

# The Dalai Lama's Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question

Edited by  
Jagannath Panda & Eerishika Pankaj

SPECIAL PAPER  
May 2023



Institute for Security &  
Development Policy



ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON  
**CHINA AND ASIA**



# The Dalai Lama's Succession : Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question

Edited by  
Jagannath Panda & Eerishika Pankaj



Institute for Security &  
Development Policy



ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH ON  
**CHINA AND ASIA**

“The Dalai Lama’s Succession: Strategic Realities of the Tibet Question” is a Special Paper published by the Institute for Security and Development Policy. The Institute is based in Stockholm, Sweden, and cooperates closely with research centers worldwide. The Institute serves a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders, and journalists. It is at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security, and development. Through its applied research, publications, research cooperation, public lectures, and seminars, it functions as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion.

No third-party textual or artistic material is included in the publication without the copyright holder’s prior consent to further dissemination by other third parties. Reproduction is authorized provided the source is acknowledged.

© ISDP, 2023

Printed in Lithuania

ISBN: 978-91-88551-40-5

Distributed in Europe by:

Institute for Security and Development Policy

Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden

Tel. +46-841056953; Fax. +46-86403370

Email: [info@isdpeu](mailto:info@isdpeu)

Editorial correspondence should be directed to the address provided above (preferably by email).

# Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	5
<i>List of Contributors</i>	6
<i>List of Exhibits</i>	13
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	14
<i>Executive Summary</i>	15
<b>Introduction</b>	
The Dalai Lama's Succession and the China-India-Tibet Complexity <i>Jagannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj</i>	21
<b>I. Succession: From Tradition to Ideology</b>	<b>35</b>
1. Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama: An Ideological Point of Contention between China and Tibetans <i>Tenzin Lhadon</i>	36
2. China's Strategy and Thinking on the Succession of Dalai Lama <i>B. R. Deepak</i>	45
3. Tibet in China's Machiavellian Thinking <i>Baogang He</i>	55
<b>II. Succession: A Wider Worldview</b>	<b>61</b>
4. Reincarnation System of Living Buddhas: A Taiwanese Perspective <i>Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Ute Wallenböck</i>	62
5. Sweden and the Dalai Lama: Of Rights and Respect <i>Torbjorn Loden and Agust Borjesson</i>	68
6. Interview with <b>David Ståhl</b> : EU, Sweden, and the Tibet Question	73
7. Britain, the Dalai Lama, and the Prospects for Post-Succession Planning <i>Gray Sergeant</i>	76
8. The European Debate on the Next Dalai Lama: The Czech Discourse <i>Martin Hříbek</i>	84
9. The EU and Beijing's Interference in the Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama <i>Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy</i>	92

10. Japan and its Stake in the Dalai Lama's Succession <i>Yoko Ishii</i>	100
<b>III. Succession: A Strategic Preview</b>	<b>105</b>
11. <u>Special Paper</u> : The 'Post-Dalai Era' – The Party Prepares for the Tibetan Leader's Death <i>Robert Barnett</i>	106
12. Contested (Geo) Politics of Reincarnation and the future China-Tibet Relations <i>Dibyesh Anand</i>	131
13. Reimagining Mongolian Buddhism in the Geopolitical Crack between China and the Dalai Lama <i>Uradyn Bulag</i>	138
14. New Delhi's (Un) Changing Policy toward Tibet <i>Krzysztof Iwanek</i>	149
15. Interview with <b>Claude Arpi</b> : Impact of the Succession Process on the India-China Border	160
<b>Summing Up</b>	<b>165</b>
The Contested Dalai Lama Succession: What's at Stake for India? <i>Jagannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj</i>	166
<b>Annexure</b>	<b>183</b>
Overview of Tibetan Government-in-Exile	

# Abbreviations

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jana Sangh
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPC	Communist Party of China
CTA	Central Tibetan Administration
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
INC	Indian National Congress
KMT	Kuomintang
LAC	Line of Actual Control
MHA	Ministry of Home Affairs
MTAC	Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SFF	Special Frontier Force
TAR	Tibet Autonomous Region
TGiE	Tibetan Government-in-Exile
TPiE	Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
U.S.	United States

# List of Contributors

## Co-editors

**Jagannath Panda** is the Head of the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs (SCSA-IPA). He is also the Editor for ISDP. In addition to his primary appointment at ISDP, Dr. Panda is the Director for Europe-Asia Research Cooperation at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS); and a Senior Fellow at The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS), The Netherlands. As a senior expert on China, East Asia, and the Indo-Pacific affairs, Dr. Panda's research focuses primarily on India's relations with Indo-Pacific powers (China, Japan, Korea, USA); China-India Relations, EU-India Relations; and EU's infrastructure, connectivity and maritime initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. Dr. Panda is the author of the book *India-China Relations and China's Path to Power: Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition*.

**Eerishika Pankaj** is the Director of New Delhi based think-tank, the Organisation for Research on China and Asia (ORCA), which focuses on decoding domestic Chinese politics and its impact on Beijing's foreign policymaking. She is also an Editorial and Research Assistant to the Series Editor for Routledge Series on Think Asia; a Young Leader in the 2020 cohort of the Pacific Forum's Young Leaders Program; a Commissioning Editor with E-International Relations for their Political Economy section; a Member of the Indo-Pacific Circle and a Council Member of the WICCI's India-EU Business Council. Primarily a China and East Asia scholar, her research focuses on Chinese elite/party politics, the India-China border, water and power politics in the Himalayas, Tibet, the Indo-Pacific and India's bilateral ties with Europe and Asia.



## Authors

**Agust Börjesson** is an intern at the Institute for Security and Development Policy's Stockholm China Center. He holds a bachelor's degree in Chinese language and a master's degree in Asian Studies from Lund University in Sweden. He has also studied Chinese language at Beijing Foreign Studies University as well as International Relations at Tsinghua University in China. Mr. Börjesson has previously worked with communications at Taipei Mission in Sweden.

**Bali R. Deepak** is Professor at the Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He was trained in Chinese history and India-China relations at the Peking University, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and University of Edinburgh, UK. He has been the Nehru and Asia Fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing. Dr. Deepak's publications include *India's China Dilemma: The Lost Equilibrium and Widening Asymmetries* (2021), and some of his translations from Chinese to Hindi and English include a translation of 85 selected classical poems for which he was awarded the 2011 "Special Book Prize of China." He writes "Eye on China" column for Sunday Guardian.

**Baogang He** (Ph.D, ANU 1994) is Alfred Deakin Professor at Deakin University, and the Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. Professor He is widely known for his work in Chinese politics, in particular the deliberative politics in China as well as in regionalism, international relations, federalism, and multiculturalism in Asia. His publications are found in top journals including *Science*, *British Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Political Theory*, *Political Studies*, and *Perspectives on Politics*. His two papers ("Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development," co-authored with Mark Warren, and "The Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road Initiative and its Implications") are on the top 1 percent of the highly cited research papers in the Web of Sciences as of February 11, 2021. His published

books include *The Democratisation of China*, *The Democratic Implications of Civil Society in China*, *Rural Democracy in China*, and *Governing Taiwan and Tibet*. His recent co-edited books include *Deliberative Democracy in Asia*, (with Michael Breen and James Fishkin), Routledge in 2021, and *China and North Korea's Human Rights* (with David Hundt, Chengxin Pan), Routledge, 2021. His forthcoming books include *The Galaxy Empire of China* (with John Keane to be published by Oxford University Press in 2023) and *Comparative Federalism in Asia* (with Michael Breen and Laura Reumann to be published by Routledge, 2023).

**Claude Arpi** is an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) born in 1949 in Angoulême, France. He settled in India 49 years ago. He is a Distinguished Fellow, Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence (Delhi). Claude Arpi earlier held the Field Marshal KM Cariappa Chair of Excellence from the United Service Institution of India (USI) for his research on the Indian Presence in Tibet 1947-1962 (in four volumes – Viji Publisher). He is the author of many books on Tibet, China, India and the Indo-French relations.

**David Stahl** (born in 1949) has studied Comparative Religion with particular focus on Indian religions at the University of Lund, and Indology at the University of Stockholm. He is a MA (Lund) with Comparative Religion as major and MA (Stockholm) with Indology as major. He worked as assistant at Dep. of Indology, University of Stockholm, 1977-1984, and has since worked as a India Analyst in his own company, Empatium, and is often engaged by the corporate sector, mass media companies and organizations. He has been President of the Swedish-Indian Society 2004-2010. He has also been involved in relief work among refugees in India and is the editor of "India Newsletter" which is published five times a year. He has also been President of the Swedish Tibet Committee during the years 1974-1988. He has done extensive travel in large parts of India, has lived in India during different periods and is now partially based in Cochin.

**Dibyesh Anand** is the Head of the School of Social Sciences and professor of international relations at the University of Westminster, London. He is the author of monographs “Geopolitical Exotica: Tibet in Western Imagination” and “Hindu Nationalism in India and the Politics of Fear” and has spoken about, and published extensively on, varied topics including postcolonial politics and international relations, Tibet, China-India border dispute, Hindu nationalism, and Islamophobia. He is on Twitter @dibyeshanand

**Gray Sergeant** is an Associate Fellow in Chinese Geopolitics at the Council on Geostrategy, a London-based foreign affairs think-tank. He is also currently completing an MPhil/PhD at the London School of Economics (LSE) on Anglo-American relations towards the People’s Republic of China during the early Cold War. He is the Chair of Hong Kong Watch and spent several years working for Free Tibet/Tibet Watch, conducting research on and advocating for Tibet.

**Julie Yu-Wen Chen** is Professor of Chinese Studies at the Department of Cultures at the University of Helsinki, formerly chair of the Nordic Association of China Studies, and formerly editor-in-chief of *Asian Ethnicity*. She was also co-editor of *Borderland Politics in Northern India* (2014) and *Tibetan Studies in Comparative Perspective* (2012). From 2023-2025, she is in the EU-funded project “The EU in the Volatile Indo-Pacific Region”, where she leads the preparatory research and provides supervision and counselling to junior researchers.

**Krzysztof Iwanek** is the Head of the Asia Research Centre (War Studies University, Poland). His main interests revolve around Indian politics and history and he has published a number of academic and non-academic articles on this subject; Krzysztof is a regular contributor to the *Diplomat*, and aside from this his texts were published, among others, by the Lowy Institute, Observer Research Foundation or the Polish Institute for International Affairs. He has also published a monograph with Oxford University Press (‘Endless Siege. Education and Nationalism in Vidya

Bharati school'). In 2004-2005, he stayed in India for an advanced Hindi course on a scholarship awarded by ICCR. From 2014 to 2016 Krzysztof taught Hindi, history of India and Indian foreign policy at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Republic of Korea; he also held courses on Indian politics at Warsaw University and Collegium Civitas. He holds two MA degrees: in History and in South Asian Studies, and a PhD in Cultural Studies. He has also co-authored a history of India in Polish titled *Indie. Od kolonii do mocarstwa. 1857-2013* ("India. From a Colony to a Power. 1857-2013"; with Adam Burakowski).

**Martin Hříbek** is an Assistant Professor in Bengali and Indian studies at the *Institute of Asian Studies*, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague. He is educated both in Indian philology and ethnology. Besides his Alma Mater, he was previously affiliated to the Department of Sociology, Calcutta University, India (2001-2004) and to the Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia (Fall 2014). His research interests include Bengali language and literature, Anthropology and Sociology of India, Indian nationalism, Czech-Indian relations, Indo-Pacific.

**Robert Barnett** works on nationality issues in China, focusing on modern Tibetan history, politics, and culture. He is a Professor, Research Associate and Senior Research Fellow at SOAS, University of London, and an Affiliate Lecturer at the Lau China Institute, Kings College, London. He founded and directed the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University in New York 1999-2017 and has also taught at Princeton, INALCO (Paris), Tibet University (Lhasa) and IACER (Kathmandu). Recent books and edited volumes include *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution* by Tsering Woeser (Nebraska, 2020) and *Conflicting Memories - Tibetan History under Mao Retold* with Benno Weiner and Françoise Robin (Brill, 2019).

**Tenzin Lhadon** is an International Relations scholar, having received her Doctoral Degree from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

She is currently a Research Fellow at the Tibetan Policy Institute, Dharamshala and her work focuses on Tibet, China's relations with the U.S. and EU, and Human Rights. She has published chapters in edited volumes, and presented papers at various national and international academic conferences. She has also published various commentaries and has frequently been featured as an expert panelist by various news outlets.

**Torbjörn Lodén** is Head of the Stockholm China Center at ISDP, professor emeritus of Chinese language and culture at Stockholm University and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities. From 1973 to 1976, he served as Swedish cultural attaché to China, and he has been a visiting professor in Hong Kong and Beijing. He has published numerous works on Chinese thought, literature, history, and politics, for example *Rediscovering Confucianism* (2006) and *Kinas vägval – från himmelskt imperium till global stormakt* [China's choice of road – from celestial empire to global great power, 2012].

**Uradyn E. Bulag** is Professor of Social Anthropology at University of Cambridge. Author of *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia* (1998), *The Mongols at China's Edge* (2002), and *Collaborative Nationalism* (2010), his research interests broadly span East Asia and Inner Asia, especially China and Mongolia, and the Mongolia-Tibet interface. His latest book is *A Chinese Rebel beyond the Great Wall: The Cultural Revolution and Ethnic Pogrom in Inner Mongolia* (co-authored with TJ Cheng and Mark Selden, University of Chicago Press, 2023).

**Ute Wallenböck** is Assistant Professor of Chinese Studies at Masaryk University, Brno. Trained as a Sinologist and Tibetologist, she holds a PhD in Chinese Studies from the University of Vienna and a degree in Social Pedagogy. She is the author of *Die Bevölkerung am Sino-Tibetischen Grenzgebiet. Identitätskonstruktion der Tibet-Mongolen* (*The Population along the Sino-Tibetan Borderland: Identity Construction of the Tibet-Mongols*) (2019) and co-editor of *The Daur at the Sino-Russian Borderlands* (2021).

**Yoko Ishii** is the President of Free Tibet Fukuoka. She is known to her fans as “Random Yoko.” She was born in Fukuoka, Japan, in 1985, and graduated from Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka majoring in English. Her YouTube channel on politics and history, *randomyoko2*, has more than 54,000 subscribers and has been viewed more than 8 million times. She has appeared in numerous print, online, and television outlets, and has published a book. Some of her work is published on Japan Forward and her commentary is seen on Fox News, CNN, BBC, CBS, NHK, South China Morning Post, Breitbart, and many more.

**Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy** is Affiliated Scholar at the Department of Political Science of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Free University of Brussels), Associated Research Fellow at the Institute for Security & Development Policy, Head of the Associates Network at 9DASHLINE, Research Fellow at Taiwan NextGen Foundation and Consultant on China, Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula at Human Rights Without Frontiers. Currently Zsuzsa is Assistant Professor at the National Dong Hwa University in Hualien, Taiwan. Zsuzsa’s fields of expertise are EU foreign and security policy, in particular in the Indo-Pacific, European normative power and human rights. Between 2008 and 2020, Zsuzsa worked as a political advisor in the European Parliament.

# List of Exhibits

Figure 1:	Some Key Tibetan Monasteries in India	25
Figure A1:	Composition of Representatives in 17th Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE)	187
Table A1:	List of Previous Dalai Lamas	184
Table A2:	List of Important CTA Officials	185
Table A3:	Monks in the 17th Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE)	186
Table A4:	A Parallel Timeline of Dalai Lama’s Life and India-China Ties	188

## Acknowledgements

A special word of thanks goes to the eminent experts who delivered timely papers and interviews despite their demanding schedules. We would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation Ms. Ahana Roy, Mr. Rahul Karan Reddy, Mr. Ratish Mehta, Mr. Omkar Bhole and Mr. Foster Cunliffe for their assistance in putting together this publication. A note of thanks to officials from the Central Tibetan Administration and Government of India that provided valuable insights to the editors.



# Executive Summary

- The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso remains one of the most recognized and beloved spiritual leaders of contemporary times. By China, he is viewed in unflattering terms, ranging from being termed a “splittist” to a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”.
- The question over the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation reflects the larger polemic ideological and political debates about the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) versus the Communist Party of China (CPC), religious freedom versus materialism, the sovereignty of Tibet versus China’s occupation of it, and history itself.
- The CPC has put strategies in place to manage the post-Dalai era: From temple management rules and education policy changes to restrictions on travel by Tibetans, the Party’s strategies have laid the foundation for preparations to mitigate uncertainties associated with the succession process.
- Such a post-Dalai strategy has massive implications not just for China’s international relations, but also the Tibet-China-India dynamic.
- Geopolitically, Tibet’s invasion by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) unequivocally altered India-China relations, particularly impacting their boundary dispute, which is further connected to the Sino-Tibetan conflict. The continued political refuge of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and, by extension, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGiE) in India has for decades impacted and strained their bilateral relations.
- Delhi’s official Tibet policy is ambiguous with the intention of engaging with the Tibetans without enraging China. Amidst mounting pressure on India to take a firmer stance against Chinese intentions, New Delhi will need to cautiously sharpen its Tibet policy and capitalize on Beijing’s weaknesses, including lack of credibility vis-à-vis its reincarnation politics.

- Not only is China worried about India leveraging its diplomatic influence for the Tibetan cause internationally, but when it comes to Tibet and its demands for independence, China seeks to control the institution of the Dalai Lama with the twin goals of protecting the One China principle and ensuring that there is no threat to Party loyalty.
- Historians and Buddhist scholars have debated the veracity and influence of the reincarnation method vis-à-vis the *tulkus system*, but the Chinese government steadfastly claims that the latter remained subject to the approval of the Qing Empire, and thus stakes its historical assertion on the right to approve any future reincarnations.
- The CPC's historical assertion, supplemented with policy implementation, can be seen as an attempt to replace the authority of the religious institution of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism with that of the Party. Apart from the question of the historical or religious legitimacy of the CPC's assertion, it is imperative to engage with its intent, beyond the reality that Beijing is increasingly curbing religious and cultural freedoms in Tibet and elsewhere.
- Notwithstanding the Dalai Lama's position in the reincarnation process, the Tibetan people in all probabilities will have two Dalai Lamas—one designated by their spiritual and temporal leader and the other by the PRC.
- In the new era under Xi Jinping, the three core demands, which are those of the Dalai Lama "accepting Tibet as an inseparable part of China, abandoning 'Tibet independence', and stopping activities to split the motherland" have been reiterated and the Dalai Lama has been advised to "discard any illusion, face reality squarely, correct mistakes, and choose an objective and rational path."
- Xi Jinping's confidence in his Tibet policy and its implementation might be insufficient in the wake of possible post-Dalai Lama radicalized politics. Beijing's 'Machiavellian' calculus when it comes to dealing with the Dalai Lama's influence in Tibet can be witnessed through the CPC's strategy of marginalizing the Dalai Lama and the promotion of 'red ideology'.

- An international collaboration between India and 'like-minded' states on Tibet beyond humanitarian concerns is yet to be formed. This requires recalibration, especially as actors like Japan, Mongolia, Taiwan, Britain, the United States (U.S.) and the European Union (EU) have great interest in the Dalai Lama institution and will be impacted by its future.
- Japan has not yielded to Chinese pressure regarding the Dalai Lama and Tibet, which is essentially due to the wide public reverence the Dalai Lama enjoys amongst the Japanese. Despite such veneration by the public and putting out policies on Tibet, the Japanese government provided limited assistance to Tibetans in exile, keeping in mind Japan's relations with China.
- Although politically there has not been much engagement between Taiwan and the TGiE, the Taiwanese government strategically allows for the democratically inclined civil society to form several non-governmental groups that openly support the Tibetan cause, which is perceived by the PRC government as a threat to Chinese national unity.
- For Mongolia, the introduction of an eight-year-old Mongolian boy born in the U.S. as the reincarnation of Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoché has thrust the nation into a state of collective anxiety surrounding the future succession of the Dalai Lama—a highly sensitive issue for China—and has challenged the very foundation of the independence of present-day Mongolia.
- For EU nations, not only has the Tibet question boiled down to human rights in Tibet, but European governments do not have a particular view of Tibet's future after the Dalai Lama and the TGiE was compelled to concede the demand for full independence.
- In Sweden, how to manage relations with China and best affect its human rights situation are questions that are ever important in forums of public debate and for the Swedish government. Strong public concern for Tibet and admiration for the Dalai Lama would catapult the Tibet issue into the forefront and translate into policy in Sweden.

- The Czech Republic has capitalized on the long term affinity with the Dalai Lama and Tibetans in exile by facilitating a string of high-level meetings with the representatives of the TGIE, public outreach activities and co-sponsorship of a seminal blueprint for action on “geopolitics of reincarnation” at the United Nations.
- Successive British governments have consistently expressed concerns about human rights in Tibet. Yet, despite Britain’s increasingly cool relations with China, the UK government has not taken a proactive stance against potential interference in the succession of the Dalai Lama by the CPC.
- Washington has more actively pre-empted attempts by Beijing to meddle in the succession process and The Tibet Policy and Support Act, which was signed into law in 2020, codified this position.
- China’s official media indicate that China now routinely calls on foreign governments to acknowledge China’s sole authority in the selection process for the next Dalai Lama and probably requires assurances that those nations will not host any candidate for 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama on their soil.
- China’s attention has also focused on Tawang, India, where the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was born in 1683. China frequently claims that India and the exiles plan to recognize a successor to the Dalai Lama in Tawang, and presents each visit by the current Dalai Lama to the area as a signal of such a plan.
- In the past, negotiations between Dharamshala and Beijing have taken place with the latter insisting it has always been about the personal status of the Dalai Lama and his possible return from exile to the homeland. The absence of any negotiations for more than a decade and the hardline stance by Communist party officials leave very little room for sincere dialogue and possible return of the Dalai Lama.
- The fact that the TGIE still resides in India theoretically offers New Delhi a never-exercised, but not impossible, option of supporting the Tibetan independence claims to some degree.

- To recognize the TGiE as the formal government of Tibet, New Delhi would have to first recognize Tibet as a state. None of these two levels of recognition have been attempted by even the staunchest of China's rivals and thus would be an unfair expectation to have from India.
- Between playing a card and not playing it all, the Indian government has a spectrum of choices, such as resorting to diplomatic grey-zone tactics by using ambiguous language on Tibet's status; issuing stapled visas for Tibetans; and, ramping up engagement with the TGiE.
- Dharamshala should show more interest in the boundary issue (for example, in providing historical records showing that the Indian stand is correct) and Delhi should take the initiative to regularly brief the TGiE about the border situation.
- India's approach towards refugees from Tibet must also incorporate local communities' sensitivities while ensuring that domestic frictions do not deter its foreign policy interests.
- It is imperative for stakeholder governments in Asia, Europe, and the U.S. to have more focused Tibet policies and outlooks, especially in the backdrop of the geopolitical complexity that will arise with the succession of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.
- On its part, the TGiE does not have high expectations of the EU, especially if it translates to jeopardizing the EU's relations with China.
- The public recognition of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd Khan by the Dalai Lama only serves as a way to establish a new Tibetan-Mongolian Buddhist World and catapulting Mongolian Buddhism to a greater global role, it also strategically enlists Mongol support for the Dalai Lama against China's Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.
- Japan needs to counter Chinese interference in the reincarnation process of the Dalai Lama and champion the right for Tibetans to freely choose for themselves. In this regard, Japan must harness public opinion in support of Tibet and build strong partnerships with the Tibetan community.
- Notwithstanding the European Union's growing skepticism of China

as a partner in light of the China-Russia “no limit” friendship, the succession issue would require broader international coordination in order to amplify support for Tibet.

- Engaging with the Tibet issue more morally and democratically could help Beijing win the world’s trust and respect while simultaneously bringing Xi Jinping closer to his aspirations of being a global leader.
- Under Xi Jinping, there are limited signs of positive moderation in Beijing’s stance towards Tibet, particularly concerning talks with the Dalai Lama. Beijing’s core position has only grown stronger and is unlikely to change without external mediation or attention; the recognition of a ‘Chinese’ Dalai Lama by the CPC is guaranteed, and while he will not enjoy the spiritual support of the Buddhists, he will still have the state-given mandate to execute the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet as the CPC sees fit.
- Despite China’s monumental arrangements in preparation for the coming succession struggle, its final goal of obtaining the support of the Tibetan population within Tibet and of world opinion, remains distant and uncertain.
- The Dalai’s successor is most likely going to be found in India, from amidst the sixth generation of Tibetan Buddhist families in the country. There is an emergent need for New Delhi to have a clear policy on Tibet, and for the CTA to have a clear policy on its approach to India.
- Succession, reincarnation, the ‘Tibet Question’, Tibetan identity and historical debates over the complex roles the three sides of India, China and Tibet have played: All these factors in themselves are highly contested topics, especially vis-à-vis terminology used. For instance, the usage of the words ‘refugee rehabilitation’ may itself be accepted by some and rejected by others. This volume has sought to keep these sensitivities in mind, and adhere to commonly used phrases in the scholarship of Tibet studies, while allowing the contributors to express research/views that are personal to their brand of study and analyses.

## Introduction

# Dalai Lama's Succession and the China-India-Tibet Complexity

**Jagannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj**

Despite its 'sacred' territory, Tibet has been long dealt the "unfortunate fate of being a strategic state in a dangerous neighborhood at a momentous time in Asian history".<sup>1</sup> The invasion of Tibet (termed "liberation of Tibet" by the Chinese)<sup>2</sup> has profoundly and consistently impacted India-China relations, especially their boundary dispute, which is intrinsically linked to the Sino-Tibetan conflict.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the institution of the Dalai Lama as the "Defender of the Faith" continues to be the centerpiece of such India-Tibet-China geopolitical complexity.

Even as the incumbent Dalai Lama remains one of the most recognized and beloved spiritual leaders of contemporary times, he is viewed in unflattering terms (from "splittist" to "wolf in sheep's clothing") by the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>4</sup> Adding to the complications, he resides freely (officially only carrying out non-political, religious activities) and continues to guide the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGiE) within the territory of PRC's main regional rival India—a sore point for China.<sup>5</sup>

## India's Tibet Outlook amidst the China Challenge

Looking back, the three-way tussle truly started in 1950, when the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—Tenzin Gyatso, then only about 15 years old—assumed full spiritual and temporal powers over Tibetan affairs.<sup>6</sup> In 1951, China's annexation of Tibet was completed when the Tibetan delegation to Beijing signed the so-called "17-point agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation on Tibet," which the Dalai Lama later disavowed as having been signed under duress. The widespread military action in "China-

occupied Tibet” resulted in Tibetan resistance actions, exemplified by the 1959 Tibetan National Uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa and the subsequent fleeing of the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans to India as political asylees.<sup>7</sup>

Notably, some have contended that the Dalai Lama’s political refuge, reportedly coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA; the principal U.S. foreign intelligence and counterintelligence agency), in India worsened India-China relations and contributed to the 1962 war—India’s continued distancing from the event as not politically motivated notwithstanding.<sup>8</sup>

A large part of China’s fears relates to the Dalai Lama’s international acceptance as the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan world, as well as a potent symbol of Tibetan independence desires. It does not matter that the Dalai Lama has since 2011 abdicated political and administrative authority and passed on these responsibilities to the elected representatives of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA; or the TGiE).<sup>9</sup> Notably, China considers the CTA as an “illegal,” and “out-and-out separatist political group.”<sup>10</sup>

Even as the Dalai Lama has long accepted Tibet as part of China,<sup>11</sup> he has also astutely highlighted the civilizational differences between Chinese and Tibetan cultures.<sup>12</sup> While not directly alluding to the Tibetans’ independent status, he has nonetheless rejected the PRC’s historical claims by contending that “since ancient times, Tibetan and Chinese peoples have lived as neighbors.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, he is willing to settle for “genuine autonomy” for the Tibetans within the PRC,<sup>14</sup> a goal outrightly rejected by the PRC.<sup>15</sup> China seeks to control the Dalai Lama institution to completely nullify the separatist threat posed by the Dalai Lama’s very existence and his influence on greater independence goals that would endanger China’s unification dream.

Consequently, in a vicious cycle, even though the “middle-way approach”<sup>16</sup> put forward by the Dalai Lama to resolve the Sino-Tibetan conflict is the official policy passed by the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile (TPiE), the question of independence does not seem to have been completely forsaken.<sup>17</sup> According to CTA President Penpa Tsering, the



middle-way policy would continue unless a “better alternative” evolves.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Tibet as an independent entity (or state) does not currently fit within the political aims for lack of a “concrete” action plan. It is just as well because for China nothing less than a subservient Tibetan region will be acceptable.

## **Tibet in India-China Power Politics**

As regards India, China’s annexation of Tibet changed the contours of India’s northern frontiers—the traditional common border with Tibet, with which India shares cultural and spiritual (as also trade) bonds, was transformed into the contentious Sino-Indian border.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Chinese have refused to accept the boundary recognized by British India and Tibet (calling it a “colonial legacy”).<sup>20</sup> The continuing lack of an agreement on a fully demarcated boundary has eclipsed the India-China bilateral.<sup>21</sup>

Further, China’s claims over the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (called “South Tibet” by the Chinese) are contended to be based on Tibetan documents. In this regard, the 1954 Sino-Indian agreement that referred to Tibet as “Tibet region of China” while securing trade and cultural (mainly on religious pilgrimages) links between Tibet and India was crucial.<sup>22</sup> India in the process gave up the right to effectively negate such Chinese claims. In 2003, India formally recognized the “Tibetan Autonomous Region” (TAR; established by China in 1965) as a part of the PRC’s territory, further shrinking the negotiating space and leading pro-Tibet commentators to label India’s actions as “semantic diplomacy.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, China continually worries about India leveraging its influence as a benefactor of the Tibetan cause, or at the very least, about India putting its diplomatic weight behind promoting adversarial conditions for China internationally. Keeping alive the Tibet question in itself is a concern for China. Nonetheless, India has refrained from attacking China, for example, on human rights abuses in Tibet to avoid eroding sensitivities and exacerbating tensions linked to the border.

Today, India’s official policy on Tibet is ambiguous, at least at the outset: while recognizing TAR as PRC territory, India allows the TGIE

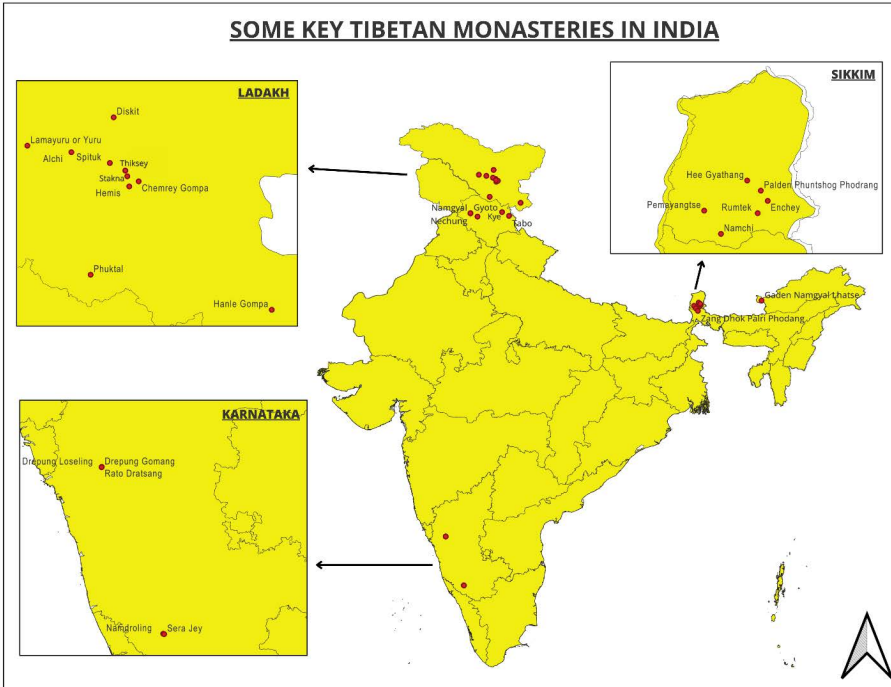
to operate from Dharamshala in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh and sponsors (limited) welfare policies. In addition, India considers its position on the Dalai Lama “clear and consistent,” revering his status as a “religious leader” and according him “all freedom to carry out his religious activities in India.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, India does not intend to enrage China by opting for a clear-cut embrace of Tibetan goals, but allows for enough engagement to be used as leverage when the time comes.

The Indian government’s circumspect support of the Dalai Lama’s activities that come under Chinese scanner (his trips to Tawang;<sup>25</sup> Modi’s infrequent interaction with His Holiness;<sup>26</sup> or low-key 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Dalai Lama’s 1959 escape to India<sup>27</sup>)—while provoking China, never crosses the “red line”—could be seen through this lens. Therefore, even as India’s promulgation of Tibetan rehabilitation/welfare policies have contributed to the sustenance of the Tibetan settlements on humane grounds,<sup>28</sup> restricted rights (ineligibility for naturalized citizenship for most) highlight the fragility of geopolitical compulsions.<sup>29</sup>

Importantly, there are currently almost 281 Tibetan nunneries and monasteries in India (see Figure 1 which shows some key monasteries).<sup>30</sup> Monasteries have historically been the main place where Tibetan culture, both material and intellectual, is created and preserved. The Tibetan monasteries in India, importantly, are hence enduring centers of higher Buddhist education, ensuring the continuation of the religion and its teaching to disciples and enthusiasts from all over the world, outside of China’s control over the ‘curriculum’. These monasteries serve as the powerhouses of Tibetan monastic hierarchy, with the High Lamas being pivotal players not just in the reincarnation process but also the continuation of faith in the institution of Dalai Lama. These monks hold important socio-political power within the TGiE, especially as Tibetans in India still continue to place more authority in His Holiness himself than the CTA despite bifurcation of roles. To China, as long as these monastic institutions flourish independently—with the monastery in Tawang (known in Tibetan as *Galden Namgye Lhatse*) being one of the oldest in Asia and based in the geopolitically contested territory of Arunachal

Pradesh—the high scholastic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and its loyalty to the Dalai Lama will endure.

**FIGURE I: SOME KEY TIBETAN MONASTERIES IN INDIA<sup>31</sup>**



To Tibetans, the Dalai Lama himself remains the “embodiment of the Tibetan people’s identity, the emblematic symbol of their unity, and their free spokesman”;<sup>32</sup> hence, China’s focus when it comes to Tibet is not just protection of the One China principle, but also the quelling of the very idea of the Dalai Lama, especially as loyalty to him as a religious leader becomes greater than loyalty to the Party. In Tibet itself, China has sought to Sinicize Tibetan monasteries, with the high monks of TAR monasteries holding key positions within the Communist Party of China (CPC)—and poised to play a vital role in selecting the 15<sup>th</sup> ‘Chinese’ Dalai Lama.<sup>33</sup>

### **‘Succession’: Between Caution and Clarity**

In this context, especially with Chinese President and CPC General

Secretary Xi Jinping's drive for rejuvenation and reunification gaining steam, the concerns over age shadowing the Dalai Lama—who turns 90 in 2025—have led to the question of succession looming large over the past decade. Hence, the power struggle to choose the Dalai Lama's successor and in turn control the Tibetan world at large is in process.

Notably, China's atheist CPC regime has a strict approach to select and manage religious leadership, including reincarnation; denouncing the Dalai Lama and recognizing the PRC-approved Panchen Lama form the core of the CPC's guidelines.<sup>34</sup> The overarching intent is to control or co-opt communities within the socialist fold and advance the Party's economic and political agenda through the (five) officially recognized religions (including Buddhism) in China.<sup>35</sup>

In 2007, China's "Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas" asserted the right of the regime (state approval) for reincarnations.<sup>36</sup> It also added the caveat that the reincarnations must be born within Chinese territory, and for high-ranking ones, selected using the Chinese method of the "Golden Urn." China's white paper on Tibet released in 2021 was yet another tool to exert maximum control on Tibetan affairs by laying out in no uncertain terms the path toward a "socialist Tibet."<sup>37</sup> Such tactics exemplify the Party's need to legitimize its total control on choosing a "China sympathizer" as the next Dalai Lama.

On the other hand, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, fully cognizant of China's questionable (political) motives, has kept the field open: He has allowed for the reincarnation to be a woman, to be born in a democratic country (mainly underscoring India), or to upend the reincarnation process depending upon the will of the people.<sup>38</sup> He has further muddied the waters, especially for the Chinese, by potentially choosing to emanate (i.e., a manifestation taking place without his passing away). He has also clearly emphasized on leaving "written" instructions, if at 90 he (consultatively) were to decide on the need for the next reincarnation; and on rejecting any of China's candidates.

The Dalai Lama's global credibility and China's persistent lack thereof—due to its morally dubious actions already amply demonstrated in 1995 when the Dalai Lama's choice for the Panchen Lama reincarnation

disappeared into Chinese custody and China appointed a regime-sponsored candidate<sup>39</sup>—as well as the changed strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific will ensure that a repeat of the events of 1995 does not happen.

In the same vein, there is mounting pressure on the Indian government to take a stronger stance against China's intentions, and declare that only the Tibetan people can choose the Dalai Lama's successor.<sup>40</sup> In 2020, the United States Congress passed the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which will allow the U.S. to respond with sanctions against any Chinese interference into the succession of Tibetan Buddhist leaders including the Dalai Lama.<sup>41</sup> Beijing views the worldwide reception of the Dalai Lama, particularly through visits with world leaders, as a threat to Chinese sovereignty and insists that he is continuing to push a political agenda that undermines China's sovereign claim to Tibet.<sup>42</sup>

### **Foreshadowing Tensions in the India-China Bilateral**

China's perspectives on India are shaped, in part, by its Tibet policy.<sup>43</sup> New Delhi is said to have a "Tibet card" that can be played as leverage against China; Beijing also claims that it is used to woo current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist supporters.<sup>44</sup> In recent years, the Indian government has been sharpening its policy over Tibet and going to greater lengths to demonstrate support for the Dalai Lama, despite the potential risks. For example, in 2017, the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh had done "serious damage" to bilateral ties due to Beijing's objections.<sup>45</sup>

Again, in July 2022, India further provoked China by not "abiding" its diktats on non-interference in Tibetan affairs.<sup>46</sup> Not only did the Indian Prime Minister wish the Dalai Lama on his 87th birthday but he was also flown to Ladakh for a month-long visit—his first trip outside Dharamshala since 2020. Such actions by India give momentum to narratives that invoke the centrality of Tibet in the boundary dispute, insisting that Tibet "won't remain a side issue" between India and China for long.<sup>47</sup> The future of their ties could become even more complicated if the reincarnate is indeed found in India, which the Dalai Lama has conjectured as one of

the many options.<sup>48</sup>

Importantly, the frequency of border clashes has increased since President Xi assumed power, which has also prompted speculation (apart from deteriorating relations) that the incursions are really about Chinese intentions to expand its buffer zone of territory surrounding Tibet and control the restive Tibetan region.<sup>49</sup> This has led to both India and China expanding their military presence and infrastructure building along the border. Besides acting as a buffer zone, Tibet is also rich in mineral resources and a crucial water source;<sup>50</sup> hence, countering China's attempts to control access to transboundary waters is especially imperative for India.<sup>51</sup>

China's increasing infrastructure development along the border in the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh) is of particular importance post the Tawang skirmish in December 2022.<sup>52</sup> Tawang, an important site for Tibetan Buddhism where the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was supposedly born (see Table A1 in *List of Exhibits*), is strategically important for the Chinese, especially amid the reincarnation politics, because of historical links to Tibet. Hence, some have termed last year's incursion in Tawang as a "planned attempt."<sup>53</sup>

In short, over the years, the Tibet question has been disruptive for India, China and the boundary dispute. Beijing considers Dalai Lama a "splittist" and is wary of China's vulnerabilities being exploited by external forces. At the same time, some have expressed concerns that in the event of the Dalai Lama making peace with Beijing or China taking control of the future Dalai Lama, India would suffer because of China gaining strategic control via the already considerable Tibetan influence in the Himalayas.<sup>54</sup>

Such theories notwithstanding, India has to be cautious while enhancing policy support to Tibetan causes. Yet India must stop putting Tibet on the back burner and capitalize on China's weaknesses, including lack of credibility vis-à-vis the reincarnation politics, by extending vocal support to the Dalai Lama and his choice; and thus strengthen its "non-interfering" but valid stake in the reincarnation process.

## About this Special Issue

Amidst such contentions, the scope of this Special Issue has been simple: How prepared are stakeholder governments in dealing with the geopolitics associated with the succession of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama? As the world focuses on China-led assertive actions in Asia (ranging from Taiwan and Hong Kong to the India-China Line of Actual Control or LAC) and Europe's strategic calculus reels from the war in Ukraine, the question of Tibet remains largely stowed away. Such undercurrents present a precarious future for Asia, especially as the stakeholders involved appear largely under-prepared on their reactions for a post-14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama contingency. Recognizing the historical importance of Tibet, and Xi Jinping's focus on uniting mainland China, it is a safe hypothesis that upon the start of the succession process, Tibet will become the primary focus of the CPC, putting Taiwan and other variables in temporary abeyance.

Keeping such directives in mind, it is critical for Europe, Asia, and the U.S. to work on their Tibet policies and outlooks with more focus. For India, the succession process proves to be a direct national security issue, especially as an ongoing stalemate along the LAC puts tensions with Beijing at an all-time high. For Washington, lapses in reactions on Hong Kong and actions in Kabul have already put its leadership role within Asia on thin ice; proactive handling in Taiwan in the aftermath of the Ukraine war in Europe has brought back vestiges of confidence. To ensure continued progress, planning ahead on Tibet is critical. For Europe, the plight of the Tibetan people has been a long-held human rights concern that must now take on increasingly geopolitical overtures owing to taut ties with China in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Apart from this introduction and a summing-up section, this special issue is divided into four main parts. The first section focuses on the succession from the perspective of traditions associated with it, juxtaposing the same with ideological contentions from a Chinese lens keeping the India-Tibet complexity as a key theme. The second section analyses the succession process from across international stakeholder perspectives ranging from Taiwan, Mongolia, Sweden, United Kingdom, Europe, European Union, and Japan. The third section provides a strategic insight

into the future, focusing on the post-Dalai contentions and how India and China as well as the Tibetans are preparing for the same. Additionally, some special interviews have been included of conversations with experts based on pointed questions focusing on geopolitical impacts of the succession process as well as the religious theology behind reincarnation. The final section of this Special Issue draws from contributions made across the publication and ideates policy recommendations—especially for India—in acclimatizing to the geopolitical realities associated with the succession and reincarnation process.

The key goal of this Special Issue is to provide a holistic understanding of the role political stakeholders are poised to play in both deriving from and shaping the future of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. By looking at perspectives from across the globe of key players, this Special Issue emerges as an addition to critical literature on policy creation in present times, ready to aid scholarship upon the actual start of the succession process. It is one of the first cohesive publications on the future of the Tibet question upon the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, and presents itself as a critical reference point for scholars, policymakers, and politicians alike.



## Notes

- 1 Diane Wolff, *Tibet Unconquered: An Epic Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.
- 2 Xinhua, "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," China.org.cn, May 22, 2001, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/13235.htm>.
- 3 Tsering Topgyal, "Charting the Tibet Issue in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute," *China Report* 47, no. 2 (2011): 115-131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445511047002>.
- 4 Ben Blanchard, "China says will stamp out Dalai Lama's voice in Tibet," *Reuters*, November 2, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-tibet-idUKL3N0IN01Q20131102>.
- 5 PTL, "Penpa Tsering sworn-in as president Tibetan government-in-exile," *The Hindu*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/penpa-tsering-sworn-in-as-president-tibetan-government-in-exile/article34656758.ece>.
- 6 His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, "Birth to Exile", Dalailama.com, n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/birth-to-exile>; see also, Central Tibetan Administration, Tibet.net, n.d., <https://tibet.net/about-tibet/glimpses-on-history-of-tibet/>.
- 7 "The Dalai Lama Escapes from the Chinese," *Time*, April 20, 1959, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,864579-9,00.html>.
- 8 Phunchok Stobdan, *The Great Game in the Buddhist Himalayas: India and China's Quest for Strategic Dominance* (New Delhi: Vintage Books, 2019).
- 9 Central Tibetan Administration, "Charter of the Tibetans in Exile," Tibet.net, n.d., <https://tibet.net/about-cta/constitution/>.
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on May 19, 2022," Press and Media Service, May 19, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/202205/t20220519\\_10689491.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/202205/t20220519_10689491.html).
- 11 Congressional Executive Commission on China, "Dalai Lama: 'Tibet is a Part of the People's Republic of China,'" March 15, 2005, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/commission-analysis/dalai-lama-tibet-is-a-part-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.
- 12 Dalailama.com, "Questions and Answers," n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/questions-answers>.
- 13 Dalailama.com, "Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the 52nd Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day," March 10, 2011, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/retirement-and-reincarnation/52-anniversary-tibetan-uprising-statement>.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 "China decries Dalai Lama's demands for autonomy," *Reuters*, December 4, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-dalai-idUSTRE4B31A320081204>.
- 16 Simply put, an option that lies somewhere between Tibetans not accepting Tibet's status under the PRC today and not seeking independence. See, Dalailama.com, "His Holiness's Middle Way Approach For Resolving the Issue of Tibet," n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach>.

- 17 Dalailama.com, "His Holiness's Middle Way Approach for Resolving the Issue of Tibet," n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach>.
- 18 Namrata Biji Ahuja, "Will work to restart the Sino-Tibetan dialogue," *The Week*, May 2, 2021, <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/more/2021/04/23/will-work-to-restart-the-sino-tibetan-dialogue.html>.
- 19 Arijit Mazumdar, "India-China Border Dispute: Centrality of Tibet," *Economic & Political Weekly* 41, no. 41 (October 2006), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2006/41/commentary/india-china-border-dispute-centrality-tibet.html>.
- 20 Wu Zhaoli, "Complex Issue, Hopeful Prospects," *BeijingReview.com.cn*, September 9, 2019, [http://www.bjreview.com.cn/print/txt/2013-09/09/content\\_566688.htm](http://www.bjreview.com.cn/print/txt/2013-09/09/content_566688.htm).
- 21 Ananth Krishnan, "What explains the India-China border flare-up?" *The Hindu*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/what-explains-the-india-china-border-flare-up/article31660378.ece>.
- 22 "Sino-Indian Trade Agreement over Tibetan Border (1954)," *Tibetjustice.org*, n.d., <https://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/china/china4.html>.
- 23 International Campaign for Tibet, "India's semantic diplomacy with China on Tibet," June 24, 2003, <https://savetibet.org/indias-semantic-diplomacy-with-china-on-tibet/>.
- 24 Ministry of External Affairs-Government of India, "Official Spokesperson's response to a query regarding a recent media report on the Government's position on His Holiness the Dalai Lama," March 2, 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/29532/Official+Spokespersons+response+to+a+query+regarding+a+recent+media+report+on+the+Governments+position+on+His+Holiness+the+Dalai+Lama>.
- 25 "Dalai Lama visited Arunachal 6 times between 1983-2009," *Business Standard*, April 4, 2017, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/dalai-lama-visited-arunachal-6-times-between-1983-2009-117040401022\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/dalai-lama-visited-arunachal-6-times-between-1983-2009-117040401022_1.html).
- 26 "For the First Time as PM, Modi Speaks to the Dalai Lama," *The Wire*, July 6, 2021, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/narendra-modi-dalai-lama-talks-china-india-disengagement-talks-stalled>.
- 27 Murali Krishnan, "Is India snubbing the Dalai Lama?" *DW*, June 3, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-india-snubbing-the-dalai-lama/a-42846107>.
- 28 Ministry of Home Affairs-Government of India, "The Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy, 2014," [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-08/FFR\\_ANNEUXURE\\_A\\_17092019%5B1%5D.pdf](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-08/FFR_ANNEUXURE_A_17092019%5B1%5D.pdf).
- 29 Tibetan Legal Association, "Legal Overview of the Status of Tibetans in India," May 25, 2022, <https://tibetanlegalassociation.org/en/legal-overview-of-the-status-of-tibetans-in-india/#:~:text=Without%20a%20refugee%20designation%2C%20Tibetans,most%20remain%20ineligible%20for%20naturalization>.
- 30 Tenzin Tsultrim, "Tibetan Buddhism: A Source and Strength of India's Soft Power Diplomacy," Vivekananda International Foundation, December 8, 2020, <https://www.vifindia.org/print/8344>.
- 31 Phunchok Stobdan, n. 8; Beatrice D. Miller, "The Web of Tibetan Monasticism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (February 1961): 197-203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2050483>.
- 32 "Tibetan Parliament Issues Statement in Response to Misinterpreted Video of His Holiness the Dalai Lama," Central Tibetan Administration, April 14, 2023, <https://tibet.net/tibetan-parliament->

issues-statement-in-response-to-misinterpreted-video-of-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/.

- 33 Claude Arpi, "The Lamas who will select the Chinese 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama," Claude Arpi's Blog, March 24, 2019, <https://claudearpi.blogspot.com/2019/03/the-lamas-who-will-select-chinese-15th.html>.
- 34 Sarah Cook, "Tibetan Buddhism: Religious Freedom in China," Freedom House, 2017, [https://freedomhouse.org/report/2017/battle-china-spirit-tibetan-buddhism-religious-freedom#footnoteref3\\_88azy0t](https://freedomhouse.org/report/2017/battle-china-spirit-tibetan-buddhism-religious-freedom#footnoteref3_88azy0t).
- 35 Sarah Cook, "Chinese Buddhism and Taoism: Religious Freedom in China," Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/2017/battle-china-spirit-chinese-buddhism-taoism>.
- 36 Sophie Richardson, "Chinese Authorities Double Down on Tibetan Reincarnations," Human Rights Watch, December 15, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/15/chinese-authorities-double-down-tibetan-reincarnations#:~:text=Since%202007%2C%20Chinese%20authorities%20have,be%20born%20within%20China's%20borders>.
- 37 Xinhua, "China issues white paper on Tibet's peaceful liberation, achievements: Full Text," Tibet.cn, May 21, 2021, [http://eng.tibet.cn/eng/index/top/202105/t20210521\\_7008122.html#:~:text=China%20issues%20white%20paper%20on%20Tibet%27s%20peaceful%20liberation%2C,and%20its%20development%20over%20the%20past%20seven%20decades](http://eng.tibet.cn/eng/index/top/202105/t20210521_7008122.html#:~:text=China%20issues%20white%20paper%20on%20Tibet%27s%20peaceful%20liberation%2C,and%20its%20development%20over%20the%20past%20seven%20decades).
- 38 Dalailama.com, "Reincarnation," September 24, 2011, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/retirement-and-reincarnation/reincarnation>; Krishna N. Das and Sunil Kataria, "Sending a Message to China, Dalai Lama Says His Successor May Come from India," *The Wire*, 2019, <https://thewire.in/religion/sending-a-message-to-china-dalai-lama-says-his-successor-may-come-from-india>.
- 39 Brooke Schedneck, "Why choosing the next dalai lama will be a religious – as well as a political – issue," *The Conversation*, June 24, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/why-choosing-the-next-dalai-lama-will-be-a-religious-as-well-as-a-political-issue-162796>.
- 40 Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Tibet and China clash over next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/31/tibet-and-china-clash-over-next-reincarnation-of-the-dalai-lama>.
- 41 "US Congress Passes Landmark Bill in Support of Tibet," *VOA News*, December 22, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_voa-news-china\\_us-congress-passes-landmark-bill-support-tibet/6199871.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_voa-news-china_us-congress-passes-landmark-bill-support-tibet/6199871.html).
- 42 "Explained: China's anger against the Dalai Lama and India's friendship with him," *First Post*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/explained-chinas-anger-against-the-dalai-lama-and-indias-friendship-with-him-10911801.html>.
- 43 Manoj Joshi, "China's 2021 White Paper on Tibet: Implications for India's China Strategy," Observer Research Foundation, June 22, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/chinas-2021-white-paper-on-tibet-implications-for-indias-china-strategy/>.
- 44 Shi Jiangtao, "Tibet again causes friction between China and India, and it doesn't bode well for ties," *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3189101/tibet-again-causes-friction-between-china-and-india-and-it>.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Gowhar Geelani, "Dalai Lama's visit to India irks China," *DW*, July 19, 2022, <https://www>.

- dw.com/en/india-dalai-lamas-ladakh-visit-irks-china/a-62531116.
- 47 Shyam Saran, "Tibet won't remain a side issue for long between India, China. Xi's policies indicate," *The Print*, August 11, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/tibet-wont-remain-a-side-issue-for-long-between-india-china-xis-policies-indicate/712702/>.
- 48 Reuters, "The next Dalai Lama could be found in India," *Hindu Business Line*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/world/the-next-dalai-lama-could-be-found-in-india/article26579400.ece>.
- 49 Salvatore Babones, "China's Incursions into India Are Really All about Tibet," *National Interest*, July 13, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-incursions-india-are-really-all-about-tibet-164655>.
- 50 "Tibet's Natural Resources: Tension Over Treasure," Chatham House, October 1, 2010, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2010/10/tibets-natural-resources-tension-over-treasure-0>.
- 51 Jagannath P. Panda, "Beijing Boosts its Position as a "Himalayan Hegemon" Through Hydropower," *China Brief* 21, no. 11 (2021).
- 52 "Explained: China's anger against the Dalai Lama and India's friendship with him," n. 41.
- 53 "India and China face off again, this time at Tawang," *The Diplomat*, December 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/india-and-china-face-off-again-this-time-at-tawang/>.
- 54 Phunchok Stobdan, n. 8.

I

**Succession:  
From Tradition to Ideology**

# 1. Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama: An Ideological Point of Contention between China and Tibetans

## Tenzin Lhadon

On October 15, 2020, a short documentary was televised through China's Global Television Network (CGTN), titled "*The Reincarnation of Living Buddhas: How is the Dalai Lama chosen?* (活佛转世 达赖喇嘛是如何产生的)".<sup>1</sup> The primary message behind the documentary was rooted in both historical and political narration, i.e., the centuries-old religious institution of reincarnation of Buddhist practitioners (known as *tulkus*), which gained institutional significance with the establishment of the *Gaden Phodrang* Government of Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was essentially validated by the Qing Dynasty and the present-day system falls under the governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The documentary needs to be understood within the larger political context, as part of a series of measures that Beijing has adopted to interject itself within the realm of religious beliefs of the Tibetan people.

The CPC's claim of control over the reincarnation of "Living Buddha" or *huofo* (活佛), a Chinese term peculiar to Tibetan Buddhism, draws its roots from the practice of the Golden Urn, introduced in 1793 during the Qing Dynasty.<sup>2</sup> Historians and Buddhist scholars have debated the veracity and influence of this method vis-à-vis the reincarnation of *tulkus*, but the Chinese government steadfastly claims that the latter remained subject to the approval of the Qing Empire, and thus stakes its historical assertion on the right to approve any future reincarnations. Perhaps the most blatant expression of this intent was the sudden state-led disappearance of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama at the age of six in 1995, recognized by the Dalai Lama, and the subsequent enthronement of his replacement. Yue Zhe noted that "in 1936, the Republic of China approved "Measures on the Reincarnation

of Lamas", which was applied in the peripheral regions outside Central Tibet."<sup>3</sup> Further attempts to control the reincarnation system gained significance with the standardization of its governance in 2007 when the PRC issued the "Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas" or the State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5.<sup>4</sup> This procedure of *tulku* identification in Tibet was codified and, for the first time, brought all the reincarnation systems in line with Chinese law. The ultimate objective behind these narrative-building legal measures is to place the CPC in a pole position in enthroning its candidate as the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, a reality that grows closer every year.

Notwithstanding the question of the historical or religious legitimacy of the CPC's assertion, it is imperative to engage with its intent, beyond the reality that Beijing is increasingly curbing religious and cultural freedom in Tibet and elsewhere. Falun Gong, Christians, and Chinese Buddhists bear testimony to the adversarial gaze of the CPC, along with Tibetans. However, such extreme measures are pushed forward to bolster the state's claim of being a legitimate governing power over a population that is increasingly divided in its relation to the former. The economic policies and market reforms that pushed China to becoming a global economic power were also meant to satiate the Chinese people disillusioned with Mao's ideological campaigns and bolster its popularity among many who steadfastly claimed it to be a colonial occupying force.

However, this approach of seeking legitimacy through material benefits hit a roadblock when it encountered communities, such as the Tibetans, where religion and culture had historically gained much traction as both an ideological and political system of beliefs. The CPC, with its banner heralding the superiority of Marxist materialist progress, could not occupy the vacuum that was left by the subsequent removal of religious and indigenous institutions in its wake. Therefore, the intervention of the state in the recognition of reincarnated *tulkus*, through recourse to both historical declarations and policy implementation, needs to be understood as an attempt to forcefully replace religious institutions.

Tibet's encounter with the Communist Party in the 1950s was an acrimonious affair, with the invasion and subsequent removal of any

vestige of Tibetan sovereignty being a consequence of Mao's efforts to unite the "Great Chinese Motherland".<sup>5</sup> The year 1959 remains a watershed moment in Tibet-China relations as the Dalai Lama, with thousands of Tibetans, escaped into exile in India, setting up the Tibetan government-in-exile and earning the ire of the CPC that has not subsided since. Within Tibet, the state swiftly implemented numerous measures to bring the population and the traditional centers of religious and political authority under its governance, but these have changed in tone and nature over the subsequent decades. Moving away from a point of complete rejection, attempts have been made to co-opt Tibetan Buddhism within the nationalist goal of Chinese rejuvenation, one that should contribute to the Party's enduring legacy and the country's ethnic unity and stability. In the past few years, the Party under Xi Jinping has increasingly sought to broaden its influence and control over Tibet's religious spaces, whether under the Ethnic Unity Law or the rising need for party officials to manage Tibetan monasteries. Observers have pointed out the Sinicization of religion under the Party, to make the latter conform to the doctrines of the Marxist Government, a stark contradiction between the constitutional protection of freedom of religious beliefs and the immense pressure from the state to bring religion within its sphere of influence.<sup>6</sup> As Xi Jinping himself noted, "we will fully implement the Party's basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society".<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between religion and state power in China has long been contested because religion was a significant source of resistance against authorities in the imperial period and a potential source of threat to the present regime in China.<sup>8</sup> The Party and religion maintain an uneasy relationship not just because the ethnic minority communities within the PRC have strong religious beliefs, but rather the fact that they have rallied and unified around religion in defiance of the government. The recent state-led campaign against Uyghur Muslims, the controversial suppression of Falun Gong adherents, the imposition of control over Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity in China, and other similar occurrences need to be



analyzed through the lens of contestation over authority and loyalty between religion and the state. Drawing similarities to other socialist regimes such as the erstwhile Soviet Union, China's religious policies seek to place the Party as the ultimate source of knowledge, truth, and legitimacy at the expense or assimilation of other traditional institutions.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the actions of the Party regarding the reincarnation process are a consequence of the above-mentioned contestation between the state and religion. There is the relevant question of whose position is more historically and theologically legitimate, the Party or Tibetan Buddhist institutions. The 2007 promulgation by Beijing asserting its claims over the institution of reincarnation casts a wide net over all reincarnations, which are numerous depending on the school of Tibetan Buddhism. However, it is important to note that not all reincarnations are equal in the sense of their political significance, and this is where the case of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation gains immense focus. Unlike its peers, the institution of the Dalai Lama has had a profound impact on the issue of asserting the historical sovereignty of Tibet, particularly since the establishment of the *Gaden Phodrang* Government under the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and global support for the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, which has irked the Party for decades. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama has gained considerable influence within the larger Buddhist community, including Chinese Buddhists in the PRC who number more than 200 million.<sup>10</sup>

The reincarnation of the Dalai Lama gains added importance when placed within the earlier mentioned dispute of legitimacy and authority between the state and religion vis-a-vis China and Tibet. Perhaps the closest parallel would be the Panchen Lama, who was abducted by the Party and a replacement installed soon after. Today the latter, who resides in Beijing but makes trips to the Tibetan regions, is a member of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, and Chairman of the Tibet Branch of the Chinese Buddhist Association. He has been a staunch advocate for the Party, frequently advising Tibetans in Tibet to stand behind the government's socialist program and remarking that Tibetan Buddhist monks should

“distance ourselves from all separatist forces, and resolutely prevent Tibetan Buddhism – including the temples, monks and nuns – from becoming a tool of Western anti-China forces to oppose the motherland and split the nation, and from becoming a victim of their political conspiracy”.<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to envision a Dalai Lama approved by the Party emulating a similar behavior, particularly since both are the two highest spiritual figures in Tibetan Buddhism.

The decision of the Party to take such aggressive measures is rooted not just in its desire to appoint its candidates at the top level of authority (the abrogation of Hong Kong’s Basic Law reflects similar intent) but also in an ideological struggle to leverage its national narrative of the country’s historical unity. The question, therefore, is one of representation and the legitimacy of one’s position. In the context of Tibet and China, since 1959, this struggle has been played out between the Communist Party which claims a historical and political right to rule Tibet and the Tibetan government-in-exile (now known as the Central Tibetan Administration) who disputes that assertion as a colonial ruse. The debate over the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama lies at the heart of this tussle, particularly since China promulgates the belief that the selection of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama lies outside the purview of the incumbent, while the CTA, *Gaden Phodrang*, and the religious heads of Buddhism in exile vehemently argue otherwise.<sup>12</sup>

The question over the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation reflects the larger polemic debates about CTA versus the CPC, religious freedom vs materialism, the sovereignty of Tibet versus China’s occupation of it, and history itself. The battle over the acceptance of either side’s recognized candidate as the legitimate successor to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and as the true holder of that institution along with its deep ties to Tibetan history, will serve as a litmus test to the strength of either side’s position in these debates. As mentioned earlier, it is not just about seeking legitimacy based on religious beliefs, an argument that overwhelmingly favors the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama but also about recognition from governments, the global community, and the Tibetan people in Tibet. The reality is that every country has accepted China’s sovereignty over Tibet, yet there remains

lingering insecurity over governments' and human rights organizations' criticism<sup>13</sup> of Beijing's heavy-handed policies against religious and political freedom and from the Tibetan population inside Tibet who continue to resist, as showcased during the 2008 pan-Tibet protests and the 159 self-immolations<sup>14</sup> that have occurred since then. It has not escaped Beijing's notice that Tibetan Buddhist monks have been at the heart of such resistance.

The CPC, under Xi Jinping, has continued to focus on "managing" Buddhism and its institutions inside Tibet to tackle such acts of defiance.<sup>15</sup> These decisions have taken various forms, from establishing management committees inside Buddhist monasteries, pushing religious figureheads such as their appointed Panchen Lama to make statements of support for the government, passing ordinances such as the 2007 State Bureau Order No. 5 and generally asserting that religions practiced in China must be "Chinese-oriented" and incorporate socialist values, a statement that figured prominently in a 2017 speech given by President Xi at a Party conference.<sup>16</sup> The Party's association of rising Tibetan unrest to their religious faith is not a random or recent occurrence. The drive to "modernize" Tibet at the expense of Buddhist traditions and replace religious authority with that of the state is a vital aspect of the Party's intent to assimilate Tibet within its interpretation of "Chinese culture", one that draws roots to the socialist "national form" of culture sought during the leadership of Mao Zedong.<sup>17</sup>

Within the corridors of the larger geopolitics, the ongoing battle between China and the Tibetan leadership in exile is of intimate concern to other stakeholders in the issue. The United States and the European Union,<sup>18</sup> have both placed their support for reincarnation to be chosen according to the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism without government interference. India, the country that plays host to the Dalai Lama, the CTA, and a 100,000-plus strong Tibetan diaspora, has maintained a studied silence on the matter, but it may have to weigh in sooner than later in the face of increasing border conflicts with and competition over influence in South Asia with China. The global popularity of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism in the world, which is greatly credited to his

presence, remains a sore sticking point for the Party which perceives him as a “splittist” and a threat to the great project of the Chinese nation-state. Its efforts to control the religious faith and institutions within Tibet and the narrative outside projects out of an insecurity of the Tibetan people’s continuing faith in the Dalai Lama and the traditional authority that is contained within his lineage, one that is anathema to the government’s project of securing socialism with Chinese characteristics in Tibet. It would seem out of place for a socialist government to liken itself to “the real living Buddha for Tibetans”, but that was a statement given by the Communist Party Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 2007.<sup>19</sup> The objective here seems not to eradicate Tibetan Buddhism, but rather to reframe it, placing the Party at the center of authority over all other traditional sources. The ideological and political battle over the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama remains a vital aspect of securing this objective since the lineage has traditionally occupied the position that the Party wishes to harness for itself.

## Notes

- 1 CGTN, "The Reincarnation of Living Buddhas: How is the Dalai Lama chosen?" [Documentary], October 15, 2020. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-15/The-Reincarnation-of-Living-Buddhas-How-is-the-Dalai-Lama-chosen--UBmptAmTcc/index.html>.
- 2 Yue Zhu, "The Legalization of Reincarnation of Living Buddha," *Advance Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2019, [https://advance.sagepub.com/articles/preprint/The\\_Legalization\\_of\\_Reincarnation\\_of\\_Living\\_Buddha/8005970](https://advance.sagepub.com/articles/preprint/The_Legalization_of_Reincarnation_of_Living_Buddha/8005970).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism," July 18, 2007, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-on-the-management-of-the-reincarnation-of-living-buddhas-in-0>.
- 5 Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (Penguin Random House, 2000).
- 6 Eleanor Albert, and Lindsay Maizland, "Religion in China," Council on Foreign Relations, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china>.
- 7 Xi Jinping, "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19<sup>th</sup> CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content\\_34115212.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm).
- 8 Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 317-337, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/20058996#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20058996#metadata_info_tab_contents).
- 9 Vivienne Shue, "Legitimacy Crisis in China," in *State and Society in 21st Century China*, ed. Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 24-49.
- 10 Adrian Croft, "China suffers from "moral crisis, Dalai Lama says," *Reuters*, May 14, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-tibet-idUSBRE84D0QC20120514>.
- 11 William Zheng, "China's official Panchen Lama tells Tibetan Buddhists to stay away from separatist forces," *South China Morning Post*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3142774/chinas-official-panchen-lama-tells-tibetan-buddhists-stay-away>.
- 12 "Tibetan Religious Figures Reject Chinese Role in Dalai Lama Reincarnation," *Radio Free Asia*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/dalalama-succession-11272019142427.html>.
- 13 Central Tibetan Administration, "China's human rights abuses: 321 NGOs call for UN investigation into violations by Beijing," Central Tibetan Administration, September 10, 2020, <https://tibet.net/chinas-human-rights-abuses-321-ngos-call-for-un-investigation-into-violations-by-beijing/>.
- 14 International Campaign for Tibet, "Self-immolation fact sheet," ICT, <https://savetibet.org/tibetan-self-immolations/>.
- 15 Human Rights Watch, "China: New Controls on Tibetan Monastery Religious, Education Authority Shifts to Party Cadres," Human Rights Watch, January 24, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/25/china-new-controls-tibetan-monastery>.

- 16 Ryan Cimmino, "Threat from Tibet? Systematic Repression of Tibetan Buddhism in China," *Harvard International Review*, September 16, 2018, <https://hir.harvard.edu/repression-tibetan-buddhism-china/>.
- 17 Wei Li, "Reinventing China: Mao's Ideas on National Form," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, no. 5 (2020): 1-9.
- 18 "EU reaffirms opposition to China's interference in Dalai Lama reincarnation issue," *Tibetan Review*, April 12, 2020, <https://www.tibetanreview.net/eu-reaffirms-opposition-to-chinas-interference-in-dalai-lama-reincarnation-issue/>.
- 19 Ryan Cimmino, n. 16.

## 2. China's Strategy and Thinking on the Succession of Dalai Lama

**B. R. Deepak**

The Tibetans believe that the issue of reincarnation of the Dalai Lama would be decided by the Dalai Lama himself. However, the People's Republic of China (PRC), which sent the People's Liberation Army to wrest control of Tibet in 1950, insists that the ultimate authority to designate a Dalai Lama lies only with it. The Dalai Lama on his part has been emanating varied signals as regards to his reincarnation, stating that the issue of reincarnation would be decided by his believers; that there would be no Dalai Lama after his death; a beautiful maiden may be his reincarnation; or his reincarnation would be outside China, and even outside the planet. Notwithstanding the Dalai Lama's thinking, the Tibetan people, in all probabilities will have two Dalai Lamas – one designated by their spiritual and temporal leader and the other by the PRC. This brief paper looks into China's strategy and thinking on the succession of Dalai Lama.

### **The Dalai Lama on Reincarnation**

The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has made a formal written declaration concerning his reincarnation on September 24, 2011. The declaration concludes by saying:<sup>1</sup>

When I am about ninety I will consult the high Lamas of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan public, and other concerned people who follow Tibetan Buddhism, and re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not.... I shall leave clear written instructions about this. Bear in mind that, apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China.

On March 18, 2019, Reuters published an exclusive interview of the Dalai Lama in which he yet again addressed the issue:<sup>2</sup>

In future, in case you see two Dalai Lamas come, one from here, in free country, one chosen by Chinese, then nobody will trust, nobody will respect (the one chosen by China). So that's an additional problem for the Chinese! It's possible, it can happen.

These arguments put forth by the Dalai Lama demonstrate the apprehensions of the Tibetan people as to what will happen to this important institution of Tibetan Buddhism under the PRC. No wonder, various Tibetan organizations have been raising China's interference in the Dalai Lama's succession. The International Campaign for Tibet, testified at the hearing of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on December 14, 2022 about the PRC's "policy of altering the very identity of Tibetan Buddhism to make it subservient to the Chinese Communist Party."<sup>3</sup> Ever since the passage of the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020, the U.S. has made it official that "the Chinese Government should have no role in the succession process of the Dalai Lama."<sup>4</sup>

## **The Chinese Response**

On March 19, Geng Shuang, the then spokesperson of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to the Dalai Lama's interview to Reuters in the following words:<sup>5</sup>

Reincarnation of living Buddhas, as a unique institution of inheritance in Tibetan Buddhism, comes with a set range of rituals and conventions. The Chinese government implements the policy of freedom of religious belief. The reincarnation system is respected and protected by such legal instruments as Regulations on Religious Affairs and Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas. The institution of reincarnation of the Dalai Lama has been in existence for several hundred years. The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama himself was found and recognized following religious rituals and historical conventions and his enthronement was approved by the then central government. Therefore, reincarnation of living Buddhas including the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws and regulations and follow religious rituals and historical conventions.

Geng Shuang's reply could be regarded as Chinese thinking and counter argument to the Dalai Lama's arguments on his reincarnation. It



emphasizes on two things. One, the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama must follow the *rituals and historical conventions*. And two, it would be decided by such *legal instruments* as “Regulations on Religious Affairs and Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas” formulated by the PRC, which the Dalai Lama has castigated in his statement on reincarnation in 2011.

### ***Rituals and historical conventions***

As regards the rituals and conventions, while explaining China's position, a document posted by the National People's Congress of the PRC, argues that the very title of the Dalai Lama was “granted by the central government of China's dynasties”, thus trying to establish the fact that Dalai Lama's authority in Tibet has been sanctioned by China.<sup>6</sup> Historical records point to the fact that it was owing to the Gelupa (Yellow Hat) influence among the Mongols that in 1576 they invited Sonam-gyatso, the third Dalai Lama to Qinghai, where the ruler Altan Khan conferred on him the title of “The Overseer of the Buddhist Faith, Vajra-dhara Dalai Lama”, a title which was posthumously given to the first two Dalai Lamas and adopted by all his successors. The title at this stage, according to Yang Dongquan, former director of China's National Archives, “was only a personal honorific title, without any political and legal significance”, the legitimacy, however, was granted to the third Dalai Lama once the Ming emperor, Wanli conferred on Dalai the title of “Vajradhara”(朵儿只唱 Dorjechang) in 1587 by way of issuing an imperial order and a letter of credence.<sup>7</sup>

It was from hereafter that the Chinese emperors followed the tradition of conferring titles to Dalai Lamas, especially the Manchus (1644-1911). In 1653, Qing emperor Shunzhi conferred the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-1682), the title of “Most benevolent, living Buddha, universal ruler of the Buddhist faith, Vajradhara, Dalai Lama of the Western Paradise” (西天大善自在佛所领天下释教普通瓦赤喇怛喇达赖喇嘛). Besides, the emperor also gave the lama a golden letter of credence (金册) and a seal (金印) bearing an inscription written in Manchurian, Tibetan and Chinese.<sup>8</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas received titles from Kangxi. In the wake of the Gurkha invasion of Tibet between 1791 and 1792,

emperor Qianlong dispatched a 170,000-strong force and drove out the invaders and established the often quoted “29-Article Ordinance for More Effective Governance of Tibet.” The ordinance stipulated that the Ambans or the Qing imperial resident commissioner in Tibet will enjoy the same status as the Dalai and the Panchen; the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, the Panchen and various Hotogtu Rinpoche must follow the procedure of drawing lots from the golden urn under the supervision of the Ambans and the same must be reported to the imperial court for approval; a new uniform currency bearing the title of the emperor was issued; traders were required to carry a passport; all communication with neighboring states was to be conducted through Ambans. The rule of golden urn was followed for the selection of successive Dalai Lama’s except the 9<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup>. In case of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the then nationalist government under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) issued an order which read: <sup>9</sup>

The Qinghai soul boy Lhamo Toinzhub, with unusual wisdom and extraordinarily intelligent signs, has been found as the reincarnation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and should be allowed to ascend his throne as the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama without going through the lot-drawing ceremony.

Though the present Dalai Lama agrees to the golden urn practice, he also states that a majority of the Dalai Lamas have not followed this tradition, and if it was followed, it was due to the priest-patron relationship between Tibet and the Manchu dynasty. Once the dynasty came to an end, so ended the relationship. According to the Dalai’s statement on reincarnation, by the time the reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama took place in 1939, “the Priest-Patron relationship between Tibet and China had already come to an end.”

As regards the nationalist government’s assertion that they allowed the reincarnation without drawing lots, the Dalai says in his statement that it was a sheer lie that has been exposed by Ngabo Ngawang Jigme, the most trusted lieutenant of the Chinese in Tibet.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Legal instruments***

As regards the 'legal instruments', the "Regulations on Religious Affairs and Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas" were issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs of the People's Republic of China on July 18, 2007 and went into effect from September 1, 2007. These provide the legal basis for China rejecting any incarnation announced outside Tibet. In all, there are 14 articles in these 'Regulations' however, article 2 remains most crucial as it stipulates:<sup>11</sup>

Reincarnating living Buddhas should respect and protect the principles of the unification of the state, protecting the unity of the minorities, protecting religious concord and social harmony, and protecting the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism. Reincarnating living Buddhas should respect the religious rituals and historically established systems of Tibetan Buddhism, but may not re-establish feudal privileges which have already been abolished. Reincarnating living Buddhas shall not be interfered with or be under the dominion of any foreign organization or individual.

It could be discerned that the "legal instruments" reiterate Tibet as an inalienable part of China and that any attempts to split Tibet from China will not be tolerated. These also attach importance to historically established systems and debar any foreign individual or organization from the reincarnation of the Dalai or other lamas. It is for these reasons that China has all along criticized and spurned the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach. In 2008, when mass protests broke out in Tibet over persecution of the Tibetans, Qin Gang, the then spokesperson of Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now the foreign minister of the PRC alleged in one of his press conferences that on the one hand, the Dalai preaches the so-called "middle way and "nonviolence", on the other hand, he is giving free hand to a radical organization such as the "Tibetan Youth Congress" to engage in sabotage, rioting, and bloodshed. The aim of both these methods adopted by the Dalai Lama is to seek Tibetan independence.<sup>12</sup> Reiterating Qin Gang's remarks, An Caidan, a researcher from China's Tibetology Research Centre in Beijing said that the myth of Dalai's Middle Way approach is exposed in the following five points:<sup>13</sup>

1. The Dalai clique maintains that "historically and culturally, Tibet is an

- independent country, not part of China.”
2. The Dalai Lama insists that the Chinese army and military installations should be withdrawn from Tibet, and that the status of Tibet be deliberated in an international forum and Tibet be declared as a “zone of peace” and a “buffer.”
  3. That Tibet be allowed to maintain diplomatic relations with other countries or international organizations.
  4. The Dalai Lama insists on including 2.4 million square kilometers of Tibetan inhabited areas in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in the so called “Greater Tibet” enjoying “genuine/meaningful autonomy”; that is to say he wants to overthrow the socialist system and regional autonomy of all these areas and wrest control of “greater Tibet” solely in his own hands.
  5. Finally, he maintains that all non-Chinese be thrown out from the so called “Greater Tibet.”

Therefore, if a government allows one of its regions to establish diplomatic relations with other countries or international organizations and withdraws its armed forces from its own territory, could it be called a sovereign nation? As such, the real motive of “genuine autonomy” could be best described as “three-step symphony” (三步曲) to secure Tibetan independence:<sup>14</sup>

1. To secure his return to Tibet through negotiations, for the Dalai clique has failed to achieve any success irrespective of engaging in independence activities for decades from outside China. In order to “directly and more effectively” command the pro-independence activities, it is important to return home first.
2. Second step is to gain political power through “genuine autonomy.”
3. And finally realize “Tibetan independence” through a “referendum.”

No wonder, China has rejected the Dalai Lama’s proposals or the demand for ‘genuine autonomy’ and described it as a ploy to seek independence, semi-independence or even independence in disguised form, for according to China the charter of the Tibetan government-in-

exile promulgated in 1991 maintains that efforts shall be made to transform a future Tibet into a Federal Democratic Self-Governing Republic and a zone of peace throughout her three regions, and the Dalai Lama as the head of such a future entity. Furthermore, the Tibetan government-in-exile, in China's view, has continued to expand in its size and scale and hence the scope of its activities. For example, in September 2006, the "government in exile" set up seven ministries such as the "Ministry of the Interior", "Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Public Information," "Ministry of Religion and Culture", "Ministry of Education", "Ministry of Finance", "Ministry of Health" and "Ministry of Security" etc., and the Dalai clique has continued to sing the so-called "Tibet's national anthem" and hoist the so called "Tibetan national flag", a clear sign of defiance and seeking independence.<sup>15</sup>

It is owing to the above thinking of China that the so called "visiting groups" (参观团) dispatched by the Dalai Lama to China post reforms and opening up have been treated as an opportunity provided to the Dalai Lama so as to "correct mistakes" (改正错误) and mend fences with China. Between 1979 and 1993, three such groups visited Tibet, and between 2002 and 2010, 10 more visits took place. A White Paper argues that "instead of accepting the goodwill and precious opportunities provided by the central government, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama insisted on "Tibet's independence", intensified separatist and sabotage activities (分裂破坏活动), and lost the opportunity to reconcile with the central government." It also maintains that the "Tibet Government in Exile" is an illegal entity and there cannot be any dialogue with it on the status and system in Tibet. If at all, the contacts with the Dalai Lama's representatives is "about personal future (个人前途) of the Dalai Lama, and at most the future of some people around him."<sup>16</sup>

## **Strategizing for the Future**

In the new era under Xi Jinping, the three core demands, i.e. the Dalai Lama "accepting Tibet as an inseparable part of China, abandoning 'Tibet independence', and stopping activities to split the motherland" have been reiterated and the Dalai Lama has been advised to "discard any illusion,

face reality squarely, correct mistakes, and choose an objective and rational path.” The White Paper talks about the tremendous achievements Tibet has made since its “peaceful liberation.” The 1951 Tibet’s GDP of RMB129 million has been compared to that of RMB190 billion of the year 2020. In the new era, Tibet declared to have eradicated poverty.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding the development and prosperity in Tibet, China remains wary of the sensitivities surrounding the Tibet issue and influence of the Dalai Lama among Tibetans as well as the international community. China has admitted that its passive and knee-jerk reaction to the discourses emanating from Tibetan émigrés and the West has put it on the back foot. Scholars like Wang Jiaquan<sup>18</sup> quoted in a report released by the International Tibetan Network have argued that there is need for course correction as the “post Dalai Lama era” would be an era of strategic opportunity for China.<sup>19</sup>

Wang’s short essay translated into English and made available on the Network argues that since China’s criticism of the Dalai Clique has not been accepted by the West, but once the “idol vanishes” the clique would be greatly splintered and the resort of the Tibetan independence forces to violence, the “Middle Way” approach of the Dalai Lama could be questioned and even abandoned. With the burgeoning international economic and political clout of China, China’s passivity on Tibet is bound to change, but the weight the Tibet issue carries internationally may not diminish. He suggests a national strategy that moves away from demonizing the Dalai Lama, stops pronouncing the Tibetan culture as backward, and recommends building of a strong discourse inside and outside Tibet through the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen, even molding of the 15<sup>th</sup> incarnation’s image. Given China’s battered image in the backdrop of the stringent dynamic zero-COVID strategy and its sliding economic growth trajectory, unfolding discourses on the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama from China, Tibetan émigrés and the democratic world will continue to generate interest in academic as well as geopolitical circles.

## Notes

- 1 Dalailama.com, "Reincarnation," September 24, 2011, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalailama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation> (accessed January 3, 2023).
- 2 "Dalai Lama contemplates Chinese gambit after his death," *Reuters*, March 18, 2019, <https://jp.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-dalai-lama-exclusive-idUSKCN1QZ1NS> (accessed December 12, 2022).
- 3 International Campaign for Tibet, "Dalai Lama succession interference raised at religious freedom hearing," December 14, 2022, <https://savetibet.org/dalai-lama-succession-interference-raised-at-religious-freedom-hearing/> (accessed January 2, 2023).
- 4 Ned Price. "Department Press Briefing," March 9, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-march-9-2021/> (accessed January 2, 2023).
- 5 Geng Shuang, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference on March 19, 2019," [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1646704.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1646704.shtml).
- 6 NPC, "Origin of the title of 'Dalai Lama' and its related background," March 18, 2009, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Special\\_NPC\\_Delegation/2009-03/18/content\\_1493972\\_3.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Special_NPC_Delegation/2009-03/18/content_1493972_3.htm) (accessed December 8, 2022).
- 7 Yang Dongquan, "《档案证明历世达赖喇嘛都是经中央政府认定、册封》 (Archives prove that successive generations of the Dalai Lamas have been confirmed and conferred the titles by the central government)," [www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-04/26/content_955279.htm), April 2008, [http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-04/26/content\\_955279.htm](http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-04/26/content_955279.htm) (accessed December 8, 2022).
- 8 Zhang Yun, "《清朝西藏治理中的若干问题》 (Issues related to the Governance of Tibet during the Qing Dynasty)," *Shixue Jikan*, December 5, 2014, [http://www.tibet.cn/zxyj/xjdt/201412/t20141205\\_2141099.htm](http://www.tibet.cn/zxyj/xjdt/201412/t20141205_2141099.htm) (accessed December 7, 2022).
- 9 NPC, n. 6.
- 10 Dalailama.com, n. 1.
- 11 PRC, "《藏传佛教活佛转世管理办法》 (Regulations on Religious Affairs and Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas)," National Religious Affairs Bureau, July 18, 2007, [http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2007-08/02/content\\_704414.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2007-08/02/content_704414.htm) (accessed December 8, 2022).
- 12 Renmin Ribao, "《外交部发言人秦刚举行例行记者会》 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Press Conference," March 18, 2008.
- 13 Lihua Qiu and Zhaoming Tang, "《达赖集团“中间道路”的真正用意就是要“西藏独立”》 The real motive of Dalai Clique's 'Middle Path' is to seek Tibet's independence," *Renmin Ribao*, March 29, 2008.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 State Council Information Office of PRC, "《西藏发展道路的历史选择》白皮书 (全文) (Full Text of the White Paper on Historical Choice of Tibet's Development Path)," April 15, 2015, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/2015/32720/32741/Document/1415491/1415491.htm> (accessed December 7, 2022).

- 17 “《西藏和平解放与繁荣发展》 (Peaceful liberation of Tibet and prosperous development).” May 21, 2021, <http://www.tibetol.cn/html/zhuanlan/3/> (accessed January 3, 2023).
- 18 Wang Jiaquan, “Escaping a predicament: Thoughts on the opportunities and considerations for communicating on Tibet in the ‘post-Dalai era’,” [https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Escaping-a-predicament\\_-thoughts-on-the-opportunities-and-considerations-for-communicating-on-Tibet-in-the-post-Dalai-era.pdf](https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Escaping-a-predicament_-thoughts-on-the-opportunities-and-considerations-for-communicating-on-Tibet-in-the-post-Dalai-era.pdf) (accessed January 3, 2023).
- 19 International Tibet Network, “Tibet, the Dalai Lama and the geopolitics of reincarnation,” October 2022, [https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/plugins/pdf-poster/pdfjs/web/viewer.html?file=https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ITN\\_Reincarnation-Report\\_Mid\\_OnlineReading.pdf&download=true&print=vera&openfile=false](https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/plugins/pdf-poster/pdfjs/web/viewer.html?file=https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ITN_Reincarnation-Report_Mid_OnlineReading.pdf&download=true&print=vera&openfile=false) (accessed January 3, 2023).



## 3 Tibet in China's Machiavellian Thinking

### Baogang He

The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2022 was a major event in contemporary Chinese politics, confirming Xi Jinping's third term, outlining major domestic and foreign policies, and offering insight into the Tibetan policy of China under Xi Jinping. The 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress document stresses the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity, but does not mention Tibet at all. The absence of the Tibet issue indicates that the Chinese government no longer worries about the Tibet issue. It also demonstrates Xi's confidence in his Tibet policy and his control machinery to manage the complicated politics of Tibet. In contrast, Taiwan has been cited six times. This indicates that the Taiwan issue has become a top priority. For the Xi government, the Tibet issue has been managed well so far. The strategy of marginalizing the Dalai Lama seems adequate and effective, and the accusation that "foreign forces" (the West) have been stirring up trouble in Tibet has helped Beijing to increase political and social controls within the country.

At the same time, the unification of Taiwan with Mainland China has provided one strong justification, among many others, for Xi Jinping to abandon the two-terms rule in 2018, which has disrupted the newly established succession norm. Xi is now serving his third term. At both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congresses, no successor was nominated by Xi. He will likely continue for at least another five, or even ten, years as there appears to be no succession plan on the horizon; and Xi is the decisive leader who will determine the Tibet policy.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Wang Yang, chairman of the National People's Political Consultative Conference, attended the discussion with the Tibetan delegation group. Wang emphasised that the 10 years (2012-

2022) under Xi's 'new era' is the best one in history for the Tibetan people.<sup>1</sup> Infrastructure has developed dramatically, including many roads, railways, hospitals, and residential buildings. The per capita GDP of Tibet has surpassed that of many other provinces in China, particularly in Lhasa where the per capita GDP has reached 85,700 yuan (Chinese Renmibi, more than USD 10,000) in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Wang articulated and illustrated the Tibet policy or strategy through four phrases using eight Chinese words: stability (wěn dìng), development (fā zhǎn), ecology (shēng tài), and strengthening the border (qiáng biān).<sup>3</sup>

Xi Jinping is increasingly showing his faith in the current management approach to Tibet and his confidence in Wang Junzheng, party secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, who is trusted to conscientiously and comprehensively implement the Party's strategy for governing Tibet. Wang was the vice party secretary of Xinjiang who had adopted harsh measures there and was sanctioned by the United States for his violation of human rights. He was promoted to party secretary of Tibet in December 2021. Wang organized a big conference to study and implement "the spirit of the 20th National Congress" featuring a big picture of Xi Jinping, elevating Xi's status as being equal to Mao's. Such an act of building a personality cult around Xi, by Wang, stands out from most Chinese provinces. Another initiative by Wang is to build a 'New Era Tibetan Red Cultural Project'.<sup>4</sup> The strategic motive behind this initiative was to contain, weaken, and dilute the influence of the Dalai Lama through promoting a "higher" and "revolutionary" culture in Tibet.

This initiative will comprehensively survey and compile the CPC's history in Tibet, with volumes including *An Oral History of Tibet's Reform and Opening Up*, *A Concise Reader of the Communist Party of China's Tibetan History*, *A Concise Reader of the Red Resources and Cultural Relics in the Tibet Region*. While this new red culture or ideology may dominate the political and social atmosphere right now, it can hardly win over the Tibetan people with their long tradition of Buddhism.

Xi's over-confidence, in fact, will soon be a source of trouble. In particular Beijing may not be prepared to deal with the potential radicalisation of post-Dalai Lama politics. Currently, a 'Middle Way'

advocated by the Dalai Lama is the policy of the Tibetan government-in-exile. However, it remains to be seen how this moderate policy will change upon the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. The Tibetan government-in-exile might undergo rapid transition toward an increasingly radicalized politics.

The present Dalai Lama has realised that he will not be able to resolve the Tibet issue in his lifetime, and has arranged a succession policy after his death. His approach is to let the Tibetans in exile make their own decisions. In December 2008, he called a Tibetan emergency meeting. In 2011, he ended a 368-year-old tradition by which the Dalai Lamas had exercised spiritual and political authority in Tibet, and transferred his temporal power to Sikyong, the democratically elected leadership. His Holiness has also designated the *Gaden Phodrang* Trust to select a successor, a 'reincarnation', in consultation with top Lamas of Tibet's Buddhist traditions, the Tibetan population, and other interested parties. One reason for retaining the reincarnation system is that at least 80 percent of Tibetans living in China must have a spiritual connection to a physical Dalai Lama.

Beijing is making its calculations too. For a start, Beijing thinks that the Tibetan national movement is unsustainable. This is because more and more young Tibetans are born overseas; many have never been to Tibet and are unlikely to have the opportunity to return. Many of these young Tibetans will likely find jobs and settle in Western democratic countries. Even Lobsang Sangay, Kalon Tripa of the Tibetan Administration from 2011 to 2012, and Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration from 2012 to 2021, holds American nationality. Thus, from the perspective of Chinese citizenship, he hardly represents the Tibetan people. In the worst scenario, even if post-Dalai Lama Tibetan politics were radicalized in demanding complete independence from China through violent revolution, Beijing could use such radicalization to frame Tibetan activists as terrorists and impose more harsh measures.

When coming to the issue of selecting a 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Beijing has made a surprising move. Unlike the Dalai Lama who departed from the Tibetan tradition in establishing the *Gaden Phodrang* Trust, the Chinese

government has constructed an image of being a strong defender of the Tibetan cultural tradition, according to the commentary made by *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.<sup>5</sup> Rather than advocating for the ending of the reincarnation system, or a substantive move away from the traditional selection method, Beijing has defended it. This tactic is Machiavellian in style. In 2007, the State Religious Affairs Bureau of the Chinese government released a document that specified concrete methods and procedures for the reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhas. Article 2 states that “Reincarnating living Buddhas should respect and protect the principles of the unification of the state, protecting the unity of the minorities, protecting religious concord and social harmony, and protecting the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism.”<sup>6</sup> Beijing has chosen and groomed a group of senior lamas who are friendly to the CPC. The Panchen Lama is among the senior lamas who will conduct the selection. Beijing is sure to present the new Dalai Lama as having been chosen by Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders rather than by CPC officials. Beijing will deny the authority of the *Gaden Phodrang* Trust, designated by the current Dalai Lama, in selecting a new successor.

Certainly, the Tibetan government-in-exile would never accept a CPC-appointed Dalai Lama. Subsequently, it is speculated that two Dalai Lamas may be chosen—one in China and one in India or another, Western democratic country. From the perspective of Beijing, the preferable outcome is the new Dalai Lama is chosen by Beijing and will live in China; Beijing naturally does not favour the outcome of two Dalai Lamas. However, if it does happen so, some Chinese scholars conjecture that having two Dalai Lamas would undermine the authority of the position, dividing the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to the advantage of Beijing. This strategic thinking is cunning, exhibiting Machiavellian calculations.

Undoubtedly Xi Jinping’s influence and intentions will be one crucial factor that will decisively shape the future of Tibet. Xi is making ‘realist’ calculations that represent a particular style of Machiavellian politics; however this may prove to be an obstacle to his ambitions of global leadership. The CPC’s Tibet policy lacks a democratic component and

does not satisfy Tibetan concerns about genuine autonomy. Nor does it meet the Tibetan demand for dignity. Perhaps a better management or solution to the Tibet issue is through democracy, but the current Chinese leadership is not interested in this.<sup>7</sup> In his interview with BBC in 2021, Lobsang Sangay said clearly, “the Chinese government must reflect on its own policies. The iron fist policy is not working. Yes, China wants to be a superpower, number one in the world. But relying solely on money and power. It is difficult to become the number one in the world. It would be best if you also had the respect, acceptance, and approval of the world. Unfortunately, the world doesn't seem to have much respect and acceptance of China, and there seems to be a trust deficit. The Tibet issue's resolution is a great opportunity to help Beijing win the respect and trust of the world.”<sup>8</sup> To achieve this goal of respect and trust, Beijing needs to step away from Machiavellian calculations and engage in more moral and democratic thinking on the Tibetan issue.

## Notes

- 1 *Xinhua*, October 18, 2022.
- 2 “2019, the per capita GDP of Tibet’s prefectures and cities ranked Lhasa over 80,000 yuan, ranking first in the autonomous region,” *Sohu.com*, March 27, 2021, [https://www.sohu.com/a/457565423\\_120896229](https://www.sohu.com/a/457565423_120896229) (accessed April 25, 2023).
- 3 *Xinhua News Agency*, October 17, 2022, [www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn) (accessed December 6, 2022).
- 4 See “Strengthen the protection and utilization of the inheritance of the red gene and strive to create a new situation in the work of revolutionary cultural relics in Tibet in the new era — Summary of the protection and utilization of revolutionary cultural relics in the past 70 years since the peaceful liberation of Tibet,” *Sohu.com*, September 20, 2021, [https://www.sohu.com/a/491076236\\_121107000](https://www.sohu.com/a/491076236_121107000); “Consistently inherit the red cultural gene of Tibet,” *Tibet.cn*, September 28, 2020, [http://m.tibet.cn/cn/index/culture/202009/t20200928\\_6863059.html](http://m.tibet.cn/cn/index/culture/202009/t20200928_6863059.html) (accessed April 25, 2023).
- 5 “The Dalai Lama and the Chinese Communist Party “Swapped Roles” on the Reincarnation Issue,” *DW*, September 29, 2011, <https://p.dw.com/p/12iqv> (accessed April 23, 2023).
- 6 “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism,” July 18, 2007, [http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2007-08/02/content\\_704414.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2007-08/02/content_704414.htm) (accessed December 7, 2022).
- 7 For a detailed discussion on the democratic approaches to the Taiwan question, see Baogang He, *Governing Taiwan and Tibet: Democratic Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).
- 8 Lobsang Sangay, “Sooner or later we will regain our dignity,” *BBC Chinese*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-56435080> (accessed December 8, 2022).

## II

# Succession: A Wider Worldview

## 4 Reincarnation System of Living Buddhas: A Taiwanese Perspective

**Julie Yu-Wen Chen and Ute Wallenböck**

Although both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the ROC, as well as their ruling parties, have changed over time, there are numerous similarities between the two sides' models of nation building, more than are commonly acknowledged. The current divergent paths of both sides in democratization and liberalization have created a stereotypical impression that they have nothing in common. However, the two converged in adopting a set of pragmatic policies to guide nation building during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and during the authoritarianism of Mao Zedong in mainland China and Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan. Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, both practiced a Han-centric form of multiculturalism, with the ultimate aim of creating national unity, which still has repercussions for their respective development today.

It is in this context, since the KMT relocated to Taiwan after losing the civil war in 1949, the KMT regime has treated Tibet as being under ROC sovereignty control. There were accusations that the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission (MTAC)—created in 1928 by the KMT government to administer Republican China's sovereignty over Tibet, and then relocated to Taiwan in 1949, where it dealt with matters relating to Mongolians and Tibetans until its dissolution on September 15, 2017—was intervening, under the KMT regime, in the Tibetan government-in-exile's affairs and even dividing the members to create the Tibetan community. Not only the PRC government but also, during the KMT time, Tibet-Taiwan relations were almost non-existent.

A number of factors caused Taiwan to improve its relations with the exiled government after the early 1990s. First, Tibetan issues were highly internationalized and able to garner international sympathy or support in



the West. In conjunction with this, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was awarded the 1989 Noble Peace Prize, which gained Tibet further international prominence. Second, Taiwan underwent democratization and liberalization in the late 1980s with Taiwan's first elected president, Lee Teng-Hui of the KMT party (1988–2000), playing an important role in Taiwan's democratization process. Having already been invited in 1992, the Dalai Lama eventually embarked on his first trip to Taiwan in 1997, followed by visits in 2001 and 2009. His first visit resulted in ROC recognition of the exiled government and the establishment of an official representative office of the Tibetan government-in-exile in Taiwan.

During his second visit in 2001, the Dalai Lama met President Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008). However, the Dalai Lama stressed that his visit to Taiwan was purely religious in nature.<sup>1</sup> Concerning his third visit in 2009, President Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016) only agreed to a visit by the Dalai Lama after pressure from the opposition. Ma invited the Dalai Lama on the ground that he will come to Taiwan to comfort the survivors of the typhoon Morakot.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, during the presidency of Chen Shui-bian, the first president from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), relations between Taiwan and the Tibetan government-in-exile flourished and made it easier for Tibetans to reside in Taiwan legally. However, when the KMT regained power in 2008, then President Ma Ying-jeou tried to prevent the Dalai Lama's visit to Taiwan in 2009 as Ma strived to improve relations with the PRC for economic reasons. As said above, if it were not for the opposition's pressure, Ma would have not invited the Dalai Lama. After Ma, Tsai Ing-Wen's DPP party (2016–present) regained power, and there were initially high hopes that Tsai's government would naturally improve relations with the Sikyong, the political leader of the Tibetan government-in-exile since 2011 (after the Dalai Lama had given up his political power). However, Tsai is cautious not to provoke China further on this issue because the cross-strait relationship is already very tense during her term.

Although the Taiwanese government's stance on the Tibetan issue has changed under different ruling regimes, the increasingly democratizing Taiwanese society has bred several non-governmental groups (e.g., Taiwan

Friends of Tibet and the Tibetan Welfare Association) that openly address support for Tibet. Human rights issues and respect for the Tibetan religion are usually what drive activists and scholars to support Tibet. Very often, supporters of these groups have a clear stance in supporting Taiwan's right to self-determination and democracy. With the increasing visibility of the Uyghur issues in the international arena, activists strategically link the Tibetan and Uyghur issues and sometimes even Taiwan independence issues together in various forms of protest and solidarity mobilization.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, the PRC government deems these movements and networks threats to China's national unity. However, in Taiwan, these non-governmental groups are free to operate at the local level and form international alliances. Tsai's administration also strategically let civil society and DPP lawmakers take the lead on the Tibetan issue to avoid direct confrontation with the PRC on this topic.

Since 2021, however, there have been more diplomatic contacts between Taiwan's representative in India and representatives of the exiled Tibetan government, based upon the background that in December 2020, the U.S. government tried to formally acknowledge the Central Tibetan Administration as the legitimate institution, with the Sikyong as its president, with the passage of the Tibetan Policy and Support Act.<sup>4</sup> Thus, after the election of the new Sikyong on May 15, 2021, not only did the U.S. State Department's spokesperson<sup>5</sup> congratulate Penpa Tsering on his election as the next Sikyong but also Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu by emphasizing the Taiwan-Tibet friendship.<sup>6</sup> Later, when a dramatic railway accident occurred in Eastern Taiwan on April 2, the Dalai Lama sent condolences to Tsai. Then, for the Dalai Lama's birthday on July 6, Tsai sent congratulatory messages via social media in both Chinese and English. On October 4, 2021, an official meeting between Taiwan's de facto ambassador to India, Mr. Baushuan Ger, and Sikyong Penpa Tsering took place in New Delhi to strengthen diplomatic ties.

## **Reincarnation Systems**

The Tibetan government-in-exile has its own system for selecting the new spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists around the world. However, based

on the 2007 order of China's State Administration of Religious Affairs, "Management measures for the reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism," the PRC government not only holds a crucial role in the recognition of the rebirth of Living Buddhas, but also this new order implicates that leaders of Tibetan Buddhism should be recognized only in the PRC.<sup>7</sup> Even before that, the PRC government intervened in the recognition of Living Buddhas. For instance, in 1995, the identification of the 11th Panchen Lama took place under the control of Chinese authorities based on their new criteria and methods, and the assistance of the Dalai Lama was refused.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, two boys were found, one of whom was identified based on traditional methods by the Dalai Lama, and the other by the PRC State Council. The Dalai Lama's chosen boy, with his parents, disappeared. His whereabouts are still unknown.

Recently, the Dalai Lama named a Mongolian boy born in the U.S. to be the incarnation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, the highest-ranking Living Buddha of the Gelukpa lineage in Mongolia. The current Taiwanese government under Tsai might not make an explicit political statement on such a specific issue and again let civil society, lawmakers, and scholars in Taiwan send out their supportive messages. The general stance would be in line with the Dalai Lama's view that Tibetans themselves should decide how they wish to choose their spiritual leaders and not the PRC government, as happened before. However, in April 2023 a delegation of the Tibet government-in-exile paid a one-week visit to Taipei, and they were promised that Taiwan will support the democratic Central Tibetan Administration internationally and domestically.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Politically, there is not much actual alliance between the Taiwanese government and the Tibetan government-in-exile. However, at the societal level, the Taiwanese people can find many motives to support exchanges with the Tibetan exiled community and to facilitate better non-governmental links and understanding. This is because Buddhism is one of the major religions of Taiwan, and the locals are generally friendly toward Buddhists and the Dalai Lama. If a new Living Buddha is

announced by the Dalai Lama, Taiwanese people will generally welcome and support him without worrying about negative reactions from Beijing. If China announces its own chosen Living Buddha, most Taiwanese people will not pay much attention to Beijing's chosen one. Apart from being friendly towards Buddhists, the increasingly uneasy cross-strait relationship makes more and more Taiwanese aware of the importance of supporting "another" group that is similarly facing threats from the PRC government. Non-governmental exchanges ranging from cultural and academic to education between the exiled Tibetan community and Taiwanese society should be fostered to deepen relations.

## Notes

- 1 "President Chen Meets with the Dalai Lama," Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan), April 5, 2011, <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/863>.
- 2 Alan D. Romberg, "Cross-Strait Relations: Weathering the Storm," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 30 (2009), <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM30AR.pdf>.
- 3 Yu-Wen Chen, "Ethnic Conflict in Xinjiang and Its International Connections," in *The Routledge Handbook of Race and Ethnicity in Asia*, ed. Michael Weiner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 231-243; Yu-Wen Chen, *The Uyghur Lobby: Global Networks, Coalitions and Strategies of the World Uyghur Congress* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).
- 4 Xia Xiaohua 夏小华, "Meiguo, Taiwan poli gonghe Bianba Ciren dangxuan Xizang liuwang zhengfu lingdaoren 美国、台湾破例恭贺边巴次仁当选西藏流亡政府领导人," (U.S. and Taiwan congratulate Penpa Tsering for his election as leader of the Tibetan government in exile). *Radio Free Asia*. May 17, 2021, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/gangtai/hx-05172021093229.html>.
- 5 Tweet by the State Department Spokesperson, May 15, 2021, <https://twitter.com/StateDeptSpox/status/1393376067101069314?lang=de>.
- 6 Phayul Newsdesk, "US, Taiwan congratulate Sikyong-elect Penpa Tsering," May 19, 2021, <http://www.phayul.com/2021/05/19/45676/>.
- 7 Guojia zongjiao shiwu juling 国家宗教事务局令 (State Religious Affairs Bureau Order (No. 5), Zangchuan fojiao huofu zhuanshi guanli banfa 藏传佛教活佛转世管理办法 (Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas), July 13, 2007, [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content\\_923053.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content_923053.htm).
- 8 Warren Smith, "China's Policy on Tibetan Autonomy," East-West Center, Washington Working Papers, no. 2, October 2004, 19, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/35281/EWC\\_WP\\_02.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/35281/EWC_WP_02.pdf).
- 9 Tenzin Dhamdul, "Tibet and Taiwan hit diplomatic home run," *Taipei Times*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/04/09/2003797575>.

## 5 Sweden and the Dalai Lama: Of Rights and Respect

### Agust Börjesson and Torbjörn Lodén

At least since the early 20th century, Tibet has captured the imagination of many Swedes as mythical and exotic. By means of his popular writings and many lectures, the explorer and prolific writer Sven Hedin (1865–1952) contributed greatly to this fascination with Tibet. Beginning in the late 19th century Hedin organized scientific expeditions to Tibet and neighboring areas, and then wrote about his experiences in many popular books that captivated readers in Sweden as well as in many other countries.<sup>1</sup> However, the rather widespread fascination did not mean that Swedes had much solid knowledge about Tibet; the object of the fascination was rather the attraction of the exotic “other”. To a great extent, it is Tibetan culture that has caught the interest of Swedes and triggered our imagination, but in the post-World War II era an increasing number of people have also paid attention to Tibet’s political status. The publication in 1960 of the report by the International Commission of Jurists entitled “Tibet and the Chinese People’s Republic” played an important role in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

A common perception in Sweden has been that Tibet is a “country” in the everyday meaning of this word, a country that belongs to China. However, as to the nature of this “belonging”, views have diverged. Most people have probably felt that Tibet is unjustly occupied and ruled by China. However, there have also been people who have evaluated the Chinese rule in Tibet in more positive terms. This was especially the case in the late 1960s and 1970s, when people with a leftist orientation felt that the Chinese rule was progressive in that it liberated the Tibetan people from the old “reactionary” order characterized by superstition

and oppression exercised in the name of religion.

One effect of China's opening up after the Cultural Revolution, which in itself was certainly a good thing, was that people outside China got to know more about the dark sides of Chinese society, including the exploitation and oppression of the national minorities, not least the Tibetans. In Sweden, it is probably true to say that the image of Chinese rule has become more and more negative after the Cultural Revolution. People see Chinese rule in Tibet as threatening to annihilate Tibet's rich cultural tradition. Especially since the crackdown on the democracy movement in June 1989, this negative image of the Chinese rule has dominated. While China's role in Tibet has been condemned as a threat to Tibetan culture, this culture has gained respect and become admired by more and more people in Sweden. Nowadays it is rare to see references to Tibetan culture as "backward" or "reactionary". One person in particular, the Dalai Lama, has meant more than anyone or anything else to achieve the respect and admiration that Tibetan culture enjoys in Sweden today. This can also be said for the support that has been garnered among Swedes that are in favor of the Tibetan people's claim to real autonomy.

The Dalai Lama has visited Sweden on 11 occasions, the first time in 1973 and the last time in 2018.<sup>3</sup> His extraordinary personal charisma combined with his commitment to modernization, equality, and human rights have gained him tens, if not hundreds of thousands of admirers in Sweden. This popularity has led to the Dalai Lama making appearances in front of thousands of attentive listeners at Stockholm's landmark globe shaped arena during some of his visits to Sweden. In December 1989, he gave a public lecture at Stockholm University that the audience, made up of students and faculty, will never forget. Not least his simultaneously firm but moderate stance vis-à-vis the leaders in Beijing has impressed people here: He sees Tibet's future as a truly autonomous area within a Chinese federation, not as a sovereign independent state. For decades now he has suggested to the Beijing leaders that they should meet and sit down and talk about Tibet's future. The general perception in Sweden is that this is a constructive suggestion that the leaders in Beijing have tragically rejected again and again.

In general, Swedish politicians just like other Swedes have also been greatly impressed by the Dalai Lama, but when representing the Swedish government, they have in general shown caution not to unnecessarily annoy Beijing. Over the years, six Swedish ministers have met him in Stockholm, beginning with the Church Minister Margot Wallström in 1990 and ending with Foreign Minister Anna Lindh and Prime Minister Göran Persson in the year 2000.<sup>4</sup> It is to be noted that no Swedish minister has met him since 2000 and inevitably one wonders to what extent this reflects mounting pressure from the Beijing government. It is also noticeable how the situation in Tibet has in recent years, in terms of attention among the Swedish public, been overshadowed, as it were, by reports about the situation in Xinjiang that an increasing number of scholars and political leaders describe as a cultural genocide perpetrated by the Chinese government. Moreover, Beijing's crackdown on Hong Kong following the 2019 protests received a great deal of attention in Sweden and led to numerous vocal protests from the general public and expressions of concern from the government.<sup>5</sup>

The question who will become the next Dalai Lama is of the utmost importance to the future of Tibet. However, in Sweden this question has thus far received very little attention. In 2021, a parliamentarian asked the then Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde how her government views the right of the Tibetan people to choose their own religious leaders. In her answer, Linde said that the Swedish government "looks seriously upon the human rights situation in Tibet" and mentioned that a report on the human rights situation in China published by her ministry in 2019 described "restrictions" of human rights in Tibet, not least with regard to religious freedom. She also pointed out that Sweden and other EU countries, as late as in March 2021, called upon China "to respect human rights and emphasized in particular that that this also applies to individuals who belong to minority groups such as religious minorities."<sup>6</sup>

In the era of rivalry between Beijing and Washington, matters related to China increasingly make it to the forefront of news headlines and debate. This oftentimes also translates to scrutiny of the human rights situation in China. In Sweden, how to manage relations with China and



best affect its human rights situation are questions that are ever important in forums of public debate and for the Swedish government. Ahead of the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the protests in Lhasa against the treatment of Tibetans in China received much attention in Sweden, as it did in many other places around the world. Newspapers reported on the unrest and the tragic casualties that followed. At the time, a reinvigorated debate in Sweden about the human rights situation in Tibet was the result. In recent years, protests for democracy in Hong Kong and the revelation of "re-education"-camps for Uyghur people in Xinjiang gave an urgency to those issues. Tibet, having been somewhat overshadowed in the Swedish discussion about human rights in China, is situated to once again claim a greater space in political and public debates. One can only hope that a sudden development regarding the Dalai Lama's succession is not the required spark to ignite that flame.

## Notes

- 1 For an informative bibliography of Sven Hedin's works, see: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110516182536/http://www.silk-road.com/bibliography/hedinb3.htm>.
- 2 *Report on Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1960).
- 3 For an archive of the Dalai Lama's travels, see: <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/travels>, His visits to Sweden took place in 1973, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2011, and in 2018.
- 4 After his meeting with the Church Minister Ms. Margot Wallström, a Social Democrat, in 1990, he met Foreign Minister Ms. Margaretha af Ugglas, member of the conservative Moderate Party in 1991, Minister for International Development Mr. Alf Svensson, leader of the Christian Democrats, in 1991, Foreign Minister Ms. Lena Hjelm-Wallén, a Social Democrat, in 1996, Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democrats Mr. Göran Persson and Foreign Minister Anna Lindh, both Social Democrats, in 2000.
- 5 Swedish Government, "Statement of Foreign Policy 2021," February 24, 2021, <https://www.government.se/speeches/2021/02/statement-of-foreign-policy/>.
- 6 Riksdagen, "Panchen Lama," May 12, 2021, [https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svar-pa-skriftlig-fraga/panchen-lama\\_H8122728](https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svar-pa-skriftlig-fraga/panchen-lama_H8122728).

## 6 Interview with David Ståhl: EU, Sweden and the Tibet Question

*David Stahl was President of the Swedish Tibet Committee during the years 1974 – 1988. This is him in conversation with Eerishika Pankaj, Director at ORCA, covering EU's and more specifically Sweden's perspective on the Tibet question.*

**What role do you think the European Union is poised to play in the future of the Tibet question, especially post the beginning of the succession process?**

All countries in the EU have recognized Tibet as an autonomous part of China. The Tibet question has boiled down to human rights, including religious freedom, in Tibet. Most EU governments are unwilling to do something that angers China. As long as China is an important trade partner to EU, this will be the case. French President Emmanuel Macron recently said that the EU should not toe the American line regarding China, but have its own policy. This is something that all EU leaders feel but haven't dared to say openly before. This means that the EU could try to be neutral, or at least not too involved, in a future conflict over Taiwan, and continue to maintain good relations to China. This is, of course, bad news for the Tibet question. When HH the Dalai Lama passes away, there will in all probability be two candidates: One "Chinese" found in Tibet, and one "Tibetan" found in exile. Possibly, the "Tibetan" candidate could be discovered in Tibet and smuggled out to India. The EU will proclaim the right of the Tibetan people to exercise their religion freely, i.e. select their own Dalai Lama without Chinese interference. Not much more than that will happen.

The Chinese have already said that the Indian Government "must" recognize the Chinese Dalai Lama. Historically, the Indian Government has never recognized any Dalai Lama or other Tibetan reincarnated lama. The Indian Government hasn't said anything, but is well aware of the upcoming issue.

**What, according to you, are the Central Tibetan Administration or the Tibet government-in-exile's expectations of the EU?**

The Tibetan government-in-exile knows that the EU won't jeopardize their relations with China for the sake of Tibet. The only way to change the attitude of the EU countries is to create a strong and vociferous opinion among the public concerning Tibet. This is what happened in the 1980s and 1990s. The public sympathy for Tibet and admiration of the Dalai Lama translated into policy, mainly through the various Green Parties and also among liberals. This phenomenon started in Germany and later spread to other countries. In Sweden also, the Left Party (ex-Communist) spearheaded the Tibet question.

**How do major European powers such as France, Germany, and Sweden view Tibet's future?**

(Thank you for calling Sweden a major power!) I don't think the governments have much of a view of Tibet's future. Sections of the people have, but for the governments Tibet is a part of China and it is not much they can do about it except call for human rights to be respected.

**What is the future of the EU's policy on Tibet, especially in light of its new China Strategy? How can Sweden spearhead the EU's Tibet outlook?**

As I stated before, I think Tibet will come to the forefront again only if there is strong public opinion. The Tibet question has been put on the backburner for a number of reasons: It's more difficult to agitate for Tibet after the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile gave up the demand for full independence. That reduced the Tibet question to one of human rights. Although Tibet's supposed autonomy is non-existent, the issue is too technical and complicated to create a strong public opinion about. Nowadays China is criticized on so many issues, like Xinjiang, Taiwan, South China Sea, and various imprisoned journalists and human rights activists. The Tibet question is just one of many. This was not the case, say, 20 years ago. As I said, the only way to go is to create a strong public opinion. One issue could be the Chinese policy of taking Tibetan

(and Uyghur) children from their parents and place them in boarding schools in China, where they learn Chinese language and are made to forget and despise their own culture. This is exactly what the Canadians did to the Native Canadians (Indians) and what we Swedes did to the Samis (Lapps). This parallel could be easily established and it is easy to understand. To be honest, I don't think Sweden will spearhead EU's Tibet outlook.

## 7 Britain, the Dalai Lama, and the Prospects for Post-Succession Planning

**Gray Sergeant**

Britain is no stranger to power politics in the Himalayas or controversies involving Tibet. Through its colonization of the Indian subcontinent to its playing of the Great Game in the region north of the Raj with Russia, Britain had cause for caring about Tibet. British officials interacted with their counterparts in Lhasa and led efforts to delineate the Indo-Tibetan border in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For these reasons, for a long time (up until 2008), Britain stood alone in not recognizing China's sovereignty over Tibet but rather mere 'suzerainty'.<sup>1</sup> Despite this unique position on Tibet's autonomy, however, successive UK governments have been particularly cautious in their dealings with the Dalai Lama. Such timidity does not point to Britain taking an active position to pre-empt potential Chinese attempts to handpick the next spiritual leader of Tibet. As things stand, London already lags behind Washington, who themselves are not especially proactive on the issue.<sup>2</sup> However, Britain's desire to be a meaningful player in the Indo-Pacific, and counter Chinese revisionism there, may force it to take a more robust stance if the circumstances arise.

Of all of Britain's modern prime ministers, it was Margaret Thatcher who made the most powerful statement on Tibet when she remarked that:

*"The Chinese now appear to have resolved upon a programme of "modernisation" that involves shifting the ethnic balance in favour of Han Chinese and away from Tibetans, as a final solution to continuing resistance. I hope they do not succeed. Some 2700 monasteries have already been destroyed since the communists marched in fifty years ago. The systematic extinction of a nation and its culture is unpardonable."<sup>3</sup>*

Her comments, in which she also questioned China's historical claim to Tibet and called on Britain to speak out in international fora, would have caused a serious diplomatic stirring had they been made over a decade earlier. Alas, by the early 2000s, the Iron Lady was already out of power. She was, not uncommonly for an ex-leader, merely advocating others act with greater boldness than she had when in office. The first meeting between a British prime minister and the Dalai Lama, one of the most visible acts of solidarity with the Tibetan cause, would not happen under Thatcher but instead under her successor.

John Major did not seize the first opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama when Tibet's leader visited the UK in early 1991, although new ground was broken. A full breakthrough, for the British Tibet lobby who had been pressing for a meeting, would not come until later and crucially not until other world leaders had. Following a review by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, it was decided that the Dalai Lama would meet the Lord Chancellor in mid-March. Although acknowledging that such a move was unprecedented and may elicit a 'sharp reaction' from the Chinese government, the treatment was deemed entirely fitting for the Dalai Lama's position.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Major refused to meet with the Dalai Lama—a move which attracted widespread criticism, including from *The Times* who branded the act "pointless appeasement".<sup>5</sup>

This initial hesitancy reflected the UK's desire to "remain well within the pack".<sup>6</sup> However, by the end of the year, other western leaders had raced ahead. Most notably, U.S. President George H.W. Bush had a meeting with the Dalai Lama, as to did leaders and foreign ministers from several European nations. These developments meant that Major met with the Dalai Lama only in early December.<sup>7</sup> Even then, specific steps were taken to minimize the disruption to UK-China relations, including avoiding advance publicity and inviting the Archbishop of Canterbury to underline that the Dalai Lama was being received in a religious capacity.<sup>8</sup> Spiritual cover which *The Times*, despite welcoming Major's decision, would label a "semantic fudge".<sup>9</sup> Still, in one year, the UK government had made a decisive shift in its approach towards the Dalai Lama, a move ground-breaking for Britain if not amongst other western countries. The

meeting would set a precedent, semantic fudges included, for future prime ministers, which would last two decades.

Despite their initial promise of an ethical foreign policy, New Labour's approach to Tibet was not remarkably different from the previous Conservative government's. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown also presented their meetings with the Dalai Lama as dialogues with a faith leader. The latter went further, arousing criticism from pro-Tibet parliamentarians, by moving the meeting from No.10 Downing Street to Lambeth Palace.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the precedent to meet with Tibet's spiritual leader was honored.

In May 2012, David Cameron followed these steps by meeting the Dalai Lama, alongside his Deputy Prime Minister, in St Paul's Cathedral. Unsurprisingly, Beijing vigorously protested, accusing the British of "seriously interfer[ing] with China's internal affairs" and warned them to expect "serious consequences".<sup>11</sup> The following year, this pressure appears to have paid off as Downing Street briefed, on the eve of a prime ministerial trip to China, that Britain had "turned a page" on the Dalai Lama and Cameron had no plans to meet him in the foreseeable future.<sup>12</sup> This reversal, perhaps more than any other incident, has been cited to illustrate the side-lining of human rights issues in UK-China relations under Cameron's 'Golden Era', which sought to make Britain Beijing's best partner in the West. So long as this strategy stood, little movement on the UK's Tibet policy could be expected.

Yet despite the death of the Golden Era strategy, following Cameron's departure from No.10 in 2016, no other prime ministers have met with the Dalai Lama. This means that since the early 1990s, there have now been as many prime ministers who have not met the Dalai Lama as have. Undoubtedly, the governing Conservative Party's recent proclivity for quickly dispensing with its leaders explains this statistic. However, the impact of COVID-19 on global travel and the Dalai Lama's health has also limited opportunities for international engagement.<sup>13</sup> These practical matters have meant that the British government's willingness to facilitate such a meeting has not had to be tested. Should it be, then no doubt political sensitivities would once again enter the fray.



Similarly, despite Britain's increasingly cool relations with China, the UK government has not taken a proactive stance against potential interference in the succession of the Dalai Lama by the Communist Party of China (CPC). In reply to a parliamentary question, in June 2016, a Foreign Office minister reaffirmed that "the [UK] Government does not have a policy on the reincarnation of Tibetan Lamas, which includes the Dalai Lama".<sup>14</sup> Tibetan and Tibet solidarity groups have sought to lobby the UK government to take steps to "ensure that no Chinese-appointed Dalai Lama will be given recognition anywhere in the world."<sup>15</sup> Yet since this ministerial reply, there have been no public statements which point to Britain altering its position.

Conversely, Washington has more actively pre-empted attempts by Beijing to meddle in the succession process. The Tibet Policy and Support Act, which was signed into law in 2020, has codified this position, stating that it is the policy of the U.S. that: "Decisions regarding the selection, education, and veneration of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the appropriate religious authorities within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in the context of the will of practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism." The legislation also attempts to deter senior Chinese officials from interfering by promising sanctions, which could include asset freezes and travel bans, under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.<sup>16</sup>

As the International Tibet Network notes in a recent report, although no member of the European Union (EU) has developed similar legislation, its foreign affairs chief has stated the organization's expectation that China respects the Dalai Lama's succession. A view which several foreign ministers from member-states have echoed.<sup>17</sup>

With the U.S. ahead of the pack, followed by parts of Europe, will Britain seek to catch up or, if unwilling to speak out pre-emptively, act in the future if needed? Several factors suggest it would do the latter, if not the former. Firstly, despite having an unremarkable Tibet policy, successive British governments have consistently expressed concerns about human rights in Tibet.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the question of the Dalai Lama's succession falls squarely into the area of religious freedom, an issue which has received significant

attention under successive Conservative governments. Secondly, unlike the past few decades, the new era of great power competition between Washington and Beijing has changed British perceptions of China. Since the end of Cameron's premiership, the UK's approach to China has shifted decisively from one that treated the rising power as a trade opportunity to one which sees it as a systematic competitor. If it was not apparent already, Rishi Sunak, speaking at the Lord Mayor's Banquet, has made it clear: "the so-called 'golden era' is over..."<sup>19</sup> From this speech, however, we shouldn't expect the British government to heighten its declaratory policy on Tibet either, as this would no doubt be seen as unnecessarily provocative. After all, while reaffirming the Golden Era's death, the new prime minister denounced "simplistic Cold War rhetoric".<sup>20</sup> Yet greater alignment with America on China issues, as has been seen in relation to restricting Chinese investments into Britain and UK-US Taiwan Strait contingency planning, appears feasible.

Finally, the UK government's post-Brexit Global Britain agenda may provide an impetus to respond to interference in the Dalai Lama's succession. This agenda, fleshed out in the March 2021 Integrated Review, places particular emphasis on the Indo-Pacific. In this region, which Britain famously promises to 'tilt' to, the strategy outlines Britain's intention to both support open societies and counteract challenges to global norms and rules.<sup>21</sup> However, incorporating the Dalai Lama's post-succession planning into this broader agenda will depend on the extent to which the CPC's co-opting of Tibetan Buddhism is seen as a means by which Beijing can exert greater regional influence, mainly through soft power. Arguments that this is indeed the case, that the Dalai Lama's succession is a geopolitical issue rather than one merely of religious liberty, are beginning to be made.<sup>22</sup> Although they are yet to gain widespread traction, let alone be adopted by governments.

Expectations that the UK government would engage in a religious and cultural power struggle in the Himalayas currently seem like a stretch, 'tilt' or no tilt. Tibet, when it is dealt with, is treated as a human rights issue rather than a geopolitical challenge, as some in South Asia may see it, or an unresolved territorial dispute, as many Tibetans themselves see the

situation. This is true even of Washington and its Tibet Policy and Support Act, although efforts are afoot to change this, and stress the Tibetan people's right to self-determination with the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act, which seeks to affirm the U.S. position that Tibet's legal status remains to be determined under international law.<sup>23</sup>

The approaches of successive prime ministers to meeting the leader of Tibetan Buddhism do not point to Britain taking a proactive policy on the Dalai Lama's succession. Although, if Beijing did attempt to handpick its own successor, the UK government would be forced to take a position and would, in all likelihood, align its declarations condemning the move closely with those of Washington. In this case, Britain's historical ties with Tibet would be of little significance to such a decision. Unlike Hong Kong, where Britain's commitment to supporting the territory's autonomy was made within living memory in the form of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, a treaty lodged at the United Nations. As the past three decades of the UK's purposefully 'remain well within the pack' Tibet policy teach us, appeals to past responsibilities have not spurred British policymakers to lead others on this issue. Instead, the need to present a unified liberal democratic world in the face of Chinese revisionism and Britain's desire to play an active role in meeting this challenge in the Indo-Pacific would likely prove the impetus for such a move. Moreover, such a move would unquestionably be led by the United States, which has already clearly laid out its position and intentions should Beijing meddle.

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the term 'suzerainty' and how Britain applied this to Tibet and its eventual decision to drop the term, see: The UK Parliament, "Tibet", March 20, 2009, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05018/SN05018.pdf>.
- 2 One notable example of Tibet being ignored, despite the activities of some on Capitol Hill, is the Trump Administration's failure to appoint a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. Despite this role being mandated by Congress, the post was vacant for most of Trump's time in the White House. See: Owen Churchill, "US announces new special coordinator for Tibetan issues," *South China Morning Post*, December 21, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3160480/us-announces-new-special-coordinator-tibetan-issues>.
- 3 Margaret Thatcher, *Statecraft* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 173.
- 4 CM (91)10, March 14, 1991, CAB 128/99/10, The National Archives (TNA).
- 5 "Not at Home to Tibet," *The Times*, March 16, 1991.
- 6 Gass to Wall, November 28, 1991, FCO 21/4848, TNA.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Davies to Burns, November 1, 1991, FCO 21/4848, TNA.
- 9 "Speaking for Tibet," *The Times*, December 2, 1991.
- 10 UK Parliament, "Prime Minister's Meeting with the Dalai Lama," May 14, 2008, <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/35845/prime-ministers-meeting-with-the-dalai-lama>.
- 11 "David Cameron's Dalai Lama meeting sparks Chinese protest," *BBC*, May 16, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18084223>.
- 12 Nicholas Watt, "David Cameron to distance Britain from Dalai Lama during China visit," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/nov/30/david-cameron-distance-britain-dalai-lama-china-visit>
- 13 For details on the Dalai Lama's limited international travel in recent years, see: His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama of Tibet, "Schedule," <https://www.dalailama.com/schedule>.
- 14 UK Parliament, "Dalai Lama: Question for Foreign and Commonwealth Office," June 10, 2016, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2016-06-10/40268>.
- 15 The APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, "Free Tibet launches 'Beyond Belief' report and petition," June 20, 2016, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/free-tibet-launches-beyond-belief-report-petition/>.
- 16 US Congress, "Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019," January 30, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/4331/text?format=txt&r=3&s=1>.
- 17 International Tibet Network, "Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the Geopolitics of Reincarnation," October 4, 2022, <https://tibetnetwork.org/geopoliticsoftibetsreincarnation/>.
- 18 UK Parliament, "China: Labour Programme in Tibet," October 7, 2020, <https://hansard.parliament.uk//Commons/2020-10-07/debates/12B1306D-28AC-43B6-BC13-E091E922E177/ChinaLabourProgrammeInTibet#contribution-E03E2EDE-1D34-401E-89C5-63BA098B0FAF>.
- 19 HM Government, "PM speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet," November 28, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-to-the-lord-mayors-banquet-28-november-2022>

- 20 Ibid.
- 21 HM Government, "Global Britain in a competitive age," March 2021, p. 66, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/975077/Global\\_Britain\\_in\\_a\\_Competitive\\_Age-the\\_Integrated\\_Review\\_of\\_Security\\_\\_Defence\\_\\_Development\\_and\\_Foreign\\_Policy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age-the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf).
- 22 For example, see: Rinzin Dorjee, "The Dalai Lama and China's Quest for Buddhist Soft Power," *The Diplomat*, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/10/the-dalai-lama-and-chinas-quest-for-buddhist-soft-power/>; International Tibet Network, "Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the Geopolitics of Reincarnation," October 4, 2022, <https://tibetnetwork.org/geopoliticsoftibetsreincarnation/>.
- 23 For further details on what the bill does, see: International Campaign for Tibet, "New bill says Tibet conflict unresolved, China violating Tibetans' self-determination," July 18, 2022, <https://savetibet.org/new-bill-says-tibet-conflict-unresolved-china-violating-tibetans-self-determination/>.

## 8 The European Debate on the Next Dalai Lama: The Czech Discourse

**Martin Hříbek**

A *European* perspective on the future reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is hard to glean as the EU does not have a common foreign policy position. National discourses not only differ considerably but also determine to a great extent the positions of respective governments at the Council of Europe. Consequently, there is no single answer as to what extent the expressions of sympathy towards the personality of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the spiritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, and Tibetans themselves bear on national policies towards China. Moreover, the accelerating global power struggle between the U.S. and China creates pressure on other countries to take sides with more clarity in all domains.

While conflicts on China's periphery (Taiwan, South China Sea, Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and the India-China border) tend to become increasingly high-profile in European public debate even in the backdrop of the war at Europe's doorstep, the dynamic nature of the ongoing revision of China ties and differing levels of interdependencies developed over time by various EU member-states do not allow the framing of a single "European" policy to, or even a perspective on, such a specific issue as the future reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.

In the absence of a tangible European perspective, I will point to a particularly well-articulated and geo-politically significant national discourse on the Dalai Lama in one European state, the Czech Republic, after the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989. It is well articulated, because the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has often served over the past decades as a salient point of reference and a kind of national-identity projection screen for the country's top politicians and he himself has enjoyed mass popularity among influential segments of the Czech public. It is geo-politically

significant, because Czech political actors repeatedly paved the way for larger recognition on the international scene of not only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile but also the institutions of the ROC in Taiwan and of the emigre communities from Xinjiang.

The outsized stature of the Dalai Lama in a landlocked post-communist country of 10.5 million is largely a personal legacy of former Czech president Václav Havel. Both Havel and the Dalai Lama were shortlisted for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. The Dalai Lama won the Prize but Havel gracefully invited him to Prague in 1990 for a state visit, the first ever such an official reception for the Dalai Lama by a state leader.

They became close friends and to mutual benefit afforded one another what in a different transnational context had been termed “platforms of recognition”.<sup>1</sup> The Dalai Lama was also one of the last people to have seen (and blessed) Havel before his death.<sup>2</sup> Since this first visit, Czech-Tibetan entanglement grew manifold and the Dalai Lama has become a cult figure in the country. So much so that anniversaries of the Tibetan uprising of March 10, 1959, are widely remembered. In 1996, four Czech municipalities officially hoisted Tibetan flags. This number has been growing steadily to over eight hundred towns and municipalities plus numerous schools, colleges, and other institutions. In 2022, the Tibetan flag was also hoisted at both chambers of the Czech parliament as well as on Prague Town Hall. The issue of Tibet and the Dalai Lama regularly resurfaces in high profile public speeches such as in election campaigns<sup>3</sup> and it is largely construed in irreconcilable opposition to pragmatic economic cooperation with China.<sup>4</sup>

This Czech-Tibetan entanglement and its ramifications stem from Havel's vision of Czechoslovakia's post-Cold War global role. In this vision, the historical experience of a small circle of dissidents who had openly challenged the communist regime for long years prior to the Velvet Revolution is accorded a universal value and offered to the domestic public to retrospectively identify with and simultaneously presented to the global audience as a trademark of Czech foreign policy in the form of strong support to groups who resist communist or post-communist authoritarian regimes. In respect to Tibet, it is a kind of orientalist affinity

construction whereby the Czechs are associated with the Tibetans and their victimhood while the CPC-ruled China as the victimizer is associated with a generalized “communist” evil that the dissidents in Czechoslovakia used to fight against and ultimately managed to shrug off, unlike (yet) the Tibetans and other communities in similar symbolic position.<sup>5</sup> This dramatic overture was effective on both counts.

On the domestic stage, it successfully reinscribed anti-communism as a form of national identity. As a foreign policy agenda, it was successful because its moral appeal remained closely aligned to U.S. foreign policy goals. The debate on Tibet assumes such a high profile in Czech discourse precisely because of its self-referential nature—it serves as a litmus paper for speakers’ attitude towards the nation’s post-communist predicament. Václav Havel’s legacy, alignment with U.S. global interests and support to the Tibetan cause remain intrinsically fused. The support for the cause among large segments of the Czech public, unique among European nations in its strength, I dare to argue, thus stems in deeper foundations than simply an infatuation with the charisma of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama’s personality or the appeal of Tibetan Buddhism.

The question of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation is occasionally discussed in Czech media, often with reference to the Dalai Lama’s own contradictory statements on the future of the lineage, namely that it may stop after his death entirely, that his successor could be a woman and that he could be reborn outside of Tibet. In any case, there is a clear understanding that preventing the Chinese government control over the selection process is what is really at stake. This issue also resonates in the camp of pro-Tibet NGOs.<sup>6</sup>

On the political level, the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2022 coincided with the development of intensive relations with the **Central Tibetan Administration (CTA)**. The Senate of the Czech Republic was particularly active. First, a delegation went to Dharamsala led by Vice-President Jiří Oberfalzer to coincide with the March 10 uprising anniversary “to deliver and express our support to free Tibet”.<sup>7</sup> In April, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský met the president of the Tibetan government-in-exile Penpa



Tsering during his visit to Washington DC.

In the end of August, Tsering and his delegation were received in Prague by speakers of both chambers of Parliament. Unlike the Dalai Lama who has been advocating Tibetan autonomy rather than independence and who called himself “a Marxist but not Leninist” on couple of occasions,<sup>8</sup> Tsering came to Prague to promote a more hawkish line—that of moving the external actors to unite and jointly contribute to nothing less than toppling of the communist regime in China.<sup>9</sup> On October 4, the Czech Republic co-sponsored (along with the UK, Canada, and Lithuania) a U.S.-led event where a 30-page report on the Chinese preparations for the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation<sup>10</sup> was revealed on the sidelines of the 51<sup>st</sup> Session of the UNHRC in Geneva.

In November 2022, the highest representatives of the Tibetan parliament were invited to Prague. On that occasion, the Senate under the auspices of the Czech EU Presidency organized a conference entitled “*What can the Czech Republic & the European Union do to address the crisis in Tibet? And why is its resolution in Europe’s interest?*”<sup>11</sup> to advocate a more asertive approach towards China. The most forceful ideas floated at this event included proposals to de-recognize Tibet as a part of China and to press other EU countries towards this end, to establish a special representative on Tibet, and to ensure that China cannot meddle into religious affairs of Tibetans, namely into the succession of the Dalai Lama, so that this transition happens through a “free and fair appointment”.<sup>12</sup>

A member of parliament Eva Decroix questioned how “we” as the international community “will be able to offer protection to the successor”. This question turns out to be still more pressing to her since in case “this leader will be somewhere in the West, in our community, we will have to protect him and it would be our task.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the Dalai Lama embodies Tibetan culture and religion as a symbol and as a “force” and some of that may be lost with his demise. Therefore, “Maybe, there will be some time during which we will have to maybe substitute this force. Maybe, it will be our community partly to be in front to hold this and to keep it.”<sup>14</sup>

Does this audacious statement from a member of the parliamentary

Committee on Foreign Affairs indicate that the Czech Republic would be willing to contribute to the protection of this “force”, in a very concrete and substantial manner? If so, the country would have a couple of unique selling points to qualify for such a role:

- Václav Havel’s legacy and his personal friendship with the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.
- Ensuing wide-scale popularity of the Dalai Lama and things Tibetan with influential segments of Czech public.
- The fact that this contemporary imagination of affinity with Tibet builds on a history of interest in India, an orientalist element in Czech national consciousness.<sup>15</sup>
- Long term history of mutually affording the platforms of recognition in terms of political representation on the international scene.
- Persistence of anti-communism as a hegemonic discourse in the Czech Republic since 1989 (rejuvenated and intensified by the war in Ukraine).
- History of close alignment with U.S. foreign policy interests (alike to most East-European states compared to West European EU members).
- Relative low profile of Christian churches and high rates of reported non-religiousness in Czech population (unlike in most other East-European states), which also allows for affirmative openness to Asian religious traditions.

The Czech Republic has used the EU Presidency effectively and decisively to raise the profile of the Tibetan issue in European politics. From a string of high-level meetings with the representatives of the Tibetan government-in-exile, to public outreach activities, to co-sponsorship of a seminal blueprint for action for like-minded governments on “geopolitics of reincarnation” at the UN, an influential section of Czech political elite has taken it upon itself to spearhead a more radical policy on both Tibet and China and, as a consequence, to directly entangle with the geopolitics of the Dalai Lama’s succession.

The question remains whether such an ambitious goal can be translated into a sustainable leadership role within the EU once the

Presidency moment has waned. The East European member-states have assumed a more prominent position in 2022 and displayed unexpected levels of leadership in supporting Ukraine. However, to gather the same momentum for protection of the successor to the Dalai Lama against the CPC would be a much taller proposition. Besides the Baltic states, few other countries even in the CEE region are likely to be willing to upset their Chinese agenda for the sake of a reincarnating Buddhist leader.

The Dalai Lama succession issue is, indeed, but one piece in the puzzle of debasing China's increasingly assertive sovereignty claims. While the U.S. seeks to constrain China alongwith Russia as a twin-block of autocracies, the EU, particularly France and Germany, would, for obvious strategic and economic reasons, still prefer to see China as a partner<sup>16</sup> and expect that China will exert some leverage over Russia. The strategic autonomy of the EU is at stake both in the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions.

In order to build on its history of affinity with the Dalai Lama and successfully engage in the geopolitics of reincarnation, the Czech Republic needs to seek a larger consensus across the EU, taking advantage of proliferating pro-Tibet groups across European legislative bodies,<sup>17</sup> and set an example for bolder steps unilaterally. A language emphasizing the normative identity of the EU would perhaps serve better the purpose than Cold-War binaries. And finally, it needs to strike a balance between the traditional alignment with U.S. foreign policy and the imperative of increased sensitivity to interests of Asian actors who stand poised to be affected by the succession.

## Notes

- 1 See Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
- 2 Havel was not the only Czech leader who transgressed usual protocol in order to honour the Dalai Lama. Several prime ministers and cabinet ministers have met him over the past two decades, ostensibly in private capacity, yet in their official premises, stirring controversy.
- 3 See Martin Hříbek, "Dalai-Lamaism: An Orientalist Construction of Post-socialist Consciousness," in H. Červinková, M. Buchowski, and Z. Uherek, (eds). *Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 219-224.
- 4 For a critical appraisal of Havel's legacy in Czech foreign policy vis-à-vis Tibet and China see Rudolf Fürst, Podpora Tibetu, "Tchaj-wanu a lidských práv v Číně: Evropská avantgarda, nebo český kýč?" [Support to Tibet, Taiwan, and human rights in China: A European avantgarde or a Czech kitsch?], in Petr Drulák and Ondřej Horký (eds). *Hledání českých zájmů: Obchod, lidská práva a mezinárodní rozvoj* [In Search of Czech Interests: Trade, Human Rights, and International Development] (Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů [Institute of International Relations], 2010), 80-101.
- 5 For the Cold-War roots of the idea of Tibet as the locus of anticommunism see Lydia Walker, "The Political Geography of International Advocacy: Indian and American Cold War Civil Society for Tibet," *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 4 (2022): 1579-1605.
- 6 See, for example: The Czechs Support Tibet group, <https://cesitibetpodporuji.cz/> or Lungta NGO, [www.lungta.cz](http://www.lungta.cz), who even organize visual arts and essay contests for schoolchildren. The winning essay in 2022 was on the topic of Dalai Lama's successor.
- 7 Central Tibetan Administration, "We came to deliver our support to Free Tibet: Vice President of the Czech Senate in Dharamshala," March 10, 2022, <https://tibet.net/we-came-to-deliver-our-support-to-free-tibet-vice-president-of-the-czech-senate-in-dharamshala/>.
- 8 This including a lecture at the author's Alma Mater in September 2013.
- 9 Greg C. Bruno, "Tibetan political leader: The EU needs a special coordinator for China. An interview with Penpa Tsering," September 19, 2022, <https://tibet.net/tibetan-political-leader-the-eu-needs-a-special-coordinator-for-china/>.
- 10 International Tibet Network, "Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and the Geopolitics of Reincarnation," 2022, <https://tibetnetwork.org/geopoliticsoftibetsreincarnation/>.
- 11 It took place on November 14, so that the visit of the Tibetan delegation symbolically overlaps with November 17, International Student's Day, which also marks the beginning of the Velvet Revolution of 1989. See the audio record of the conference at [cesitibetpodporuji.cz](http://cesitibetpodporuji.cz).
- 12 *Ibid.*, Speech by a Czech MP and the Chairman of *Tibet* friendship group Hayato Okamura, min. 3:29:52. Other speakers appealed for the Dalai Lama's address in the European Parliament; for connecting the stories of actual or potential victims of China's expansionism into a single narrative; for practicing more effective due diligence; for leveraging the 1948 Genocide Convention against China as well as for introducing Magnitsky-Act-like legislation.
- 13 *Ibid.* min. 2:38:55.
- 14 *Ibid.* min. 2:39:40.

- 15 See Martin Hříbek, "Czech Indology and the concept of Orientalism," in *Understanding India: Indology and Beyond*, edited by Jaroslav Vacek and Harbans Mukhia. Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica 1-2011, Orientalia Pragensia XXVIII, 2012: 45-56.
- 16 Evident from the resumption of the EU-China human rights dialogue in February 2023, which was heavily criticised by human rights organisations. See Human Rights Watch, Joint Public Letter, February 16, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/16/eu-suspend-meaningless-human-rights-dialogues-beijing>.
- 17 The Tibet Interest Group in the European Parliament is currently headed by a Czech MEP, Mikuláš Peksa. Recently, he led a group of MEPs to Dharamsala on the occasion of the March 10 uprising 2023 anniversary. His visit followed closely that of the Czech Minister of Foreign affairs to India who met the international relations representative of the Tibetan government-in-exile in New Delhi in February 2023. These contacts further testify to the consistency of Czech policy as well as to the effort to internationalise its implications.

## 9 The EU and Beijing's Interference in the Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama

**Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy**

Tibet's geostrategic importance cannot be overestimated. With the Tibetan Plateau under Beijing's control, China is in charge of access to the water that more than 1.9 billion people in Asia depend on. With Tibet's central role in the geopolitics of water, China has had a stronger position in territorial disputes with India and over water flowing from the Plateau toward South and Southeast Asian countries. For Beijing, Tibet is a non-negotiable core issue. Any position or discussion concerning Tibet from the outside equals interference into China's domestic affairs.

As a result, the Chinese leadership has for decades perceived the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as a separatist, claiming that his struggle for autonomy for Tibet is code for independence. Countering his "subversive" activities and cracking down on all those who follow his guidance has been of the highest priority for the CPC. Beyond Tibet, Beijing's treatment of the issue of reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama matters to all those who follow Tibetan Buddhism across the Himalayas, from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh, and into Mongolia. The way the Chinese leadership therefore treats the reincarnation issue and interacts with international norms in the process has broad implications. Given this reality, the European Union (EU) must actively address Beijing's interference attempts in the reincarnation process. Articulating an EU-level opposition of all interference into the reincarnation is key for the EU's credibility.

### **Beijing's Claims**

Tibetan Buddhism follows customized practice to recognize the next Dalai Lama, rooted in the belief in continuous rebirth. Following consultations of the High Lamas of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and the Tibetan public,

the responsibility concerning reincarnation and the recognition of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama rests primarily on the High Lamas. Apart from the reincarnation recognized through such legitimate methods, no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama clarified in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

Beijing claims it has the sole authority to choose the next incarnation of the Tibetan spiritual leader. The Communist Party of China (CPC) has imposed a false narrative as part of its plans to eradicate Tibetan religious traditions and practices, culture, and identity. In its exchanges with Chinese counterparts, the EU has raised concerns regarding Tibet. Yet, as Beijing considers Tibet a core issue, it has refused meaningful discussions. On the question of Chinese interference in the reincarnation, the EU has not adopted a common position.

If the EU turns a blind eye to Beijing's interference, it runs the risk of projecting weakness, not strength in its dealings with China. Not addressing the issue will weaken its integrity as a normative power, and undermine its toughening stance on China. With an emerging, but fragile European convergence on the need to counter the threats presented by China, the EU now has the opportunity to ensure that Tibet is high on its agenda as it pursues a political and economic de-risking of relations with China.<sup>2</sup>

## **EU's Toughening Stance on China**

In April 2021, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the reality is the EU and China have fundamental divergences, be it about their economic systems and managing globalization, democracy and human rights, and these must not be brushed under the carpet.<sup>3</sup> In an assertive speech on the state of EU-China relations in March this year, days before she joined French President Emmanuel Macron in Beijing for meetings with China's leader, she stressed that "we have to recognize that the world and China have changed significantly in the last three years".

Following decades of economic cooperation, since Xi Jinping came to power the EU's stance on China has hardened. It was in 2016 that the

EU first noted that “China’s authoritarian response to domestic dissent is undermining efforts to establish the rule of law”, language that has since become common in Brussels.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the EU labeled China a “systemic rival”.<sup>5</sup> In 2021, it noted that Beijing had taken a more assertive line, continuing its “authoritarian shift” with further closure of the domestic political space, increasing social controls and repression in Xinjiang and Tibet.<sup>6</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing’s policies in Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, its economic coercion against Lithuania and its rhetorical alignment with Moscow following the latter’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have aggravated tensions.<sup>7</sup> The Commission president stressed the way China interacts with Putin’s war will determine the future of EU-China relations. Both Russia and China have been seeking to discredit democracy, and have thrived on democracies’ lack of political will to protect their interests. While Brussels has embraced a realist dimension in its discourse, progress on rebalancing ties is slow. For decades, Beijing has managed to keep Tibet off the agenda of bilateral discussions. With no alignment in member-states’ China policies, the EU remains limited in its impact on issues China considers non-negotiable.

With the European Parliament (EP) leading efforts, the EU has urged China to live up to its own international commitments when it comes to the human rights situation in Tibet. In 1998, the EP became the first parliament in Europe to allow the Dalai Lama to address an official meeting on Tibet despite protests from the Chinese government.<sup>8</sup> Over the past three decades, the EP has passed over 50 resolutions on Tibet, China or human rights, advocating for a peaceful resolution of the divergences between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government through dialogue. European legislators have recognized the Dalai Lama’s calls for a middle way of genuine cultural and political autonomy and religious freedom – not independence.

In its 2019 resolution, the EP condemned China’s patriotic education campaigns, including interferences in the management of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, urging the Chinese government to “uphold the linguistic, cultural, religious and other fundamental freedoms of



Tibetans".<sup>9</sup> In response, Beijing has urged non-interference, claiming that any criticism of its human rights record is only meant to obstruct China's development.<sup>10</sup> By weaponizing this claim, Beijing has been able to shut the door to discussions on the Tiananmen massacre, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan.

With EU-China relations currently stuck in a downward spiral, the space for the EU to raise concerns over Tibet has now shrunk even further. China has not only continued to cancel discussions, by for example suspending the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in 2019 after rounds of tit-for-tat sanctions, but it is seeking to shape the international discourse on global norms in UN resolutions.<sup>11</sup> Beijing is working on imposing its own alternative model and discourse based on its concept of 'democracy that works', in contrast to claims that Western liberal democracy does not.<sup>12</sup> Xi's obsession with defending core issues while protecting China's image has not changed.

For Xi, winning the battle of narratives on Tibet (by rebutting democracy) is vital for his domestic legitimacy inside China. If the international community refuses to recognize the candidate that the CPC imposes as the next Dalai Lama, Xi's legitimacy is on the line. This is all the more important for Beijing, as China is seeking greater influence in the Global South. It is only if the international community stands united in its condemnation of the CPC's interference that they can weaken the CPC's political legitimacy that rests on false pillars.

## **Tibet and the World**

China's anti-terrorism law prescribes a broad definition of terrorism, including violent attacks but also thought or speech that seeks to split the state, which has implications for Tibet. As such, Chinese media have directly accused the Dalai Lama of inciting "hatred, terror, and extremist action".<sup>13</sup> Seen from the perspective of authoritarian control, interfering in the reincarnation issue is therefore an indispensable—and natural—step towards full control of Tibet, and therefore non-negotiable. This approach is irreconcilable with the principle of sustainable development, which is possible only with the active cooperation of those most affected by

policies on the ground, which Beijing has refused. The Chinese leadership has excluded the idea of cooperation on Tibet also with its neighbors.

For democracies across the globe, the Dalai Lama is a symbol of Tibet's non-violent struggle. He is the foundation of Tibet's internationalization unfolding over the past decades, under his political leadership until 2011 (when he decided to step down as a political leader) and continues to provide spiritual guidance until this day.<sup>14</sup> His leadership has ensured that Tibet's struggle for genuine autonomy remains peaceful. Democracies have embraced his non-violent stance, and are working to develop closer coordination to address Beijing's authoritarian push. Yet, structured international coordination between democracies is still a work in progress, including on the issue of Chinese interference in the reincarnation.

While China's coercion remains most acute within the Indo-Pacific, democracies are now more willing to embrace minilateral security-focused cooperation mechanisms, view China as more of a security risk and reflect on how to reduce economic dependencies. With its 2020 Tibet Policy and Support Act, the United States made it official U.S. policy that the succession issue is a strictly religious matter. Should China attempt to identify a future Dalai Lama, under the Act they will face sanctions including the freezing of their assets and denial of entry to the U.S. Washington has therefore doubled down on previous warnings by making clear the consequences for transgressing the Act.

The EU is shifting away from overreliance on trade with China and is focusing instead on de-risking relations, though it has stopped short of embracing a common position on the reincarnation issue. In April 2020, in a written answer to a question from several Members of the European Parliament, the EU's High Representative Josep Borrell urged China to respect the succession of the Dalai Lama.<sup>15</sup> "The European Union has consistently indicated that it expects China to respect the Dalai Lama's succession, in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist standards". Borrell said that "the European Union will continue to express its position on this issue". Yet, notwithstanding the EU's growing skepticism of China as a partner in light of the China-Russia "no limit" friendship, Tibet will remain a difficult issue for the EU to pursue and make progress on, which

highlights the importance of broad international coordination in order to amplify the support for Tibet.

Beijing considers any moves towards closer coordination among democracies as anti-China. When in April 2021, Lithuania's Parliament condemned Beijing's repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang as genocide, China's embassy in Vilnius said this was "an anti-China farce choreographed by some anti-China individuals who intended to smear China".<sup>16</sup> On Taiwan, China has imposed its One China principle, falsely claiming that it has been embraced by democracies, while in reality many democracies, including the EU as a whole, have their own One China policy.<sup>17</sup> Going forward, pushing back against China's false narrative and information manipulation is vital for democratic resilience in general, and for the EU's own interests.

## Conclusion

"In order to be involved in my reincarnation, firstly, they should accept Buddhism. Or religion. [...] Then they should recognize Chairman Mao Zedong's reincarnation. Deng Xiaoping's reincarnation. Then, they have reason to show some interest about the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. Otherwise, nonsense!" This is what the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, had to say to Beijing's claims that the Chinese communist leadership has the sole right to identify his successor.<sup>18</sup>

Tibet is not just a human rights issue. Whatever happens in Tibet will have regional implications and will impact China's relations with its neighbors. Whether the EU counters Beijing's false narrative and opposes its interference will also shape the future of the rules-based international order, some of which rules Beijing continues to violate, facing little democratic push-back in the process.

In a 2001 speech to the European Parliament, the Dalai Lama stated, "it is clear now that only increased, concerted and consistent international efforts will persuade Beijing to change its policy on Tibet".<sup>19</sup> In line with its position on Tibet, there are several measures the EU should consider going forward. First, the EP should table a resolution urging the bloc to take a clear stance and firmly oppose interference in the reincarnation

issue. Second, given that the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue resumed following a joint pledge at the April 2022 bilateral summit, the EU must ensure the issue remains on the agenda.

Third, the EP's Human Rights Committee should hold a public hearing on the reincarnation issue, so as to increase pressure on Beijing and raise awareness. Proactively creating content to empower European citizens in the face of Beijing's information manipulation is necessary to effectively counter threats. Finally, the EU should seek to develop a common stance with its like-minded partners, and help strengthen the emerging democratic convergence on China. This is vital in order to send Beijing a message and therefore deter further aggression and interference. The European leadership must understand the gravity of the issue and urge broader awareness of the implications of Beijing's interference in Tibetan affairs.

## Notes

- 1 Dalailama.com, "Reincarnation," <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>.
- 2 European Commission, "Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre," March 30, 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_23\\_2063](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063).
- 3 Stuart Lau, "EU slams China's 'authoritarian shift' and broken economic promises," Politico, April 25, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-china-biden-economy-climate-europe/>.
- 4 European Commission, "Elements for a new EU strategy on China," June 22, 2016.
- 5 European Commission, "EU-China – A strategic outlook," March 12, 2019.
- 6 Stuart Lau, n. 3.
- 7 Konstantinas Andrijauskas, "An Analysis of China's Economic Coercion against Lithuania," Council on Foreign Relations, May 12, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/analysis-chinas-economic-coercion-against-lithuania>.
- 8 International Campaign for Tibet, "The European Parliament and Tibet," <https://www.savetibet.eu/eu-institutions/european-parliament/>.
- 9 European Parliament, "Joint motion for a resolution on China, notably the situation of religious and ethnic minorities," April 17, 2019.
- 10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The majority of Countries oppose the interference in China's internal affairs in the name of human rights," October 21, 2021.
- 11 "China sanctions EU officials over Uyghur row," DW, March 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-sanctions-eu-officials-in-response-to-uyghur-row/a-56948924#:~:text=Beijing%20has%20said%20it%20will,Beijing%20for%20abuses%20in%20Xinjiang>.
- 12 "Full text: China: Democracy that works," Xinhuanet, December 4, 2021, [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c\\_1310351231.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/04/c_1310351231.htm).
- 13 Shannon Tiezzi, "In war on terror, China takes aim at Tibet," *The Diplomat*, February 3, 2015.
- 14 Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, "Tibet: Dalai Lama steps down as PM, successor chosen," April 27, 2011.
- 15 Central Tibetan Administration, "European Union says it expect China to respect Dalai Lama's succession in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist standards," April 9, 2020, <https://tibet.net/european-union-demands-china-to-respect-dalai-lamas-succession-in-accordance-with-tibetan-buddhist-standards/>.
- 16 LRT, "Chinese embassy slams Uighur genocide talks in Lithuania as 'farce'," April 23, 2021.
- 17 Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (ed.), "Unpacking Beijing's narrative on Taiwan," ISDP, April 2023, <https://www.isdp.eu/publication/unpacking-beijings-narrative-on-taiwan/>.
- 18 Campbell Clark, "Dalai Lama mocks China's interest in naming his successor," *The Globe and Mail*, April 27, 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/dalai-lama-mocks-chinas-interest-in-naming-his-successor/article4103254/>.
- 19 Dalailama.com, "Speech of HH the Dalai Lama to the European Parliament, Strasbourg," October 14, 2001, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/strasbourg-speech-2001>.

# 10 Japan and its Stake in the Dalai Lama's Succession

**Yoko Ishii**

His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is widely known in Japan, and he is loved, respected, and accepted. If you go to a Japanese bookstore, you will quickly notice that the works of His Holiness are lined up in the religious and philosophical sections. In the fall of 2018, when His Holiness gave his special lecture in my hometown Fukuoka, I was also given the opportunity to have an audience with His Holiness along with my husband and our friends.<sup>1</sup> Also, during the International Conference of Tibet Support Groups in the fall of 2019, I had an audience with His Holiness at his official residence in Dharamsala and listened to his speech.<sup>2</sup> I personally respect him with all my heart and wish him a long life. I hesitate to write an article that assumes a post-Dalai Lama contingency, but I would like to present my arguments for the purpose of academic discussion.

Before COVID-19, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama visited Japan almost every year,<sup>3</sup> giving lectures at various places in Japan and interacting with people. His Holiness's lectures are always packed to capacity wherever they are held in Japan. He has also given lectures in front of National Diet (Parliament) members.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Japanese government issued a visa to His Holiness and accepted his entry into the country. First of all, I would like to say that this situation is actually very rare in Asia. For example, South Korea has yet to permit His Holiness into the country.<sup>5</sup> His visits to Taiwan have been stopped since 2009.<sup>6</sup> Mongolia was sanctioned by China after accepting a visit by him in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that almost all Mongolians follow Tibetan Buddhism, Mongolia, which has suffered under Chinese sanctions, has not received a visit from him since. The Buddhist nation, Thailand last accepted a visit from him in 1993 and has not issued a visa since.<sup>8</sup> Japan is the only country that has

not yielded to Chinese pressure and continues to accept his visits almost every year. This is the reality of Asia, which is directly under pressure from China.

In fact, among Japanese politicians, the idea of respecting His Holiness the Dalai Lama is widely shared. This, even though the Japanese government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have for long been soft toward China, Japan's Parliamentary Support Group for Tibet has more than 100 members, including major National Diet members from both the ruling and opposition parties. This number is the largest in the world.<sup>9</sup> The total number of National Diet members in Japan is about 700. That means about 15 percent of National Diet members are in this support group.

However, on the other hand, the Japanese government has so far provided almost no concrete assistance to Tibet. In Japan, unlike Western countries, only the government has budgets, and the National Diet does not. Moreover, the Japanese government has never provided funds to support Tibet in consideration of its relationship with China. It wasn't until 2020 that the government funded a support project of water supply, sewerage facilities, and public toilets for Tibetan refugees living in India, with the aim of actually helping Tibet.<sup>10</sup> Though this indicated a paradigm shift, the Japanese government did not use the word 'Tibet' from the beginning to the end of this project. It only said that it was helping 'people living in India.'

Also, the National Diet issued a resolution in 2022 on human rights violations in China, including in Tibet. The title of the resolution is "Resolution on Serious Human Rights Situation in Xinjiang Uyghur and Others".<sup>11</sup> This was another first for Japan.

However, National Diet resolutions are traditionally passed by unanimous vote, not by majority vote. As a result, the resolution became extremely weak under the influence of the pro-China political party Komeito. The resolution states, "In recent years, the international community has expressed concern over serious human rights situations, including violations of religious freedom and forced imprisonment, in Xinjiang Uyghur, Tibet, Southern Mongolia, Hong Kong, and other countries." Instead of the term 'human rights oppression', the term 'human rights situation' was used. Nor

was it able to single out China. It's not a condemnation, just an expression of concern. Unfortunately, such weak words were necessary in order to achieve unanimity in the Japanese National Diet.

Among Asian countries, Japan has a high level of interest in His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet, and Japan has, as seen above, done more than others. However, the country has always taken into consideration the need to balance its relations with China and the pro-China faction in the country. And much of the interest in Tibet by the Japanese government and Japanese people is largely due to the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As I said at the beginning of this article, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is highly respected in Japan. I've never met anyone in Japan who speaks ill of him. The fact that he has won the Nobel Peace Prize is also a big plus in the Japanese mindset.

It is terrifying to me to imagine a Japan post His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. Arguably, Japanese people's interest in Tibet will decline. There will be less news about Tibet. Many Japanese will not be able to picture a specific figure when they hear or talk about Tibet. I am very concerned about the time it takes for His Holiness to reincarnate and grow to take on the mantle.

We must never allow the Chinese government to interfere in the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. That is for the Tibetans to decide, and we Tibetan supporters must do our best to protect it with full force.

We must now make efforts to create public opinion in support of Tibet without relying on His Holiness' personality. It'll be too late if it's after.

It's also necessary to build solid partnerships among Tibet, Uyghur, Southern Mongolia, and Hong Kong. All those who value freedom and human rights must work together to face all the problems caused by China's hegemony and expansionism. I could say that the Japanese government is now the only country in Asia that is barely disseminating the Tibetan issue. My husband Hidetoshi Ishii often says, "Japan should be the fortress of freedom in Asia." Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, Japan has also made progress in strengthening its defense capabilities and improving its economic security. All of this is to counter China. The idea is to raise a strong voice from Japan that it will not allow China's hegemony.



## Notes

- 1 Hidetoshi Ishii, "His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama," Hidetoshi Ishii Official Website, November 23, 2018, <https://hidetoshi.website/i-met-his-holiness-the-14th-dalai-lama-in-fukuoka/>.
- 2 Hidetoshi Ishii, "8th International Conference of Tibet Support Groups in Dharamshala," Hidetoshi Ishii Official Website, November 5, 2019, <https://hidetoshi.website/8th-international-conference-of-tibet-support-groups/>.
- 3 Liaison Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for Japan & East Asia, "法王来日履歴," November 22, 2018, <https://www.tibethouse.jp/%E6%B3%95%E7%8E%8B%E6%9D%A5%E6%97%A5%E5%B1%A5%E6%AD%B4/>.
- 4 Liaison Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for Japan & East Asia, "10日目 東京 最終日 / ダライ ラマ法王、日本訪問の最終日," November 7, 2011, (<https://www.tibethouse.jp/10%E6%97%A5%E7%9B%AE%E3%80%80%E6%9D%B1%E4%BA%AC%E3%83%BB%E6%9C%80%E7%B5%82%E6%97%A5%EF%BC%8F%E3%83%80%E3%83%A9%E3%82%A4%E3%83%BB%E3%83%A9%E3%83%9E%E6%B3%95%E7%8E%8B%E3%80%81%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC%E8%A8%AA/>). See also "東京 / 議員会館での講演 近代科学/ 仏教科学に関するパネルディスカッション," November 13, 2012, <https://www.tibethouse.jp/%E6%9D%B1%E4%BA%AC%EF%BC%8F%E8%AD%B0%E5%93%A1%E4%BC%9A%E9%A4%A8%E3%81%A7%E3%81%AE%E8%AC%9B%E6%BC%94%E3%80%80%E8%BF%91%E4%BB%A3%E7%A7%91%E5%AD%A6%E4%BB%8F%E6%95%99%E7%A7%91%E5%AD%A6%E3%81%AB%E9%96%A2/>); "超党派国会議員グループ向けのダライ ラマ法王のスピーチ," November 20, 2013, <https://www.tibethouse.jp/%E8%B6%85%E5%85%9A%E6%B4%BE%E5%9B%BD%E4%BC%9A%E8%AD%B0%E5%93%A1%E3%82%B0%E3%83%AB%E3%83%BC%E3%83%97%E5%90%91%E3%81%91%E3%81%AE%E3%83%80%E3%83%A9%E3%82%A4%E3%83%BB%E3%83%A9%E3%83%9E%E6%B3%95%E7%8E%8B/>; "ダライ ラマ法王、国会議員と会見," April 6, 2015, <https://www.tibethouse.jp/%E3%83%80%E3%83%A9%E3%82%A4%E3%83%BB%E3%83%A9%E3%83%9E%E6%B3%95%E7%8E%8B%E3%80%81%E5%9B%BD%E4%BC%9A%E8%AD%B0%E5%93%A1%E3%81%A8%E4%BC%9A%E8%A6%8B-2/>); "国会議員会館で世界平和を説かれる," November 16, 2016, <https://www.tibethouse.jp/%E5%9B%BD%E4%BC%9A%E8%AD%B0%E5%93%A1%E4%BC%9A%E9%A4%A8%E3%81%A7%E4%B8%96%E7%95%8C%E5%B9%B3%E5%92%8C%E3%82%92%E8%AA%AC%E3%81%8B%E3%82%8C%E3%82%8B/>.
- 5 "Dalai Lama asks how many more years before he can visit S. Korea," *Hankyoreh*, September 4, 2016, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/759802.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/759802.html).
- 6 "China warns Taiwan not to allow Dalai Lama to visit," *Reuters*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-taiwan-dalailama-idUKKCN11K0C8>.
- 7 "China says hopes Mongolia learned lesson after Dalai Lama visit," *Reuters*, January 24, 2017, <https://jp.reuters.com/article/us-china-mongolia-dalailama/china-says-hopes-mongolia-learned-lesson-after-dalai-lama-visit-idUSKBN158197>.
- 8 "Dalai Lama: Blackballed from Thailand," *MinnPost*, February 12, 2010, <https://www.minnpost.com/global-post/2010/02/dalai-lama-blackballed-thailand/>.
- 9 Hakubun Shimomura, "日本チベット国会議員連盟総会," Hakubun Shimomura Official Website, September 21, 2022, <https://www.hakubun.biz/2022/09/21/%E6%97%A5>

E6%9C% AC%E3%83%81%E3%83%99% E3%83%83%E3%83%88%  
E5%9B% BD%E4%BC%9A%E8%AD%B0%E5%93% A1%E9%80%A3%  
E7%9B%9F%E7%B7%8F%E4%BC%9A/.

- 10 Yoko Ishii, "Secret Support for Tibet: Next Let's Acknowledge the Exiled Government," *Japan Forward*, December 29, 2022, <https://japan-forward.com/secret-support-for-tibet-next-lets-acknowledge-the-exiled-government/>.
- 11 The House of Representatives, Japan, "新疆ウイグル等における深刻な人権状況に対する決議案（第二〇八回国会、決議第一号）," February 1, 2022, [https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb\\_annai.nsf/html/statics/topics/ketugi220201-1.html](https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_annai.nsf/html/statics/topics/ketugi220201-1.html).

# III

## Succession: A Strategic Preview

# 11 Special Paper: The ‘Post-Dalai Era’ — The Party Prepares for the Tibetan Leader’s Death

**Robert Barnett**

Twenty years ago, a series of diplomats from the Chinese Consulate or its UN Mission came to visit me in my office in New York every two or three weeks, supposedly to get my thoughts on how China should improve its policies in Tibet or communicate them to the West. Those questions were, of course, a fabrication (“Why would we care about the opinion of some foreign professor of Tibetan studies?” one of the diplomats told me years later). The real purpose of the visits was always clear, although it was only ever mentioned in the last minutes of each meeting: their mission was to collect intelligence, and the principal topic they were interested in was the health of the Dalai Lama. Their interest in the exiled Tibetan leader’s well-being was evidently driven not by sympathy but by a wish to get prior warning of his coming death. And, while China’s diplomats and agents across the world seek out clues about the Tibetan leader’s state of health, its policy-makers in Beijing and Lhasa have been developing detailed measures to manage the fallout from his death within Tibet and overseas.

Public statements by Chinese policy-analysts present the Dalai Lama’s death as important to China because it will provide an opportunity to fragment the Tibetan exile movement whilst it is leaderless.<sup>1</sup> But the phrase used uniformly in official media reports to describe the coming event suggests a more serious concern: These refer to the Dalai Lama’s death as a “major challenge” in Chinese (*zhongda tiaozhan* 的重大挑战),<sup>2</sup> and as a “critical period” in Tibetan (*‘gag rtsa’i dus skabs* འགག་རྩའི་དུས་སྐབས་).<sup>3</sup> The official plans to deal with this challenge suggest a fear among officials that the response among Tibetans in Tibet to the Dalai Lama’s death, should it happen abroad, could present a serious risk to stability in Tibet. But

those plans focus, above all, on controlling the selection process of the next Dalai Lama. This in turn suggests that, at some level, Beijing's strategists either have reverted to Mao's view in the 1950s that China's rule of Tibet is uncertain unless it is endorsed by the Dalai Lama or a religious leader of equivalent status,<sup>45</sup> or fear that a future Dalai Lama outside China could still threaten its position in Tibet.

## **The Cooperation Phase**

In the early 1990s, Beijing began to seek a reliable method by which it could manage the selection and upbringing of religious leaders in Tibet who might in time have sufficient stature to replace or succeed the Dalai Lama. Initially, Beijing's approach was to develop a collaborative model with leading Tibetan religious institutions based on respect for traditional practices. This required the Communist Party of China (CPC) to perform a feat of theoretical self-contradiction: It had to endorse the credibility of the *trulku* (*sprul sku*) concept. This is the belief that after their death, certain highly-accomplished lamas, unlike normal beings or ordinary monks,<sup>6</sup> are reborn as humans because of a vow they have taken to help other beings achieve enlightenment; these reincarnates, it is believed, can retain some of their former spiritual abilities despite the rigors of the rebirth process and therefore can be identified as infants.<sup>7</sup> These *trulkus* (the term means literally "emanation bodies", usually rendered as "reincarnate lamas") are identified through certain divination rituals, which might include consulting mountain deities, drawing lots, seeking visions in an oracle lake, studying dreams or conducting other ritual practices in order to find clues leading to the location of the reincarnated child. A number of children will then be visited by the former lama's close followers, who will look for signs that one child is, for example, drawn to them or shows some familiarity with the previous lama's belongings. If that child is then confirmed by other leading lamas as a *trulku*, he or she will then be brought up in a monastery and, as an adult, will become a highly influential figure in the local community, religious school or wider region, or, in the case of the Dalai Lama, will become the leader of the nation. This is the politico-religious belief-system, unique to Tibetan

Buddhism, that the Party, notwithstanding its commitment to atheism, decided in the 1990s implicitly to endorse in the hope of ensuring that the most important of all Tibetan *trulkus*, after the Dalai Lama, would become future spokesmen for its rule.

The first major outcome of this policy emerged in 1992 as the result of a secret agreement brokered through the extraordinary persistence and ingenuity of a Britain-based exile Tibetan lama, the late Akong Rinpoche.<sup>8</sup> In that agreement, the Party allowed Akong Rinpoche to return to Tibet and to find and identify a child there as a *trulku* in the traditional way. In return the exile lamas whom he represented agreed that the child could remain in Tibet and be educated there instead of being taken secretly to India for training, as had been the general practice until that time, on condition that China allow him continued access to his exiled teachers (that condition was not kept, and in late 1999 the child fled to India). The boy that Akong and his fellow-lamas identified within Tibet was the reincarnation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, among the most prominent of all religious figures in Tibet.<sup>9</sup> His discovery was widely publicized by the Chinese media and he was later flown to Beijing for a one-on-one audience with China's then leader, Jiang Zemin.<sup>10</sup> The Karmapa was 10 years old at that time. He became the first *trulku* to be officially recognized since the 1950s by both the modern Chinese state and the exiled Dalai Lama.

One year later, the Party agreed to another, even more important collaboration: In mid-1993 Beijing sent, through another lama, Chadrel Rinpoche, an invitation to the Dalai Lama to suggest a similar arrangement concerning the search for an even more significant reincarnation, that of the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, the most influential of all religious leaders to have remained in Tibet after the Dalai Lama's flight to India in 1959.<sup>11</sup> At the end of August 1993, however, according to the Tibetan side, China abruptly cut off all formal channels of communication with the exiles.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for China's sudden severance of contact with Dharamsala were never made public, but Jagannath Panda has suggested that China presumed contact with the Dalai Lama might derail ongoing talks with New Delhi, with which Beijing was about to sign an important agreement concerning settlement of their border dispute.<sup>13</sup> The Dalai Lama publicly pleaded for

Beijing to resume its contacts with him,<sup>14</sup> but China had shut down any chance of collaboration on the selection of a successor to the Panchen Lama or other religious leaders in Tibet.

Even so, the Party was still planning at that time to let Tibetans within Tibet use traditional means to identify reincarnated lamas, provided they obtained subsequent approval from the state.<sup>15</sup> In April 1995, a draft law to that effect was presented to the token parliament of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Over the next six months, however, that draft was changed five times, with each version diminishing the role of lamas and traditional practices while increasing state control over the process.<sup>16</sup> In November that year, following the unilateral recognition by the Dalai Lama of a child as the next Panchen Lama, China ended even token gestures of cooperation with the exiles. It abducted the infant named by the Dalai Lama, issued new regulations stating that any search for a *trulku* must have prior permission from the state and be managed by state officials at every stage,<sup>17</sup> and enthroned its own infant appointee as the only legal Panchen reincarnation. This ended China's brief experiment with openness to collaboration with the Tibetan Buddhist leadership on the selection of reincarnate lamas in Tibet.

## **Denunciation and the 'Late-Dalai Era'**

Over the following decade, the main focus of the men ruling Tibet on behalf of the CPC became limiting the Dalai Lama's influence within Tibet. Their strategy was simple: To destroy his personal reputation. A major meeting chaired by Jiang Zemin in July 1994, known as The Third Forum on Tibet Work, announced four slogans that had to be memorized by every public figure, repeated in almost every media article and public speech, and endorsed by every government employee. These denounced the Dalai Lama as a blasphemer, fraud, hypocrite, separatist and "the source of all turmoil in Tibetan society".<sup>18</sup> Photographs of the Tibetan leader and prayers to him were proscribed, and tens of thousands of monks and nuns in the TAR were required to denounce him.<sup>19</sup>

By 2011, perhaps aware that this campaign of denunciation had not worked,<sup>20</sup> officials appear to have begun to develop a set of more

sophisticated mechanisms to prepare for the Dalai Lama's death. Their approach was summarized in two main formulae—"actively deal with the major challenge of the transition from the 'Late-Dalai' [Era] to the 'Post-Dalai' [Era] (*'hou dalai' xiang 'dalai hou'*, "后达赖"向"达赖后"),"<sup>21</sup> and "be aware of the acute and complex situation of the Late-Dalai period in the anti-secession struggle."<sup>22</sup> The Late-Dalai Era refers to the current period up until the Dalai Lama dies. Policy analysts in China date this period from March 2011, when the Dalai Lama retired as head of the exile Tibetan administration; they describe that act as a form of subterfuge ("advance by retreat") during which the Dalai Lama "is laying the groundwork to set up his posthumous regime,"<sup>23</sup> meaning that he is plotting ways to promote secessionism in Tibet from behind the scenes. To frustrate these efforts, the basic aim of Chinese policy in this period is to counter the Dalai Lama's influence and to prevent it from reaching Tibetans within Tibet.

### *Managing the Monasteries*

The main policies for countering the Dalai Lama's influence in the Late-Dalai Era largely consist, as always in Tibet, of efforts to upgrade and extend security operations and controls over information flows, communications, movement, education, religious practice, social organizations, local disputes, and other activities that might lead to dissent. According to two Tibetan officials interviewed in private as part of the research for this paper, two particular policy measures constitute the core of the Late-Dalai Era strategy, but are not highlighted as such in public statements. The first of these measures is "temple management." This term in the Tibetan context refers to controlling the running of monasteries and their residents. It is in part a response to the findings of an internal Party research project in 2008 that surveyed the views of 4,975 Tibetan monks and nuns and concluded that they "lacked awareness of the Motherland, civic consciousness and legal consciousness, and they are unclear about the rights and wrongs of the Dalai clique's infiltration and incitement."<sup>24</sup> But in fact the focus by CPC officials in Tibet on monasteries is based on a long-standing adjudication by the Party that monks and nuns are the primary channel for influence and "infiltration" by the Dalai Lama and



his exile “clique”; tens of thousands have been imprisoned, expelled from monasteries, or subjected to repeated political re-education over the last four decades or more on suspicion of residual disloyalty to the regime.

In the 1980s, the state had nevertheless allowed monasteries a certain degree of self-management, at least on paper, allowing them to form “Democratic Management Committees” chosen (at least in theory) and staffed by the residents. From 1996, however, every monastic had to undertake three months of intensive study followed by an examination requiring them to denounce the Dalai Lama in writing.<sup>25</sup> Since then, successive education programs have been carried out in Tibetan monasteries, initially under the title of “patriotic education” but after 2008 referred to as “legal education”.<sup>26</sup> In September 2011, a major shift took place in state control of monasteries: The “Democratic Management Committees” were abruptly replaced and instead, for the first time, permanent teams of cadres were installed in every monastery at township-level or above in the TAR to run all aspects of monastic life. Their tasks include compiling a file on each monk or nun and conducting systematic political training with a “focus on exposing and criticizing the Dalai”.<sup>27</sup>

Temple management has been re-framed since 2018 within a more systematic program that requires all monks and nuns to adhere to “Four Standards”. These include “political reliability” and “playing an active role at critical moments”. The meaning of the latter requirement has not been clarified in public statements but appears to be key to the Late-Dalai Era strategy: The term “critical moment” almost certainly refers primarily to the death of the Dalai Lama, and the “active role” includes obeying the Party-State on its sole right to manage the search for and selection of the next Dalai Lama.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the state has set up at least eight Buddhist training institutes in Tibetan areas of China where leading monks are given intensive education; official media reports note that religious teachings in these institutes should increasingly be given in Chinese.<sup>29</sup> The institute in Lhasa has a special feature: It provides primary-level teaching for infant *trulkus*, who are shown in media footage as wearing monastic robes.<sup>30</sup> Since no children are allowed by law to become monks in the PRC—there are constant campaigns across Tibet to prevent monasteries from enrolling

monks under the age of 18 or teaching local children—this appears to be another instance of ideological dissonance: The Party overrides its own policies in order to ensure that young *trulkus* will receive correct political education in their early years.

More recently, China has introduced new restrictions on religious teaching that takes place outside monasteries. These target in particular Tibetan lamas who have large numbers of ethnic Chinese followers, which in the cases of some lamas who give teachings online in Chinese, can run into millions. In 2022, China passed a new regulation which limited religious teaching in a more significant way: It bans any religious teaching via social media or online without official permission. The regulation, which applies to all religions in China, has shut down, at least for the time being, the main method used by Tibetan lamas in the last decade to reach their millions of followers in Tibet and China.<sup>31</sup> In addition, there appears to be a policy to close down religious teaching by Tibetan lamas in non-Tibetan areas of China, and a number of inland Chinese provinces have issued orders forbidding Tibetan lamas from teaching in those provinces and closed their centers or monasteries.<sup>32</sup>

The second policy measure which interviewees considered central to the Late-Dalai Era strategy concerns restrictions on movement, and particularly the movement of monastics. China already has regulations in each Tibetan jurisdiction to control any travel by monks and nuns. It's not clear when these regulations were introduced, as they have not been published, but numerous official media reports say monks, nuns, and religious teachers are banned from travelling beyond their local area without written permission from local officials.<sup>33</sup> Control on the movement of lay Tibetans, particularly government employees, was increased significantly in 2012 after some 7,000 Tibetans travelled, without breaching any laws or regulations existing at that time, to India to attend religious teachings by the Dalai Lama. Immediately afterwards, the local Tibetan administration confiscated the passports of almost all residents of the TAR and made rules for their re-issuance exceptionally burdensome.<sup>34</sup> Since then, the TAR authorities have rarely allowed Tibetan residents to travel abroad. No official explanation has been given for these limitations, but

a number of internal regulations issued in 2012 banned Tibetans from traveling abroad to attend teachings by the Dalai Lama,<sup>35</sup> cutting off one more avenue by which Tibetans might be exposed to his influence.

## The “Post-Dalai” Strategy

The Post-Dalai Era, according to Chinese analysts, will begin immediately after the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama dies. Public statements by Chinese officials are vague about the risks they expect to face at the time of his death: Officials speak in public only in general terms about the overriding importance at that time of “safeguarding the unity of the motherland, strengthening national unity, and carrying out the anti-secession struggle”,<sup>36</sup> and of the urgent need at that “critical moment” to win “the battle ... to ensure sustained social stability, long-term stability, [and] comprehensive stability”.<sup>37</sup> The main step being taken to prepare for this moment, and the enormous expenditure that it involves, however, suggests a highly unusual, indeed unique, level of concern: The posting of a cadre team in each village in the TAR. This measure has never been explicitly connected to the “major challenge of the transition from the Late-Dalai to the Post-Dalai era”, but it is hard to find another explanation for it.

The sending out of village-resident work teams (Ch.: *zhucun gongzuodui*; Tib.: *grong tshor bca' sdod las don ru khag*) to the countryside began on October 11, 2011, when the TAR authorities announced that 21,000 cadres—approximately a quarter of the region’s entire administrative force—were going to live and work in each of the 5,451 villages in the region.<sup>38</sup> Each team consisted of at least four full-time cadres (meaning CPC or government officials), usually including both Chinese and Tibetans, who are posted to a village on one-year or 18-month rotations. Their orders were to oversee all issues of life, economy and politics in that village, to “benefit the masses”, and at the same time to carry out “feel gratitude to the Party” education with the local residents. The program was initially represented as a one-off, three-year experiment, but in 2014 it was redefined as “long-term”, with no mention of an end-date.<sup>39</sup> Twelve years later, the cadre teams are still in place.

Nothing like this has happened before in China’s history: The lowest

level of government administration in China is the township, and no government in China, including that of the PRC, has ever stationed full-time officials at the village level on a systematic basis. When it began, the program was unique in China, and only later was it rolled out in parts of Xinjiang too, where the state has openly declared that it fears grassroots unrest or insurrection. But in the TAR, political unrest in Tibetan villages is extremely rare, government offices at the township level already supervise each village closely, and each village already has an administrative committee and a Party branch staffed by part-time local personnel who run all village business. There is therefore no obvious reason for cadre-teams to be posted permanently in every village. As a result, speculation has spread privately among some Tibetans that the real reason the village-based cadre teams have been posted in Tibetan villages is to await the Dalai Lama's death and manage the response of Tibetans to that event at the local level.

### *Managing the Succession*

The public focus of official preparation for the Post-Dalai Era, however, is on the succession issue. There, the principal objective is to control the selection, upbringing, and education of the next Dalai Lama, while at the same time undermining the exile project, which it is assumed will be highly vulnerable by that stage. China's effort to control the succession process is, at least on the surface, one of institutionalization. It seeks to remove the process from the domain of customary cultural and religious practices and instead to reconfigure it as a legalized, administrative practice. It has done this by introducing a strict legal system for the recognition of lamas, centered on the promulgation in 2007 by China's State Administration for Religious Affairs of a national-level edict ("Order No. 5"),<sup>40</sup> which formalized the 14-stage system announced by the TAR in November 1995. Other measures that institutionalized the selection process included the establishment of a register of reincarnations in China (much as the Qing had done) who had state approval; by 2016 there were 1,311 *trulkus* on the list, each with an official identity card.<sup>41</sup> The list was placed online so that members of the public can search for approved *trulkus* and identify unregistered impostors, who would be in breach of the law.

The 2007 regulation allows only the government to authorize and conduct searches for reincarnate lamas or to grant recognition to them. This means that only the Chinese state now has the authority and right to select the next Dalai Lama, and any contrary action or claim is illegal under Chinese law: In cases where the regulation is contravened, says Article 11 of the Order, “when a crime has been constituted, criminal responsibility shall be pursued.”

Defining the selection of topmost religious leaders as a responsibility of the state is not new or exceptional. Claims by some foreigners and exiles that religious practices such as the selection of clerical leaders are never regulated by modern, democratic states are not, of course, correct; Britain is one example. Neither was it the case in pre-invasion Tibet that the identification of *trulkus* was always a spiritual affair with no governmental involvement: Tibetan and Chinese governments often had a role in the selection process in the past.<sup>42</sup> In particular, China has been able to draw on another Qing precedent: A famous law promulgated by Qianlong in 1793 which ordered Tibetans to use a specific method—drawing lots from a “golden urn” placed in front of a statue of the Buddha—for the final stage of the selection process for Dalai Lamas and other *trulkus*. China’s Order No. 5 of 2007 was presented as updating that same form of management.

This in theory matches with the CPC’s approach to religion since the early 1990s. As Pitman Potter has noted, at that time China’s approach to state management of religion became bureaucratic rather than ideological: The state put in place rules for supervising religious institutions and personnel. Although in due course the state required additional ideological declarations by religious teachers and personnel, notably that they must be patriotic and support the Party,<sup>43</sup> and in Tibet banned all mention of or reverence for the Dalai Lama, there was relatively little interference at that time in the content of religious belief other than for Party members, unlike the situation in the Maoist era.

The 2007 regulation, however, represented a major shift in post-Maoist approaches to the relationship of religion with the state. As well as institutionalizing religious practices and procedures, it involved the state in rescripting and adjudicating spiritual aspects of the succession process

and related beliefs. It was thus very different from its 18<sup>th</sup> century precursor. For one thing, Qianlong and many of his officials were Buddhist believers and devotees or students of Tibetan lamas. Secondly, the Qing court did not openly aim to control or decide which child should be chosen; that was generally left to the Tibetan clergy and to spiritual forces (specified in the 29 Articles as “the image of Shakyamuni” and “the Four Guardians of Dharma”) as long as the court was asked to confirm the final choice. That was, in fact, roughly the arrangement that the CPC had proposed in the draft rules drawn up in 1989 and even in the initial four revisions of those rules in early 1995. The 2007 regulation, by contrast, ruled not only that the state alone can select a lama or authorize a search for one, but that a lama cannot even reincarnate—whether found or not—without permission of the state.<sup>44</sup> Metempsychosis itself is thus regulated.

The most telling move by China on this issue, however, has been its efforts to disseminate knowledge of the 2007 regulation among the wider population in Tibet. This has taken primarily three forms, as far as one can tell, besides the usual flood of articles and analyses explaining and justifying the new rules. Firstly, officials have worked to get support from members of the religious leadership within Tibet, enjoining them to affirm China’s sole right to recognize *trulkus*. These declarations of support are announced in media articles about conferences and meetings held to celebrate and support the authorities’ new arrangements on reincarnation. Secondly, the government has held training sessions for monks and nuns on the new laws governing the selection process, since monastics are viewed as the “frontline” in the struggle to maintain support for the state in Tibet; probably all monastics have been required to attend such training sessions. In 2021, the third form of preparation became apparent: Training sessions on reincarnation rules for the general public. Surprisingly, many of the sessions described in official media reports were in rural villages,<sup>45</sup> suggesting concern that even the support of leading lamas and the monastic community might not be enough to avoid popular dissent among the rural population once China selects its own candidate as the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

At the same time, according to one Tibetan official interviewed during the research for this article, China has already set up the machinery for the

selection process of the next Dalai Lama. Termed the “Preparatory Search Committee”, the committee is based in Lhasa and reportedly consists of 25 members who will manage China’s search once the Dalai Lama dies. If it follows the precedent set in 1995 for the official search for the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, the new committee will be run by the TAR authorities and will be led its Party Secretary. It will be reporting, at least on paper, to the State Council in Beijing (in actuality, the process will be run, as in the past, by the Party, not the state). Tibet is a closed country, and as outsiders we can know little of what is happening there, but the indications are that China has the mechanisms in place to optimize its handling within Tibet of the succession of the Dalai Lama.

### ***International Dimensions***

Externally, the situation is clearer: The Dalai Lama succession issue is going to become a significant factor in China’s international relations, especially in its neighborhood. China’s foreign-language outlets, from *China Daily* to its television arm CGTN, have released scores of articles and videos asserting the historical and legal correctness of Order No. 5 and denying any entity besides the Chinese state the right to be involved in any selection process for the next Dalai Lama. Taken at face value, these warnings apply only to Tibetan exiles, since they are the only community with an interest or capacity to select a Dalai Lama. China surely does not expect the exiles themselves to heed its demands: The exiles are certain to choose a successor to the Dalai Lama irrespective of Beijing’s warnings (the selection method they will use remains unknown, since the current Dalai Lama has listed three possible methods,<sup>46</sup> one of which he will decide upon when he is 90, in two years’ time). But the Tibetan exiles are probably not the real target of this policy. In practice, it is a device to get foreign governments either to act as China’s proxies by shutting down the exiles’ efforts, or to get them to comply with other, as yet unstated, Chinese aims and objectives, or both. This follows China’s routine diplomatic practice of holding governments responsible for any activities on their soil that China has declared antagonistic to its interests, even if those governments have no involvement in those activities—a point China

made clear in its six-year-long de-normalization of relations with Norway after an independent committee based in Oslo awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese dissident Lu Xiaobo in 2010. In such cases, China does not accept as a defense claims by democratic governments that they have no right to restrict legal activities by their citizens; it is unlikely to accept such claims even if its demand is to ban religious followers from claiming mystical insights about an infant's former life. Instead, China is likely to insist, as is its usual practice, that any government that allows a Tibetan exile selection process is a party to that process, and to argue that by doing so it is enabling a breach of China's laws, committing an unfriendly act, and even challenging China's national interests.

In 2021, an article appeared in *Renmin ribao*, the main mouthpiece of the CPC, that underlined China's view of the Dalai Lama succession issue as fundamentally about territory and about banning any involvement in that issue beyond China's borders. The article, which was widely republished within China, explained at length that a reincarnate lama can be reborn only within China's current borders, at least if their mother-temple is in China.<sup>47</sup> The assertion ignores historical precedent (to take one example, the 4<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was born in Mongolia in 1589) and is incompatible with religious understandings of the *trulku* concept, since a reincarnate lama by definition appears wherever that lama's vow to benefit others and his or her karmic or past associations dictate; even Order No. 5 does not mention any geographical restriction. This somewhat bizarre, pseudo-legal addition to China's regulation of the selection process (and to its re-interpretation of esoteric doctrine) signals a hardening of its position in terms of foreign relations.

It thus seems likely that China will increasingly insist that foreign governments acknowledge China's sole authority to conduct the selection process. It is likely too that it will escalate that demand to a formal, public declaration by foreign governments to that effect. It is impossible to say if this insistence means that China's policy-makers are seriously concerned and anxious about the threat of a 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama being born and recognized outside their territory; it is equally possible that its demands could be largely a device to place pressure on other governments. A



strategy of gradually increasing demands has been used previously by China with regard to the Dalai Lama, and with extraordinary success, over the issue of his travels abroad. China began this process in the late 1980s by requiring assurances from foreign countries that they would not allow visits to their territory by the current Dalai Lama, then required that he not be received by leaders in those countries, and then further required that he not be allowed to meet with officials of those countries. Those demands were not immediately successful in most western states, but they turned out, in effect, to be smokescreens: Their actual objective appears to have been to get countries to make a concession of a far more fundamental kind as a form of apology for not conceding to the original, token demands. That major concession was either a formal, binding acknowledgement that Tibet is part of China or, if that had already been given, a public statement of opposing support for Tibetan independence activities. France and Denmark made such statements about Tibetan independence in 2008-9 as apologies, in effect, for their leaders having met with the Dalai Lama, and Norway stated in 2016, as if apologizing for the Nobel Prize to Lu Xiaobo, that it will not support actions that undermine China's "core interests and major concerns".<sup>48</sup> But it seems certain that the only real, substantive aim in the Dalai Lama-visits issue from the very beginning was to get the UK to state that Tibet is part of China. By the 1990s, Britain was the only major power, if not the only government, never to have done this, and the only one with treaty obligations to the former Tibetan government. China's long-term strategy on protesting Dalai Lama visits failed on the surface but was extraordinarily successful in achieving its real goal: In October 2008, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband gave the required undertaking that Tibet was part of China despite Britain's earlier agreements with Tibet, as an apology for meetings with the Dalai Lama and to maintain trade access.<sup>49</sup> A similar strategy of incremental asks is used on the Taiwan issue with regard to visits by Taiwanese leaders to foreign countries or by members of foreign parliaments to Taiwan. The succession issue is also likely to be instrumentalized as leverage by Beijing to get concessions from other states beyond the initial ask.

Diplomatic drives by China of this type, often over ritual or arcane

matters that appear merely symbolic to the other party, create considerable, sometimes insurmountable pressures on foreign states to declare compliance with China's interests. These pressures can be particularly significant within China's neighborhood: In effect, they enable China to expand its sphere of influence, claiming authority over certain kinds of activities beyond its borders. Nepal stopped issuing identity documents to Tibetan refugees in the 1990s, banned public activities or organizations that represent or refer to the current Dalai Lama, and is under increasing pressure to repatriate any new, undocumented arrivals from Tibet. Bhutan is under pressure from China of a different and more serious kind, since it has not yet allowed China (or any other G5 nation) a formal diplomatic presence in its country—China has already annexed and settled some 2 percent of Bhutan's territory in the last five years to pressure Bhutan to yield to China's security interests rather than those of India concerning territory that China seeks in Bhutan's south-west. Clearly, although a Buddhist country founded by a reincarnate lama, Bhutan could never risk allowing a candidate for the next Dalai Lama to be announced within its territory. Nepal is equally unlikely to risk such a development. Both states are trapped by geography between the conflicting interests of their powerful neighbors, and factors such as the succession issue can be used to push them further in one direction or the other.

This has perhaps even more serious implications for a country like Mongolia, where the government has tried to retain an independent foreign policy, respectful but not beholden to its southern neighbor. The country is a focus of the reincarnation dispute, not least because of historical resonances: The Dalai Lama institution was initiated by a Mongol ruler, the 4<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was identified there, the 5<sup>th</sup> was enthroned by a Mongol khan, the religion of much of the population since the 17<sup>th</sup> century is derived from Tibetan Buddhism and its texts were written in Tibetan, and in 1913 Tibet and Mongolia declared independence in a joint statement issued in the names of their then rulers, the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the 8<sup>th</sup> Jetsun Dampa, the leading *khutuktu* (high-level *trulku*) lineage in Mongolian Buddhism.<sup>50</sup> That history continues: In March this year, the current Dalai Lama publicly signaled his recognition of an eight-year old boy as the

latest reincarnation of the Jetsun Dampa. China has not commented on the Dalai Lama's involvement in that recognition, but Chinese commentators have long speculated that the Dalai Lama's visits to Mongolia might be precursors to his rebirth there. In the Mongolian policy domain, this has led to serious concern that, were Tibetan exiles to recognize the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama there, China might use that as an excuse to precipitate a conflict and even to claim territory.<sup>51</sup>

It is, however, India which is the prime target for Chinese pressure on this issue; it hosts the current Dalai Lama and his exile administration as well as the exile community, provides security for them, operates exile schools and institutions, gives extensive funding and advice, and enables foreign travel for the exile leader and his officials as well as permitting foreigners and journalists to visit them in India. New Delhi has done so without any lapse for over 60 years. In effect, from China's perspective, India holds all the key cards on the Tibet issue. This is signaled by the remarkable fact that China seems never to have risked demanding publicly that New Delhi ban the exile administration or the Dalai Lama from its territory—presumably because it knows that this demand would fail, and because, with India, far too much is at stake. Instead, in its dealings with New Delhi, it has focused on the border issue, and particularly on Tawang, probably the one territory that China most hopes to regain from India.

Now part of the far north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang is central to the succession issue, such that reclaiming it might even be the undeclared key target behind Beijing's entire strategy on this issue. Chinese official media and unofficial blogs frequently remind their readers that it was in Tawang, in 1683, that the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama was born. Those reports argue that India and the exiles may be planning to recognize a successor to the Dalai Lama in Tawang and present each of the current Dalai Lama's eight visits to the area as a signal of such a plan; the Chief Minister of Arunachal announced in January that another visit is expected soon.<sup>52</sup> Chinese complaints about these visits have more than rhetorical significance, because India's claim to Tawang has a critical vulnerability: The region was ceded by Tibet to British India only in 1914 under terms of the very same agreement that the British implicitly renounced when it

finally recognized Tibet as part of China in 2008.<sup>53</sup> China has no apparent support on the ground for its claims to Tawang, let alone for its more or less symbolic claim to Arunachal Pradesh, but the history of the Tawang issue gives it significant legal and negotiating leverage that it could use with India. The succession issue allows it to concentrate further attention on Tawang and its complex, recent history as part of Indian territory.

Aside from the growing border conflicts with China, India has, however, avoided further aggravation of relations with China and so has not taken any strong political positions in public on the Tibet or Dalai Lama issues; it refers to him, diplomatically, simply as an “honored guest”. Currently, New Delhi appears to be signaling a somewhat more assertive position on the Tibet issue, at least symbolically, by hosting a Global Buddhist Summit at which Prime Minister Modi made a substantial appearance—as did the Dalai Lama. This does not allow us to predict whether India will in time allow Tibetan exiles to identify a future Dalai Lama candidate within its borders or whether it might instead accede to Chinese pressure on that issue, or even go as far as to shut down the exile administration once the Dalai Lama dies. These would be major objectives for China, and a great deal of planning will have taken place to promote those goals. Nothing can be certain in this regard, but based on its previous record, India is likely to seek a compromise solution that suits its interests at the time, avoiding either extreme and instead attempting to use the situation to negotiate with China according to its own priorities. But it is certain that in years to come China will be using the succession issue as an additional form of pressure on New Delhi with even greater intensity than on its other diplomatic partners.

## **The Future**

What is the situation going forward? At the moment, China’s representatives abroad are quietly encouraging exile lamas to visit China and in return to agree to endorse Beijing’s sole right to choose the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, thus laying the ground for future splits within the exile community. At the same time, diplomats are working on foreign governments to persuade them to agree in advance to reject any exile candidate or selection process

within their borders. This effort has failed dramatically so far with the United States, which in line with a Congressional resolution in 2020, has clearly set out its position on the Dalai Lama succession issue in an official statement: “We will explore all tools at our disposal to promote accountability for PRC officials who interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession, and we will urge our likeminded partners to do the same. We call on the international community to reject any PRC attempts to install a state-selected proxy, and we will use every opportunity available with our partners and allies to discredit PRC interference in this process.”<sup>54</sup>

But it is not clear that it is the U.S. or its likeminded partners who really matter to China on this issue. In the current climate of febrile anti-China hostility in the West, such declarations are more likely to benefit China’s narrative of residual foreign hostility than to damage its Tibet project. The role of neighboring Buddhist countries and of India as hosts to Tibetan exiles and yet vulnerable to pressure is likely to be far more significant to Beijing’s calculations. The governments of those nations will need to develop a sophisticated long-term strategy, ideally in concert, for handling Beijing’s uniquely assertive diplomatic tactics so as to outmaneuver efforts to pressurize them either to align themselves with the China bloc or become outright opponents to it.

As this new challenge emerges for diplomats and analysts in those countries, they face the reality that China has grown immeasurably more powerful on the international stage at the very time that the Dalai Lama approaches his final years. The prospect of a negotiated settlement between Beijing and the Dalai Lama—the only real solution to this issue—remains possible, if foreign governments collectively push for that outcome, but this possibility is increasingly remote.

Nevertheless, there are some signs of unease among officials in Beijing about whether they have done enough to manage the risks that will come with the Dalai Lama’s death. For me, a sign of this came one day in early 2011, not long after the consular officials had stopped their information-gathering visits, when a prominent Chinese historian of Tibet asked to meet me in New York. This time, there was no dissimulation: He made it clear that he had been sent from Beijing to collect opinions about a particular

question. That question was extremely specific and unusual: Were Tibetan exiles going to do with the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama what the Tibetan government in Lhasa had done with the 5<sup>th</sup>?

The question referred to an event 320 years before—in 1682, to be precise—when the then regent of Tibet, Sangye Gyatso, informed the public and indirectly the imperial court in Beijing that the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama had gone into meditative retreat and was not to be disturbed. The supposed retreat lasted some 15 years. It was only then that the regent Sangye Gyatso informed Kangxi, the Qing Emperor in Beijing, (who had earlier sent several emissaries to Lhasa to check the claim, all of whom were fooled) that the Dalai Lama had been dead throughout that time. By then, Sangye Gyatso had already identified a successor as the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama—the one born in Tawang, now part of India. The Emperor could do little other than complain; the new Dalai Lama was at that time important to Qing strategic interests. Kangxi allowed recognition of the new Dalai Lama to stand for several years; he did not even punish Sangye Gyatso for what had been a master-class in international deception.

My visitor's concern that the Dalai Lama's death might be concealed for years seemed a little unlikely in the modern world, where the Tibetan leader appears almost daily on our screens and phones. China, in any case, must have numerous sources of intelligence on the plans and actions of the Tibetan exiles and their leader. But the fact that a scholar had been sent halfway round the world to assess the risk of a stratagem last heard of in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a reminder that China's anxieties about its Tibet predicament are not trivial. His question suggested that Beijing's plans, however carefully laid, can never cover all contingencies on this issue, relating as it does to sentiments, histories and concepts with which, like all communist bureaucracies, China has no familiarity and little understanding, alongside a long record of failure. The historian's question also indicated that China sees Tibetan exiles as strategically resourceful operators, something not lost on any observer of the Dalai Lama's moves on this issue: His warnings that he might not wait until he dies before choosing his successor put China on notice that it might do better by negotiating with him rather than through its often awkward

demands that other governments close down his work and legacy. China has put monumental, system-wide arrangements in place in preparation for the coming succession struggle, but its aim—in essence, to obtain long-term support and legitimacy for its rule in Tibet from both the Tibetan population within Tibet and from foreign governments—remains elusive and uncertain.

## Notes

- 1 “As the Dalai clique enters the Post-Dalai era, contests over the ‘reincarnation issue’ will be unavoidable, but as far as our side is concerned, this is also an opportunity: We can use the recognition of the reincarnated soul boy and the new Dalai Lama to attack the pseudo-regime” (Wang Yanmin, “*Hou Dalai shiqi Zangdu fenlie huodong xin bianhua ji duice yanjiu - shouji zhi wang* 后达赖时期藏独分裂活动新变化及对策研究 - 手机知网 (A study of new changes in Tibet independence splittist activities in the post-Dalai era and countermeasures),” MA Dissertation, Public Security University of China, April 7, 2017, <https://wap.cnki.net/touch/web/Dissertation/Article/10041-1017861373.nh.html>; archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20211221171904/https://wap.cnki.net/touch/web/Dissertation/Article/10041-1017861373.nh.html>. For translation, see <https://tibetnetwork.org/free1/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/New-changes-and-countermeasures-against-Tibet-independence-splittist-activities-in-the-post-Dalai-era.pdf>. See also Kate Saunders, “The Empty Urn,” International Tibet Network, October 2022, <https://tibetnetwork.org/theemptyurn/>.
- 2 See for example, “*Luobu dunzhu danke jiang jie bianba zhaxi he wenhao baima wangdui liu jiang chen yongqi fenbie canjia zi zizhiqi shi yi jie renda ercihui* 罗布顿珠旦科姜杰边巴扎 何 浩 玛旺堆刘江陈永奇分参加 自治区 届人大二次会 议代表团分组审议 [Luobu Dunzhu, Danke, Jiang Jie, Bianba Zhaxi, He Wenhao, Baima Wangdui, Liu Jiang and Chen Yongqi participated in the second session of the 11<sup>th</sup> NPC delegation group deliberations],” *Xizang ribao* (Tibet Daily), January 14, 2019.
- 3 “པད་མ་དབང་འདུས་གྲིས་གོང་མུང་གྱི་རིགས་པའི་གཞུང་ལུགས་སློབ་ལྗོངས་ལའི་ཚོགས་ཚང་གི་ཚད་དོན་སློབ་ལྗོངས་གྲིས་མོལ་ (ལྷ་ཆེ) ཚོགས་འདུའི་ཚོག (Pema Wangdu at the Municipal Committee (Expanded) Consultation Study Group on the topic of studying core theory),” *Lha sa’i nyin re’i tshags bar* (Lhasa daily) August 6, 2018, <http://www.lasariobao.com/lrsrbzw/pc/content/201809/06/c44947.html>.
- 4 In the 1950s, Mao decided on a policy that “consistently followed a Dalai Lama-centered approach to solving the Tibetan question.” See Xiaoyuan Liu, *To the End of Revolution: The Chinese Communist Party and Tibet, 1949-1959* (Columbia University Press, 2020), Chapter 2. See also Melvyn Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama*, (University of California Press, 1997), 45 (on the 1950s) and 69 (on the 1980s).
- 5 Beijing tried to enlist a number of major lamas as proxy figureheads to garner support for its project in Tibet: The 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama in the early 1960s and the 1980s, the Karmapa in the early 1990s, and more recently the official 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. See Robert Barnett, “Mimetic re-enchantment: The endorsement of Tibetan religious leaders in contemporary China,” in *Varieties of Secularism, in Asia: Anthropological Explorations of Religion, Politics and the Spiritual*, edited by Nils Ole Bubandt and Martijn van Beek (Routledge, 2011), 29-54.
- 6 The term lama (Tibetan: *bla ma*) is used here, as is usually the case in Tibet, to refer not to a monk but to a religious teacher considered to be of high spiritual standing and ability. In Chinese the term is used for any Tibetan monk.
- 7 On the *trulku* institution, see Turrell Wylie, “Reincarnation: A Political Innovation,” in *Proceedings of the Csoma de Koros Memorial Symposium*, edited by L. Ligeti, (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1978), 579-586; Alexander Berzin, “Reincarnate Lamas: Tulkus and Rinpoches,” <http://studybuddhism.com/en/advanced-studies/lam-rim/student-teacher-relationship/spiritual-teachers-and-spiritual-students/the-traditional-meaning-of-a-spiritual-teacher#reincarnate-lamas-tulkus-and-rinpoches>.



- 8 See Robert Barnett, "The Life and Murder of Akong Rinpoche," *Tricycle*, November 15, 2013, <https://tricycle.org/article/life-and-murder-akong-rinpoche/>.
- 9 "New Incarnation of His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa Recognized," *Snow Lion*, 1992 *Summer Supplement* 7, no. 3, Shambhala, 1992, <https://www.shambhala.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/18.pdf>; "Predictions Fulfilled," *Kagyuoffice.org*, <https://kagyuoffice.org/in-tibet/predictions-fulfilled-the-search-party-finds-the-karmapa-may-june-1992/>.
- 10 "Jiang Zemin meets incarnate Karmapa lama in Tiananmen Square," *Xinhua*, October 1, 1994. Republished with this title in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, October 4, 1994.
- 11 Julia Famularo, *Spinning the Wheel: Policy Implications of the Dalai Lama's Reincarnation*, Project 2049 Institute, January 30, 2012: 12, [https://case.edu/artsci/tibet/sites/case.edu.tibet/files/2022-05/Spinning\\_the\\_Wheel\\_Policy\\_Implications\\_o.pdf#page=13](https://case.edu/artsci/tibet/sites/case.edu.tibet/files/2022-05/Spinning_the_Wheel_Policy_Implications_o.pdf#page=13); Robert Barnett, "Authenticity, secrecy and public space: Chen Kuyuan and representations of the Panchen Lama reincarnation dispute of 1995," in *Tibetan Modernities: Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change. Papers presented at the Xth IATS Seminar*, edited by Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz (Oxford, 2003; Brill, Leiden, 2008), 353-422.
- 12 Central Tibetan Administration, "Stalemate in Dialogue (1990-1993)," in "Sino-Tibetan Dialogue: A Chronological Account since 1978," Dharamsala, n.d., <https://tibet.net/important-issues/sino-tibetan-dialogue/an-overview-of-sino-tibetan-dialogue/sino-tibetan-dialogue-stalemate-in-dialogue-1990-1993/>; DIIR (Department of Information and International Relations), "Contact with the Chinese authorities regarding the search for the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama," Dharamsala, November 29, 1995.
- 13 "Both the Chinese and Indian sides created a context that 'sensitive' matters should be kept aside in order to take forward the boundary negotiation process as well as to normalize relations. It was a very conscious effort on the part of the Chinese to suddenly break ties with Dharamsala: The idea was to negotiate with India at its maximum since this was the first-ever period post the 1962 war when the boundary negotiation process exclusively through CBMs in 1993 started" (Jagannath Panda, personal communication, April 10, 2023). The two sides signed the "Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement" on September 7, 1993, agreeing to maintain the status quo on their mutual border pending an eventual boundary settlement.
- 14 Central Tibetan Administration, "Text of statement issued to the press by His Holiness the Dalai Lama on September 4th, 1993," Dharamsala, September 4, 1993, <https://tibet.net/important-issues/sino-tibetan-dialogue/important-statements-of-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama/text-of-statement-issued-to-the-press-by-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-on-september-4-1993/>.
- 15 As early as February 1989, China had published an official "procedure" for finding the reincarnation of the Panchen. The first four of its five stages were entirely traditional, with no government or Party involvement. See Robert Barnett, "Chinese Regulations and Procedures on the Panchen Lama Reincarnation: The Five Stage Procedure of 1989 - Documents and Statements from Tibet," Tibet Information Network Background Briefing Paper 26, Tibet Information Network, December 29, 1995: 2-5, [https://archive.org/details/ldpd\\_14410752\\_000/](https://archive.org/details/ldpd_14410752_000/).
- 16 See Julia Famularo, n. 11 *supra*.
- 17 "TIN: Reincarnation and the 14-Stage Procedure of November 1995," Tibet Radio, November 8, 1995, published in translation by the *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*.
- 18 Yixi Pingcuobuqiong, Xiangzhi Dorje, and Cui Chenchen, "Jiji yindao Zang chuan fojiao yu shehui

- zhuyi shehui xiang shiyong* 积极引导藏传佛教与社会主义社会相适应 (Actively Guide Tibetan Buddhism to Adapt to Socialist Society)," Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, November 28, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190806194639/http://www.xzass.org/html/news2993.html>.
- 19 See Peter Dzedzic, "Religion Under Fire: A Report and Policy Paper on Religious Freedom in Tibet," *Tibet Journal* 38, no. 3-4 (2013): 87-113. See also Xuyang Jingjing, "Trained in patriotism," *Global Times*, March 13, 2013, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/767918.shtml>.
  - 20 As yet unconfirmed information from a private source in Tibet earlier this year reported that Beijing has finally decided to scale back denunciations of the Dalai Lama following indications that these denunciations increase support for or knowledge about him.
  - 21 "Jianchi yifa zhili minzu shiwu —lun guanche luoshi xijinping zong shuji quanguo minzu tuanjie jinbu biao Zhang dahui zhongyao jianghua jingshen 坚持依法治理民族事务—论贯彻落实习近平总书记全国民族团结进步表彰大会重要讲话精神 (Persist in governing ethnic affairs according to law—On implementing the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important speech at the National National Unity and Progress Commendation Conference)," *Xizang ribao*, October 25, 2019.
  - 22 "Jianshou gongchandang ren jingshen jiayuan yong bao gongchandang ren zhengzhi ben se 坚守共产党精神家园 永葆共产党 政治本 (Adhere to the spiritual home of the Communist Party, always maintain the true political qualities of the Communist Party)," *Xizang ribao*, December 6, 2016.
  - 23 Wang Yanmin, n.1 *supra*, Section 1.3.3.
  - 24 *Ibid.*, Section 5.5.1.
  - 25 See Robert Barnett with Mickey Spiegel, *Cutting Off the Serpent's Head: Tightening Control in Tibet, 1994-95*, Tibet Information Network and Human Rights Watch, 1996.
  - 26 See, for example, "New wave of 'patriotic education' leads to religious crackdown in Lhasa," International Campaign for Tibet, November 30, 2005, <https://savetibet.org/new-wave-of-patriotic-education-leads-to-religious-crackdown-in-lhasa/>.
  - 27 Wang Yamin, n. 1, Section 4.2.
  - 28 "China: New Political Requirements for Tibetan Monastics: Authorities 'Sinicizing' Religion," Human Rights Watch, October 30, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/30/china-new-political-requirements-tibetan-monastics>.
  - 29 "Foxue yong guojia tongyong yuyan wenzi kecheng jianshe yantao hui zai Qinghai sheng Zangyu xi fo xueyuan longzhong juxing 佛学用国家通用语言文字课程建设研讨会在青海省藏语系佛学院隆重举行 (The seminar on the construction of the national common language course for Buddhism was grandly held by the Qinghai Provincial Buddhist Institute's Tibetan Language Department)," Qinghai Provincial Buddhist Institute, Tibetan Language Department, September 29, 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/TjnICy-aORXy3enwxyeIyw>.
  - 30 Sam McNeil, "China offers glimpse of Tibetan life without the Dalai Lama," *Associated Press*, June 16, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/dalai-lama-tibet-china-europe-business-ee607f3daa747b03414c972541251306>.
  - 31 Tsukasa Hadano, "China bans online religious activity ahead of party congress," *Nikkei*, January 6, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-bans-online-religious-activity-ahead-of-party-congress>.
  - 32 "City in China's Guangdong province bans visiting Tibetan Buddhist monks," *Tibetan Review*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.tibetanreview.net/city-in-chinas-guangdong-province-bans-visiting-tibetan-buddhist-monks/>.

- 33 "Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services," Article 34, China Law Translate, December 20, 2021, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/internet-religious-information/>.
- 34 "One Passport, Two Systems: China's Restrictions on Foreign Travel by Tibetans and Others," Human Rights Watch, July 13, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/07/13/one-passport-two-systems/chinas-restrictions-foreign-travel-tibetans-and-others>.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 "Quannian tigao xin shidai zang chuan fojiao gongzuo shuiping zizhiqiangwei zheng yan shi 全面提高新时代藏传佛教工作水平 (Comprehensively improve the work level of Tibetan Buddhism in the new era-Political Research Office of the Autonomous Region Party Committee)," *Xizang ribao*, March 31, 2018.
- 37 "Fayang douzheng jingshen yi douzheng tuidong gongzuo luoshi shi renda changwei hui fu zhuren, Qushui xianwei shuji Peng Feiyue 发扬斗争精神 以斗争推动工作落实 市人大常委会副主任、曲水县委书记 彭飞跃" (Carrying forward the spirit of struggle and promoting work implementation through struggle - Peng Feiyue, Deputy Director of the Standing Committee of the Municipal People's Congress and Party Secretary of Qushui County)," *Lasa wanbao* (Lhasa Evening News), September 27, 2019.
- 38 "China: 'Benefit the Masses' Campaign Surveilling Tibetans: Cadre Teams in Villages Collecting Political Information, Monitoring Opinions," Human Rights Watch, June 18, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/18/china-benefit-masses-campaign-surveilling-tibetans>.
- 39 "China: No End to Tibet Surveillance Program: 21,000 Officials Stationed Indefinitely in Villages," Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/18/china-no-end-tibet-surveillance-program>.
- 40 "藏传佛教活佛转世管理办法 (Management measures for the reincarnation of living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism)," State Administration of Religious Affairs Order No. 5 (2007), passed at the administrative affairs conference of the State Administration of Religious Affairs on July 13, 2007, and implemented on September 1, 2007, [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content\\_923053.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2008/content_923053.htm).
- 41 "China Living Buddha database nearly complete," *Global Times*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/980724.shtml>.
- 42 See Peter Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet* (Columbia University Press, 2018).
- 43 Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in control: Regulation of religion in China," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 317-337.
- 44 "Applicants to be reincarnating living Buddhas who have any of the following conditions may not be reincarnated: ... Those in city-level people's governments and above with delineated districts, which ordered no reincarnations to be permitted" (Article 4).
- 45 See for example, "Instructor training and training on Tibetan Buddhism living Buddha reincarnation management methods in Angren County," 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211126184346/https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/F9BzgSTOYk6rriirLGTcuXQ>; "མོག་རྫོང་གིས་གཞི་རིམ་དུ་དམིགས་ལམ་འདོད་ལྟོས་ཀྱི་མིང་ཆས་སྐོག་འཇཉག་བྱས་པ། (Sog county relays policies to the grassroots in a targeted manner)," November 22, 2021, [http://epaper.chinatibetnews.com/xzrbzw/202111/22/content\\_112301.html](http://epaper.chinatibetnews.com/xzrbzw/202111/22/content_112301.html);

- "Exhibition on recognition of reincarnations in Tibetan Buddhism and training class on Tulku [recognition] held at Sichuan Tibetan Buddhism Institute," September 5, 2020, <http://ti.zangdiy.com/article/detail/id/17902.html>.
- 46 Dalailama.com, "Reincarnation," September 24, 2011, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/retirement-and-reincarnation/reincarnation>.
- 47 Li Decheng, "Zang chuan fojiao huofu zhuanshi de lishi dingzhi he yuanze 藏传佛教活佛转世的历史定制和原则 (The Historical Customization and Principles of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism)," *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), December 31, 2020, <https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202102/10/WS6023e1f8a3101e7ce973f90a.html>. Articles in the Indian media in 2019 noted that a TAR official, Wang Nengsheng, had stated that the selection process for lamas must take place in China, but he did not specify the location of a lama's birth (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/next-dalai-lama-must-be-chosen-within-china-india-should-not-intervene-chinese-authorities/articleshow/70215668.cms>).
- 48 Sewell Chan, "Norway and China Restore Ties, 6 Years After Nobel Prize Dispute," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/europe/china-norway-nobel-liu-xiaobo.html>.
- 49 Robert Barnett, "Memo - Tibet in China's Diplomacy: The Implications of the Trojan Horse Hypothesis," Asia Centre.eu, September 2016, <http://www.centreasia.eu/publication/memo--tibet-in-china%E2%80%99s-diplomacy%3A-the-implications-of-the-trojan-horse-hypothesis>. This strategy also led to unforced declarations by Denmark and France promising not to support Tibetan claims to independence.
- 50 "Dalai Lama: The 10<sup>th</sup> Khutughtu has been born in Mongolia," News.mn, November 23, 2016, <https://news.mn/r/751335/>.
- 51 Mashbat Otgonbayar Sarlagtay, "International politics of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama," Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School, June 2007, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/3399>. See also, Tal Iron, "Mongolia vs. the Dalai Lama: Nationalizing the Dorje Shugden Controversy," Presentation for the American Ethnological Society Conference, San Diego, March 12-14, 2015.
- 52 "Arunachal: Dalai Lama likely to visit state soon," *India Today: NE*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.indiatodayne.in/aranachal-pradesh/story/aranachal-dalai-lama-likely-visit-state-soon-492237-2023-01-03>.
- 53 Robert Barnett, "Did Britain Just Sell Tibet?" *New York Times*, November 24, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/25/opinion/25barnett.html>.
- 54 "Under Secretary Zeya's Remarks at Human Rights Implications of the Dalai Lama's Succession: A Side Event of the 51st Session of the Human Rights Council," U.S. Mission, Geneva, October 6, 2022, <https://geneva.usmission.gov/2022/10/06/under-secretary-zeyas-remarks-at-human-rights-implications-of-the-dalai-lamas-succession-hrc51-side-event/>.

## 12 Contested (Geo) Politics of Reincarnation and the Future China-Tibet Relations

**Dibyesh Anand**

Conventional international relations, based on secularized modernist ideas of sovereignty, statehood, and nationalism, creates winners and losers since not all people have secured their claims to these ideas. As European ideas and ideals of political community became universalized in the Tibetan-Himalayan world, China, both through actual physical occupation as well as its speedy sovereignty claims, has been a beneficiary while the Tibetan people lost out as their traditional lamaist state<sup>1</sup> was erased under the aegis of communist modernity.

A specific feature of Tibetan polity and culture has been the *trulku* system,<sup>2</sup> where certain lineages and beings are considered to be reincarnations, and some of them *bodddhisatvas*, those sacred deities who have attained the highest level of enlightenment but delay entering into paradise because they want to be on earth to help fellow beings.<sup>3</sup> While the notion of *karmic* cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is common to Hindu as well as Buddhist societies, reincarnation is different. Unlike ordinary sentient beings who are not aware of their previous births nor can escape the karmic cycle, the Tibetan Buddhist world in the last millennium developed the belief that a very select few can escape the cycle if they want to since they are enlightened; but they choose to come back on this earth for their missions are incomplete. There are hundreds of reincarnate lamas, often, but not always, males,<sup>4</sup> in the wider Tibetan world, of which the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and Karmapa are the most prominent. The Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of *Avalokitesvara*, the *bodddhisatva* of compassion.

Unlike most traditional polities organized around tribes, kingdoms, or empires, Tibet was a lamaist state where it was the reincarnate lamas and

their close ones who governed the state. The Dalai Lamas have been the head of that state for a few centuries. The present Dalai Lama, who often speaks of himself as a 'simple monk', is more than a religious leader; he is not a pope, he is not a prophet, he is the sacrality himself. The present 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has gone beyond being head of the Tibetan traditional state and since 1959 of the Tibetan movement-in-exile; he is a global figure. In fact, he insists that his priorities are universal compassion, inter-faith dialogue and religious harmony, and the Tibetan issue, in the declining order of importance. In his own words, "As far as this third commitment, it will cease to exist once a mutually beneficial solution is reached between the Tibetans and Chinese. However, my first two commitments I will carry on till my last breath."<sup>5</sup>

The Dalai Lama's role in surviving, sustaining, and flourishing the Tibetan national movement in exile is unparalleled. While the People's Republic of China often demonizes him as a separatist, splittist, and enemy of China, they do recognize him as the legitimate Dalai Lama; this recognition of him is only as a 'high lama' and not the paramount leader of the Tibetan people. While Tibetans insist the reincarnation system is indigenous and based on a belief system that is not shared by the Chinese Communist Party and hence the latter has no locus standi, Beijing claims *trulkus* to be under its sovereignty. In the past, negotiations between Dharamshala, the seat of the Dalai Lama and of the de facto Tibetan Government-in-exile, and Beijing have taken place with latter insisting it has always been about the personal status of the Dalai Lama and his possible return from exile to the homeland. The absence of any negotiations for more than a decade and the relentless hardline stance by Communist party officials leave very little room for sincere dialogue and possible return of the Dalai Lama. In fact, Beijing insists on referring to him as "politician in exile" who is a "splittist."<sup>6</sup>

As the Dalai Lama advances in age, Beijing has insisted that ultimate sovereignty over the institution lies with it, rather than with the Dalai Lama himself. Tibetans and their supporters are aware of how Beijing has sought to control the reincarnation system and specifically intervene when it comes to 'high lamas'. The Dalai Lama's chosen candidate for

the Panchen Lama remains one of the world's longest political prisoner, removed from public eye by the Chinese government, while Beijing imposed its own candidate and provides immense resources to bolster his legitimacy.

While it is tempting to reject this politicization of religious beliefs as stemming from the atheism of the party state of China, the story is more complex. The *trulku* system has never been free from politics, including high politics;<sup>7</sup> even the name "Dalai" ("Ocean of Wisdom") was given by a Mongol prince. The high lamas like the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama are the senior most *trulkus*, the reincarnate lamas. The Qing Empire run by the Manchus did claim some role in the recognition of the three highest lamas of the Gelug sect, the dominant ones in Tibet and Mongolia. Contestation over reincarnation and the existence of more than one candidates supported by different factions of the *labrang* (monastic household) is not new. However, what is new is the fact that unlike the Manchus who sought to claim and play a role in order to prevent internecine conflicts and support and promote Tibetan Buddhism, specifically the primacy of the Gelug sect, the Communist Party of China interferes to sow discord, domesticate Tibetan Buddhism and dilute legitimacy.

Thus, the reincarnation of the future 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama will take place under intense media scrutiny and immense public interest, in addition to causing anxieties amongst not only Tibetans and the Chinese government, but various states including India, Mongolia, and even Russia that has two Buddhist republics within its territories. This topic is more than about contested reincarnation of one religious figure living in exile. The uncertainty relating to it will have significance beyond the Tibetans in Tibet because of the veneration for the Dalai Lama amongst Tibetan Buddhist populations outside Tibet.

For Tibetans, it will be a matter of life and death of their national movement. The 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama will be the reincarnation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama; the manifestation will continue but through the body of a new person. Following centuries of tradition, it is the present Dalai Lama who will decide where he wants to reincarnate and it is those close to him

in his personal office, *Gaden Phodrang*,<sup>8</sup> who would have the traditional legitimacy to search for his reincarnation. The Dalai Lama has repeatedly made it clear that he will not reincarnate in Chinese controlled territories until the political conflict between China and Tibet is resolved; he has even referred to the possibility of not reincarnating at all. He asserts his agency.

Beijing's insistence<sup>9</sup> that the present Dalai Lama is going against tradition and Tibetan belief system by saying he will not reincarnate raises questions of absurdity. A modernist communist state claims to be a defender of the reincarnation system while the reincarnate lama himself says his future will be determined by him and the Tibetan people alone.<sup>10</sup> There is absolutely no precedence for anyone to force an enlightened *bodhisatva* to reincarnate against their own wishes.

Beijing's denial of agency to the Dalai Lama to reincarnate or not points toward its actual desire—it is not to preserve Tibetan tradition; it is to control and colonise it. Beijing will hope that its meddling, including setting up contenders, will either make Tibetans give up resistance or become disillusioned by the entire system. In both cases, Beijing, with the hubris of a colonizer, hopes to be the winner.

What about neighboring countries with Tibetan presence or influence of Tibetan Buddhism? If we focus only on India, it has avoided direct interference and so far adopted an agnostic approach toward the *trulku* system. Other than the fiasco over the Karmapa, it has sought to keep out of decision making on who is the legitimate reincarnation and who is not. With the Dalai Lama, who misses no opportunity in expressing his gratitude to India for hosting him and Tibetan refugees, and thus acts as a most invaluable soft power for India without being its citizen, India has, in military language, a 'strategic asset'. His role in providing India with a good image, in keeping Himalayan Buddhist people soft toward India and reducing tensions is not easily calculable. With an impasse over reincarnation, India can expect severe instability in its already sensitive borderland areas at best, and conspicuously greater tension with China.

For the sake of speculation, imagine this. What if the next Dalai Lama's reincarnation gets identified in Tawang region, the birthplace of



the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, in Arunachal Pradesh? It is a region where Tibetan Buddhism is predominant and so it makes sense from a conventional, religious and cultural perspective. It is outside China's jurisdiction and therefore meets the Dalai Lama's vision. How will China that claims Tawang and whose map shows it to be part of the PRC, react? Will it accept the mismatch between its cartographical claim and ground reality and insist that the process is not acceptable because the reincarnation has taken place outside its jurisdiction? Whether Indian governments wants it or not, it cannot wash its hands off the issue.

The coming years will be most tense and unprecedented in China-Tibet relations and the politics over reincarnation will have impact beyond these two countries, one the occupier, one occupied. It will also bring further instability in China-India relations. One scenario, that Beijing will hope for, is a period of tensions and uprising that it would crush and wait for the Tibetans to give up resistance and accept its choice of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama recognized in exile would, over the time, lose traction as the international community loses interest, China's might makes most countries go silent, and the exiled Tibetans accept the fait accompli. The second scenario is one where the competing choice of the Dalai Lama leads to a permanent fracture between exiled Tibetans and Beijing, where there is no room for any negotiation. The Dalai Lama in exile becomes a magnet for dissent while China uses blatant repression. The third scenario is one where the exiles find the reincarnation, Beijing does not go for its own candidate and then dangles the carrot of "recognition" in return for the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama led exile community to give up their struggle and return to their homeland. The fourth scenario, favored by many Tibetans, is that China has increasing tensions and instability, it collapses and Tibet becomes free. All the signs are that it is first or second scenario that is more likely.

What will India,<sup>11</sup> host to the largest Tibetan exile community do in these different scenarios? Will it offer hospitality to the new Dalai Lama or will it indulge in some grand bargain with China where in return for giving up on Tibetans it gets a resolution of the boundary dispute, or will it simply continue with its present, rather disjointed and ambiguous,

approach. All these are speculations and the only thing that is certain is that the geopolitics of reincarnation will enter a more turbulent phase than ever in its history.

Reincarnation challenges conventional ideas and practices of international relations and yet a modernist nation-state like China is insisting on its sovereign right to control the traditional belief system. Most Tibetans may reject this but they face an uphill struggle as China has what we can call “sovereignty privilege”. In international relations, the views of sovereign states count more than that of occupied people, even if the matter under consideration is peripheral for the state and integral to the belief systems of the occupied people.

## Notes

- 1 Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951—The Demise of the Lamaist State* (London: University of California Press, 1991).
- 2 Dalailama.com, "Reincarnation," September 24, 2021, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>.
- 3 Jonathan Silk, "Bodhisattva," n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/bodhisattva>. See also: *History Today*, "Bodhistava," 2018, 68, 8, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/foundations/what-bodhisattva>.
- 4 Samding Dorje Phagmo hails from a rare female *trulku* lineage and is the senior most. See: <https://www.socanth.cam.ac.uk/directory/research-clusters/other-research-projects/tibetan-woman-lama-reincarnations>.
- 5 Dalailama.com, "Questions and Answers," n.d., <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/questions-answers>.
- 6 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Poland, "Statement by Foreign Affairs Committee of NPC on Tibetan Problem (October 27, 2001)," June 9, 2004, [http://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/pol/zt/zgxz/200406/t20040609\\_2370767.htm](http://pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/pol/zt/zgxz/200406/t20040609_2370767.htm).
- 7 Deepak Thapa, "The Lama and the Khan," *Himal*, April 1, 1996, <https://www.himalmag.com/the-lama-and-the-khan/>.
- 8 See: Tshering Chonzhom, "The Dalai Lama's Reincarnation Debate: Unravelling Hype, Identifying Interests," *China Report* 51, no. 3 (2015): 258-269, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0009445515587399>.
- 9 See, for instance: Tibet.Cn, "Three Sins of the Dalai Lama 'Reincarnation Statement'," December 3, 2015, [http://m.tibet.cn/eng/opinion/editorial/201512/t20151203\\_5763739.html](http://m.tibet.cn/eng/opinion/editorial/201512/t20151203_5763739.html).
- 10 Dibyesh Anand, "The Next Dalai Lama: China has a Choice," *The Guardian*, December 15, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/dec/15/china-dalai-lama-exile-tibetans>.
- 11 See: Dibyesh Anand, "The Great Wall of Tibet," Gateway House, May 17, 2013, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/great-wall-of-tibet/>.

# 13 Reimagining Mongolian Buddhism in the Geopolitical Crack between China and the Dalai Lama

**Uradyn E. Bulag**

## **Succession of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd of Mongolia**

“We have the reincarnation of Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoché of Mongolia with us today.” Thus the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama tersely introduced an eight-year-old Mongolian boy born in the United States on March 8, 2023 in Dharamshala, India, where he conducted the preliminary Chakrasamvara empowerment procedures for 600 Mongolians and thousands of more Tibetan worshippers. The young boy is not an ordinary Mongolian reincarnation—the Dalai Lama has personally recognized over 40 reincarnations in Mongolia in recent decades—rather, he is the “spiritual leader” of Mongolia, where he is known as the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd, the Holy, a title associated with the 8th Jebtsundamba Khutagt, the holy ruler or Bogd Khan of the newly independent Mongolia declared on December 29, 1911. Even though the occasion was not an official enthronement, the young Bogd’s Mandala offering to the Dalai Lama at the ceremony confirmed the succession of the highest Buddhist authority in Mongolia. However, irony should not be lost that with this ritual, Mongolia has willingly submitted the recognition of the nation’s spiritual sovereign and symbol of independence to the authority of a foreigner, notwithstanding his moral or spiritual standing in the world, or his quarrel with China. Whether intentionally or not, it has thrust Mongolia into the controversy surrounding the future succession of the Dalai Lama, a highly sensitive issue for China.

Upon hearing the news, instead of jubilation, the Mongolian nation experienced a state of collective anxiety, unsure of what might lie ahead, prompted no doubt by the fresh memory many had of China’s violent response to the Dalai Lama’s visit to Mongolia in November 2016 during

which he announced the birth of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd without revealing his name. In that instance, China punished Mongolia by imposing import taxes on Mongolian goods and additional transit fees on goods entering China. This was a severe blow for a landlocked nation whose economy is dependent on China's goodwill. The government of Mongolia was compelled to issue a humiliating promise in January 2017 that it would not invite the Dalai Lama back during the period of its administration. The government also defended itself by invoking the constitutional provision regarding the separation of politics and religion, insisting that it was an act by Buddhists that had nothing to do with the government of Mongolia. This promise was rumored to have been extended by the current President of Mongolia, Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, during his state visit to China in November 2022, stating that the Mongolian government would not recognize the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd for the duration of his six-year term, or until 2027.

China's reaction to the March 2023 event was muted; unlike in 2016, China has not issued a public statement this time as of this writing. However, unconfirmed reports in Mongolia indicate that China has expressed its displeasure to Mongolia through diplomatic channels for failing to learn its lesson by permitting the Dalai Lama to expand his influence in Mongolia by publicly recognizing the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd. China's uncharacteristic public silence is holding the Mongolian public and government in suspense anxiously awaiting the imminent fall of the Sword of Damocles. This uncertainty has generated a spectrum of political emotions among the Mongolians, including both defiance and fear. Mongolians are no stranger to China's economic sanctions, memorialized by the Great Wall, but they are also aware of the massive damage Chinese sanctions could cause to the country's fragile economy. Mongolians already suspect that the postponement of the Prime Minister's originally planned March-May visit to China and China's refusal to accept Mongolian coal at market price are related to the Dalai Lama's recognition of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd. Some netizens wonder why the Mongolians should allow the Dalai Lama to use Mongolian Buddhism as leverage in his political struggle against China, even questioning the relevance of the Bogd for modern Mongolia.

## Geopolitical Autotomy and the Foundation of Mongolia's Independence

The Mongolian-Tibetan interface as manifest in the Dalai Lama's public recognition of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd challenges the fundamental principles of the current world order based on the Westphalian principles defining sovereign states, and it has the potential to undermine the foundation of the independence of modern Mongolia, which traces its roots to Mongolia's declaration of independence from the Qing Empire in 1911. This independence came about by conducting *autotomy*, as it were, that is, severing from its own geobody Mongolian communities that had succumbed to Chinese and Russian settler colonization. Moreover, the truncated Mongolia was largely based on a Mongolian "tribe"—the Khalkha—which occupies the historical homeland of the Mongols but has minimal demographic and territorial ties to the nation's two contiguous neighbors: China and Russia. This is a conglomeration of various groups congealed by the institution of the Jebtsundamba Khutagt—a Buddhist reincarnation lineage—the Khalkha Chinggisid nobles established in 1639, during a period of intense military threat posed by the expanding Manchu who had already conquered what eventually became Inner Mongolia. By 1911, the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba had become the Holy Khan, the theocratic leader of the newly independent Mongolian state.

The unique union of the Jebtsundamba institution with the Khalkha nobility should be evaluated in light of both the universal or cosmopolitan principle of Tibetan Buddhism and its quest for ethnic separation. In contrast to other Mongolian groups which sought to exercise military and political control over Tibetan Buddhists in order to form a composite polity, as in the case of the Tumed and Ordos political dominance over the Dalai Lama institution and the Hoshut establishment of the Panchen Lama institution while ruling Tibet, the Khalkha preferred to have a spiritual leader born from within their princely family, thereby resulting in a relatively closed Buddhist polity. Unlike Tibetan Buddhist leaders who relied on Mongol support while simultaneously holding them in contempt and assigning them a lower status as protectors of the Dharma, the Jebtsundamba institution provided not only ethnic cohesion to the Khalkha, but also

leadership, as evidenced by the 1<sup>st</sup> Jebtsundamba's role in defying attacks from the Oirat Mongols and leading the Khalkha to submit to the Qing Empire for protection in 1691. After executing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jebtsundamba in 1758 for his rebellion, the Qing attempted to destroy the politico-religious cohesion of the Khalkha by mandating that his reincarnation be found in Tibet. The short lifespans of the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> Tibetan-born Jebtsundambas were evidence of ethnic tension, but the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba redeemed himself in the eyes of many Mongols by not only being adopted into the Chinggisid lineage of the Khalkha, but also by displaying defiance against both the Qing Emperor and the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. He never visited Beijing for imperial audiences, and he avoided meeting the Dalai Lama during his two-year long sojourn in Khalkha Mongolia from 1904 to 1906. This laid the groundwork for Mongolia's independence from both the Qing Empire and what may be called "the Tibetan Buddhist Society" dominated by the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama in 1911.

The succession of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd is thus a poignant reminder of the long history of Qing colonial conquest of the Khalkha and its subordination of Khalkha under the Tibetan Buddhists. He owes his title not so much to the great polymath Zanabazar, the 1<sup>st</sup> Jebtsundamba, whose title was Öndör Gegeen (High Saint), but to Bogd Khan, the 8<sup>th</sup> Jebtsundamba whose Tibetan soul had been transformed into a Mongol. Bogd, meaning Holy, is a title of the highest rank in Mongolian, such that the current reincarnation is popularly known as the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd while his original title Jebtsundamba Khutagt is largely forgotten by the general public. His Mongolian identity is a result of the Mongolian government's deal with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bogd, a Tibetan monk who was recognized by the Dalai Lama in 1992 as the reincarnation of the Bogd Khan at an advanced age of 59, and who came to Mongolia as a tourist in July 1999 on the advice of the Dalai Lama. It took the Mongolian government more than 11 years to recognize him as the head of Buddhists of Mongolia in November 2011, just four months before his death, but not before he was made a citizen of Mongolia, took a vow not to be involved in politics, and wrote in his will that his reincarnation should be born in Mongolia. Mongols have never formed an emotional bond with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bogd.

## State Absenteeism and the Re-emergence of a Mongolian Buddhist Kingdom

The Mongolian government's insistence on the separation of politics and religion, as well as the Mongol identity of the Bogd, raised concerns regarding two sensitive aspects surrounding the Bogd: national and political. The Bogd institution is inherently political; in fact, this nation owes more to Bogd Khan than to Chinggis Khan, as Mongolia is predominantly a Khalkha nation. The country of Mongolia founded in 1911 was named "*Olnoo Örgögdsön Mongol Uls*," also popularly known as "*Bogd Khaant Mongol Uls*," the former after the reign title of Bogd Khan—"Elevated by the many," and the latter after his title—"Holy Ruler"; its anniversary has been celebrated every year since the beginning of the 21st century as Mongolia's National Revolution of Regaining Freedom, one of the most significant milestones in Mongolia's state history along with the Hunnu empire founded in 209 BCE by Modun Shanyu, Great Mongolia by Chinggis Khan in 1206, and the People's Revolution led by General Sukhbaatar in 1921. In 2021, a statue of Bogd Khan was erected in front of his winter palace in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, evoking the city and nation's Buddhist past as a supplement, if not an alternative, to the current state's emphasis on secular history, symbolized by the statues of Sukhbaatar in the central square and Chinggis Khan in front of the Government House.

Nationalist or Buddhist nostalgia notwithstanding, however, unlike Chinggis Khan, who is worshipped as an unrepeatable historical figure and the identity-giver of the Mongols, the worship of Bogd Khan represents an entirely unpredictable problem because he is "reincarnatable" in a real person and could return to Mongolia's political and religious life, with a theocratic system potentially challenging the modern political system based on secularism. This problem was exacerbated by Mongolia's democratic revolution of 1990, when Buddhism's revival became symbolic of decolonization and opposition to communism. India, for example, then sent the 19<sup>th</sup> Kushok *Bakula* Rinpoche, a prominent Ladakh monk politician, to serve as its ambassador to Mongolia where he served for over 10 years from January 1990 to October 2000,<sup>1</sup> with the mission of restoring



Mongolian Buddhism to “its previous glory.”<sup>2</sup> This laid the foundation for a constitutional provision adopted in 1992 that states: “In Mongolia, the State shall respect religion, and religion shall respect the State” (Article 9, clause 1). While this clause precludes the revival of theocracy through the reincarnation of the Bogd Khan, it is equivalent to defining religion as a sovereign entity parallel to and in symbiotic relationship with the state. The second clause strengthens these two sovereign realms by declaring mutual non-interference: “State organs shall not engage in religious activities, and religious organizations and monasteries shall not engage in political activities.” While this Constitutional provision has been used by the Mongolian government as a shield against China’s criticism of Mongolia’s decision to involve the Dalai Lama in selecting and authenticating the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd, it has simultaneously absolved the Mongolian government of responsibility in the religious sphere, allowing Buddhists to engage in activities with profound political implications. Two Mongolian legislators proposed an amendment to the country’s religious law in 2017 so that parental consent would be required for the selection of young children as reincarnate lamas, but the amendment failed to pass.

Yet, despite this insistence on the separation of politics and religion, the Buddhists’ unfettered prerogative to select the new Bogd resulted in a tighter entanglement with politicians. The prestige associated with the Bogd, the ultimate symbol of Mongolia’s independence, was too great to be missed by ambitious politicians seeking to tap into this resource to enhance their electoral appeal. Likewise, Buddhist monks also actively sought political patrons, and the enormous cost of educating and protecting the young Bogd was also a factor in the lamas’ choice of the next reincarnation. The process of selection was “competitive,” with the majority of finalists being descendants of prominent and wealthy politicians. On November 22, 2016, the Dalai Lama chose one of the twin grandsons of Ts. Garamjav as the new reincarnation. This choice made the optimal sense, for she was not only a politician (MP 2016–2019), but also the owner of one of the largest mining companies of Mongolia, Monpolymet LLC. The boy’s mother is the current CEO of the company. Importantly, Garamjav is said to have a track record of being an earlier

disciple of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bogd and his main economic patron, and it is said that a few days before his death on March 1, 2012, the 9<sup>th</sup> Bogd prophesied that he would visit her family. If this was the deciding factor in the selection of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd, then, his fate had been determined three years prior to his birth (the boy was born in the U.S. on May 4, 2015).

It could be argued that the significance of this selection resides less in the cronyism involved, as repulsive as it may be to many people today, and more in the subtle transformation of the structural relationship between Buddhism and the State in Mongolia. Due to constitutional provisions granting religious freedom and autonomy, the Buddhist establishment has been able to reshape Mongolia's political landscape by recruiting influential politicians and entrepreneurs as their disciples. By Tibetan or Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist convention, gurus have authority over their disciples, thereby creating an alternative power field in which the Mongolian state has become useful to Buddhism via its officeholders. This has paved the way for a new expansive Buddhism that transcends modern state boundaries in the name of disseminating the Dharma. This logic underpins the ability of Buddhist institutions in Mongolia to install the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd in order to provide spiritual and institutional coherence, as well as the Dalai Lama's approval for the consolidation of this institution, as he lent his authority derived from his position at the apex of the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy and his global reputation. In light of this, the boy's American Mongolian identity makes perfect sense, as the United States, the world's greatest power, has been enlisted as the "protector" of Mongolian Buddhism.

## **Recentering Mongolia for post-Dalai Lama World Tibetan Buddhism?**

As previously stated, the succession of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd and his public recognition by the Dalai Lama were primarily the consequence of the constitutional separation of state sovereignty and Buddhist establishments in Mongolia. It has not so much strengthened the Mongolian identity of Mongolian Buddhism, which the Bogd institution represents, as it has emboldened an ambitious religious institution eager to intervene in world

politics, including the succession of the Dalai Lama. The Mongolian Buddhists' audacity in crossing China's red lines stands in striking contrast to the Mongolian government's aversion to interfering in China's internal affairs.

This Buddhist ambition begins with the creation of a new order of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, making the Bogd the third of the reimagined triumvirate of the highest authorities, after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. The invention has the potential to expand "the Tibetan Buddhist Society" beyond an ethnic Tibetan society centered on the rivalry between the Dalai and the Panchen to include Mongolia and the Mongols, thereby establishing a new "Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist World." The Bogd is not viewed as a mediator between the Dalai and the Panchen, but rather a steadfast ally of the former. Despite the absence of historical precedent, the Bogd has been granted a role as an authority alternative to the Panchen Lama in the selection and authentication of the future reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Given his advanced age of 87 and fragile health, the moment of truth could arrive at any time in the near future, despite his own prediction that he will live over 113 years. Mongolians believe that the tween has begun systematic Buddhist training in Dharamshala in preparation for this mission.

As much as this is a Mongol Buddhist aspiration for a greater global role, it also appears to be the Dalai Lama's strategy to garner Mongolian support for his confrontation with China. China's recent campaign of Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism, reaffirmed by the 20<sup>th</sup> CPC Congress in October 2022, to assimilate all of China's minorities into a Han Chinese-centered "Chinese nation," appeared to have persuaded the Dalai Lama that his rebirth outside of China would be essential to ensure the survival of Tibetan Buddhism. In an interview with BBC in June 2020, he stated that "the Himalayan Buddhists of Tibet and Mongolia" would determine his future. Although he did not elucidate, this statement assigned Mongolian Buddhists with a significant role in his reincarnation and succession. "The Battle for Tibetan Buddhism Will Be Decided in Mongolia,"<sup>3</sup> the title of an article written by Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva, a policy analyst at the National Security Council of Mongolia, for *World Politics Review* in

February 2022, encapsulates not only how Mongols perceive their role, but also how they envision Mongolia as the future home of Tibetan Buddhism, and the only one.

Even though the blueprint for this future center of Tibetan Buddhism is vague, it is already in circulation. It envisages a post-Dalai Lama era Mongolia in which the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd will hold the highest religious authority in the Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhist world, both selecting and serving as the next Dalai Lama's teacher. As the world leader of Tibeto-Mongolian Buddhism, the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd will annually attract hundreds of thousands of tourists and pilgrims to Ulaanbaatar and Mongolia in general, just as tourists and pilgrims flock to Dharamshala today. As is apparent, in this schema, Mongolian Buddhists hope to turn the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd into a financial bonanza fueled by tourist dollars and pilgrim donations. But this is not a pipe dream, because since 2009, a large statue of Maitreya blessed by the Dalai Lama has been planned for a so-called Maidar-Eco City to be built south of the capital, Ulaanbaatar, though as of the time of this writing, it still remains on paper.

Another Maitreya statue has, however, already been built in the Dashchoilin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, the second largest monastery in Mongolia and the rival of the Ganden Monastery associated with the Dalai Lama. The statue was donated by Beijing's Yonghegong monastery, a former Qing imperial monastery, as "an embodiment of Sino-Mongolian friendship." A large number of Buddhist monks from a network of monasteries in Mongolia affiliated with this monastery appear to have developed close ties with Buddhist organizations in China and the United Front Department of the CPC, which oversees religious affairs.

Maitreya is the Buddha of the Future. The construction of two Maitreya statues by two opposing Buddhist factions in Mongolia indicates that they both intend to turn Mongolia into a Buddhist nation in the future, but they quarrel loudly with one another, fighting on behalf of either China or the Dalai Lama and accusing each other of corruption or treason. With the succession of the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd, the future of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism may indeed be decided in Mongolia, though the outcome is anyone's guess. It is unclear whether or when the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd will ever be

recognized by the Mongolian government, and most importantly, neither the title nor the Dalai Lama's recognition is sufficient to ensure the 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd's appeal. This will depend on the type of education he will receive and his ability to connect with the highly educated young population of the country. Before assuming any religious role in Mongolia, he would also need to renounce his American citizenship, as Mongolia does not recognise dual citizenship. Nor is it obvious whether Tibetan Buddhist institutions in Dharamshala will accept Mongolia as the new home of Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama. What is certain, however, is that the Mongolian government has shied away from this epic battle, hiding behind the Constitutional provision of separation of church and state even while individual politicians line up behind their respective warring Buddhist gurus.

## Notes

- 1 "KushokBakula Rinpoche – India's Monk Ambassador to Mongolia," India Foundation, March 9, 2018, <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/kushokbakula-rinpoche-indias-monk-ambassador-to-mongolia/>.
- 2 Ganesh Malhotra, "Kushok Bakula's role in India-Mongolia relations," *Daily Excelsior*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.dailyexcelsior.com/kushok-bakulas-role-india-mongolia-relations/>.
- 3 Munkhnaran Bayarlkhagva, "The Battle for Tibetan Buddhism Will Be Decided in Mongolia," *World Politics Review*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/the-battle-over-buddhism-reincarnation-will-be-decided-in-mongolia/?one-time-read-code=10935168086957673111>.

# 14 New Delhi's (Un)changing Policy Towards Tibet

**Krzysztof Iwanek**

India's general approach toward the Tibet question is largely known; it is that of the middle ground. Over decades, governments in New Delhi did not, and still do not, counter the PRC's claims to Tibet on the official diplomatic level. Yet, New Delhi did open its doors to thousands of fleeing Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama's exiled government (without giving it formal recognition). The fact that, despite Chinese concerns, the Tibetan government-in-exile still resides in India offers New Delhi a never-exercised but not impossible option of supporting the Tibetan independence claims to some degree, should India decide that this could be useful for political purposes in its relations with China.

This scenario is often referred to as 'playing the Tibet card' —however, from the perspective of China, if played, such a card would have been akin to setting off a diplomatic bomb. To recognize the Tibetan government-in-exile (TGiE) as a formal government of Tibet, New Delhi would have to first recognize Tibet as a state. None of these two levels of recognition have been attempted by even the staunchest of China's current rivals, the U.S., and thus it would be unfair to expect India to do so alone. However, between playing a card and not playing it all, a government has a spectrum of choices. As argued by one analyst in 2019, India could, for instance, resort to such diplomatic grey-zone tactics as "using ambiguous language on Tibet's status, issuing stapled visas for Tibetans [...] and ramping up engagement with the Tibetan government in exile."<sup>1</sup> Yet, while certain Tibet-related accents did appear and disappear in the line of New Delhi's actions and declarations over the past years, it cannot be said that the Tibet card has been seen, even partially. In other words, it cannot be argued that New Delhi is seen progressively and coherently making more references

to the Tibet question in the recent period, despite the deterioration of ties with the PRC in the years of 2017-2022.

In 2014, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the national parliamentary elections and its leader, Narendra Modi, was being sworn in as the country's new Prime Minister, the head of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA; this is how the Tibetan government-in-exile refers to itself), Lobsang Sangey, was invited to the ceremony. Beijing was reportedly angry with this development. Yet, in 2014-2016, Modi extended a hand to China, as these years represented a short period of "informal summits" between him and Xi Jinping. However, these have not led to a diplomatic breakthrough, while the 2017 stand-off at the Doklam plateau, on the intersections of Chinese, Bhutanese, and Indian territories, led to political tensions between the PRC and India. Still, in 2018 the Indian government reportedly asked its officials not to accept the invitation to Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations, given the sensitive conditions of New Delhi's relations with Beijing.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, when the BJP won the elections again in 2019, and Narendra Modi was being sworn in for the second time, the head of the TGiE was not invited.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, a friendly hand was not extended by Modi's government in the first half of his second tenure, the way it was during the first one. In hindsight, even had it been extended, such attempts would have probably been proven futile, given that diplomatic tensions between the two countries soared to a new hot point in 2020. This was a result of a bloody confrontation between the soldiers of both armies in the Galwan river valley in Ladakh. Yet, among the punitive steps taken by the Indian government in 2020-2022 in response to this clash (and to Beijing's standpoint on it)—such as blocking and more thoroughly screening investments from Chinese firms, or halting access to certain smartphone applications ran by the PRC companies—there was no action taken in connection to Tibet. While in 2021 Narendra Modi publicly issued birthday wishes to the Dalai Lama—a move that represented "the first time since 2015 that the Indian prime minister has publicized his call to the Tibetan spiritual leader", as noted by Sudha Ramachandran<sup>4</sup>—such single accent cannot be constructed as a significant shift in India's foreign policy.



Still, the period of 2020-2022, marked by continuing political and military tensions between New Delhi and Beijing following the 2020 confrontation, saw certain Indian politicians raise the Tibet issue more visibly than before. This included some lawmakers of the ruling party, the BJP, but again, it does seem they have not done so in their capacity of representatives of the government or the Parliament. In December 2021, 11 Indian politicians accepted an invitation to a dinner organized in Delhi by the TGiE and held under the Tibetan Advocacy Campaign. This development unsurprisingly irked the Chinese embassy in India and prompted an angry response for a political counsellor of this institution. Interestingly, these politicians represented various Indian parties, and six among the 11 of them belonged to the ruling party, with two even serving as lower-rank ministers (Ramdas Athawale and Rajeev Chandrashekar).<sup>5</sup> The others invited were: KC Ramamurthy (BJP), Maneka Gandhi (BJP), Swapan Dasgupta (BJP), Janardan Singh Sigriwal (BJP), and a member of a BJP's ally, Sujeet Kumar (Biju Janata Dal), and four opposition politicians: Jairam Ramesh (Indian National Congress; INC), Manish Tiwari (INC), Rani Pratibha Singh (INC), and Chandeshwar Prasad (JD[U]).

It does seem that these politicians, or some among them, participated in the event as members of All Party Indian Parliamentary Forum For Tibet. This body appeared to be marginal and perhaps even moribund in earlier years, but the post-2020 period saw its activities surge (or perhaps they began to be more noticed by the press). In August 2022, the forum called for the New Delhi government to confer Bharat Ratna, an Indian state award, on the Dalai Lama.<sup>6</sup> While this is a notable development, and so is the presence of ruling coalition politicians in the current iteration of this forum, the result of this action remains uncertain, and it still cannot be interpreted as an official standpoint of the New Delhi government. Thus what has been changing in the last years is not New Delhi's policy as such, but rather certain accents—especially beyond, and on the margins of, the official line; undercurrents and bays of alternative opinions aside from the main stream of diplomacy.

This is because underneath the surface of this broader policy, various opinions on the Tibet question have always been appearing in the Indian

political discourse. These include more marginal, but notable calls to support the idea of a free Tibet. For instance, in 2017, in the context of the Doklam crisis, the recently departed Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav did openly and boldly declare in Lok Sabha that India should support Tibetan calls for independence.<sup>7</sup> Such declarations used to be much more common on the Hindu Right—and interestingly, a part of Indian Socialists too; Yadav was one of them. In the past, other Socialist leaders who warned New Delhi of Beijing’s aggressive designs and declared that it would be in India’s interest to have an independent Tibet between her and China included Ram Manohar Lohia.<sup>8</sup>

In the tense atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s, the voices of those who warned of the resurgent Chinese imperials and who argued that the existence of a free Tibet would have been in India’s interest even included the Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel.<sup>9</sup> And yet the foreign policy as led by the Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs, Jawaharlal Nehru, was much more accommodative towards the PRC, barring the 1959-1962 period. While all the New Delhi government did in face of the 1950 Chinese annexation of Tibet was to express “regret and surprise”, minister Patel spoke of Beijing’s action as “aggression”.<sup>10</sup> Even when the annexation was complete, Patel argued that “[w]e cannot save Tibet [...] It may be possible, however, that we might able to help Tibet retain a large measure of autonomy [...] This can only be done on the diplomatic level”.<sup>11</sup> Such autonomy was not being advocated by the New Delhi government then and it is not being raised now. This is hardly surprising, however, given that the current political circumstances suggest that the centralizing and autocratic tendencies in the PRC have grown so strong that it would have been futile to attempt supporting such autonomy from the outside.

As for the Hindu Right, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), BJP’s earlier incarnation, called for New Delhi to stop recognizing Chinese rights to Tibet in 1961 and demanded to recognize Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile as the government of Tibet (BJS did so a few times, including in 1959, 1962, 1967). In 1960, a call for Tibet’s independence was also raised by *Panchjanya*, a medium published by the organization tied to the BJS, the RSS

(see further), and then in 1962, by the RSS leader, M.S. Golwalkar.<sup>12</sup> The BJS spoke of the need to liberate Tibet even as late as in its 1973 manifesto.<sup>13</sup> It is only in the 1980s that the BJP ceased to speak about China and Tibet in such belligerent terms.

It may be pointed out that such declarations can be heard more often from the politicians and parties when they are not in power, and hence not responsible for India's official relations with China. They can be heard especially when the representation of such individuals or entities in national politics is smaller, which is a position in which one is freer to use a more radical language. This was the case with the BJS in its earlier years (though no longer in 1967-1977, even though the party was still hawkish on Tibet in this period). The main reason why the later BJP did not speak of Tibet and the PRC in such bold words as the BJS did, it may be assumed, was that the party and its politicians became one of the main powers in national politics, and would often be a part of the national government between 1989 and 2022. As expressed by an Indian academic, "if it seems ironic that [...] the [...] ultra-nationalists [...] had been willing to modify their positions and been responsible for some major breakthroughs in relations with China (and Pakistan) while in government".<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, the Socialist politician Mulayam Singh Yadav was heard speaking so boldly on Tibet when the role of his party on the national stage diminished considerably. To this author's knowledge, Yadav had not uttered similarly strong statements during the earlier period when he served as the Defence Minister of India (1996-1998). The same may probably be said of another Socialist leader, George Fernandes who, like Yadav, served as India's Defence Minister and who is also not among us anymore (he died in 2019). In the past, e.g. in the 1960s, Fernandes was vocal in his support for the cause of free Tibet, and so was one party under his leadership (Praja Socialist Party). However, this author is not aware of Fernandes speaking the same way of Tibet in the position of Defence Minister (1998-2001 and 2001-2004) though he continued to support the Tibetan cause privately.<sup>15</sup>

A similar pattern is that bold, yet unofficial statements on Tibet surface in India when New Delhi's relations with Beijing are undergoing a

particularly turbulent phase. During the 2017 Doklam crisis not only did the opposition member, Yadav, speak of the need to support an independent Tibet, but so did at least one member of the BJP, known for his pro-Tibetan views: B.S. Koshiyari.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, however, Koshiyari is not a leading politician and not a member of the central government. This resurgence of anti-China and pro-Tibet voices (however marginal) has also been the case in 2020. This was when clashes in the Galwan river valley in Ladakh led to casualties among both Indian and Chinese soldiers, leading to a political backlash much worse than the 2017 one. At this point, the Tibet question did resurface, for instance, in the publications of the RSS, the Hindu nationalist organization closely tied to the ruling party, the BJP. While the RSS and the BJP remain connected through overlapping membership and a shared ideology, the RSS media are not always speaking in exactly the same voice as the BJP government, and thus cannot be taken as the official statements of the party.

After the June 2022 clashes, the call to recognize Tibet's independence did resurface in the RSS media on at least one occasion, although such voices should still be considered marginal, and they did not come from regular contributors to such publications. One commentary published by *Organiser* declared that New Delhi should stop recognizing Tibet as part of China and formally recognize the Tibetan government-in-exile.<sup>17</sup> In the same period, *Organiser* also interviewed the information secretary of the Tibetan government-in-exile, Tsewang Gyalpo Arya, who called for the international community to work to replace "dictatorial and tyrannical regimes" (such as China's) with "democratic and responsible" ones.<sup>18</sup> However, most authors writing in those quarters did not go so far. A text published by another RSS mouthpiece, *Panchjanya*, called the Beijing "Maoist-Fascist" and yet admitted that "[d]e-recognition of Tibet's annexation by China [...] may not be effective due to delay of seventy years."<sup>19</sup> An editor of *Panchjanya*, declared that (until 1950) Tibet used to be a "peace zone" (*shant patti*) and allowing this buffer area to disappear had been New Delhi's mistake; however, the author does not openly call for the government to raise a call for independent Tibet.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

While New Delhi has coherently continued to recognize China's rights to Tibet, Indian political discourse has an off-the-mainstream tradition of calling for Tibet's independence. While such voices have grown marginal, especially since around 1980-1990s, they did appear at a number of points of the political spectrum, especially left of center (among the non-Congress Socialists), and right of center (from Patel to BJP and RSS). That such voices have appeared on the Hindu Right is probably mostly connected to a vision of a bolder foreign policy that such nationalist circles usually uphold, especially when in opposition. In the case of the RSS, it is also connected to an emphasis on historical spiritual ties between religions in India and Tibetan Buddhism. The RSS has been nourishing its relations with the Dalai Lama, despite Indian governments, including the BJP ones, mostly keeping aloof from him.<sup>21</sup> In the left-of-center area of the Indian political spectrum, the Indian Socialists raised anti-China and pro-Tibet calls, this way also showing their differences with the Socialists of the once-ruling Indian National Congress (which mostly strived to build friendship with the PRC) and the Communist parties (some of which has been most outspokenly pro-China among all hues of the Indian political scene).

Secondly, the anti-China voices, and among them even the marginal pro-Tibet ones, have been appearing especially during the periods of border tensions, or fights, with the PRC. This was the case of years 1959 to 1962 but also, to a comparatively lesser degree, of the months that followed the 2017 Doklam stand-off and the 2020 Ladakh clashes. While one does not expect New Delhi to fully endorse the idea of Tibetan independence, it is not impossible that such calls may be revived at some points of the Indian political spectrum if Sino-Indian relations weaken further (which unfortunately appears rather likely). In case of such a scenario unfolding, those making the calls have the already-mentioned right-of-center and left-of-center traditions of speaking in Tibet's support to tap into.

Thirdly, recent developments suggest that the Indian government would rather resort to certain aspects, such as displaying certain forms of contact with the Central Tibetan Administration, but without modifying

the central diplomatic line. However, beyond the official approach, a somewhat larger role could be hypothetically played by non-government pro-Tibetan organizations that may include representatives of Parliament or even the government. A recent case of this are the activities of the above-mentioned and recently-resurrected All Party Indian Parliamentary Forum For Tibet which, while small in total numbers, includes members of the ruling party, the BJP.<sup>22</sup>

Fourthly, there are many signs of the Sino-Indian relations deteriorating post the 2017 Doklam stand-off and the bloody 2020 clashes in Ladakh. In this period, New Delhi has begun to take harsher steps towards Beijing. These included a backlash in the sphere of economy—an area which New Delhi was earlier detaching from its political relations with Beijing. Thus, while there is no official narrative of the current government when it comes to the Tibet question and though such narrative may not emerge in the coming time, India's relations with China will most probably be growing worse for other reasons, such as the border tensions.<sup>23</sup> This scenario is unfortunately unlikely to make the position of the Tibetan government-in-exile any better but it is at least sheltering it from making it any worse. This is because this negative state of political relations will not allow Beijing to pressurize New Delhi any further on the issue of Tibetans in India.

These circumstances bear certain similarities with the approach of European countries to the Tibetan question. Like India, European (and other) states do not formally counter Beijing's claims to Tibet. As in India, in Europe the support to Tibetan cause has been scattered and functioning below the official diplomatic line: Certain European politicians have been, for instance, voicing their support for Tibet and the Dalai Lama, but not the European governments as such. With the call for Tibetan independence being a 'nuclear option' that the governments in India and Europe are refraining from resorting to in their relations with China, India and Europe are unlikely to make common cause on this. However, other avenues of cooperation on Chinese issues (and against threats caused by the PRC) are opening between India and Europe.

Just like India, Europe is, broadly speaking, torn between the promise of economic cooperation with China and security concerns about the

PRC's activities. There is, for instance, a huge disconnect between many European business leaders who still want to deepen their economic ties with China, and the circles of European security experts who have been calling for more caution and safeguards against the PRC's inroads with every passing year. The security question is even more acute in India: A country that has a border dispute with China. In Europe, most of the concerns are about cybersecurity, influence operations and economic and security-related threats emerging from the activities of certain Chinese companies functioning on the continent. These concerns are voices in India as well—thus, Indian and European governments may begin to share more experience in areas such as countering cybersecurity threats or screening FDIs coming from the PRC. As these areas are of immediate importance to their respective national interests, Indian and European governments are more likely to cooperate on those levels than when it comes to the (unfortunately sidelined) Tibetan question.

## Notes

- 1 Aakriti Bachhawat, "India should play the Tibet card with China," *The Strategist*, April 3, 2019, [https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/india-should-play-the-tibet-card-with-china/?fbclid=IwAR0u\\_zvqzT6qo5r3pNJRvQOWMyT8UChvl-ZJeX9WIZuN6l8kCboTRJzs52U](https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/india-should-play-the-tibet-card-with-china/?fbclid=IwAR0u_zvqzT6qo5r3pNJRvQOWMyT8UChvl-ZJeX9WIZuN6l8kCboTRJzs52U).
- 2 Murali Krishnan, "Is India snubbing the Dalai Lama?" *Deutsche Welle*, July 3, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-india-snubbing-the-dalai-lama/a-42846107>.
- 3 "Tibetan Leader Lobsang Sangey Not Invited to Modi's Swearing-In This Time," *The Wire*, May 13, 2019, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/lobsang-sangey-not-invited-modi-swearing-in>.
- 4 Sudha Ramachandran, "Prime Minister Modi Plays the Tibet Card again," *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/prime-minister-modi-plays-the-tibet-card-again/>.
- 5 Ramdas Athavale is the Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment; Rajeev Chandrashekhar is the Union Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology and Union Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.
- 6 "Members of Parliament's Forum On Tibet Seeks Bharat Ratna For Dalai Lama," *NDTV*, August 20, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/members-of-parliaments-forum-on-tibet-seeks-bharat-ratna-for-dalai-lama-3271700>.
- 7 "China ready to attack India, claims Mulayam Singh Yadav," *LiveMint*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/FtLHSqO9ErTtwzCF3gQx9J/China-ready-to-attack-India-claims-Mulayam-Singh-Yadav-in-L.html>.
- 8 For a short review of Indian Socialist leaders' approach to China, cf. Dilip Mandal, "India's Socialist leaders warned China was bigger enemy, but both BJP and Congress ignored," *The Print*, June 19, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/india-socialist-leaders-warned-china-bigger-enemy-bjp-congress-ignored/444525/>.
- 9 Ramachandra Guha, *India after Gandhi. The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (Macmillan, 2007), 168-169.
- 10 Rajmohan Gandhi, *Patel. A Life* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing Trust, 2011), 311.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 513.
- 12 Krzysztof Iwanek, "Will India's Hindu Nationalists Play the 'Tibet Card' Against China?" *The Diplomat*, October 1, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/will-indias-hindu-nationalists-play-the-tibet-card-against-china>.
- 13 For a brief summary of such declarations within the Hindu Right, cf. Krzysztof Iwanek, "When Did India's BJP Lose Its Hawkishness on China?" *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/when-did-indias-bjp-lose-its-hawkishness-on-china/>.
- 14 Jabin J. Jacob, "Friend, Foe or Competitor? Mapping the Indian Discourse on China," in *Does India Think Strategically? Institutions, Strategic Culture and Security Policies*, ed. Happymon Jacob (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2014), 251.
- 15 Cf. this text as summary of Fernandes' approach to China and Tibet: Bhartendu Kumar Singh, "George Fernandes and Sino-Indian Relations," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, May 27, 2003, <http://www.ipcs.org/focusthemsel.php?articleNo=1044>.
- 16 Siraq Qureshi, "125 crore Indians support Free Tibet: BJP leader Koshiyari on China's Kashmir



barb," *India Today*, July 10, 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/125-crore-indians-support-free-tibet-bs-koshiyari-china-kashmir-1023493-2017-07-10>.

- 17 Vijay Kranti, "Time to Tame the Dragon," *Organiser*, 23 June 2020, <https://organiser.org/Encyc/2020/6/23/Time-to-Tame-the-Dragon-.html>.
- 18 Interview with Tsewang Gyalpo Arya, *Organiser*, June 18, 2020, <https://organiser.org/Encyc/2020/6/18/Tsewang-Gyalpo-Arya.html>.
- 19 Sonali Chitalkar, "Global Political Game of Maoist-Fascist China," *Organiser*, June 20, 2022, <https://epaper.organiser.org/index.php?edition=Mpage&date=2020-06-20&page=13>.
- 20 Hitesh Shankar, "The Answer to Expansionism," *Panchjanya*, June 22, 2020, <https://panchjanya.com/Encyc/2020/6/22/The-answer-to-expansionism.html>. For a summary of RSS' media reactions to the Galwan river valley clash, cf. Krzysztof Iwanek, "Galwanized Mood: How India's Hindu Nationalists Have Reacted to the India-China Crisis," *The Diplomat*, June 30, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/galwanized-mood-how-indias-hindu-nationalists-have-reacted-to-the-india-china-crisis/>.
- 21 Krzysztof Iwanek, n. 12.
- 22 I would like to thank Mr. Tenzin Lekhay, the Spokesperson and Additional Secretary, Department of Information and International Relations of the Central Tibetan Administration, for sharing information on this forum (private communication).
- 23 I am aware that the Sino-Indian border tensions are not really separate from the Tibet question, as China and India would have not had any border tensions had the PRC not annexed Tibet. What this text argues, however, is that in New Delhi's official diplomatic approach these issues are separate since New Delhi rejects China's claims to parts of Himalayan territory which India recognizes as its own but does not reject Beijing's claims to Tibet as such.

## 15 Interview with Claude Arpi: Impact of the Succession Process on the India-China Border

**On your blog, you have written about Arunachal Pradesh extensively, connecting the territorial sovereignty of India—which China questions by periodically renaming places in Arunachal Pradesh—to Tibet. In this context, what is the political importance of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation for India? How will a 'Chinese' Dalai Lama pose problems for India along the border and the Himalayan belt?**

One has to understand that the Himalaya is a 'live' border, which has unfortunately recently witnessed several armed conflicts (Doklam in 2017, Ladakh 2020 till date, Arunachal Pradesh December 2022). On the Ladakh front, between 50,000 and 60,000 troops on each side of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) are facing each other. Similarly Northern Sikkim or Arunachal Pradesh have witnessed very large deployments of troops.

One can't deny that the Indian side of the great Himalayan mountain range has had a Tibetan influence in the past, but 'influence' does not mean that they belonged to Tibet, it merely indicates that the culture and religion of Tibet had similarities with these areas. In previous times, there was a constant flow of Tibetan lamas and monks crossing the Himalayas to visit the great Indian *viharas* of Nalanda, Odantapuri or Vikramasila. Himalayan yogis and pundits regularly visited the Land of Snows.

For 2,000 years, India had a peaceful unguarded Himalayan frontier. After China entered Tibet in 1950-51, a new neighbor (with an aggressive ideology) settled along the mountainous frontier. This drastically changed the lives of the Himalayan populations. It is important to understand that if something happens on one side of the border (or LAC), it has implications for the other side.

A 'Chinese' Dalai Lama would definitely pose a serious threat to India, because the new lama would have the entire ideological baggage

and would certainly side with China in its border conflict with India.

Let us remember that one of the present Dalai Lama's most remarkable achievements has been the spiritual and cultural renaissance of the Himalayan Belt. Also worth noting, is the fact that in July 2022, when the Dalai Lama arrived in Leh, more than a lakh devotees welcomed him in the streets of Ladakh's capital; around the same time, Gyaltzen Norbu, the Chinese-selected Panchen Lama toured the areas north of the Indian border (in Arunachal Pradesh sector), hardly 20-30 Tibetans received him. This shows the difference of acceptance between a genuine leader and one selected by the Communist Party.

**Upon appointment of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, potentially from India as per His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso's comments over the years, how should India maneuver Chinese reactions/retaliation along the border? To what extent does India's continued extension of refugee status to Tibetans pose a block in India-China border negotiations?**

It depends how the Dalai Lama is going to be 'selected'. In 2011, the present incarnation explained the concept of 'Emanation Bodies' or 'tulkus'; he said: "The main purpose of the appearance of a reincarnation is to continue the predecessor's unfinished work to serve Dharma and beings." The Tibetan leader mentioned an alternative to reincarnation, which would in my opinion be less disruptive: "Alternatively it is possible for the Lama to appoint a successor who is either his disciple or someone young who is to be recognized as his emanation," the Dalai Lama wrote. A problem linked to incarnations is that finding the new reincarnation is a long process which can be manipulated at will; for example, serious doubts have been raised about the authenticity of lamas such as Gyaltzen Norbu.

Delhi does not want a 'Chinese' Dalai Lama who is bound to create problems for the borders. But India remains secular State and therefore can't be involved in a religious process such as the selection of the Dalai Lama (it should be the same for China, but Beijing is usually shameless on such issues); however, even if Delhi is not involved in the selection, India can certainly voice its own concerns. For this, India does not need to wait

for a 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to be 'selected'; Delhi should clearly state that the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama will be a 'guest of honor' if he decides to 'come back' in India, whether as a reincarnation or an emanation.

The continuation of refugee status to Tibetans is not directly linked to the presence of the Dalai Lama in India. However, the Tibetan population in India is facing a serious issue due to the mass migration to the West (one of the reasons is that the Indian Government does not provide the refugees rights at par with its own citizens, though majority of the young Tibetans are born in India). The number of Tibetan refugees living in India was estimated at over 150,000 a few years ago, but a recent survey conducted in 2022 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), showed that only 72,312 Tibetans remain in the country (the real figure is probably closer to 65,000). If the Dalai Lama is 'Chinese', apart from the ideological and strategic implications, the Tibetans (including in the border areas) will continue to migrate in large numbers to the West. This is regrettable.

Regarding the India-China border negotiations, it is only indirectly linked with the presence of the Dalai Lama in India.

**Post the 20th Party Congress, how do you see Tibet and the Dalai Lama's succession featuring in Xi Jinping's next five-year leadership plans, both politically and militarily? How does the recruitment drive of Tibetans into the PLA emerge as a tool for the CMC in this?**

Perhaps more important for Tibet than the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, was the Seventh Tibet Work Forum (TWF) held in Beijing on August 28 and 29, 2020. A TWF usually decides the fate of Roof of the World for the next five to ten years. A Work Forum (or Conference) is attended by two to three hundred officials, including the entire Politburo (with the Standing Committee standing on the dais), the People's Liberation Army (including the all-powerful members of the Central Military Commission), Party Secretaries of at least five provinces, representatives from different ministries, as well as local satraps posted in Tibet. It was the Sixth TWF in 2015 which decided to change the demography of Tibet-India's border by building several

hundred 'well-off' (*Xiaokang*) villages. At the time of the Seventh TWF, India faced a precarious situation in Ladakh, the TWF among other things defined China's western border policies ...and the push for the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism.

In his speech, Xi Jinping emphasized 'The Ten Musts'. Buddhism had an important place in this scheme, the Communist Party strives to "actively guide Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to the socialist society and promote the Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism," Xi said. In this context, controlling the reincarnation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is a 'Must'.

The recruitment of Tibetans in the PLA started soon after the Indian Army took control over the Kailash range on the southern bank of Pangong Tso (lake) in Ladakh on August 29, 2020. At that time, many discovered the existence of the Special Frontier Force (SFF) Tibetan troops, also known as Establishment 22. On the night of August 29-30, Tibetan commandos managed to capture a string of strategic high-altitude areas on the Kailash range. It was a resounding victory for India ...and the Tibetans.

From that time, rumors circulated that the PLA wanted to replicate the SFF, but it's doubtful if Beijing can succeed and this for several reasons, the first one being a lack of trust in the Dalai Lama's countrymen. It could be at best a 'territorial Army' (known as 'Yulmag' in Tibetan) or militiamen or members of the National Immigration Agency (NIA). The PLA leadership will not trust the Tibetans for a commando operation.

**How has the TGiE supported New Delhi in matters wherein India and China have been at odds, such as the boundary question, Doklam standoff, and Galwan clash? To what extent does TGiE's response—or lack of—shape India's own outlook towards Tibet? What potential support should India expect from TGiE vis-à-vis the border and what are, according to you, the TGiE's expectations of New Delhi vis-à-vis China and the succession process?**

In my opinion, the TGiE has not done enough to support India on the boundary issue, although the Dalai Lama has often reiterated that the Tawang area was ceded to India through the March 1914 Border Agreement

in Simla with Lochen Shatra, the Tibetan Prime Minister (known as 'the McMahon Line'). Similar reiteration should be done for areas like Demchok or the Indus valley till Dungti (in Ladakh) which are claimed by China. Dharamshala should also side with India regarding smaller areas in the Central Sector (Uttarakhand – Barahoti or Himachal Pradesh – Shipkila, etc.). Delhi-Dharamshala is a two-way relation; however, it is also true that since the first meeting between Prime Minister Nehru and the Dalai Lama in May 1959 in Mussoorie, New Delhi has reiterated time and again that it will not support the Tibetan 'political' cause.

While Dharamshala should show more interest in the boundary issue (for example in providing historical records showing that the Indian stand is correct), Delhi should take the initiative to regularly brief the TGIE about the boundary issue.

In this context, the attitude of Pema Khandu, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh is correct: he always speaks of a Tibet-India border. Incidentally, he has recently invited the Dalai Lama to pay a visit to his state: "Blessed to have audience with the apostle of peace; embodiment of compassion; ocean of wisdom, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> @DalaiLama along with my family members today morning. Happy that His Holiness has reiterated his assurance to visit Arunachal by October/November this year. Sought His blessings for the State & its people."

Let us hope that it will materialize, it is important to reiterate India's stand on the border.

# Summing Up

# The Contested Dalai Lama Succession: What's at Stake for India?

**Jagannath Panda and Eerishika Pankaj**

India has been the political refuge of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhists for over six decades. As per its 2020-2021 annual report, the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) confirmed that India is home to 72,312 Tibetans, although the number remains disputed due to unregistered refugees.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, within almost a decade, the population has dropped significantly—compared to about 150,000 in 2011—as the Tibetan community has begun to migrate to the U.S. and Europe (with some even choosing to move to China).<sup>2</sup> This migration away from India, however, cannot negate the successful rehabilitation of the Tibetan refugee community in India, with agriculture-, handicrafts-, and cluster-based Tibetan settlements spread across the country.<sup>3</sup> In this context, the refugee status granted to them remains one of the most politically relevant actions taken by the Indian government to date in determining the future of Delhi's bilateral with Beijing. Importantly, the question of this politically charged refugee resettlement is a central aspect of the hostile dynamics between India and China.

Consequently, the Tibet factor (or more specifically, the *Gaden Phodrang Labrang* or the institution of the Dalai Lama) in India-China relations must be viewed as a geopolitical linchpin that can improve or break their complex ties. The Tibet question, kept alive by the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhists following his spiritual guidance in and outside India (especially as disciples of His Holiness become international voices advocating for the 'free Tibet' movement), has been an integral part of India-China relations since the 1950 Chinese occupation of Tibet. Post 1950, for the first time in history, India shared a tempestuous and



undefined border with China as Tibet was no longer a buffer territory. Since then, China's military presence and infrastructure development in Tibet, as well as plans to divert rivers that flow into India, have increased India's apprehensions.

On its part, China is highly anxious about India exploiting the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugees living in India to cause unrest in Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Given India's long-standing commitment to open democracy and providing refuge to the persecuted, meeting China's expectations on the Tibetan front without a *quid pro quo* would be politically unfeasible. Concurrently, the breakdown of talks between the Chinese government and representatives from the Dalai Lama in the late 2000s does not bode well for present or future circumstances.<sup>5</sup> When the Dalai Lama passes away, the situation will become even more complex as both Tibet and Tibetans are a core variable influencing the trajectory of India-China ties.

## India's Stake in the Succession Process

Tibet remains a perceptual and perpetual dispute of historical complexity between India and China.<sup>6</sup> Three factors bring it to the core of their bilateral relations: Mutual misperceptions over Tibet and its affairs; the succession of the Dalai Lama; and, the identity insecurity of Tibetans.<sup>7</sup> Post-independence, the Indian approach towards Tibet has focused on recognizing Chinese suzerainty, supporting the idea of Tibet as an autonomous buffer between India and China.<sup>8</sup> In this context, a relevant question that arises is: Does political asylum granted to the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama automatically pass on to his reincarnation in the form of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama? The question brings to forefront the juxtaposition of spirituality, religion, and politics in a manner few conflicts around the world do; it integrates the concerns related to not just regional politics and political legacy, but also spiritual and ritualistic practices sacred to a community.

The last Dalai Lama succession process took place in 1933; since then, India-China ties have witnessed many changes, including a war in 1962 wherein Tibet and the sanctuary provided to Dalai Lama were key factors that led to this war.<sup>9</sup> Currently, the central roles both countries play in a multipolar Asia and the reactivation of the boundary dispute post the

conflict in Galwan in 2020 have led to the two economic giants being recognized as competitive rivals rather than cooperative neighbors. While India is not looking to revisit its stand on the territorial status of Tibet—instead supporting autonomous status for the region therein aligning with its commitment to “One China”—New Delhi is tired of China’s non-compliance to what has been referred to unofficially as a “One India” policy.<sup>10</sup>

Here, it is important to remember that the Tibet issue is linked directly to the India-China boundary dispute as Beijing’s claim on Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet stems from the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama’s connection with the region.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the current Dalai Lama’s succession process will have ramifications on the India-China border dynamics due to the issues about the legitimacy of the succession and the unity of the Tibetan identity. China will attempt to establish a “Chinese” Dalai Lama as the true successor of the institution. It has already increased the participation of the “Chinese” Panchen Lama via political tours across Tibet, while *Gedhun Choekyi Nyima*, the 11<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of the Panchen Lama endorsed by the Dalai Lama, was taken into custody by China at the age of six in 1995.<sup>12</sup>

For the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), the incarceration of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama reincarnate highlighted that the selection of the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama would have to be from outside Tibet, with the most prominent choice emerging as India. The monks, officials, and researchers in Dharamshala, as well as representatives of His Holiness, have made it increasingly clear that the Dalai Lama will choose to return to the world in a democratic country, especially as that would make most sense to the goal of continuing the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>13</sup> His Holiness himself has stated that India is now “home” to him, and the chances of his reincarnation being found in India are increasingly high.

In this context, the recent decision by the Dalai Lama to select an eight-year-old U.S.-born Mongolian boy as the latest reincarnation of the Khalkha Jetsun Dhampa Rinpoché (Tibetan Buddhism’s third-most important monk and the faith’s leader in Mongolia) becomes important. It is both a spiritually driven yet strategic move and a minor precursor to major tensions that will follow once the process of the Dalai Lama’s

succession begins, especially as the official announcement of this reincarnation has affected Mongolia-China ties.<sup>14</sup>

From an Indian perspective, the need to find a nexus between the expectations of the Tibetan government-in-exile (TGiE), realities of Indian foreign policy outlooks vis-à-vis Tibet, and the different political angles wherein the two differ—or could collaborate on—is crucial. The “Tibet question,” shaped along the lines of power politics, has over time inducted different kinds of political factors into its quest for resolution; religious and succession politics plus propaganda warfare are all strong aspects of the TGiE-Communist Party of China (CPC) “push and pull,” with India acting as a key stakeholder.<sup>15</sup>

Another significant factor for India’s calculus is the future of Tibetan unity, more specifically the activist movement for a “Free Tibet,” which currently has survived via the Tibetan refugees in India. The unity of the Tibetan Buddhists is maintained under the strong and revered leadership of the current Dalai Lama; the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama will take time to build such a followership. Moreover, the newer generation of Tibetans in India—both activists and non-activists—are seeking to gain broader political and civil rights in the country. From more space to more opportunities, such needs are only bound to grow. Importantly, they are also contending for a seat at the India-China negotiating table, especially as some Tibetans believe that India is “technically” negotiating the border with Tibet and not China.<sup>16</sup>

As per one CTA representative, “India has a moral duty and authority to comment on the Dalai Lama’s succession and future of Tibetans.”<sup>17</sup> Here, the issues of perception emerge clearly between India and the CTA. On the one hand, a stark change in India’s Tibet policy bordering on the lines of support for the Tibetan freedom movement will lead to a further breakdown of trust with China, who will retaliate along the border. On the other, the Dalai Lama’s statement that the fate of the Tibetan people and Tibet’s survival as a culture and homeland is more important than his own has highlighted how China will constantly be at odds with the Tibetans even in a scenario wherein “genuine autonomy” is granted to Tibet.<sup>18</sup> The dredging of a sacred lake during the Qinghai-Tibet railroad

construction provides a glimpse into their contending frames of reference: The Chinese saw it as “material progress” while the Tibetans viewed it as “desecration of holy land.”<sup>19</sup>

For India, the Tibet factor has been critical to its bilateral with China for over six decades. However, it has also been vital to domestic policymaking vis-à-vis the strengthening of India’s might. The creation of India’s Special Frontier Force (SFF) in the immediate aftermath of the 1962 war has seen Tibetans fighting for India under the Indian command, establishing itself as one of the best battalions of the Indian Army.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the Dalai Lama has remained a political trump card for India in its dealings against China, while also emerging as one of the most famous pop-culture icons. Notably, Indian soft power diplomacy has capitalized on this aspect by portraying India as the benefactor and protector of Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in particular.

Rarely has a cause had such unusual allies as that of the Free Tibet movement: From intelligence agencies to news outlets, scholars, spiritualists, students, performers, artists, writers, and world leaders. As a result, the intersection of “friends” of the Tibetan people has produced a vital geopolitical tool that Delhi could utilize to its advantage, should conflict with China worsen to the edge of another war. For this contingency, it also becomes imperative that India’s present support to the Tibetan people must continue, if not increase.

## **Key Takeaways from this Special Issue**

This Special Issue has been an attempt to create a scholarly understanding of the expectations of various key stakeholders in Dharamshala (referring to the CTA, which is headquartered there), India, Europe, and broader Asia with regard to the succession process of the Dalai Lama. Amidst a persistent China challenge, this volume brings to the forefront key consolidated deductions on the succession process from a geopolitical lens. As the “Tibet question” becomes increasingly relevant, several other questions emerge as vital subsets. This volume has sought to shed light on some of them and to ideate potential responses.

### ***What is Xi Jinping's Tibet policy?***

The 20<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress of the CPC in 2022 has ensured the continuity of Xi Jinping as Party helmsman, supreme leader of China, and chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC). Internationally, the war in Ukraine has created ripple effects across Asia, from energy and food insecurity to growing regional tensions, especially raising questions about a similar situation emerging in Taiwan. Such fears have furthered immense international focus on Taiwan due to highly publicized U.S. and Chinese political and military tactics: Increased US-Taiwan exchanges—soon after the then U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial visit in August 2022, another delegation of U.S. lawmakers visited Taiwan and in 2023 while Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen met Kevin McCarthy, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, in the U.S.—and China's ramped up military posture in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>21</sup> In addition, China's efforts to bolster regional and global support for its "One China" principle have gained momentum. In such a scenario, there are few sensitivities that will reorient Xi's focus; the onset of the succession process of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, it can be safely assumed, is one such core sensitivity.

This volume has analyzed China's position on the succession process of the Dalai Lama in light of its historical engagements with the *Gaden Phodrang Labrang*. Furthermore, it has examined the challenges that China will face from other stakeholders to get recognition for the CPC-approved Dalai Lama. Hence, as assessments in this Special Issue have highlighted, despite Xi Jinping's confidence in his Tibet Policy and its implementation, Beijing may be unprepared to manage possible radicalized politics after the succession process is completed. However, it is unlikely that Beijing will handle the Tibetan issue any more tactfully than complete interference. It does not matter to Xi that Beijing's "Machiavellian" calculus when dealing with the current Dalai Lama's influence will not be enough to achieve the CPC's ultimate goal of Sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). China's attempts to reframe Tibetan Buddhism and legitimize CPC control over it reveal a contestation between state and religion in an atheist China, mainly driven by Beijing's efforts to replace Buddhist traditions with state authority.

The CPC has put strategies in place to manage the post-succession era: Temple management rules, education policy changes, and restrictions on travel by Tibetans are a few examples. These strategies have laid the foundation for preparations to mitigate uncertainties associated with the succession process. Such a strategy, which involves numerous arrangements to institutionalize a strictly legal process for the recognition of lamas, has massive implications not just for China's international relations, but also the Tibet-China-India dynamics. Concurrently, there are contested contours of the reincarnation process in Tibet's polity and culture, which have been studied in this issue via assessing the *trulku* system and analyzing the politics behind the succession process itself. This is critical to decoding and critiquing China's religious politics vis-à-vis Tibet.

Ultimately, Beijing has consistently held firm on the issue of Chinese sovereignty (especially jurisdictional sovereignty) over Tibet and has been unwilling to compromise on it.<sup>22</sup> Policies of assertiveness adopted by Beijing since late 1987, combined with focused diplomatic activity, increased use of force, and utilization of economic development programs demonstrate this position. Under Xi, Beijing's core position has only grown stronger and is unlikely to change without external mediation or attention; the recognition of a "Chinese" Dalai Lama by the CPC is guaranteed, and while he will not enjoy the spiritual support of the Buddhists, he will still have the state-given mandate to execute the practice of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet as the CPC sees fit. This will only further curtail the freedom and culture of Tibetans in China, and severely set back any notions of an autonomous state of Tibet with return of refugees to their homeland.

### ***Multilateral politics and third-party stakeholders***

International collaboration between India and "like-minded" states on Tibet beyond humanitarian concerns is yet to be formed. This requires recalibration, especially as actors like the UK, Japan, Mongolia, Taiwan, the U.S., and the European Union (EU) hold great interest in and will be impacted by the future of the Dalai Lama institution. For instance, the UK has a moral obligation vis-à-vis Tibet owing in its case to its

colonial legacy that is deemed responsible for scripting the current state of Tibetan affairs. Therein, London needs to reconfigure its Tibet policy as per emerging strategic realities. Moreover, the UK's renewed efforts to play a meaningful role in the Indo-Pacific and the continued hardening of its China stance (such as condemning China's human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang) will be crucial to deciding its position on the Dalai Lama's succession politics.

Another European power whose response on the Tibet question is equally critical is the EU: The EU has made its intent to counter China clear, be it via its recently launched Indo-Pacific strategy or its so-called infrastructure alternative to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Gateway. However, at present, for the EU and its member-states, the Tibet issue has focused largely on serious concerns about human rights, especially after the Dalai Lama and the TGiE gave up demands for full independence. Although the CTA has no extreme expectations from the EU, it hopes that democratic European governments will respond to a strong public opinion concerning Tibet upon the start of the succession process in gathering support for the Dalai Lama.

The need for the EU to carefully prepare its position in respect to China's claim on the reincarnation process of the Dalai Lama is vital amidst broader implications of Beijing's interference in Tibetan affairs for Europe and beyond. Here, individual states like Sweden have seen an evolving perception about Tibet among the political class and common public. Human rights concerns in Tibet have been largely overshadowed by China's actions in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. However, as this volume has highlighted, the Tibet issue will regain prominence in Swedish policy during the Dalai Lama's succession process in the future by virtue of how important it will be to Xi Jinping's long game and legacy.

Importantly, the Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022 has elevated the Tibetan issue in European politics, despite the absence of a consolidated European policy on the geopolitics of the Dalai Lama's succession. Furthermore, Czech-Tibetan entanglement over the years and the Czech Republic's ambitions to resolve the crisis in Tibet has consistently grown, making Prague a key friend for the CTA during

the reincarnation debate.

Another key player is the United States. Undoubtedly, the complicated relationship between the United States and China is one of the most pivotal factors shaping foreign policy and strategic interests in Asia. Consequently, the Tibet question has received considerable attention in the U.S.. Over the past 15 years, the U.S. Congress has demonstrated a bipartisan consensus on Tibet through the implementation of supportive measures such as funding Tibetan language broadcasts by the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia, as well as passing various non-binding resolutions that recognize Tibet as a “captive nation.”<sup>23</sup>

However, even as the U.S. has flagged China’s abuse of power in TAR, America is unlikely to reverse its official position that Tibet is a part of China. The Tibet Policy and Support Act, passed by the U.S. Senate in 2020, strengthened the U.S. commitment to the Tibetan cause.<sup>24</sup> Among other aspects, the act mandates that the succession or reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhist leaders, including the future Dalai Lama, is reserved exclusively for the Tibetan Buddhist community, without any interference from Chinese officials.<sup>25</sup> Even as Washington is keeping a keen eye on the latest developments, building a policy response to the start of the succession process remains an underprepared goal.<sup>26</sup>

Within Asia, beyond India, this volume has highlighted an overview of the relationship between the Tibetan exile community and Taiwan, comparing governmental and civilian outlooks. It has taken into account the differing public opinions within Taiwan and mainland China regarding the reincarnation system of Living Buddhas. Notably, how the CTA and Taipei build consensus on achieving mutually beneficial support from each other is an avenue of policy consideration that both sides must seek to build so as to put dual pressure on Beijing. Meanwhile, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, the effect of the succession process on China-Mongolia ties is already beginning to show, especially as the newly selected 10<sup>th</sup> Bogd will play a key role in selecting and serving as a teacher to the 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

In this context, Japan’s public reverence of Dalai Lama indicates that a post-succession Dalai Lama contingency would have political implications in Japan. While the Japanese government has provided limited assistance



to Tibetans, the Dalai Lama has always been welcomed in Japan. Therefore, amidst its own attempts at containing and countering Chinese revisionism in the region, including fears of a Taiwan emergency, Japan, too, must review its Tibet policy—especially regarding what support it can provide India in international and regional diplomatic maneuvers.

### *India as a consensus maker: Question of reciprocity*

China scholars from across the world, but especially India, need to give equal importance to the Tibet question and its impact on South Asia's regional politics, especially when looking at the India-China border. Such a purview requires understanding the Tibetan customs and rituals that direct political decisions of the CTA. India, for its part, remains critical to the future of this "question." The Indian government must ensure that established tradition is followed in the appointment of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Given concerns that China is expected to interfere in the process, India must tactically ensure that no external influence affects it. Here, showing support for the six-point plan prepared by the CTA should be encouraged.<sup>27</sup> In the long term, the government must also encourage more focused scholarship on Tibetan religious affairs to understand the nuances of the reincarnation process.

Despite providing political refuge to the Dalai Lama for over six decades, India still does not have a well-defined Tibet policy. Its approach to Tibet has changed over the past six decades owing to the various positions Indian political parties in power have undertaken across the political spectrum in tandem with India's equation with China during those corresponding periods. Moreover, a consistent and unfulfilled need for better coordination between TGiE and the Indian government remains on issues such as the border. Herein, a lack of equal reciprocity in India-CTA relations has been a characteristic shortcoming. Indian officials working on Tibet have highlighted that stronger and more vocal support by the CTA on issues like the India-China boundary dispute and Kashmir—variables that threaten Indian sovereignty—will be critical in aiding India's own reciprocity toward the needs and demands of the Tibetans in the country.

Furthermore, India's present hostile equation with China, precariously balanced with both Xi and Narendra Modi being populist "strongmen" leaders, does not allow for diminished Indian support, let alone a withdrawal of continued support and asylum, for the Tibetan refugees. As the world's largest democracy, India's need to maintain support for the democratic TGiE also remains strong. However, for there to be a more assertive change in India's Tibet stand, the CTA must emerge as a critical and bankable strategic partner—Tibet as a political leverage only serves so far.

For India, given China's increased efforts to claim Arunachal Pradesh as part of Tibet based on its Buddhist legacy, Beijing's military incursions in the region could be expected to intensify along the line of actual control (LAC) during the succession process. To avoid conflagrating such conflict scenarios, New Delhi must take pre-emptive measures such as increasing its border security along the border to curtail Chinese incursions and prevent Beijing from linking the Dalai Lama's succession process to its bilateral border dispute.

The "logistics" of continued asylum to Tibetan refugees also extends beyond the political. India's Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy released in 2014, which was formulated with inputs from the TGiE, aimed to provide temporary land tenure guarantees and welfare benefits to Tibetan refugees settled in different states.<sup>28</sup> However, the policy also ended up creating unease within local communities leading to protests in some regions.<sup>29</sup> Hence, India's approach toward refugees from Tibet must also incorporate local communities' sensitivities while ensuring that domestic frictions do not deter its foreign policy interests. Moreover, it should also pursue establishing formal structures that streamline cross-border travel to and from Tibet, which is expected to intensify during the succession process. The Indian government should also ensure that its policies concerning the religious affairs of the Tibetan communities are made with a deeper understanding of the sectoral differences within the community.

## **Preparing for the Immediate Future**

Notably, as this Special Issue has repeatedly highlighted, it is not just

India, China, and the CTA that will be impacted by or have interests in the succession politics of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. If a country has or wants a stake in the Indo-Pacific security landscape, it will have to configure its entry into the contested Tibetan question, particularly the looming Dalai Lama succession. The reason is China's intent to alter the existing liberal order in regional and global affairs, and its interference in the succession is a vital reference point for the precarious flashpoints featuring China as the aggressor, be it in the Taiwan Strait or in the Himalayas.

Also, of note is China's soft-power diplomacy that is insidiously seeking to control ethnic cultures through dubious tactics, visible particularly in its Himalayan strategy that targets India. For example, under its expansive BRI, China has spent over US\$3 billion in revival efforts focused on Lumbini in Nepal, the birthplace of the Buddha.<sup>30</sup> Not only has China been hosting the World Buddhist Forum, it has also invested in the Buddhist sites in Pakistan and a Buddhist center in Myanmar—a BRI-driven strategy to create soft-power linkages for wider political motives.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, such efforts highlight the apathy of the Chinese state, which carries out forced assimilation tactics in TAR; the United Nations, too, has reported about large-scale mandatory programs for Tibetan children to assimilate Tibetan Buddhists into the majority Han culture.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, China's five-year Sinicization plan (2019-2024) for the five largest religious groups in China, including Buddhism, legitimizes such efforts.

Unfortunately, for China, the threads are gradually coming undone. In the last few years, not only has the international community, including the Chinese engagement-tilted European states and the "inclusive" Asian countries, become aware of the China challenge, but the democratic solidarity for Taiwan post the Ukraine invasion by Russia has raised hopes of support for the Tibetan cause. The Dalai Lama, for his part, has diffused China's plans by refusing to give a clearer picture of what he will do in the future. His insistence on surviving for another two decades has further complicated Beijing's designs on a quicker solution to its succession dilemma.<sup>33</sup>

Another important obstacle is India's growing projection and

perception of its global profile. As a central pillar in countering China's Indo-Pacific aspirations, India will leverage its stake as the leading center for Buddhism and political refuge for Tibetan Buddhists. Moreover, the Tibetan refugee settlements in India are one of the most well-structured and socially integrated groups, the declining population of Tibetans in India notwithstanding. This also allows the CTA to focus on reorienting the Tibetan movement toward "genuine autonomy" for Tibet and to devise ways to engender global solidarity for the community's fight against religious persecution in TAR.

Despite the challenges faced by the community, Dharamshala—termed "mini-Lhasa"—stands out as an example of how the idea of a nation continues to exist, tied both to the Dalai Lama and to the increased democratization of political authority within the community. The CTA-run ministries, parliament, universities, schools, and hospitals in Dharamshala exemplify the truly unique nature of an autonomous entity within a country. The "Charter of the Tibetans in Exile," the name given to Tibet's democratic constitution, was adopted in 1991 and was the official continuation of the draft democratic constitution presented by the Dalai Lama in 1963.<sup>34</sup>

As a result of this continuing Tibetan democratic setup outside its borders, China recognizes that just territorial control over Tibet has not accomplished the Sinicization of Tibetan identity—and India's role in ensuring this survival remains a big impediment to the holistic improvement of bilateral ties. Nonetheless, India needs to reorient its support for Tibetans from a wider geopolitical perspective. Above all, its diplomatic global outreach to countries sympathetic to the Tibetan cause will enable a proactive approach to the succession question as well.

In this context, India will benefit if international stakeholders could be encouraged to change their respective Tibet policies to a more action-oriented outlook. Finding broader areas of building such synergy is difficult, especially as no country recognizes Tibet as a separate nation or the CTA as a sovereign government. However, as the succession issue gains momentum, the need for including Tibet in multilateral discussions and ideating ways of working with the CTA as a true Tibetan

representative body is crucial. Notably, the lack of actual territory and hard power makes engagement with the CTA starkly different from the unofficial working bilateral states have built with Taiwan. It is therefore important for countries to first internally build stronger policies on Tibet, so as to recognize what level or form of ties they actually wish to build with the Tibetans. This is pivotal as it will define the degree to which countries support, draw from, and participate in promoting the succession process of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

## Notes

- 1 “Over 58,000 Sri Lankan & 72,000 Tibetan refugees living in India: MHA,” *Business Standard*, April 27, 2022, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/over-58-000-sri-lankan-72-000-tibetan-refugees-living-in-india-mha-122042700434\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/over-58-000-sri-lankan-72-000-tibetan-refugees-living-in-india-mha-122042700434_1.html); see also, “Tibetan Settlements in India,” Central Tibetan Relief Committee, n.d., <https://centraltibetanreliefcommittee.net/settlements/tibetan-settlements-in-india/>.
- 2 Rahul Tripathi, “Tibetan refugees down from 1.5 lakh to 85,000 in 7 years,” *Indian Express*, September 11, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/tibetan-refugees-down-from-1-5-lakh-to-85000-in-7-years-5349587/>.
- 3 “Tibetan Settlements in India,” Central Tibetan Relief Committee, <https://centraltibetanreliefcommittee.net/settlements/tibetan-settlements-in-india/>.
- 4 Rajiv Sikri, “The Tibet Factor in India-China Relations,” *Journal of International Affairs* 64, no. 2 (2011): 55-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24385534>.
- 5 “Chinese Official: Dalai Lama ‘Stubborn in Talks, Not Sure to His Word,’” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Hellenic Republic, March 26, 2009, [gr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtd/200903/t20090326\\_3159403.htm](http://gr.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtd/200903/t20090326_3159403.htm).
- 6 Jagannath Panda, *India-China Relations: Politics of Resources, Identity and Authority in a Multipolar World-Order* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 53.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Tien-sze Fang, “The Tibet Issue in Sino-Indian Relations,” *Asymmetrical Threat Perceptions in India-China Relations*, Oxford International Relations in South Asia, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198095958.003.0003>.
- 9 Bertil Lintner, *China’s India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.
- 10 Pranab Dhal Samanta, “One China? What about One India policy: Sushma Swaraj to Wang Yi,” *Indian Express*, June 12, 2014, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/one-china-what-about-one-india-policy-sushma-to-wang/>.
- 11 Steven A. Hoffmann, “Rethinking the Linkage between Tibet and the China-India Border Conflict: A Realist Approach,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3 (2006): 165-94, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26925946>.
- 12 “China Focus: Panchen Lama concludes tour in Tibet,” *Xinhua*, October 21, 2020, [www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/21/c\\_139454850.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/21/c_139454850.htm); “Renewed Call for the Release of the Panchen Lama and His Family,” Central Tibetan Administration, April 25, 2022, <https://tibet.net/renewed-call-for-the-release-of-the-panchen-lama-and-his-family/>.
- 13 This statement is based on the co-author Eerishika Pankaj’s field visit to Dharamshala in 2022; she interviewed (off the record) officials, locals, activists, and monks on the political repercussions of the succession process of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.
- 14 Brooke Schedneck, “Dalai Lama identifies the reincarnation of Mongolia’s spiritual leader—a preview of tensions around finding his own replacement,” *Conversation*, March 30, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/dalai-lama-identifies-the-reincarnation-of-mongolias-spiritual-leader-a-preview-of-tensions-around-finding-his-own-replacement-202888>.

- 15 "Beijing's How to Win Friends and Influence People," Department of Information and International Relations, Central Tibetan Administration, April 29, 2010, <https://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/BEIJINGS-HOW-TO-WIN-FRIENDS-AND-INFLUENCE-PEOPLE.pdf>.
- 16 See, n. 13.
- 17 See, n. 13.
- 18 "Note on the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People," International Campaign for Tibet, February 19, 2010, <https://savetibet.org/advocacy/note-on-the-memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>.
- 19 Diane Wolff, *Tibet Unconquered: An Epic Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11.
- 20 John B. Roberts and Elizabeth A. Roberts, *Freeing Tibet: 50 Years of Struggle, Resilience and Hope* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2011), 109.
- 21 Eric Cheung and Devan Cole, "A second US congressional delegation visits Taiwan," *CNN*, August 15, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/14/politics/congressional-delegation-taiwan/index.html>; Helen Davidson, "Taiwan president's meeting with US speaker divides opinion at home," *Guardian*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/07/taiwan-president-tsai-ing-wen-meeting-us-speaker-divides-opinion>.
- 22 Allen Carlson, "Beijing's Tibet Policy:: Securing Sovereignty and Legitimacy," East West Center, 2004, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep06499.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Afe7d4b7c4087fa1ab850bc7c57a4814&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep06499.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Afe7d4b7c4087fa1ab850bc7c57a4814&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=).
- 23 Melvyn C. Goldstein, "Tibet and China in the Twentieth Century," in *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2004), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctvbtzm7t.10.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac333a157e66783c8c9813565d0d9a1c1&ab\\_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctvbtzm7t.10.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ac333a157e66783c8c9813565d0d9a1c1&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1).
- 24 "Tibet: Chairs Welcome Passage of the Tibetan Policy and Support Act," Congressional-Executive Commission On China, December 22, 2020, <https://www.cecc.gov/media-center/press-releases/chairs-welcome-passage-of-the-tibetan-policy-and-support-act>.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Conversation with American embassy representatives and scholars.
- 27 "China will interfere with Dalai Lama succession, prepared for democratic transition: Tibetan Sikyong," Press Trust of India, January 4, 2023, <https://www.ptinews.com/news/national/china-will-interfere-with-dalai-lama-succession-prepared-for-democratic-transition-tibetan-sikyong/488141.html>.
- 28 "Government of India formalises Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy 2014," Central Tibetan Administration, October 21, 2014, <https://tibet.net/government-of-india-formalises-tibetan-rehabilitation-policy-2014/>; Yeshi Choedon, "The Unintended Consequences of India's Policy on Citizenship for Tibetan Refugees," Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis, February 23, 2018, <https://www.idsa.in/policybrief/unintended-consequences-of-india-policy-on-citizenship-for-tibetan-refugees-ychoedon-230218>.

- 29 Lobsang Tenchoe, "Student group serves 3-day ultimatum to rollback Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy in Arunachal," *Tibet Express*, July 11, 2018, <https://tibetexpress.net/8636/student-group-serves-3-day-ultimatum-to-rollback-tibetan-rehabilitation-policy-in-arunachal/>.
- 30 "A bizarre project in Nepal: At Buddha's birthplace," *Economist*, August 20, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/node/21526389/all-comments>.
- 31 Krithika Varagur, "The Coming Fight for the Dalai Lama's Soul," *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/22/dalai-lama-reincarnation-beijing-politics-tibet/>.
- 32 "China: Tibetan children forced to assimilate, independent rights experts fear," United Nations, February 6, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133212>.
- 33 "I will live to be 110 years: Dalai Lama assures followers," *Outlook*, August 27, 2019, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/i-will-live-to-be-110-years-dalai-lama-assures-followers/1605627>.
- 34 "His Holiness the Dalai Lama," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibet.net/about-tibet/his-holiness/>.



# Annexure

## Overview of Tibetan Government-in-Exile

Table A1: List of Previous Dalai Lamas<sup>1</sup>

Dalai Lama	Name after Ordination	Original Name	Birth Year	Birth Place	Annointment	Death	Comment
1st	Gedun Drupa	Pema Dorjee	1391	Gyurmey Rupa, Tibet	1411	1474	Founded Tashi Lhunpo monastery in Shigatse
2nd	Gedun Gyatso	Sangye Phel	1475	Tanag Sekme, Tibet	1486	1542	Revived Monlam Chenmo Festival
3rd	Sonam Gyatso	Ranu Sicho Pelzang	1543	Tolung, Tibet	1565	1588	The title of "Dalai Lama" was conferred by Mongolian king Altan Khan for the first time
4th	Yonten Gyatso	N/A	1589	Mongolia	1614	1617	Only Dalai Lama to be born in Mongolia
5th	Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso	Kunga Migyur	1617	Lhoka Chingwar Taktse, Tibet	1642	1682	First Dalai Lama to be conferred both religious and political power
6th	Tsangyang Gyatso	Sanje Tenzin	1683	Tawang, India	1697	1706	Only Dalai Lama to be born in India
7th	Kelzang Gyatso	N/A	1708	Litang, Tibet	1726	1757	Established the 'Kashag' or Council of Ministers under Tibetan government and abolished the post of 'Desi' (Regent)
8th	Jamphel Gyatso	N/A	1758	Lhari Gang, Tibet	1777	1804	Constructed Summer Palace (Norbulingka) in Lhasa
9th	Lungtok Gyatso	N/A	1805	Kham, Tibet	1810	1815	Died at the age of 9; undertook first ever meeting between a Dalai Lama and a British citizen
10th	Tsultrim Gyatso	N/A	1816	Kham, Tibet	1835	1837	Reconstructed Potala Palace
11th	Khedrup Gyatso	N/A	1838	Litang, Tibet	1842	1856	Led Tibet in Nepal-Tibet war in 1855-56
12th	Trinley Gyatso	N/A	1856	Lhoka, Tibet	1873	1875	His short life coincided with a time of major political unrest and wars among Tibet's neighbours
13th	Thupten Gyatso	N/A	1876	Dakpo, Tibet	1895	1933	Introduced Tibetan currency and undertook modernization of Tibet
14th	Tenzin Gyatso	Lhamo Dhondup	1935	Amdo, Tibet	1940	-	Escaped to India and established TGIE

<sup>1</sup> "Short Biographies of the Previous Dalai Lamas," The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/previous-dalai-lamas/previous-dalai-lama>; "His Holiness," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibtet.net/about-tibet/his-holiness/>; "A Brief Biography of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama," The Tibet Museum, <https://tibetmuseum.org/exhibitions/travelling-exhibition/a-brief-biography-of-his-holiness-the-fourteenth-dalai-lama/>.

**Table A2: List of Important CTA officials<sup>2</sup>**

Member Name	Designation	Authority
Penpa Tsering	President (Sikyong)/Health Department/Department of Religion and Culture	Cabinet (Kashag)
Tharlam Dolma Changra	Department of Education	Cabinet (Kashag)
Dolma Gyari	Department of Security	Cabinet (Kashag)
Norzin Dolma	Department of Information and International Relations	Cabinet (Kashag)
Penpa Tsering	Home Department	Cabinet (Kashag)
Penpa Tsering	Finance Department	Cabinet (Kashag)
Karma Dadul	Chief Justice Commissioner	Judiciary
Khenpo Sonam Tenphel	Speaker 17th Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile	Legislature
Wangdu Tsering Pesur	Commissioner	Election Commission
Pema Dadul Arya	Auditor General	Auditor General

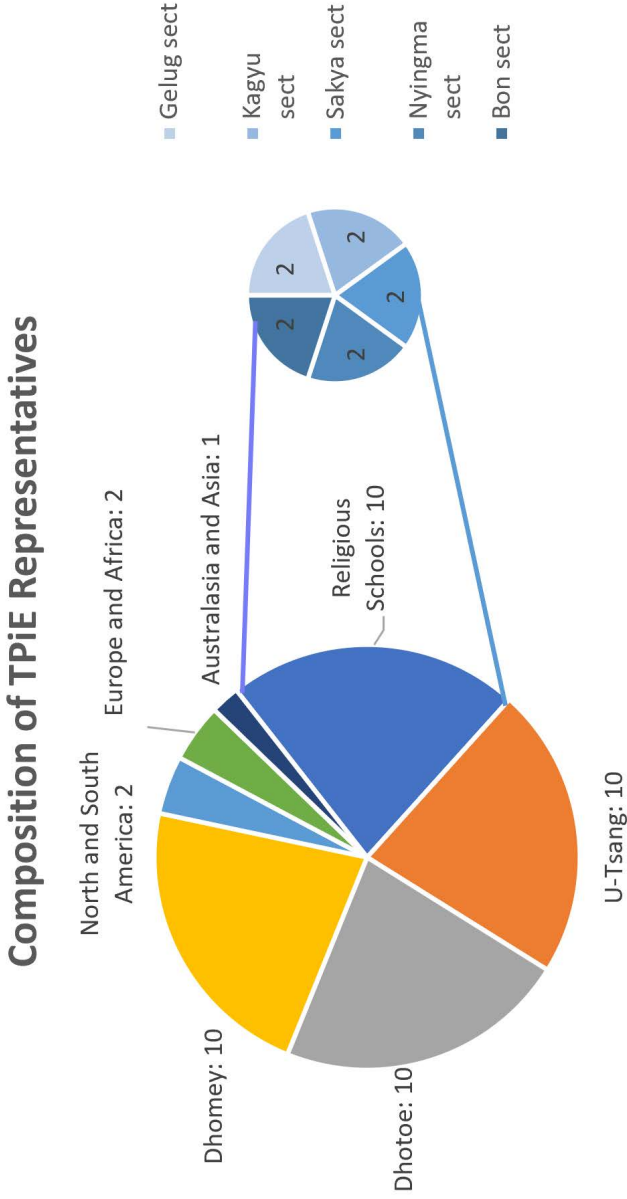
<sup>2</sup> "Kalon / Kalon's Message," Department of Health, <https://tibetanhealth.org/about/kalon-kalons-message/>; "The Kashag (Cabinet)," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibet.net/about-cta/executive/>; "Department of Finance," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibet.net/department/finance/>; "Home Department," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibet.net/department/home/>; "WHO'S WHO IN CENTRAL TIBETAN ADMINISTRATION," Central Tibetan Administration, <https://tibet.net/about-cta/leadership/>.

Table A3: Monks in the 17<sup>th</sup> Tibetan Parliament in Exile (TPiE)<sup>3</sup>

Sr. No.	Name	Sect	Birth Year	Birth Place	Attached to	Notable Work
1	Ven. Khenpo Sonam Tenphel	Nyingma	1974	Kham, Tibet	Namdroling monastery, Karnataka, India	Speaker of 17th TPiE, received 'Khenpo' title for completing Ph.D. In Buddhist philosophy
2	Ven. Khenpo Jamphal Tenzin	Nyingma	1982	Minyak, Tibet	Dzogchen monastery, Tibet	Support to underprivileged Tibetans with medical care, financial aid and scholarships
3	Ven. Kunga Sotop	Kagyü	1980	Kham, Tibet	Palpung Sherbaling Monastery, Sichuan, China	Administrator of Tergar monastery in Bodhgaya, Bihar, India
4	Ven. Tenpa Yarphel	Kagyü	1979	Chamdo Zagyü, Tibet	Sera Jey monastery, Karnataka, India	Edited three volumes on the history of over 300 monasteries
5	Ven. Lopon Thubten Gyaltzen	Sakya	1980	Markham, Tibet	Sakya Tibetan Institute, Puruwala, India	Edited a dictionary for Sakya editorial office and active member of official Tibet outreach programs
6	Ven. Khenpo Kada Ngedup Sonam	Sakya	1979	Kham, Tibet	Tharik Shedra Monastery, Nepal	Authored 13 published books and 45 unpublished work, member of standing committee of 17th TPiE
7	Ven. Geshe Lharampa Gowlo Lobsang Phende	Gelug	1977	Kham, Tibet	Drepung Loseling monastery, Karnataka, India	Former President of the Regional Tibetan Freedom Movement of Mundgod, member of standing committee of 17th TPiE
8	Ven. Geshe Lharampa Atuk Tsetan	Gelug	1972	Tibet	Drepung Gomang monastery, Karnataka, India	Earned Geshe Lharampa's degree (Ph.D. in Buddhist Philosophy)
9	Ven. Geshe Atong Rinchen Gyaltsen	Bon	1981	Kham, Tibet	Menri Bon monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India	Published two research books and editorial member of the Bon-Go printing press
10	Ven. Geshe Monlam Tharchin	Bon	1968	Thingchen, Tibet	Menri Bon monastery, Himachal Pradesh, India	Earned Geshe Lharampa's degree (Ph.D. in Buddhist Philosophy and edited several books)

<sup>3</sup> "Seventeenth TPiE," Tibetan Parliament in Exile, <https://tibetanparliament.org/about-tpie/the-successive-tpie/seventeenth-tpie/>.

Figure A1: Composition of Representatives in 17th TPIE<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> "Composition," Tibetan Parliament in Exile, <https://tibetanparliament.org/about-tpie/composition/>.

**Table A4: A Parallel Timeline of Dalai Lama's Life and India-China Ties<sup>5</sup>**

14th Dalai Lama's Life Journey	Year	Development in India-China Relations
Dalai Lama born on 6th of July as Lhamo Dhondup in Amdo, North-eastern Tibet	1935	
Dhondup recognised as the reincarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama	1937	
Formally enthroned at a ceremony in Potala Palace	1940	
	1949	People's Republic of China begins incursions into Tibet
Assumed full political power in Tibet at the age of 15	1950	Chinese troops capture Chamdo, capital of Kham in eastern Tibet
	1951	17-point Agreement signed between PRC and the Tibetan Government
Dalai Lama visits Beijing to meet Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai	1954	PM Jawaharlal Nehru visits China and the Pancasheel Agreement (Agreement on Trade and Intercourse Between Tibet Region of China and India) is signed
Dalai Lama along with Panchen lama visits India at the invitation of the Government of India and Mahabodhi Society	1956	
Awarded the Geshe Lharampa Degree (Doctorate of Buddhist Philosophy), Escapes to India in light of PLA's invasion of Tibet, 17-Point Agreement formally repudiated by Tibetan Government	1959	
Publishes his first autobiography titled 'My Land and My People'	1962	The China-India war takes place and strains bilateral relations between the two countries
Dalai Lama presents a draft for a democratic constitution called "The Charter of Tibetans in Exile"	1963	
First contact with the government of the People's Republic of China established since coming into exile in 1959	1979	
Dalai Lama proposes a Five-Point Peace Plan for Tibet at the U.S Congress in Washington	1987	
	1988	PM Rajiv Gandhi undertakes a historic visit to China
Awarded Noble Peace Prize for his non-violent struggle for the liberation of Tibet	1989	
First democratic elections conducted to elect the Tibetan Cabinet (Kashag)	1990	

14th Dalai Lama's Life Journey	Year	Development in India-China Relations
Publishes his second autobiography titled 'Freedom in Exile'	1991	Memorandum between India and China signed on Resumption of Border Trade
	1992	India-China border trade through the Lipulekh pass resumes after suspension since the 1962 war
	1993	The Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement signed between India and China
	1994	The Shipki La trade route resumed for bilateral trade engagements
Dalai Lama names Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th incarnation of the Panchen Lama but is rejected by China and remains untraceable to date	1995	
	1996	Agreement on Military Confidence Building Measures signed between India and China
First direct elections for the Kalon Tripa (Chairman of Cabinet) held	2001	
	2003	PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee visits China and signs the Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India
	2005	Agreement of Protocol for the Implementation of Military Confidence Building Measures signed between India and China
	2006	Nathu La officially opened for trade after a hiatus of four decades
Tibetan unrest leads to a crackdown by Chinese authorities	2008	
Dalai Lama devolves political authority to elected leadership of the TGIE	2011	
	2017	Doklam Crisis leads to India-China Border stand-off
	2020	Galwan Valley Clash results in casualties for the first time in decades

<sup>5</sup> "Chronology of Events," The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/chronology-of-events>; "India-China Relations," Ministry of External Affairs, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-China\\_Relations.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-China_Relations.pdf); "Back India and China: A timeline of how ties have unfolded over the years," *Livemint*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/X2JQZHDEPGNBpMjLqC19I/India-and-China-A-timeline-of-how-ties-have-unfolded-over-t.html>; "CHRONOLOGY-Key events in China-India relations," *Reuters*, January 20, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-india-china-relations-idUKDEL11874020061121>; "Timeline: 70 years of China-India diplomatic relations," March 31, 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-31/Timeline-70-years-of-China-India-diplomatic-relations-PjoLH5tKPC/index.html>.

