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Abstract

This article examines the role of foreign affairs work offices at provincial, prefecture, and county levels in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) since 2014. While the Tibet issue has always been important in Chinese foreign policy, in the last decade, China has also considerably strengthened the functions and capacity of Foreign Affairs Offices in TAR itself. The establishment of such offices at prefectural and county levels in 2019 and greater resources devoted to the training of personnel have boosted institutional capacity. These developments also parallel the increase in the number of events and activities hosted by the Foreign Affairs Offices in the region and visits by provincial Party Secretaries and other senior officials to other countries to develop trade and commercial links. However, success in building economic and trade links is limited to increasing trade and connectivity with Nepal due to geographical constraints.

Key Words: Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), China, foreign policy, sub-national governance, propaganda, economic exchange, Foreign Affairs Office.

The State Council, China's cabinet, issued the White Paper titled "CPC Policies on the Governance of Xizang in the New Era: Approach and Achievements" on November 10, 2023, emphasising, inter-alia, the Tibet Autonomous Region's (TAR) exchange and cooperation with outside world (State Council Information Office 2023). The White Paper summed up the Party-state's foreign affairs work on the Tibet question and related issues during Xi Jinping's tenure as the General Secretary of the CPC. Although Tibet has long been a focus area in China's foreign policy in terms of its efforts to shape narratives and counter criticism and narratives of the Tibetan exiled community and Trans-Atlantic countries, there is a visible increase in foreign affairs-related work by TAR authorities since Xi came to power in 2012.

In this context, it is pertinent to assess the extent and significance of the role of local authorities in the TAR in foreign policy-related affairs. This essay, therefore, surveys Tibet-related foreign policy activities, trends, and their significance since 2014. These activities can be functionally divided into three categories, namely, foreign policies conducted by central authorities - including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), and departments of the CPC such as the International Liaison Department (ILD) - foreign activities of the TAR government, through its foreign affairs offices at provincial, prefectural, and county levels (*waishi bangongshi* 外事)

办公室), and cooperation and exchanges between TAR and other sub-national government entities at the same level in China.¹

In particular, the essay focuses on foreign policy activities related to Tibet at the sub-national level by TAR government agencies with support from central level agencies and ministries. It excludes sub-national cooperation among Chinese provinces/cities and China's diplomatic activities in international organizations and foreign and security policies outside the TAR region.

The following discussion is based on a survey and analysis of foreign affairs related work undertaken by the Foreign Affairs Work Office of the TAR (*Xizang Zizhiqu Waishi Bangongshi* 西藏自治区外事办公室) and its subordinate offices at prefecture and county levels in the region, which were established in 2019 (*Lhasa Daily* 2019).

Changing Nature and Scope of Foreign Affairs Work in TAR

In the last few years, the scope of foreign affairs work (*waijiao gongzuo* 外交工作) has expanded due to the increasing salience of Tibet-related issues in Chinese foreign policy. China's violation of human rights in Tibet has particularly influenced its ties with US and Western European countries. There are also China's efforts to prepare for a post-Dalai Lama scenario, the Party-state's economic and security policies in the region, continued tensions on border with India, and its efforts to open up trade with Nepal, among others.

A close look at the patterns and nature of events organized by the authorities in the TAR reveals that the nature and extent of events related to foreign affairs in TAR have moved from a relatively low profile to the center-stage of foreign affairs related to the TAR. For example, the number of visits organized for foreign diplomats, media persons, think-tanks, and academics has increased both in terms of the number of events and countries involved, and a greater focus on economic and trade exchanges. In addition, the Chinese authorities have utilized foreign social media influencers for promoting its preferred narratives.

A major change taking shape during the period since 2014 is the increasing number of events involving foreign government functionaries, political parties, and sportspersons. However, the focus of these events remains on countries from the developing world in general, and neighbouring countries in Asia, in particular. Nevertheless, these highly publicized events underscore the fact that the Tibet issue remains salient in China's interactions with the outside world, and it is making proactive efforts to shape narratives.

For example, the TAR regional government with support from central level Party-state actors have organized five editions of the China Tibet Tourism and Culture

¹ An example of such cooperation between provincial and sub-national governments in foreign affairs related work is a recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Yunnan Foreign Affairs Work Office and TAR Foreign Affairs Work Office for horizontal cooperation for "major events, major projects, external exchanges, cultural publicity, and special work" (Yunnan Foreign Affairs Office 2023).

International Expo since 2014 and three editions of the China Xizang Trans-Himalaya Forum for International Cooperation since 2018 (*Xinhua* 2023).

The third edition of the Trans-Himalaya Forum was held in Nyingchi, TAR, on 4 and 5 October 2023 and was organized jointly by the People's Government of the TAR and MOFA (Nyima 2023). The event was attended by delegates from several central-level Party organs and state ministries, including the ILD and the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Water Resources, and Ministry of Natural Resources, and representatives from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Hong Kong, Macau, and other provinces. It was a highly publicized and significant foreign policy event in Tibet and was also attended by representatives from Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Mongolia, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar, in addition to 13 other countries and the Deputy Secretary-General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Journalists from 25 countries, including Pakistan, Nepal, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ethiopia, and Chile, also attended the event.

The event is an effort to bring countries in the region together to rally support in favour of Chinese narratives and policies on Tibet. Interestingly, the foreign ministers of Pakistan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan not only attended the event but also used the term "Xizang" for Tibet in their statements, which the Chinese authorities have started to use in official English translations in an effort to downplay the political significance attached with Tibet at international levels.

While the broader significance of these events is to propagate Chinese narratives on Tibet, TAR's provincial and local governments also aim to improve prospects for tourism and economic cooperation with other countries, especially those in the neighborhood. The post-Trans-Himalaya Forum talks between visiting foreign representatives and TAR leaders indicate that the central government is also encouraging sub-national economic cooperation with other countries in alignment with national policy goals. In fact, TAR's opening up to the outside world has been talked of for some time, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (Singh 2022).

Foreign Affairs Work in TAR since 2014: Trends and Institutional Changes

At the international level, the Chinese government's efforts to shape narratives on Tibet, including opposing criticism and narratives emerging from the Tibetan exiled community on human rights, represent continuity from the pre-2014 period. Despite increasing focus on human rights and Tibet in Sino-US relations in the last few years, there is no change in China's efforts to invite diplomats and media persons including from the US and its allies.

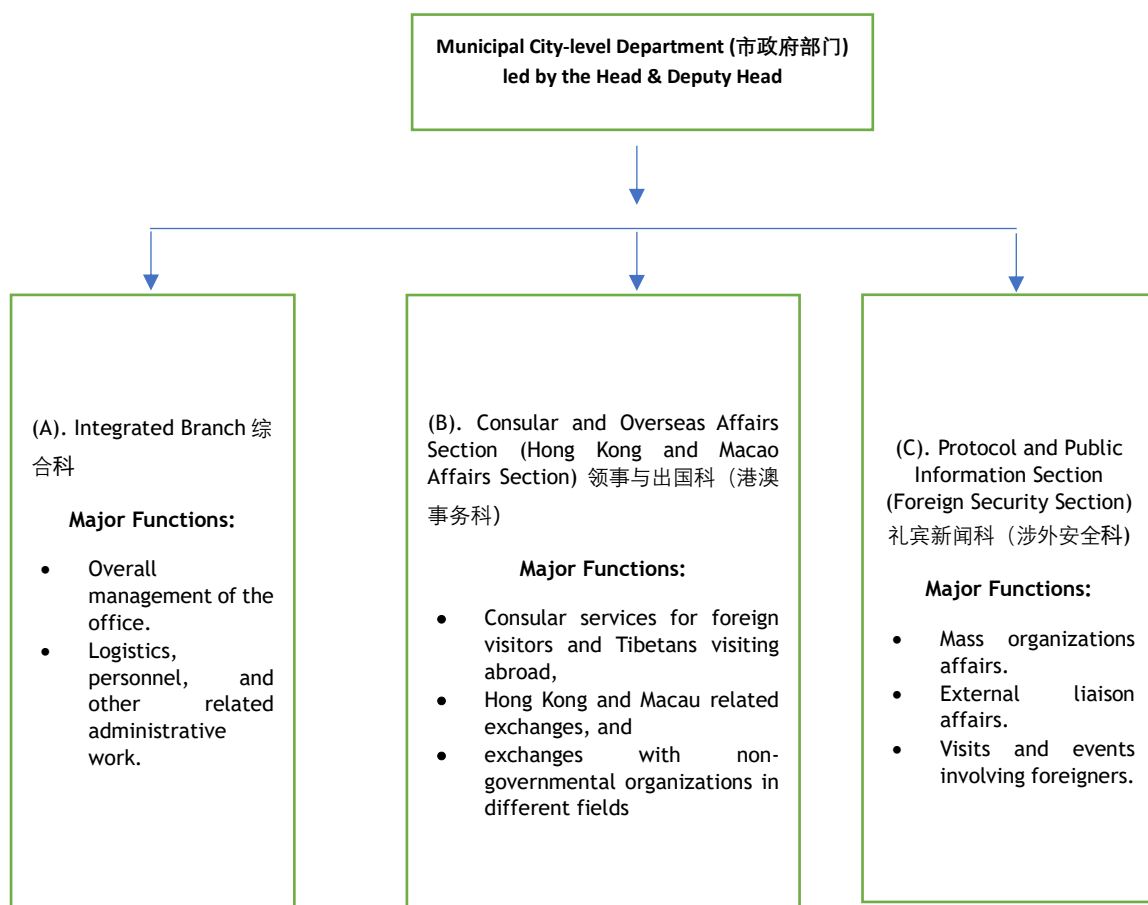
However, the hosting of delegations comprising foreign media, officials/parliamentarians, leaders, and think-tank and university scholars by the Foreign Affairs Office of TAR has seen an uptick since 2017.

This increased focus has also led to efforts to enhance the capacity of institutions, namely the Foreign Affairs Office and agencies handling overseas Chinese affairs. For example, while the Foreign Affairs Office of TAR has existed since 1952 (*Tibet*

Online 2023), the county- and prefecture-level foreign affairs offices in the region were established only in 2019 as part of quinquennial nation-wide institutional reform plan undertaken after the 19th Party Congress of the CPC in 2018 at all levels of the Party-state hierarchy (*Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang* 2018). As part of the plan in TAR, 41 state departments and 14 party agencies were established by creating new ones, expanding existing ones below provincial levels, or merging functions of different departments and agencies.

Typically, such offices at prefectural levels have internal departments including ones dealing with overseas Chinese, mass organizations, functions relating to visits of foreigners, and events involving foreigners (Figure 1), while at the county level, they usually do not have internal departments. In border prefectures and counties, these offices are usually designated as the Boundary Affairs Coordination Office (*Bianjie Shiwu Xietiao Bangongshi* 边界事务协调办公室), a practice prevalent for all border prefectures and counties abutting China’s land borders. At county and prefecture levels, aside from the delegated responsibilities by the provincial department with respect to foreign affairs work, external liaison (*duiwai lianluo shiwu* 对外联络事务) and mass organizations affairs (*qunzhong tuanti shiwu* 群众团体事务) are important tasks (for example, Gar County Government 2023).

Figure 1: Internal Organizational Structure of Prefecture-level Foreign Affairs Office



Sources: Shigaste City Foreign Affairs Office (n.d.); Lhasa City Foreign Affairs Office (n.d.)

Their establishment indicates the expansion of foreign policy work carried out by the TAR government Foreign Affairs Office in the last few years. It is also part of broader patterns of capacity-building below provincial levels in the post-2008 period. To cite an example of such efforts in other institutions, the capacity of courts and procuratorates have been enhanced both in terms of budgetary allocation, digitization, and establishment of new offices at county and prefecture levels in the last decade. Thus, the establishment of foreign affairs offices below provincial level is part of larger efforts to enhance the state's administrative and institutional capacity as well as of the need to suppress transnational connections, which the Party-state thinks is a major hurdle in realizing stability in Tibetan areas (Odgaard & Nielsen 2014).

There here has also been a concerted efforts to curb cross-border migration of Tibetans out of TAR to Nepal and India because of which the number of Tibetan moving out has gone down considerably. News reports suggest that the Chinese government has made efforts to connect with the Tibetan exiled community and with their families in TAR and other Tibetan areas leading to an increase in workload of local authorities dealing with transnational activities involving the Tibetan exiled community (Puri 2019).

In addition to establishment of new offices as part of enhancing state capacity, officials, and cadres in TAR prefecture- and county-level foreign affairs offices, have frequently received training in translation in foreign languages and diplomatic work, to boost their language and communication skills (Ministry of Culture and Tourism 2019; Xizang Zizhiqu Waishi Bangongshi 2021).

The Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO) and the United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the CPC play a critical role in arranging and hosting foreign delegations of various kinds through Chinese friendship associations and other such organizations working in various countries. In addition, events such as the Tibet Expo, a trade promotion event, international cycling, and mountaineering competitions involving athletes from various countries, and standalone individual visits or group events, are frequently organized by regional authorities with support from these organizations.

Even as China responds to policies and narratives of Western European countries, the US, and of American allies, it has frequently hosted religious, media, academic, and official delegations from countries in the developing world and particularly Buddhist countries in Asia, like Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Vietnam, among others. This has several implications. One, that China has indeed focused on Buddhist countries in Asia as part of efforts to promote soft power in recent years (Scott 2016). Two, some of these countries have influential Buddhist monasteries with deep connections with Tibetan Buddhism and the exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama while other countries have schools of Buddhism different from Tibetan Buddhism and do not accord the Dalai Lama equivalent weight (Attanayake 2023). Either way, by reaching out to religious clergy and people in these countries, China has attempted to undercut the influence of the Dalai Lama and potential criticism

of its ethnic and religious policies in Tibetan areas, including the TAR, from these countries (Rosendal 2023).

Given geographical proximity to TAR as well as China's efforts to enhance its economic profile and geopolitical influence in the country, Nepal stands out from other countries in terms of foreign affairs work conducted by the TAR government. Nepalese officials' delegations, including senior leaders, frequently make stopovers in Lhasa and the TAR government conducts youth leader training for young Nepali political party cadres and officials (Xizang Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu 2022). In addition to cross-border trade, meanwhile, Nepalese cooperation with the Chinese authorities involves curbing the presence and activities of Tibetan refugees (Giri 2022).

Conclusion

China's overarching goal is to shape the narrative on Tibet. However, the objectives of the foreign affairs work conducted by the TAR authorities go beyond this and the nature and scope of the activities have expanded considerably since 2014.

The Chinese government has pressed local agencies and governments to tighten cross-border movement and enhance contacts with Tibetans overseas. One of the motives behind creating foreign affairs offices at county and prefecture levels since 2019 is to develop capacity of the regional authorities to achieve these goals.

However, TAR officials also have sub-national interests as part of their foreign and economic policies to improve cross-border connectivity and economic and commercial ties with the outside world. While economic exchanges and cooperation between the TAR and outside world is often emphasized by the central government officials (for example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023), provincial officials have begun to explore such possibilities in recent years. For example, in a rare instance for a TAR Party Secretary, Wang Junzheng travelled to Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Singapore in November 2023 promoting, among other things, economic and trade exchanges (Xizang Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu 2023).

Trade and tourist exhibitions, opportunities in tourism, economic, cultural and people to people exchanges, and related areas are also being explored with other countries like Mongolia, Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam, and Japan, which also have substantial Buddhist populations. However, Chinese officials also recognize the limitations that Tibet's geography imposes and so efforts to increase cross-border connectivity, trade, and people-to-people exchange with Nepal stand out.

The establishment of local-level foreign affairs offices also facilitates better policy feedback and the implementation of the decisions and policies of the Central government thereby boosting the overall capacities of the Central Tibet Work Coordination Group and the UFWD

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