

The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India

Vijay Gokhale 

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Introduction

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is eighty-nine years of age. He has been living in exile since 1959. He assures his followers that he will live for several more years, possibly until he is 113.¹ Since the early 1980s, there have been attempts by the Dalai Lama to reconcile with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Thus far, these efforts have not borne fruit. Although a reconciliation in the future that might permit him to return to Tibet cannot be ruled out, the likelihood of this happening appears to be remote. He could likely pass away in exile. In 2022, he said that he would prefer to die in a free and democratic country like India rather than be surrounded by Chinese officials at the time of his death.²

As a Living Buddha, he is expected to reincarnate, but the question of his succession remains shrouded in uncertainty since the current Dalai Lama has forewarned of the possibility that the line might end with him. He has also indicated at various times that he might reincarnate outside Tibet. The PRC, which has ruled Tibet since 1950, says there will be a successor to the 14th Dalai Lama and that the next incarnation will be born inside China and approved by the Chinese government.

The question of who selects the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is debatable. Tibetans reject the idea that China has the authority to exercise legal jurisdiction over the process of selecting the Dalai Lama (and other Living Buddhas of Tibet). The PRC claims that the imperial ordinance of 1793 (known as the Imperially Approved Ordinance for Better Governance of Tibet or the 29-article Ordinance) stipulates the procedure for the reincarnation of the Living Buddhas (including the Dalai Lama) and subjects the selected candidate to approval by Beijing.³ However, it is a fact that the Golden Urn method of selecting the Dalai Lamas, stipulated by the 1793 imperial ordinance, was only selectively applied in the cases of the 11th and 12th Dalai Lamas but was dispensed with for the 9th, 13th, and 14th Dalai Lamas.⁴

If the current Dalai Lama chooses to reincarnate, possibly outside the territory of the PRC, and another reincarnation is selected by the PRC, more than one reincarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama could co-exist.⁵

This situation will be monitored with great interest in India, where the Dalai Lama has been residing since 1959. His presence has been a continuing sore point in India's relations with the PRC. After his passing, a sizeable Tibetan community-in-exile will continue on Indian soil. Should the reincarnation either be found in or relocated to India, it might complicate relations in light of China's declaration that the reincarnation must be found with its prior approval within sovereign Chinese territory. One study supposes that the PRC would probably demand the closure of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) as well as Tibetan educational and cultural institutions located in India. The possibility that the PRC will try to split the exile community by infiltrating and influencing Buddhist monasteries and communities in India's Himalayan region will have security implications for India.⁶

The reincarnation question has salience for India. Tibetan Buddhism has a significant Indian following in the Himalayan states, and controversy over the selection of the next Dalai Lama could have domestic reverberations. There is also a significant Tibetan population that has been residing in India—which is the result of the poor handling of Tibetan issues by the PRC—and India has an interest in an orderly transition taking place for Tibet's highest-ranking spiritual leader. Hence, the policy question of how India might handle such a situation, should it arise, is of crucial importance domestically as well as for the future relationship between India and the PRC.

In India, the issue of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is usually viewed from a bilateral perspective—as either giving India leverage vis-à-vis China or imposing a burden upon it in the context of India–China relations. It presumes that India's posture on the sensitive matter of the reincarnation could be central to the crafting of the PRC's policy in a post-14th Dalai Lama scenario. This approach attributes a passive or reactive role to the PRC. The aim of this paper is to look beyond the India–China dynamics on the Dalai Lama and Tibet and at how the PRC shapes its approach to the reincarnation question based on its broader domestic and foreign policy needs so that India might generate appropriate policy to handle the same.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first part examines how the evolution of Chinese policy toward religion in general, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, since 1949 is shaping Chinese thinking on the question of the next Dalai Lama. The second part looks at how external factors, in particular the approach of the United States toward Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama, has impacted the Chinese policy on Tibet, and how the current state of U.S.–China relations might shape the PRC's approach on the reincarnation issue. The two sections identify domestic and external drivers of Chinese policy on the issue at hand. The third part looks at the history of India–China relations with respect to the Dalai Lama and how both countries have handled the matter. It seeks to draw some broad learnings from the past sixty-five years of interaction between the two countries after the Dalai Lama came to India. The last part of the paper identifies some of the policy questions that India might need to handle in order to shape a coherent and stable policy in a post-14th Dalai Lama scenario.

The paper concludes that the PRC's policy on the Dalai Lama and the reincarnation question is not primarily driven by India's actions or policy. The primary drivers are the overriding domestic requirement of politico-social stability in an ethnically distinct borderland region and the external dynamics of the U.S.–China competition. The PRC has tolerated the Dalai Lama's presence in India so long as it does not impinge on the two critical concerns of social stability and Sino–U.S. competition. A unilateral gesture of goodwill that India might show after the passing of the 14th Dalai Lama, (for example, possibly disallowing the Dalai Lama's chosen successor from living in India or officially acknowledging the PRC's candidate as the successor to the 14th Dalai Lama) is unlikely to change the PRC's policy toward India. The passing of the 14th Dalai Lama will also bring a material change in the India–China–Tibet equation because they might not agree on the next incarnation. This is likely to raise important questions for which India needs to develop policy responses in advance of the event. Given his age and health, critically thinking through these questions ought not to be postponed.

Part I: Religion in China and the Chinese Communist Party

Prior to 1949, religion did not prominently figure in Mao Zedong's conversations and speeches. His priority was to establish communist rule in China, including over the minority regions like Tibet.⁷ As Mao put it, the minority regions comprised over half the territory of China; they were resource-rich, and located in the borderlands.⁸ Hence, the establishment of Chinese control over Tibet was the priority and not the religious question.

So far as general religious policy was concerned, apart from the fact that religion was antithetical to communism, the newly established PRC took a relatively benign approach. They needed support from all segments of the population and accepted the influence of religion in Chinese society as a reality. In April 1945, Mao Zedong told the 7th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that, “all religions are permitted in China's liberated areas in accordance with the principle of freedom of religious belief. All believers in Protestantism, Catholicism, Islamism, Buddhism, and other faiths enjoy the protection of the people's government so long as they are abiding by its laws.”⁹ The CCP's policy toward religious groups in China was conditioned by two priorities—social stability and national security. In the former case, the party felt that the nexus between entrenched feudal interests and religious groups might be an obstacle to the CCP's efforts to establish complete control over society. In the latter case, their concern was that foreign domination of religious organizations inside China could become conduits for opposition. In such cases, the party applied restrictions and took action against religious groups.

Since the CCP's priority in Tibet was to gain political control, plans were made to attack Tibet immediately after the establishment of the PRC in 1949.¹⁰ Mao personally approved these plans.¹¹ Following the People's Liberation Army's invasion in October 1950, the Tibetan government was compelled to negotiate the Agreement of the Central People's Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (known as the Seventeen-Point Agreement). It brought the Tibetan people into the "big family of the motherland—The People's Republic of China," and accorded autonomous status to Tibet but only as a "local government" under the leadership of the central authority in Beijing.¹²

The CCP did not trust the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist clergy but was conscious that their hold over Tibet was tenuous and that they lacked the material means to administer complete control over Tibet. They needed to consolidate before tackling the Dalai Lama. In April 1952, an inner-party directive was sent by the party's central committee to the southwest bureau (in charge of Tibet), which acknowledged that, "while they [the Dalai Lama's government] are inferior to us in military strength, they have an advantage over us in social influence. We should . . . put off the full implementation of the agreement." The priority was to "take proper steps to win over the Dalai and the majority of his top echelon . . . in order to achieve a gradual, bloodless transformation of the Tibetan economic and political system over a number of years."¹³ There was no direct move to interfere with Tibetan Buddhism, although they began to undermine the Dalai Lama's influence in other ways.¹⁴ The soft approach taken by the PRC in the early 1950s is reflected in the Dalai Lama's statement that Mao was a fatherly figure with whom he had good relations.¹⁵ By the late 1950s, the PRC had grown more confident about its position inside Tibet and had begun tightening its control over Tibetan society. After the Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959, the PRC introduced repressive policies. In the wake of the Dalai Lama's flight, Mao's government confiscated estates belonging to the religious elites and closed down many monasteries. The destruction of monasteries, imprisonment of monks, and banning of worship during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) is well-documented. It was similar to their approach toward other organized religions inside China (Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Taoism). Thus, religious policy in general during Mao Zedong's period, as well as more specifically in Tibet, was guided by priorities of domestic political stability and national security rather than Marxist dogma. These remain the fundamental pillars of the PRC's subsequent religion policy.

After Mao's passing, the PRC's religious policy entered its second phase. In March 1982, the party's central committee formally acknowledged the harsh religious repression and enormous destruction of places of worship in China during the Cultural Revolution. It passed a landmark resolution titled "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period."¹⁶ Commonly known as Document 19, this became the new guideline for all religious policy, including that toward Tibetan Buddhism, under Deng Xiaoping. Document 19 acknowledged the existence of religion inside the PRC, its mass nature, and its entanglement with the ethnic question in the borderlands.¹⁷ It posited a basic question that became the determinant of the PRC's revised religious policy, namely

“can we handle this religious question properly as we work towards national stability and ethnic unity, as we develop our international relations while resisting the infiltration of hostile forces from abroad?”¹⁸ While acknowledging both the domestic (social stability) and international (national security) dimensions, as Mao had done, Deng reoriented religious policy to meet the requirements of the new policy of reform and opening up to the outside world.

The PRC permitted the revival of religious activity by recognized religious groups but set clear limits within which such a revival could proceed. Freedom of religious belief was given constitutional protection in 1982 (Chapter II, Article 36 of the PRC Constitution).¹⁹ But religious establishments were not permitted to repossess their feudal privileges and use religious pretexts to oppose the Communist Party’s leadership, nor to destroy national or ethnic unity. Within the rubric of this broad religious policy, the PRC also began its reengagement with the Dalai Lama. In 1979, with Deng’s approval, the PRC reestablished contact through his brother Gyalo Thondup.²⁰ Beijing believed that the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet would confirm China’s sovereign claim to the region. Thondup led the team of the Dalai Lama’s representatives for two exploratory talks (in 1982 and 1984). It did not lead to a wider dialogue between the PRC and the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama subsequently built pressure by internationalizing the Tibet question in his speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg in June 1988 and, in turn, the PRC labeled the Dalai Lama as a “splittist.” But the PRC’s policy toward Tibetan Buddhism broadly remained in line with the overall religious policy.²¹ In fact, from the 1980s onward, Chinese strategy gave priority to economically integrating Tibet with the rest of China so that it might reduce the role of religion and the Dalai Lama in the minds of the Tibetan people over time.

Through the 1990s, as a substantial religious revival began in China, regulations were introduced to manage religious affairs, beginning with the party’s central committee’s Document No. 6 in 1991, increasing regulatory control over religious activity. In 1994, under the Regulations on Managing Religious Activities of the State Council (known as Document No. 144), it was made mandatory for religious organizations to register with local governments and to certify that they were free from foreign controls. In 1995, fifteen religious groups (including the Fa Lun Gong) were labelled as “evil cults” and banned.²² In 1997, the State Council issued a white paper on freedom of religious belief in China, which said that religions must conduct activities within the sphere of the law. Despite tighter regulations, a tolerant perspective was adopted toward the organized religions so long as they operated under the leadership of the State Religious Affairs Bureau and the patriotic religious organizations approved by Beijing. At the National Conference on Religious Affairs in December 2001, general secretary Jiang Zemin called for greater “guidance” to religion but also reminded officials to adhere to the party’s basic line on religious policy and not to use administrative measures to eliminate religion in China.²³ This relatively benign approach to religion was reflected in the party’s handling of Tibetan Buddhism. During Jiang Zemin’s term as president, informal contact was resumed with the Dalai Lama’s representative, which would lead to the establishment of a formal dialogue from September 2002 onward between the party’s United Front Work Department (UFW) and the Dalai Lama’s chief representative, Lodi Gyari.²⁴

China's overall religious policy entered a transition phase under Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao. The first signs of the tightening of religious freedoms appeared in 2004 when the State Council passed Decree No. 426 (known as Document No. 6) titled "The Regulations on Religious Affairs."²⁵ These regulations decreed that religion in China shall not be used to undermine the country's social order (Article 3), stipulated enhanced measures for the establishment of new religious institutions, and more strictly regulated the conduct of religious activities (Articles 8 and 12), and made it mandatory for religious clergy to have prior recognition from the state authorities (Article 29). The new regulations did not prohibit external contact but said that these should be nonconditional.²⁶ For Tibetan Buddhism, the 2004 regulations were also significant because, for the first time, it introduced stipulations on the selection of high-ranking Tibetan lamas. Article 27 of Document No. 6 stated: "The inheritance and succession of the Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism shall be handled in accordance with religious rituals and historical customs under the guidance of Buddhist groups and reported to the religious affairs department of the people's government."²⁷ This was the first sign that the central leadership was focusing on the reincarnation of ranking lamas of Tibetan Buddhism. While the 2004 regulations did not stipulate any specific procedures for the state to control the process of the selection of Living Buddhas, Article 27 laid the basis for a subsequent set of specific rules on their selection.

In 2007, the State Religious Affairs Bureau issued Order No. 5 titled "Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism," which made it clear that the central government intended to control the entire process of selection and appointment of Living Buddhas.²⁸ The regulations specified that only registered monasteries in Tibet could apply for Living Buddha reincarnations (Article 3). No group or individual could carry out any activity related to the search or recognition of a reincarnation without authorization from state authorities (Article 7). Any person or group that initiated a search for Living Buddha candidates without prior authorization would be deemed as committing a criminal offense that warranted harsh punishment (Article 11). Furthermore, it was explicitly stated that Living Buddhas with a "particularly great impact" (*you tebie zhongda yingxiang-de*)—such as the Dalai Lama—could only be approved by the highest state organ of the PRC (Articles 5 and 9).²⁹ From September 1, 2007, the process of reincarnation of all Living Buddhas has been under the complete control of the Chinese central government.

The lack of progress in reconciliation between the Dalai Lama and the PRC is one factor that would explain the party's decision to enact specific regulations on Living Buddha reincarnations. According to Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's main negotiator for nine rounds of talks from 2002 until 2010, both sides appeared satisfied until the fourth round of talks in July 2005, after which the Dalai Lama's representatives saw a hardening of the Chinese position along with a sustained propaganda campaign against him. This hardening coincided with a period of tense rioting that erupted in Tibet in 2008.³⁰ All this made it less likely that the Dalai Lama would agree to Chinese terms. The tapering off of Chinese hopes about securing a favorable resolution to the Tibetan question through talks, coupled with the Dalai Lama's advancing age, appears to have triggered the change in policy. Perhaps Chinese

leaders kept in mind the controversy that had erupted in the early 1990s over the selection of the 11th Panchen Lama and wished to preempt it when it was time to find the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.³¹

Since 2013, China's current leader, President Xi Jinping, has overseen the further tightening of controls over all religious activity in China. This is part of his broader plan to restore the party's authority and to prevent inimical forces from injecting ideas that are detrimental to the party's dominance. The Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere (also known as Document No. 9), issued in early 2013, has specifically identified "the use of ethnic and religious issues to divide and breakup" China as a challenge to the party's long-term dominance.³² Xi has taken steps to deal with it. In May 2015, he convened a United Front Work Conference where he publicly called for the "Sinicization" of religions in China, a call that was repeated at the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016.³³ Xi announced that this process would be managed through laws.³⁴ Wang Zuo'an, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, said that religions in China needed to be guided towards this process of "localization."³⁵ A slew of legislative and regulatory provisions followed.

In February 2018, the State Council made it mandatory for all religious organizations, instructors, and colleges to register with the state authority and to seek prior permission before establishing religious colleges and conducting teachings and other religious activities at public venues.³⁶ In February 2020, further regulations titled Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups stipulated that all religious organizations "must follow the leadership of the CCP" (Article 5) rather than simply supporting the CCP leadership as stipulated in the 2018 regulations. It became mandatory for all religious groups to accept the supervision, oversight, and administration of local and central governments (Article 6); to publicize the party's directives and policies and to educate and guide believers toward supporting the party's leadership (Article 17); and to establish study systems for this purpose (Article 25).

Each subsequent regulation since 2020 has progressively tightened the scope of religious activity inside China and built pressure on religions to sinicize. These regulations include a prohibition on the distribution of unauthorized domestically generated online religious content without the state's approval (Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services, March 2021), empowering the state to exercise closer financial supervision over religious institutions (Measures on Financial Management of Venues for Religious Activities, June 2021), and making it mandatory for all religious venues to study Xi Jinping thought (Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues, September 2023).³⁷ The steady advancement of state and party control over all religious activity inside China is also evident in the language of the legislation, which has evolved from "guiding" religious groups in order to support CCP leadership in the 2018 regulations, to the more authoritative "must follow" the CCP leadership in the 2020 regulations, and the definitive "must uphold" (not simply follow) the CCP leadership and sinicize religion in the latest (2023) regulations. They reflect growing concerns within the party leadership that religious activity inside

China might prove to be a politically destabilizing force that requires to be reined in since maintaining political and social stability at all costs is the overriding consideration for the Communist Party of China.

In the case of Tibet, concerns over the potentially destabilizing role of Tibetan Buddhism are magnified by the separate ethnic identity of the Tibetans and their geographical location in the borderland. At the Seventh Tibet Work Forum in 2020, Xi made it clear that Chinese policy in Tibet will continue to be based primarily on maintaining security and political stability.³⁸ This means tighter supervision over Tibetan Buddhism.³⁹ Since 2011, permanent teams of party cadres have been assigned to all Tibetan monasteries. After 2018, a systematic program to make monks and nuns “politically reliable” is underway.⁴⁰ Thus, the overriding concern of ensuring domestic stability that has guided the PRC’s overall religious policy is reflected in its treatment of Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet, ethnic and geographical factors have accentuated the Chinese concerns. The fear that Tibetan irredentism or separatism might be used by external enemies has shaped Chinese policy since the beginning and, as we shall see in the next part, from early on, the PRC has worked its policy to eliminate such a possibility.

The PRC’s perception of Tibetan Buddhism from the prism of its domestic stability concerns is a critical (but not the sole) determinant in shaping policy on the selection of the next Dalai Lama.

Part II: The United States, China, and Tibetan Buddhism

Aside from domestic concerns over the undermining of social stability by the established religions in China, the influence of external forces on religions inside the region is also a general concern for the Communist Party. It maintains that Western religions like Catholicism and Protestantism in particular “had long been controlled and utilized by colonialists and imperialists.”⁴¹ In 1949, the PRC deported Western missionaries and created “patriotic” religious associations to manage the religious question under direct state supervision.⁴²

So far as Tibet was concerned, the ethnic identity gave an edge to the PRC’s concerns about the manipulation of Tibetan Buddhism by external forces in order to separate Tibet from China. In the CCP’s opinion, the British had encouraged a distinct and separate Tibetan identity after 1911, by acknowledging Chinese “suzerainty” but not “sovereignty” over Tibet and dealing directly with the Dalai Lama’s government.⁴³ The PRC felt that even after Britain’s withdrawal from India, the United States continued to pursue efforts to separate Tibet from China by championing the cause of “Tibet independence.”⁴⁴ Hence, an examination of U.S. policy and its impact in shaping the PRC’s attitude toward the Dalai Lama is important.

The United States has had a checkered policy with respect to Tibet. During World War II, the U.S. government disagreed with the British on Tibet's status. In its memorandum to the British government in July 1942, the United States opined that "for the most part the government of the United States has borne in mind the fact that the Chinese government has long claimed suzerainty over Tibet and that the Chinese constitution lists Tibet among areas constituting the territory of the Republic of China. This government has at no time raised a question regarding either of these claims."⁴⁵ The United States did not agree with the Dalai Lama's request in 1949 for support to the idea of an independent Tibet either.⁴⁶ By the early 1950s, American policy had changed because of the Korean War. The United States wanted the Dalai Lama to disavow the Seventeen-Point Agreement (1951) and flee into exile, and said that it would recognize him as the "head of an autonomous Tibet."⁴⁷ The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency financed the Khampa rebellion in eastern Tibet during the mid-fifties. The rebellion failed, but the United States took an important step towards recognizing Tibet's special status when, after 1959, letters delivered to the Dalai Lama explicitly stated the willingness of the U.S. government "to make a public declaration of its support for the principle of self-determination for the Tibetan people."⁴⁸

Tibet became marginal to American interests after the U.S.-China rapprochement. When the Dalai Lama wished to visit the United States in 1970, Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser to president Richard Nixon, said that "too close an identification with Tibetan separatist aspirations would rank with our Taiwan policy as key roadblocks to any improvement of relations with communist China."⁴⁹ The Nixon administration adopted a hands-off approach that was to continue through subsequent administrations until the early 1990s.

The United States Congress became involved in the Tibetan Buddhist cause from the late 1980s. After the end of the Cold War, Bill Clinton became the first U.S. president to officially receive the Dalai Lama in the White House.⁵⁰ Clinton raised the issue of religious freedoms in China, including for Tibetan Buddhism, with China's president Jiang Zemin. In October 1997, president Jiang Zemin told a press conference in Washington that all Chinese citizens had freedom of religious belief.⁵¹ In June 1998, in his second press appearance with Clinton in Beijing, Jiang explicitly said that Chinese constitutional provisions on freedom of religious belief also extended to Tibet. "As long as the Dalai Lama can publicly make a statement and a commitment that Tibet is an inalienable part of China," said Jiang, "the door to dialogue and negotiation is open. Actually, we are having several channels of communication with the Dalai Lama."⁵² He also publicly confirmed that confidential contacts had resumed between the Dalai Lama's representatives and the party's United Front Work Department (UFW).⁵³ During the second Clinton administration, a new position of special coordinator for Tibetan affairs was created within the State Department. In 2000, the newly established Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) was mandated to maintain regular scrutiny of China's human rights record and to cooperate with the special coordinator for Tibet in these matters.⁵⁴ It signaled the return of a proactive American phase on the Tibet question.

In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed the Tibetan Policy Act (TPA). This was, as Lodi Gyari put it, “not simply a resolution expressing the sense of Congress but rather a binding law requiring action on behalf of the U.S. government.”⁵⁵ It was the core legislative measure guiding the U.S. policy on Tibet. It institutionalized the Office of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Affairs, officially encouraged the Chinese government to hold a dialogue with the Dalai Lama, and provided financial support for the preservation of the Tibetan identity.

Since the passage of the TPA in 2002, Tibet has been on the political agenda. Congress enacted the second piece of Tibet legislation, known as the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (TPSA), that president Donald Trump signed into law in December 2020. The TPSA specifically endorsed the right of the Tibetans to select, educate, and venerate their own religious leaders in accordance with their established religious practices and system. It called on the PRC to respect the reincarnation system of Tibetan Buddhism. The act also stated that the PRC’s interference in the process of reincarnation was a “clear violation of the fundamental religious freedoms of Tibetan Buddhists and the Tibetan people,” and asked the U.S. government to take “all appropriate measures to hold accountable senior officials of the government of the PRC or the Chinese Communist Party who directly interfere with the identification and installation of the 15th Dalai Lama.”⁵⁶ The special coordinator was mandated to pursue the building of international coalitions to oppose the PRC’s efforts to select Tibetan Living Buddhas and to ensure that the future Dalai Lama is determined solely within the Tibetan Buddhist community. In short, the TPSA 2020 directly took a stand that is contrary to the PRC’s on the question of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation.

In July 2024, the third and most recent piece of legislation was signed into law by President Joe Biden. The Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet–China Dispute Act (known as the Resolve Tibet Act) authorizes funds for countering Chinese disinformation about the Dalai Lama and urges the PRC to engage in meaningful and direct dialogue with him without preconditions. It reiterates the mandate given to the special coordinator in the TPSA 2020 to “coordinate with other governments in multilateral efforts toward this goal.”⁵⁷ The act is also significant because it states that “the U.S. government has never taken the position that Tibet was a part of China since ancient times,” and challenges the statutory definition of Tibet by the PRC as limited to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). The Resolve Tibet Act, defines Tibet as the TAR, as well as other Tibetan areas in Chinese provinces (Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan).⁵⁸

These three pieces of American legislation on Tibet since 2002 raise doubts about the historical Chinese claims to Tibet, challenge the PRC’s claim to having locus standi on the future Dalai Lama’s selection and enthronement, and internationalize the Tibet issue by mandating the special coordinator to counter Chinese propaganda and coordinate with foreign governments on pressing the Chinese to have an unconditional dialogue with the Dalai Lama. China has categorically rejected all three pieces of legislation and refused to recognize the special coordinator.⁵⁹ China’s foreign ministry said that the TPSA 2020 severely violates the norms governing international relations and is an attempt to interfere in

China's domestic affairs.⁶⁰ In response to the Resolve Tibet Act of 2024, the PRC has said that China's internal affairs "brook no interference by any external forces" and that "no one and no force should ever attempt to destabilize Xizang [Tibet] to contain and suppress China."⁶¹

Although the passage of the TPA in 2002 took place when Sino-U.S. relations were in a better shape than they currently are, its significance was not lost on China. It revived concerns about the United States' intentions with respect to Tibet. In the subsequent raft of domestic legislation on religious policy enacted by the PRC from 2004 onward (detailed in the first part of this paper), the theme of foreign interference and the PRC's determination to restrict it are palpable.

Article 4 of the 2004 Chinese legislation explicitly states that religious affairs shall not be dominated by foreign forces.⁶² Article 2 of the 2007 regulations reiterates this point specifically on the question of the selection of Living Buddhas of Tibet. It states that "reincarnating Buddhas shall not be interfered with or be under the domination of any foreign organization or individual."⁶³ The PRC's efforts to insulate the process from foreign interference have accelerated since President Xi Jinping assumed office in 2013.

Xi called for the "sinocization" of all religions in China at the National Conference on Religious Work (the first to be held after 2001) in April 2016. In this context, he explicitly stated that "we must resolutely guard against overseas infiltration via religious means."⁶⁴ Wang Zuo'an, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, has since elaborated on this theme by claiming that the West is using religion to infiltrate the PRC with the objective of changing its political system.⁶⁵ Under Xi, the fresh regulations are aimed at eliminating any possibility for foreign involvement in China's religious affairs. Since 2018, foreigners have been prohibited from establishing religious organizations, setting up religious institutions or sites, recruiting Chinese followers, and engaging in missionary activities inside the PRC.⁶⁶ Since 2021, there has been a ban on overseas organizations or individuals from operating online religious services without prior Chinese approval.⁶⁷ The Law on Administration of Activities of Overseas NGOs within China also prohibits overseas NGOs from engaging in or sponsoring any religious activities inside China.

These new regulations are stringently applied in Tibet where, aside from limiting the role of foreigners, the state has severely curtailed foreign travel by Tibetans to attend the Dalai Lama's teachings abroad and pressured the government of Nepal to close its borders to devotees and refugees from Tibet. Strict laws have criminalized self-immolations and those abetting such practices because of the adverse international attention that such acts have attracted in the recent past. Officials have been placed in monasteries for supervision and the "patriotic re-education" of monks and nuns.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the PRC has tightened its grip on the identification and selection process for Living Buddhas. According to a Chinese source, by the end of 2022, ninety-three newly incarnated Living Buddhas have been found inside and approved and recognized by the PRC.⁶⁹ Lastly, despite international appeals and the American legislation, President Xi Jinping has not renewed talks with the Dalai Lama.

Thus, the actions of both the PRC and the United States on the Dalai Lama reincarnation question since the beginning of the twenty-first century have made it a significant friction point in their relationship. China's concerns over American objectives in Tibet and the public support in the United States and the West for the Tibetan cause are strong drivers of the PRC's policy on the reincarnation question. It is leading to the securitization of the reincarnation, becoming a part of the larger Sino–U.S. competition. It is thus clear that Beijing's worries over the effectiveness of its control on Tibet and their concerns over American objectives are shaping a hard-line policy on Tibet and the Dalai Lama. This will have important implications for India too.

Part III: A Short Account of Indian and Chinese Approaches to the Dalai Lama

Although India and Tibet had several centuries of spiritual and cultural contact, modern political relations began with the British rule over India. The British interest in Tibet grew from the concern that at the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire was seeking to expand into Southern Asia. The determination of the frontier was crucial to halt the Russian advance north of the great Himalayan range. The matter was complicated by the dynamics between China and Tibet—the Chinese claimed sovereignty over Tibet, and the Tibetans claimed that Tibet had never been a part of China. The British sidestepped the question of Tibet's status by acknowledging Chinese “suzerainty” but not “sovereignty” over Tibet and finalized the Indo–Tibetan frontier as per the traditional and customary line that lay along the highest Himalayan watershed, with the 13th Dalai Lama's government in 1914.⁷⁰

After independence in 1947, the government of India maintained its ties to the Dalai Lama's government. In 1949, India's dilemma, contained in a note from the prime minister, was one of how to “maintain and continue our friendly relations with the Tibetan government” without “taking any measure which might be considered a challenge to the Chinese communist government.”⁷¹ India's primary interest was to ensure that the boundary remained unchanged, less so with regard to the survivability of the Dalai Lama's government.⁷² This remained the primary Indian objective in Tibet after the Chinese takeover in 1950. The Dalai Lama became a factor in India's policy only much later when he fled into exile.

In contrast, China's primary objective was to seize control over Tibet. They were concerned about Western interference. India, by virtue of its close relationship with the UK, was viewed with suspicion—because not only did the Chinese think that India might interfere, but they also felt that India might be pressured to allow its territory to be used by the West to frustrate the PRC's objective of fully controlling Tibet. At critical times in the 1950s, when their concerns grew over Western interference in Tibetan affairs, Chinese officials and

media accused the government of India “as having been affected by foreign influences hostile to China in Tibet,” or alleging that India was providing behind-the-scenes support to the West in fomenting the trouble in 1959.⁷³

It is worth noting that although the PRC brooked no interference from any foreign power in Tibet, it would ask India from time to time to intervene with the Dalai Lama when this aligned with the PRC’s own priorities. In March 1951, former Chinese premier Zhou Enlai personally sought Indian assistance in dissuading the Dalai Lama from leaving Tibet during the negotiations on the Seventeen-Point Agreement.⁷⁴ In 1956, when the Dalai Lama was reluctant to return to Tibet (he had come to India to attend the 2500th anniversary celebrations of the birth of the Lord Buddha), premier Zhou directly requested India’s prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru to persuade him to return, adding that, “as long as the Dalai Lama is away [from Tibet] something might happen. . . . This is chiefly instigated by the United States and Taiwan.”⁷⁵

Three broad conclusions might be drawn from this recounting of the early history of India–China exchanges on Tibet and the Dalai Lama.

First, from the very beginning, India and China had different objectives in Tibet. Complete control over the Dalai Lama’s government and Tibetan society, which were Chinese priorities, was not India’s primary concern. For India, its relationship with the Dalai Lama was about ensuring the finality and inviolability of its boundary.

Second, the PRC acknowledged Indian influence on the Dalai Lama. Hence, they sought India’s help or involvement when required. At such times, the PRC expected India to assist unconditionally, but it would not reciprocally permit India any relationship with the Dalai Lama on matters of interest to India. In other words, China used the doctrine of “non-interference in internal affairs” selectively.

Third, since the PRC was primarily concerned about American efforts to frustrate their objectives in Tibet, their policy was to neutralize India so that Indian territory was not available to the West to subvert China in Tibet. They soft-pedaled the border issue until they had marginalized India’s influence by ending extraterritorial privileges in 1954. In the late 1950s, after the CIA commenced operations inside Tibet, the PRC brought pressure on India to dissociate from such efforts but without directly accusing India of interference (until the Dalai Lama arrived in India), although the Chinese leadership distrusted the government of India’s motives in Tibet.

The PRC has continued to follow this pattern in dealing with India on matters relating to the Dalai Lama in certain ways. First, it focuses on securing reaffirmations from India about Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, thus reducing the scope for ambiguity.⁷⁶ Second, it accepts the Dalai Lama’s presence in India and tolerates the so-called Tibetan government-in-exile (Central Tibetan Administration or the CTA) in return for regular Indian assurances that it does not recognize the CTA or permit the Dalai Lama to engage in anti-China political

activity from Indian soil.⁷⁷ Third, it seeks to deny the use of Indian soil to the United States for the purpose of subverting the PRC's sovereignty in Tibet. China is also careful not to "provoke" India by accusing it of being a part of the Western "plot" to promote Tibetan "independence." The white paper on Tibet issued by China's State Council in May 2021, for example, does not allege Indian involvement with the United States in efforts to support the Khampa rebellion in the 1950s, nor about India's alleged involvement in the 1959 uprising in Tibet.⁷⁸ The official PRC statements are cautious, confining themselves to expressing the hope that India will abide by its assurances of not letting the Dalai Lama engage in political activity or denying the use of its territory to China's adversaries. They also remain mostly silent or make pro forma protests when Indian leaders meet the Dalai Lama.

The PRC does not want to trigger active Indian support to the activities of the Tibetan exile community living in India or create scope for "anti-Chinese western forces" to subvert the PRC's territorial integrity from Indian soil. The Chinese leadership has designed its policy toward India with these objectives in mind.

For its part, India is publicly circumspect in its dealings with the Dalai Lama, but it has not allowed the PRC to stop its support toward preserving the Tibetan way of life or circumscribing the spiritual and religious activities of the Dalai Lama. India's policy is that he is a revered religious leader and is accorded freedom to carry out his religious activities in India.⁷⁹ From time to time, India's leadership also receives the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader and exchanges greetings on special occasions. It permits foreign disciples to attend his teachings and to seek his blessings. It does not prevent visits by foreign government or legislative representatives, but it also does not associate with or endorse them.

India has not taken a public stand so far on the question of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation. It has, however, demonstrated that it is not willing to unconditionally accept the PRC's-anointed Living Buddhas (as in the case of Ugyen Thinley Dorje, the so-called 17th Karmapa Lama). It permits alternative Living Buddha candidates to stay and pursue their claim from India. It also continues to permit the entry of Tibetan refugees, supports Tibetan educational and cultural institutions, and allows the exile community to practice Tibetan Buddhism in whatever manner they choose. The Tibetan community has been able to live, practice, and nurture their culture and civilization unhindered in India for more than sixty years.

India does not formally acknowledge the CTA or the Tibetan parliament-in-exile, but it does not interfere with their lawful activity. It has not taken a position on their demands for self-determination. Nor has India called upon either party to hold dialogue to resolve the matter. Overall, India has sufficiently managed the difficult situation of providing asylum to the Dalai Lama and sustenance to the Tibetan exile community. India's policy has been tolerated by the PRC because it aligns with their own objectives.

As the 14th Dalai Lama ages, the question of what happens after he passes is becoming more pressing. Although China has labeled him a "splittist," he is recognized by both parties as the legitimate Dalai Lama and, thus, India and China are in agreement on this basic point.

If more than one incarnation of the 15th Dalai Lama emerges and there is a disagreement between India and China on the next incarnation, the question of whether the PRC will see the presence of an alternative to the Chinese candidate living on Indian soil as a subversive action on India's part could have a bearing on their policy toward India. This would depend on what sort of threat the 15th Dalai Lama candidate poses to the PRC's control of Tibet as well as the state of Sino-U.S. ties. Although India's approach and behavior is not the primary driver of Chinese policy on Tibet and the Dalai Lama, its stance on the selection of the next Dalai Lama will also be a factor in China's handling of the reincarnation question. The activities of the Tibetan community in exile, including the CTA and Tibetan parliament in the post-14th Dalai Lama scenario, are also likely to have policy implications for India. The international response may also influence the policies of both countries. Hence, an exploration of options that India might need to ponder is relevant.

Part IV: The Available Options

In India, the Dalai Lama question is garnering public interest. In June 2024, the *Times of India*, a mainstream newspaper, published an op-ed asking India to prepare for a post-Dalai Lama scenario. The piece advocated for a robust Tibet policy as leverage against China at a sensitive time of transition in the highest echelon of Tibetan Buddhism.⁸⁰ Such views are also reflected in the works of scholars who think that the PRC's arrangements to control the succession process once the 14th Dalai Lama passes and its acceptability to the people in Tibet appear dubious.⁸¹ There have been suggestions that India ought to take a clear position on the succession question. This is also the demand of the Tibetan exile community. Stagnating relations between India and China after 2020 because of the latter's military activity in eastern Ladakh have impacted the public discourse on India's Tibet policy. The passage of the Resolve Tibet Act 2024 as well as, more generally, greater criticism of China's human rights record are amplifying international concerns over the succession question.

Given the domestic stability and national security sensibilities of the Chinese Communist Party and the PRC on the matter of the Dalai Lama's succession, any unilateral gesture or goodwill that India makes toward the PRC with regard to the Dalai Lama on the assumption that China might view it positively is not likely to resonate in Beijing and should therefore be avoided. The PRC distrusts India's motives but tolerates its current policy in pursuit of larger stability and security goals. Their approach with India on the Tibet issue is unidirectional—India must be sensitive to Chinese concerns, but China need not show reciprocal sensitivity to India's concerns relating to Tibet. Hence, any unilateral step that seeks to please China should not be pursued as it will not result in any benefit for India.

Neither should India take an entirely hands-off approach to the reincarnation question, which has salience for India. Tibetan Buddhism has a significant Indian following, and controversy over the selection of the next Dalai Lama could have domestic reverberations.

There is also a significant resident Tibetan population since 1959, which is the result of the poor handling of Tibetan issues by the PRC, and India has an interest in an orderly transition in Tibet's highest-ranking spiritual leader.

There are some topics on which the government of India might think through policy options during the lifetime of the 14th Dalai Lama.

First, should India opine on the issue of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation and, more generally, on the right of the Tibetan Buddhist community to select its spiritual leaders without state interference? Thus far, India has avoided this topic. However, if the 14th Dalai Lama decides he will reincarnate, this process could begin in India.⁸² The PRC is bound to protest, and the international community is likely to welcome it. By both convention and practice, the Indian state does not interfere in the selection of leaders of any faith in India. Tibetan Buddhism is also a faith that is practiced by communities in some of the northern Indian states. A statement from the government of India, at the appropriate time, about permitting the Tibetan Buddhist community to select its own religious leaders freely and without interference is sustainable as per both the constitution and practice. Going into the details of the selection processes as called for by the Tibetan community by, for example, endorsing the 14th Dalai Lama's statement of September 24, 2011, on reincarnation processes is neither necessary nor desirable.⁸³

Second, should India lend its public support to the demand for dialogue between the PRC and the Dalai Lama? The Indian government has not publicly articulated support for the Dalai Lama's call for dialogue with the PRC. However, the PRC, from time to time, publicly calls upon India to have a dialogue to resolve the Jammu and Kashmir issue, even when India makes it clear that this is an internal matter on which China has no *locus standi*. Given the growing demand from the international community for dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama, India ought to consider articulating its support for these demands. It could be argued that the presence of a large Tibetan exile community in India for more than six decades (as a result of the current Chinese policy in Tibet) gives India *locus standi* in the future of Tibet. It is not necessary that this should be done jointly with others. Although it is extremely unlikely that the PRC will heed India's appeal for dialogue, such articulation will be in line with the current policy of the three mutuals articulated by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in 2022—mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest.⁸⁴

Third, should India support the demand of the Tibetan community-in-exile for the right to self-determination? India has not supported these demands in the past. China does not show the same sensitivity toward India's concerns in Jammu & Kashmir. It regularly urges India to resolve the matter in accordance with the will of the people of Kashmir. India might consider using identical or similar language in the future when the occasion arises. This is both different from supporting the demand for self-determination and adequately nuanced to make the point that principles that China claims to espouse in its foreign policy should also be applied to its domestic policy.

Fourth, should India agree to a site or a shrine in India for the final resting place of the mortal remains of the 14th Dalai Lama? Should the 14th Dalai Lama pass away on Indian soil, this might become inevitable. If that happens, the 14th Dalai Lama will be the first Dalai Lama since circa 1706 to be buried outside the Potala Palace in Lhasa.⁸⁵ Should the Dalai Lama pass away in India, the government may have no choice in the matter of where his mortal remains should rest. Working on this presumption, the government of India might wish to identify potential resting sites for his mortal remains well in advance, bearing in mind that the place of interment of the 14th Dalai Lama's mortal remains will automatically become a holy shrine for millions of pilgrims. Hence, potential locations, accessibility for pilgrims, and the social and security considerations need to be carefully thought out. Since the PRC still claims that the Dalai Lama is a citizen of the PRC, albeit a renegade, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that it might demand his mortal remains for interment in Lhasa. The government of India would need to develop an appropriate policy response, including potential recourse to legal means, to deal with such demands from the PRC.

Fifth, in what manner will the government of India handle the interregnum between the passing away of the 14th Dalai Lama and the identification of the 15th one? This period could last several months. The government of India needs to frame appropriate policy responses as to the terms of its engagement with the CTA and the Tibetan parliament located in India during this time as the expulsion of the Tibetan community is not an option available to India. Such contacts are important because the presence and activities of the exile community have domestic, social, and law and order implications. Since mechanisms are already in place for this purpose, there is no need to either formally recognize the CTA or formalize the interaction through the appointment of a coordinator, as suggested in one study.⁸⁶ India should continue to support the cultural, educational, and spiritual activities of the Tibetan community in the future.

The related question of how India deals with elements in the Tibetan exile community that wish to change the strategy and tactics of “resistance,” without the guiding hand of the 14th Dalai Lama (who has called for a peaceful resolution of the Tibet–China issue), is also worth pondering. This situation might come to pass if, as one study has suggested, the PRC selects a Living Buddha incarnation from the Shugden sect (with which the 14th Dalai Lama has serious differences) as the 15th Dalai Lama.⁸⁷ In the eventuality of such an occurrence, there might be potential for acts of violence within the Tibetan exile community, with consequent law and order problems for India. In both constitutional and legal terms, so long as the exile community does not engage in acts that are contrary to India's national security (including domestic law and order), there should be no hesitation in permitting the community and its institutions to continue operating from Indian soil. Any sort of violent behavior within the Tibetan community or the threat to use violence against the PRC from Indian soil cannot be tolerated. Equally, neither should India brook any interference by the PRC or its agents like the United Front Work Department in the affairs of the Tibetan community in India. Efforts by Chinese agencies to interfere in any manner should be firmly dealt with under domestic laws, and relevant legal clauses that may be applied should be identified in advance for such purposes.

Sixth, the idea that India should coordinate with like-minded states on the post-14th Dalai Lama situation requires a careful cost-benefit analysis.⁸⁸ The U.S. Congress has already mandated the administration to build multilateral momentum on countering the PRC's narrative and claims. Suggestions for joint initiatives to create a global coalition on the reincarnation question may need to be studied carefully from an Indian perspective, keeping in consideration the implications for the country. International opinion will undoubtedly have domestic reverberations and should be respected, but it is also important that third parties should not be permitted to take undue advantage of the tentativeness of the situation to engage in activities that might exacerbate the tension between India and the PRC.

Seventh, the 14th Dalai Lama has already said that if he reincarnates, it will be in a "free" country. In 2011, the Dalai Lama explicitly said that "no recognition or acceptance should be given to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the PRC." This raises the following questions for which appropriate policy would need to be identified.

- If the 15th Dalai Lama candidate is found in a third country, how would India respond to an explicit demand from the PRC that the former does not, officially or unofficially, recognize him as the legitimate Dalai Lama?
- Even if the government of India does not take an explicit position on the candidate who is found abroad, would it permit him to enter the country? How will India deal with the Chinese objections?
- If the 15th Dalai Lama candidate is discovered in Indian territory, will India publicly acknowledge this fact? If not, what will be the status of the Living Buddha candidate?
- Since a number of the exile community holds Indian citizenship, how would the country deal with the situation if the selected Dalai Lama candidate were an Indian national?
- In the aforementioned second or third scenario, would India permit the 15th Dalai Lama unfettered access to the 14th Dalai Lama's residence and possession of the ritual objects and symbols of the Dalai Lama, along with the enthronement ceremony?
- How would India deal with the PRC's demands that the ritual objects and symbols of the Dalai Lamas belong to China and must be returned to them? Along with the political implications, this might also have legal implications.
- The Living Buddha child, who is identified as the 15th Dalai Lama, will be under the guidance of a regency council until maturity. What relationship, if any, will India have with this regency council, and under what guidelines might they be permitted to operate in India?

Since this set of questions has both foreign policy and domestic implications, they should be dealt with on the principle of separating the question of recognition from that of location or residence. In constitutional terms, religious organizations have the right to determine their own leadership, residence, and practices without state interference. The PRC will seek to pressure India to reject the alternative candidate, but the government of India need not express any view either in favor of or against such a candidate on the grounds that the selection of religious leaders by the concerned communities is permitted within the scope of the constitution and laws of the land. Allowing the candidate to reside in India is also in keeping with India's ethos and past practice. The demand of the Tibetan community to permit access to their 15th Dalai Lama candidate to the current Dalai Lama's ritual objects and symbols of office is a more sensitive issue. The PRC will claim ownership over the ritual objects and symbols, alleging that they were illegally smuggled out of India and should be returned.

Conclusion

India is not central to the framing of Chinese policy on the Dalai Lama and the reincarnation issue. The Chinese policy is primarily driven by concerns regarding maintaining stability and political control over Tibet and what the United States might do during the transition to destabilize Tibet and discredit China internationally. India has a stake in the reincarnation question due to the domestic following and the presence of the exile community on Indian soil. It is not a passive spectator.

Even six decades after he left Tibet, the Dalai Lama still holds significant influence over the hearts and minds of Tibetans; this worries Beijing, as does Washington's escalating support for the Tibetan cause and the Dalai Lama personally. Therefore, there has been a hardening of the PRC's position on the 14th Dalai Lama and the reincarnation question in the past fifteen years. This hardening is likely to create fresh challenges for India's policy, particularly on the key questions of the reincarnation and recognition of the 15th Dalai Lama, as well as the interregnum between the passing of the 14th Dalai Lama and the selection of his successor.

For the past sixty-five years, an uneasy *modus vivendi* between India and China has prevailed because both acknowledge the same individual as the 14th Dalai Lama. This might not be the case after his passing since a Dalai Lama reincarnation found outside the PRC will not be accepted by China. Since the primary residence, temporary religious seat, and symbols of the Dalai Lama are located in India, its approach to the reincarnation question and handling of the candidate found outside China will become of great interest to the PRC. Indian policy is likely to be tested on the touchstone of how it helps or hinders the PRC in its twin objectives of maintaining stability in Tibet and deterring American efforts to destabilize Tibet. This future quagmire should necessitate India to craft policy on this subject, bearing in mind not only its relations with the PRC and the Tibetan community in India and abroad but also the context of Sino–U.S. and Indo–U.S. relations.

Lastly, inaction would not be sustainable in the face of international and domestic public pressure to allow the Dalai Lama candidate to take up his duties in Dharamsala. Taking unilateral steps to please the PRC in the hope that the passing of the 14th Dalai Lama is an opportunity to reset the bilateral relationship is unlikely to be viewed in a similar vein by the PRC. Pondering the questions posed in the final part of this paper may lead to clarity of objectives, help to handle the difficulties, and create opportunities for India to pursue its basic goals.

The views expressed in this paper strictly reflect the personal views of the author and do not represent in any manner the view of any other institution, official, or otherwise. This publication is meant as a source of information for the reader and does not claim to be authoritative or exhaustive in terms of subject matter.

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