

**Statement before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Tibet: Freedom of Religion

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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, Members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this important topic. Over the years, this Commission and its predecessor have given welcome and needed attention to Tibet, not just on human rights and religious freedom, but on political issues and the Dalai Lama's quest for a durable solution.

I have closely followed Tibetan affairs for almost a decade. Most recently, I staffed the State Department's Office of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, serving as a senior advisor to Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights Sarah Sewall, who served concurrently as Special Coordinator.

Overview

Authorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) -- both the government and the party -- impose severe restrictions on the religious freedom of the Tibetan people. These limitations are well documented by the State Department in its annual reports on International Religious Freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and many non-governmental organizations.

The Chinese government treats Tibetan Buddhism not as a spiritual tradition to be respected but as a rival for fealty. As with any other entity it sees as a threat to party dominance, it treats Tibetan Buddhism with a heavy and intrusive hand.

When looking at Tibet, we should keep in mind the distinction between "freedom of religion" and "freedom of religious practice."

Chinese officials will show you monks in a monastery and say there is freedom of religion. But the monks may not be able to travel to further their spiritual education. Government-imposed travel restrictions, especially on monks and nuns, can have serious implications for the religion's vitality. Oral transmission of teachings from master to student is the life-blood of the religion. Severing this connection undermines the intellectual dynamism that is at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism.

Chinese tour guides will point to a Tibetan reciting mantras with a prayer wheel and say there is freedom of religion. But that Tibetan cannot display a photo of the Dalai Lama or publicly wish him a long life. In many areas, Tibetans can be punished for publicly venerating the Dalai Lama or possessing a photo of him. Cleaving the Dalai Lama, an incarnation of the Bodhisattva of

Compassion, from the belief system rips at the heart of the religious, social and ethnic identity of the Tibetan people.

Chinese media will showcase a Tibetan lama presiding over a religious ceremony. But that lama may have been selected by an apparatchik over the wishes of the guardians of his lineage and not respected by his erstwhile followers. In 2007 the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) set regulations requiring that reincarnate lamas be approved by the government. They provide that no foreign entity can have a role in a recognition and that reincarnations must happen inside China. There is now a government registry of approved lamas. The 14th Dalai Lama is not on the list.

In essence, China is creating a Potemkin village of Tibetan Buddhism, with glittering temples, fluttering prayer flags and "Living Buddhas" on state TV. But behind the facade, regulations and restrictions are undermining the architecture of this ancient and rich religion.

Reincarnation of the Dalai Lama

I would like to focus on the issue of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and why it demands increased attention from U.S. policy-makers.

The Dalai Lama celebrated his 82nd birthday last week. While he is in good health, each year brings us closer to the question of his succession or reincarnation.

Every analyst I have consulted assesses a high likelihood of unrest and violence in Tibet if the 14th Dalai Lama dies in exile absent a negotiated arrangement on his succession. The Dalai Lama has represented Tibetans' hope for deliverance. His passing could unleash decades-worth of anger and resentment. We could expect a brutal response from Chinese security forces.

This is an avoidable crisis. We know it is coming. There is time to find an offramp, if the parties can summon the will, and if the international community can prioritize the search for a solution.

The Chinese government says it retains the exclusive right to select the next Dalai Lama and that his reincarnation can only happen inside the PRC. The Dalai Lama says that only he, in consultation with senior lamas, certain followers of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Tibetan public, can decide. He has said he could reincarnate as was done the 13 previous times. He could emanate, akin to transferring his spirit into an already living person. He could choose not to reincarnate if he finds the institution is no longer useful. All of these options are legitimate, with precedents, in Tibetan Buddhism. He has also said he could return as a woman and that he almost certainly would be reborn "in freedom," meaning outside the borders of the PRC.

The Chinese position is inflexible, the Dalai Lama's elastic. China calculates they can win the hearts and minds of Tibetans with economic inducements. They are betting that Tibetans can be peacefully cleaved from their core spiritual identity. You will find few observers who think they can win that bet.

Some have called this the "two Dalai Lama problem," with one in Tibet selected by China and the other in exile chosen per the 14th Dalai Lama's instructions. Such a scenario would likely worsen

relations between Tibetans and the Chinese who govern them. It would likely exacerbate friction between China and India, assuming the latter continues to provide refuge to Tibetan exiles.

Why does China take such a hard line? Because it seeks legitimacy to rule Tibet that it has failed to acquire over six decades of occupation. It wants from the 15th Dalai Lama what the 14th cannot grant -- a statement, historically false, that Tibet has been part of China since ancient times.

The stakes go beyond the confines of the Tibetan plateau. The geography of the Tibetan Buddhist world encompasses the Himalayan belt -- Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and parts of India -- Mongolia, and three regions in the Russian Federation. China's actions to exert greater control over Tibetan Buddhism, including giving financial support to certain monasteries and factions, are a key component in its effort to extend influence on its periphery. Moreover, Buddhism is an element in the soft power competition between China and India, as each claims to be seen as the top benefactor of global Buddhism, sponsoring competing conferences and financing religious sites.

This issue is an example of the nexus between religious freedom and international security. Policy interventions on behalf of religious freedom are directly relevant to addressing challenges of stability.

United States interests

Why should the United States care about the Dalai Lama's succession? There are several U.S. interests at stake:

- Our interest in stability, both regionally and internally in China.
- Our interest in China becoming a stable and sustainable multi-ethnic nation where pluralism is valued and supported by the law, rather than suspect and smothered by an iron fist. We don't want China's behavior to serve as a model for other authoritarians ruling heterogeneous states.
- Our interest in limiting the anti-democratic Chinese government's expansion in the region.
- Our interest in preserving the distinct religion, culture and language of the Tibetan people. Promoting religious freedom is a core foreign policy objective of the United States. Inherent in this principle is the right of Tibetan Buddhists to determine the individuals who guide and sustain their religion, especially through the traditional practice of reincarnation.

Considerations

As policy-makers address this issue, a few considerations are worth bearing in mind:

- Unrest in Tibet could precede the Dalai Lama's death, if he becomes infirm and Tibetans see his return home as an impossibility. The desire to pass on near one's home is very important in Tibetan culture.

- There is a significant interregnum that occurs under the traditional process. The child is not recognized until age 3-5, and he does not achieve majority for another 13-15 years. The politics of a "two Dalai Lama problem" would play out over decades.
- In the case of the 11th Panchen Lama, the Chinese government allowed the Dalai Lama to have a role in the search for the reincarnation, providing an example that coordination is possible. The case is also illustrative of China's heavy hand, when coordination ceased and they disappeared the boy chosen by Dalai Lama and appointed their own.
- We should not assume a monolithic Chinese position. There are scholars in China who have warned of the dangers of a "two Dalai Lama problem." However, these voices are not allowed an airing in the current climate.

Recommendations

The optimum outcome is one where the passing of the Dalai Lama does not result in violence and unrest and where the choice of a spiritual successor is made with the genuine input of the Tibetan people consistent with their belief system and their right to religious liberty. I offer a set of recommendations for policy-makers in the Executive Branch and Congress:

- **Approach the Dalai Lama's succession as a matter of regional security**, and address the religious freedom component not just as a values issue, but integral to the security problem and potential solutions.
- **Ensure that the aperture for assessing the risks of a clash over the Dalai Lama's succession include the geographic breadth of the Tibetan Buddhist world**, including India, Mongolia, Nepal and Bhutan, in addition to Tibetan areas of the PRC.
- **Clearly state the position of the United States.** Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Sarah Sewall testified before this Commission that "the basic and universally recognized right of religious freedom demands that any decision on the next Dalai Lama be reserved to the current Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhist leaders, and the Tibetan people." The Trump Administration should adopt and enunciate this position, and Congress should reinforce it through legislation.
- **Have a contingency plan for the U.S. government in place.** Elements should include a pre-drafted statement to be issued upon the Dalai Lama's death; responses to anticipated Chinese statements and actions; a mechanism for coordination with relevant governments; and a list of key contacts in the Tibetan Buddhist community inside and outside of China with whom to engage.
- **Engage with China on the benefits of finding a solution to the "two Dalai Lama problem" before he dies and on the risks if they don't.** Urge Chinese officials to engage with the Dalai Lama or his representatives.
- **Urge China to refrain from making statements or taking actions that could inflame the situation following the Dalai Lama's death.**

- **Encourage track two dialogues** between academics and/or Tibetan Buddhist leaders from both inside and outside the PRC.
- **Engage the Indian government and other stakeholders in India to identify common interests and objectives.** No nation outside China has a larger stake in the "two Dalai Lama problem."
- **Ensure that U.S. diplomats based in Beijing, Chengdu, New Delhi, Kathmandu and Ulaanbaatar are aware of the political dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism** and specifically the issue of the Dalai Lama's succession and reincarnation, and include them in their reporting.
- **Encourage the Dalai Lama to be clear about his intentions.** His friends in the international community can be more helpful with a roadmap based on his plans.
- **Provide the Dalai Lama platforms to communicate his message,** and encourage like-minded governments in Europe and Asia to do the same. Elevating his stature is needed in the effort to encourage dialogue.
- **Continue to provide support to Tibetan communities in India and Nepal.** They are the guarantors of an authentic Tibetan Buddhism while it is being eroded within the PRC.

The effectiveness of these actions will be enhanced if the U.S. government coordinates with like-minded governments in Europe and Asia. Such coordination must be part of the game plan. Members of Congress can help by engaging your interlocutors in these countries on this issue.

In conclusion, the reincarnation/succession of the Dalai Lama could be an inflection point in the history of China and Tibet. We do not want it to trigger violence and instability. We have the luxury of knowing the event is coming. We can prepare and work to steer it away from a bad outcome. There will be no positive outcome that does not allow Tibetan Buddhists to be able to freely practice their religion.

Thank you.