Bhutan<sup>2</sup>] by China’:

‘Gyalaphug is now one of three new villages (two already occupied, one under construction), 66 miles of new roads, a small hydropower station, two Communist Party administrative centers, a communications base, a disaster relief warehouse, five military or police outposts, and what are believed to be a major signals tower, a satellite receiving station, a military base, and up to six security sites and outposts that China has constructed in what it says are parts of Lhodrak in the TAR [Tibet Autonomous Region] but which in fact are in the far north of Bhutan.’

[Hundreds of such structures](#) are being built along the Tibetan side of the Himalayas;<sup>3</sup> however, these ones in particular are being built in another country.

After elaborating on Chinese constructions in Gyalaphug and its surrounding area (a process depicted as the [‘settlement of entire districts’](#)), Barnett draws the larger picture as concerns Beijing’s claims over Bhutanese territory. According to the

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<sup>1</sup> Words in *italic represent the corresponding names in Chinese.*

<sup>2</sup> Beyul, or more concretely the Beyul Khenpajong (Beyul means ‘hidden valley’), is recognised by the Royal Government of Bhutan as part of the [Kurtoe Gewog](#) (subdistrict) of the Lhuentse Dzongkhag (district).

<sup>3</sup> According to the South China Morning Post, 628 such villages were constructed up to December 2020.

scholar, currently ‘China claims four areas in the west<sup>4</sup>, three in the north (Beyul Khenpajong [*Baiyu*; were Gyalaphug is located], Menchuma Valley [*Minjiuma*] and Chagdzom area<sup>5</sup>) and one in the east (Sakteng [*Molasading*])’ of Bhutan. Here, Barnett [stresses](#) the following points:

Firstly, China’s territorial claims vis-à-vis Bhutan follow two tendencies: Beijing is formulating its territorial claims more actively, and it is extending them. Basically, Chinese-Bhutanese border disputes emerged with [Beijing’s annexation of Tibet](#) in the 1950s. Immediately afterwards, China raised claims over areas in the West and North of Bhutan. However, Barnett underlines that only in the 1980s did Beijing begin to formulate its claims over the above-mentioned areas in northern Bhutan more ‘[volubly](#)’. For the scholar, this is remarkable because before the 1980s, official Chinese maps showed areas such as Beyul Khenpajong and Menchuma Valley as Bhutanese territory. Moreover, since June 2020, Beijing started to describe the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Bhutan as disputed territory as well.

Secondly, China conducts construction measures and subsequent settlements on territory which it claims from Bhutan. Moreover, [Barnett](#) identified (based on satellite imagery provided by Google Earth) not only an intensification of building but also an extension of types of infrastructure built by China on claimed territories: roads, villages, military outposts and other security facilities. As indicated above, Chinese construction efforts in northern Bhutan in general and the Gyalaphug village in particular are used by Barnett as a main point of reference. [For him](#), Beijing’s engagement in Gyalaphug reflects its wider expansionist strategy. Said strategy begins with the formulation of territorial claims vis-à-vis a given neighbour, followed by the launch of a construction campaign within the disputed area, in turn accompanied by migrant Chinese settlers.<sup>6</sup> Barnett underlines that both

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<sup>4</sup>(1) Dramana (*Zhuomoma*) and Shakhatoe (*Xiabu*), (2) Sinchulungpa (*Senqionglong*) and the Langmarpo (*Langmapu*) valley, (3) Yak chu (*Lulinqu*) and Charithang chu (*Qiaertangqu*) valleys, and (4) Doklam (*Danglang*).

<sup>5</sup> Like the Beyul valley, so too the Menchuma valley and Chagdzom (Chiwog [administrative level below gewog/subdistrict] Chagdzom-Chhusa) are recognised by Bhutan as part of its Kurtoe subdistrict of Lhuntse.

<sup>6</sup> Barnett’s report highlights that China started to build its first road into northern Bhutan in October 2015. In October 2018, Gyalaphug was opened with residents from China (Tibet), followed by the construction of additional roads, villages, and security as well as military sites.

the Beyul and Menchuma valleys were hardly populated in the past, if at all – whilst today these areas ([1 percent of Bhutan’s territory](#)) are ‘controlled by China’.

Barnett also refers to a ‘[reported](#)’ Chinese village project in southwestern Bhutan, called Pangda. He also adds that Beijing denies this endeavour and that Thimphu adopted a ‘[disciplined silence](#)’ on that matter. Some Bhutanese officials [reject](#) these statements; for instance well-known Bhutanese media representatives such as Tensing Samsang simply argue that ‘[there is no “Chinese village” constructed inside Bhutan](#)’. Nevertheless, it is confirmed that China attempted to build roads into western Bhutan<sup>7</sup> and that a village called Pangda, constructed by China in the India-Bhutan-China trijunction, not only [does exist](#) but was actively populated by migrants from the Yadong county in Southwestern Tibet. However, there seems to coexist [different interpretations](#) by various experts of the satellite images involved – which show the village either on Chinese or Bhutanese soil.

Thirdly, Barnett [emphasizes](#) a similarity between China’s action in the South China Sea and its activities in Bhutan when it comes to realising territorial claims. Obviously, he sees a correlation between the crabbing and fortification of disputed islands as well as the building of new artificial islands in disputed waters in the South China Sea and the land-grabbing and village constructions in the Himalayas. In order to strengthen this comparison, he uses the term ‘salami-slicing tactic’ - an approach which the Chinese call “can shi” (nibbling like a silkworm) - for China’s encroachments into Bhutan. This known term [describes](#) Beijing’s policy to incrementally improve its “territorial” position in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.<sup>8</sup>

Fourthly, Barnett [highlights](#) that ‘China’s multilevel construction drive [roads, villages, military/security sites] within Bhutan has gone almost completely unnoticed by the outside world’. This is [surprising for him](#), since this action ‘involves a strategy that is more provocative than anything China has done on its land borders in the past’.

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<sup>7</sup> As an example, Barnett cites the Chinese road construction attempt at the Doklam plateau in southwestern Bhutan. The latter was put on hold due to Indian intervention, an incident which became known as the [2017 China India border standoff](#).

<sup>8</sup> Brahma Chellaney [describes](#) this approach as a blend of ‘conventional and irregular tactics with small incremental territorial encroachments (or “salami slicing”), psychological manipulation, disinformation, lawfare, and coercive diplomacy’.

The goals of this belligerent facet of Chinese foreign policy are clear. Beijing aims to ensure border security and political stabilization of its hinterland. It also wills to gain [control over strategic significant areas](#) capable of providing military [advantages](#) before states - like India - willing and able to stand up against Chinese territorial claims. [According to](#) Don Mclain Gill, ‘China has been quietly expanding its territorial reach throughout South Asia to maximize power and to constrain India’s role as the status quo power in the region.’ Furthermore, China uses the intrusions and occupation of foreign territory as a kind of ‘[pressure tactics](#)’ – in our instance to force the Bhutanese government to give in to Chinese demands<sup>9</sup> and bring the kingdom in line with Beijing’s interests. According to analysts, Beijing wants Thimphu to accept a ‘land swap deal’<sup>10</sup> which would improve its geostrategic position in the region – and allow Chinese diplomatic presence in Bhutan to minimize Indian influence.

When observing China’s strategy of ‘[robust steps to change the status quo on the ground](#)’, it is crucial to highlight some assessments. Despite Bhutan signalling its willingness to solve outstanding border issues, even by [giving up its own claims](#) over an area (*Kula Khari or Kulha Kangri*) within Tibet, the country is not spared from Beijing’s unrestricted crave for territory and influence. On the other hand, Beijing’s border policy has severe social, economic, and cultural ramifications<sup>11</sup> for the local people in the affected areas – both inside Tibet and in the seized territories of Bhutan. Nowadays, China no longer merely claims territories – it also actually occupies land for constructions and settlements. Hence, the issue is not only that Beijing is breaking existing agreements.<sup>12</sup> Nowadays, all states neighbouring China

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<sup>9</sup> Namely, Beijing wants Thimphu to accept a [land swap deal](#) which would improve its geostrategic position in the region, and allow Chinese diplomatic presence in Bhutan so as to minimize Indian influence.

<sup>10</sup> Since 1990, Beijing has been offering to give up 495 square kilometres of its claims in the north if Thimphu yields 269 square kilometres of its territory in the west to China.

<sup>11</sup> In Tibet it was reported that the creation of new villages led to: (1) enforced displacements of the local population (described as relocation due to a persuasion process) and partly to deportations in so-called ‘re-education camps’ as well as new settlements (by proved loyalists of the Communist Party of China) from other areas of China; (2) the deprivation of traditional livelihoods (Yak economy), (3) the elimination of local religious-cultural and traditional elements, especially religious (Buddhist) sides such as monasteries and other places of worship, monuments; and (4) instances of destructions of houses and other properties so as to “convince” the initial inhabitants to move into different areas – meaning away from the border.

<sup>12</sup> Here, the [1988 and 1998 Treaties](#) to Maintain Peace and Tranquillity on the Bhutan-China border areas, the two sides (Beijing and Thimphu) agreed to maintain the status quo on the border areas as

must be aware that their borders can be tampered with at any time. Further, the West needs to understand that Beijing feels much empowered not only by the apparently reduced role of the US in the world stage but also by the European Union's (both as an organisation and at the individual membership level) preference not to take a clear position against Beijing's challenging the existing international order (as well as the territorial integrity and sovereignty of other countries).

In sum, the Chinese leadership no longer pretends to follow a 'soft-power' approach<sup>13</sup> to achieve its national interests. Instead, we now witness the forthright use of coercive force as the defining criteria in its relations with other countries – namely, as a means to solve disputes. This is a reality that China's neighbouring states (from Japan, via the Philippines and Vietnam, to India) have been experiencing for years. It's time to understand that Beijing's lulling '[Panda diplomacy](#)' is over.

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before March 1959. [Moreover](#), '[t]he agreements also state that the two sides will refrain from taking unilateral action, or use of force, to change the status quo of the boundary'.

<sup>13</sup> For President Xi Jinping, the Panda symbolized “powerful weapons” in his effort to build soft power'. More concretely, the lending or donating of Panda bears to zoos and parks in other countries is an attempt '[to make China look soft](#)'.

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