

# Research on the Role of the Third Front Construction in China's Modernization

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**Abstract:** The Third Front Construction was a major national strategy implemented by China in the 1960s, aimed at promoting the industrialization of the central and western regions while addressing external security threats. This initiative not only laid a solid foundation for China's industrialization but also revealed unique paths of Chinese modernization, such as regional coordinated development and the integration of national defense and economic growth. However, the Third Front Construction also brought about environmental degradation and over-exploitation of resources, providing important lessons for contemporary China's development. In the modernization process, it is crucial to draw on the experiences of the Third Front Construction, focusing on regional coordinated development and enhancing social mobilization capabilities. By summarizing the experiences and lessons of the Third Front Construction, this paper provides historical references and future directions for the development of Chinese-style modernization.

**Keywords:** Third Front Construction; Chinese-style Modernization; Regional Coordinated Development; National Defense Security; Ecological Civilization; Social Mobilization.

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## 1. Introduction

The Third Front Construction was a significant strategic initiative undertaken by China in the 1960s to address both international and domestic security situations and to promote economic and national defense infrastructure development in inland areas. In the complex international environment of the time, China faced dual military threats from the Soviet Union and the United States, posing severe challenges to national security and development. Consequently, the central government decided to relocate some industrial, defense projects, and important facilities from coastal areas to the inland strategic depth, following the principle of "relying on mountains, dispersing, and concealing." This historic move laid the foundation for a modern industrial system to some extent and provided valuable experience for China's modernization. The Third Front Construction was not merely an emergency national defense action but also a part of China's industrialization process, profoundly influencing the path of Chinese modernization. The economic, social, and cultural impacts of the Third Front Construction are still evident in the western regions, making it an essential aspect of studying the Chinese modernization process. By reviewing and reflecting on the history of the Third Front Construction, we can better understand the unique path of Chinese modernization and the strategic choices in national construction. Therefore, this paper systematically reviews the history of the Third Front Construction and deeply explores its role in China's modernization and contemporary implications.

## 2. The Role of the Third Front Construction in Chinese-style Modernization

### 2.1. The Third Front Construction as the Foundation of China's Industrialization

The Third Front Construction played a foundational role in

China's modernization process, promoting the industrialization of the central and western regions and providing a solid material basis for the country's overall modernization. Since the early 1960s, China's modernization process was mainly concentrated in the eastern coastal areas, while the industrial base in the central and western regions was relatively weak, and infrastructure construction was severely lagging. Through large-scale industrial layout, the Third Front Construction not only promoted the establishment of industrial systems in the central and western regions but also facilitated the formation of a relatively complete industrial base nationwide. In the initial stage of modernization, the state focused on building basic industries such as steel, coal, and electricity, which not only provided essential resources and energy support for subsequent industrialization but also created necessary conditions for various infrastructure projects in modernization. During the Third Front Construction, the state established a number of heavy industry bases and energy bases in the central and western regions, which became important pillars of China's industrial development. The Third Front Construction not only expanded the country's industrial map but also made the country more autonomous and independent in future industrialization, laying a solid foundation for China's modernization.

### 2.2. The Third Front Construction Promoted the Integration of National Defense and Industry

The initial purpose of the Third Front Construction was driven by national security and defense needs, responding to the complex international environment of the Cold War and preventing external threats. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the Third Front Construction was to promote the development of the national defense industry, which not only directly ensured national security but also accelerated the process of industrial modernization. By building national defense industrial bases in the inland central and western regions, the Third Front Construction avoided the

concentration risks of industrial layout in coastal areas and ensured the smooth progress of industrialization in a secure environment. This integration of national defense and industry was not only a strategic requirement for national defense security but also opened a unique development path for Chinese-style modernization. This model of the Third Front Construction promoted the integration of China's industrial and defense technologies and laid the foundation for the subsequent modernization and technological advancement of the national defense industry. In a period of relatively weak industrial base, the Third Front Construction prioritized national defense, driving the construction and development of other related industries, playing an indispensable role in the process of Chinese-style modernization.

### **2.3. Strategic Pivot in Regional Coordinated Development**

The Third Front Construction was not only a national defense and industrial strategy but also carried a significant mission in regional development. An important feature of Chinese-style modernization is the emphasis on regional coordinated development to alleviate regional development imbalances. The Third Front Construction was a product of this strategy, promoting economic development in the central and western regions by laying out numerous industrial and infrastructure projects, gradually narrowing the gap between the eastern coastal and inland areas. In the policy context of the time, the Third Front Construction, through large-scale resource investment, enhanced the industrialization level of the central and western regions and simultaneously drove the construction of related infrastructure, gradually integrating these regions into the national modernization process. The Third Front Construction not only changed the economic structure and development model of the central and western regions but also provided an important foundation and experience for subsequent reform and opening-up and the Western Development Strategy. It can be said that the Third Front Construction, as a strategic pivot in national regional coordinated development, provided important support for the balanced development of China's modernization.

### **2.4. Successful Practice of Social Mobilization and Large-scale Infrastructure Construction**

Another important role of the Third Front Construction lies in its practice of large-scale social mobilization and infrastructure construction. The Third Front Construction involved not only numerous industrial projects but also supporting infrastructure projects such as transportation, power, and communications. Through the Third Front Construction, the state achieved cross-regional mobilization of resources, funds, and manpower, completing a large number of infrastructure construction tasks in a short period, providing strong support for national modernization. This experience of large-scale mobilization and infrastructure construction became a valuable asset in China's subsequent modernization process. During the infrastructure construction boom after the reform and opening-up, the model and experience of the Third Front Construction were widely applied, especially in transportation, energy, and communication fields, where the foundation laid by the Third Front Construction greatly accelerated China's modernization. Additionally, the social mobilization and organizational

model during the Third Front Construction provided important insights for China in mobilizing national resources and organizing large-scale project construction during modernization, demonstrating China's organizational and execution capabilities in large-scale national construction projects.

## **3. Contemporary Implications of the Third Front Construction for Chinese-style Modernization**

### **3.1. Strategic Layout of Regional Coordinated Development**

One of the core implications of the Third Front Construction is the importance of promoting regional coordinated development. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Third Front Construction balanced the development gap between coastal and inland areas by investing substantial resources in the central and western regions, initially forming a balanced national industrial layout. Today, as China's modernization process deepens, regional development imbalances remain a significant issue. Coastal areas, with their advantageous geographical and economic conditions, rapidly rose after the reform and opening-up, while the relatively backward state of the central and western regions still exists to some extent. In advancing modernization, contemporary China should continue to draw on the experience of the Third Front Construction, further promoting economic growth in the central and western and other underdeveloped regions through policy guidance and financial support. For example, strategies like the "Western Development" inherit and develop the regional development concept of the Third Front Construction. These strategies, through infrastructure construction, industrial guidance, and technological innovation, gradually narrow the regional development gap, allowing all regions to share the development dividends brought by modernization. Just as the Third Front Construction promoted the industrialization of the central and western regions, the current modernization process should also focus on balanced regional development to achieve overall national prosperity.

### **3.2. Coordination of National Security and Economic Development**

Another important implication of the Third Front Construction is the mutually reinforcing relationship between national defense security and economic development. During the Cold War, the primary task of the Third Front Construction was to ensure national defense security, but it also greatly promoted the process of industrialization. Modernization is not only economic modernization but also a process of simultaneous development of national defense and economy. Today, as China's position on the international stage rises and the global strategic environment remains complex, balancing national security issues with economic development is increasingly important. The experience of the Third Front Construction tells us that while advancing economic development, the state must always pay attention to national defense construction, ensuring the simultaneous enhancement of national economic and security interests. Currently, with China's rise in technology, energy, and military fields, modernization must continue to emphasize the independence and autonomy of the national defense industry,

enhancing the country's ability to resist external risks. The model of close integration of national defense and industry formed during the Third Front Construction can still provide references for contemporary national defense modernization, building a solid national defense system while enhancing economic strength.

### 3.3. Collaborative Advancement of Infrastructure Construction and Technological Innovation

During the Third Front Construction, large-scale infrastructure construction laid the foundation for national modernization, with transportation facilities such as railways and highways, as well as basic projects like hydropower and energy, having a profound impact on the economic development of the central and western regions. This provides valuable experience for contemporary China's infrastructure construction. In the current modernization process, infrastructure remains a crucial engine for enhancing national competitiveness and driving economic growth. However, unlike the single industrial infrastructure construction during the Third Front Construction, today's infrastructure construction should be combined with technological innovation to promote industrial upgrading and accelerate modernization. By developing high-speed rail, 5G, artificial intelligence, and smart manufacturing, China can not only drive its economic transformation but also gain a favorable position in global technological competition. The Third Front Construction's lesson is that infrastructure construction should have long-term planning and strategic vision, considering not only current needs but also paving the way for future industrial development and technological progress. The synergy between technology and infrastructure will be a key driver for China to achieve modernization.

### 3.4. Inheritance of Social Mobilization and Collective Cooperation Spirit

A key factor in the success of the Third Front Construction was the extensive social mobilization and collective cooperation spirit. Nationwide, the government, enterprises, and people worked together to contribute to the construction of the central and western regions. This social mobilization capability played a crucial role in the construction at that time and provided organizational and management experience for large-scale project construction in China's modernization process. In contemporary China's modernization process, this mobilization capability and cooperative spirit are still needed. Whether in infrastructure construction, disaster response, or addressing global challenges such as climate change and pandemic prevention, social mobilization and public participation are indispensable forces. The experience of the Third Front Construction tells us that in advancing major projects, the state must form strong mobilization capabilities, gather forces from all sectors of society, and create a collaborative and progressive social atmosphere to ensure the smooth progress of modernization.

## 4. Conclusion

The historical experience of the Third Front Construction has profound implications for contemporary China's modernization process. By reflecting on and summarizing the Third Front Construction, we can see that modernization is not only about material industrialization and infrastructure

construction but also requires coordinated regional development, attention to national defense security, emphasis on ecological protection, and continuous promotion of technological innovation and talent cultivation. Today, China's modernization has entered a new stage, facing a more complex global environment and more severe resource and environmental challenges. The experience of the Third Front Construction provides valuable historical lessons. By drawing on these experiences, the state can more scientifically and systematically plan the modernization process, ensuring sustainable development in the economy, society, and environment. In future modernization efforts, we should continue to carry forward the strategic vision, social mobilization capabilities, and innovative spirit demonstrated during the Third Front Construction, driving China steadily and far on the path to modernization.

The insights from the Third Front Construction for contemporary China's modernization process mainly lie in regional coordinated development, the integration of national defense and economic development, the introduction of green development concepts, the collaborative advancement of infrastructure and technology, the inheritance and promotion of social mobilization capabilities, and the importance of talent cultivation for regional development. These historical experiences not only promoted China's modernization process at the time but also provide rich experiences and lessons for today's modernization efforts. By carefully summarizing and reflecting on the historical lessons and experiences of the Third Front Construction, China can more steadily and orderly move towards the goal of comprehensive modernization.

## Acknowledgments

Sichuan Province Social Science Key Research Base—Sichuan Third Front Construction Research Center Funding (A Historical Review of the Third Front Construction and Its Role in China's Modernization Construction Study SXP23-15); Resource-based City Development Research Center Project Funding (ZYZX-YB-2303); Sichuan Multicultural Research Center Project (DYWH2223); Huanggang Normal University Dabie Mountain Red Culture Research Center Project (202307004); Deyang City Philosophy and Social Science Key Research Base "Red Song Research Center" Project (Project Number: HSGY2024ZC17).

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