

EastAsiaWatch

The dragon and the Himalayas

China has ambitions to breach the great geographical barrier via road and rail projects, the most recent with Nepal – mountains and India stand in its way



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For The Straits Times

Geography is destiny. The notion that geography is immutable and sets constraints on national strategies is central to modern geopolitical thinking. China is testing that proposition.

The Great Himalayas that separate China from the Indian subcontinent have long been a difficult barrier to cross. But China's economic corridors now under development are trying to breach it.

China's latest trans-Himalayan connectivity network was unveiled earlier this month when President Xi Jinping visited Nepal. Among the many agreements that the two sides signed was a feasibility study on extending China's Tibet railway into Nepal.

The Tibet railway was itself an engineering marvel, built as it was on the plateau's permafrost. Over the past few years, China has extended that railway from Lhasa to Xigaze farther south. Now China is itching to take that railway down from the Tibetan plateau and up again through the Himalayan ranges into Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. From there, the railway will branch out to Pokhara in western Nepal and Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha in the southern plains bordering India.

During Mr Xi's visit, China and Nepal also signed an agreement to cooperate in tunnelling through the mountains to facilitate the development of a modern transport corridor between the Tibet border and Kathmandu.

CORRIDOR DIPLOMACY

Mr Xi's Tibet-Nepal railway is part of China's promise to turn landlocked Nepal into a "land-linked nation". Nepal's traditional road and rail links have run from the Himalayas into India's Gangetic plain. The

China-Nepal Economic Corridor wants to develop Nepal's connectivity across the Himalayas into the north. The current government in Kathmandu is eager to support this venture as part of its effort to reduce what it sees as Nepal's excessive dependence on India.

The Tibet-Nepal railway is certainly not the first of China's Himalayan transport projects. Road building was central to China's strategy of gaining control and establishing sovereignty over Tibet immediately after the Communist Party took charge of Beijing in 1949. Mao Zedong reportedly ordered the People's Liberation Army to build roads as it marched into the Tibet region, which was then poorly connected to the rest of China.

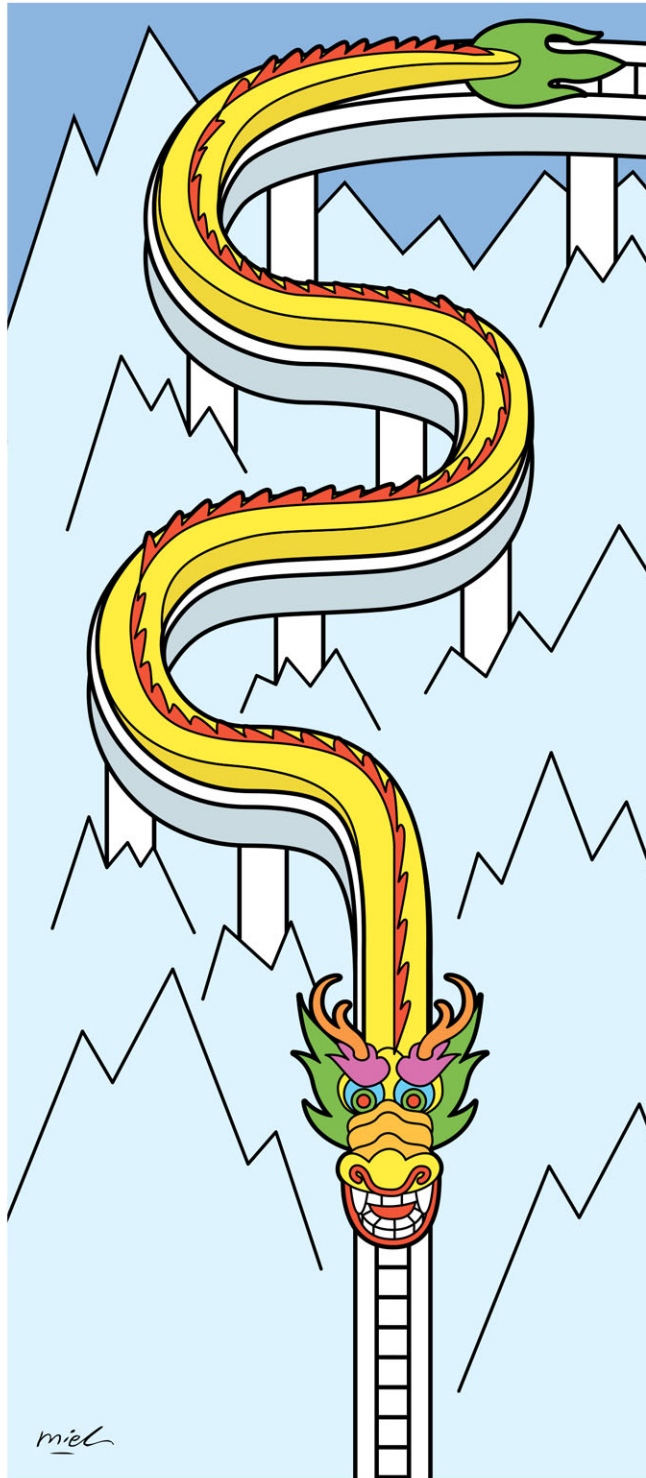
Having used road building to consolidate itself in Tibet and Xinjiang, China turned its attention to its neighbours. It built a "friendship highway" across the Himalayas towards Kathmandu in the 1960s. In the 1970s, it did something far more spectacular – it built a highway across the indomitable Karakoram range at great human and material cost. The highway runs from Kashgar in Xinjiang province into northern Pakistan and links up with Islamabad's national network.

In the early years of this century, China unveiled a more ambitious project for an economic corridor in Pakistan that would run all the way from Kashgar to Karachi and Gwadar on Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast. Mr Xi made the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) the flagship project under his Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

As part of the CPEC, Beijing is also planning to modernise the Karakoram Highway and add a railway line across the western Himalayas. It might be a lot harder, though, to build a railway track across the Karakoram, given the challenge of frequent landslides, flash floods and earthquakes.

Although it was initially listed as one of the top BRI projects, the future of the Karakoram railway remains uncertain, given the degree of difficulty that it confronts.

To the east of Tibet and Nepal, China is also discussing with



Myanmar plans to build a railway across the eastern Himalayas. The plan is for the line to initially run from the border town of Muse to Mandalay; it could eventually be extended to the port city of Kyaukpyu on the Arakan coast in the Bay of Bengal.

The project – expected to cost close to US\$10 billion (S\$13.6 billion) – is part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. The railway line is expected to be laid along the twin pipeline system that China built earlier this decade to move oil and natural gas from Kyaukpyu into south-western China.

China has also offered to develop a similar corridor running from Kunming in Yunnan province to Kolkata in India. The so-called Kunming-Kolkata corridor will run through Myanmar and Bangladesh. The four countries have been discussing the proposal for a few years now but without much progress.

There is no doubt that these

corridors promise to transform the geography of the Himalayas by making them porous and promoting connectivity between China's western provinces and southern Asia.

MONEY AND EXPERIENCE

It is not that there has not been connectivity across the Himalayas. Buddhism, for instance, travelled from the subcontinent to China across the mountains. Local communities in Yunnan, Tibet and Xinjiang have traded for centuries across the Himalayan terrain with the communities of the Indo-Gangetic plains.

What China brings today is an unprecedented scale of financial resources. The British Raj, for example, began work in the late 19th century on building a railway in Myanmar exactly along the route China is considering today. But the Raj ran out of the resources that were needed for the venture.

Engineering has, of course, evolved with new technologies.

And this reinforces the Chinese fondness for and strength in large-scale engineering projects that go back to the days of the building of the Great Wall and the Grand Canal system.

China's trans-Himalayan corridors complement the BRI projects that aim to connect China across land to parts of Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, as well as its maritime corridors linking China's eastern seaboard with the Indian Ocean littoral, the Mediterranean and beyond. The unique feature of the trans-Himalayan network is the effort to connect the landlocked western provinces of China to the nearest seas of the Indian Ocean by overcoming the Great Himalayas.

COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES

China's trans-Himalayan corridors have not been without controversy. It is one thing to have the engineering capability, but it is entirely another to deal with the costs and consequences.

The Himalayan ranges, for example, are relatively unstable, with much of the region prone to earthquakes. This raises the cost of the projects. Extending the rail line from Kerung on the Tibetan side of the Nepal border to Kathmandu, for instance, is estimated to cost US\$3 billion. Given the lack of publicly available information to assess the nature of Chinese funding for the project – such as the balance between grants and loans and the interest rate – critics fear the high cost will push Nepal into a "debt trap".

The geopolitical consequences of Beijing's road construction have been enduring. China's roads in and around the subcontinent have been a major source of conflict with India over the past six decades. The first instance was in the late 1950s, when India discovered a Chinese road construction project in the northern marches of the Ladakh region. China claimed that the roadworks were to connect Xinjiang with Tibet and was within its territory. New Delhi disputed China's territorial claim.

The dispute at the trijunction between Ladakh, western Tibet and Xinjiang remains an important part of the India-China boundary dispute that extends all the way to eastern Tibet.

INDIA'S CONCERNS

The border dispute led to a brief war between the two countries in the autumn of 1962. It did a lot more than leave a permanent sore in India's relations with China. It also shattered the longstanding illusion among the subcontinent's rulers – from the Mauryas to the Moghuls to the British – that the Himalayas were a natural rampart in defending India. Nearly six decades later, the military contestation between the armed forces of China and India continues all along the Himalayas.

India's apprehensions about China's trans-Himalayan road network continue to deepen. New Delhi has also been one of the most vocal opponents of Beijing's BRI projects. Indian opposition is three-pronged. First is the general critique of the BRI as promoting projects that are unsustainable and non-transparent. The second has to do with specific concerns about sovereignty. China's Karakoram projects and the CPEC run through a part of Kashmir that India claims

but which is under the control of Pakistan. The third is rooted in apprehensions about China undermining India's relations with its smaller neighbours with its connectivity projects. The differences remain despite the recent meeting between Mr Xi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the outskirts of Chennai.

India's rejection of the BRI has had the effect of limiting the value of China's trans-Himalayan networks. China's western provinces are relatively underdeveloped and underpopulated in comparison with its eastern sea board. Connecting them to even more underdeveloped regions in Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar certainly generates some benefits on both sides of the Great Himalayas. But it is not clear if the rail and road corridors to the three countries will generate enough traffic to make the engineering trouble of breaking through the Himalayan barrier worthwhile.

But connecting those corridors to India could significantly change the economic logic of these networks. Integrating China's western provinces with the large and growing Indian economy could produce a far more sustainable commercial basis for the trans-Himalayan networks. It will also generate more substantial benefits for Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar acting as land bridges between two of the world's largest economies.

BEYOND ENGINEERING

Beijing's Himalayan rail and road networks are not the first man-made projects that have had a great impact on geography. The Suez Canal built in the mid-19th century produced new sea routes between Europe and the Indian Ocean and the Far East. The Panama Canal in the early 20th century did something similar for commerce between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Geography, therefore, is certainly not immutable. But to be as consequential as the Suez and Panama canals, the trans-Himalayan corridors need real collaboration between China and India.

Some elements of geography are certainly unyielding. Connecting Xinjiang to Pakistan or Tibet to Nepal through spectacular engineering does not alter the fact that the commerce within the plains of the subcontinent is easier and more organic than trade across the Himalayas.

Political disputes and poor economic policies have had a huge negative effect on the commercial geography of the subcontinent. If China and India put aside their differences on how to proceed with trans-Himalayan networks, they might be able to persuade their common neighbours, including Pakistan and Nepal, to contribute to the genuine transformation of connectivity across and along the Great Himalayas.

It is when impressive engineering aligns with sensible economics and wise politics that mega infrastructure projects produce the greatest impact on geography.

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