



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Celebrating 20 years of the Tibetan Policy Act

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The US Congress has been hard at work on Tibet in recent years, with Democratic and Republican leaders partnering to pass laws that aid Tibetans' nonviolent struggle against China's brutal occupation of their homeland.

But as recently as two decades ago, even though there was grassroots support for Tibet in the United States, it was not codified in law. That changed when members of Congress took action to pass a watershed bill spurred by regular meetings the Dalai Lama had with Congressional leaders, as well as activism by Tibetan Americans and Tibet supporters across the country.

The Tibetan Policy Act was signed into law on Sept. 30, 2002.

As the 20th anniversary of its enactment nears, the International Campaign for Tibet thanks everyone who made the TPA law, from the Congress members who voted for it, to the Tibetan American community who advocated for it, to others who worked for its passage.

ICT also looks forward to Congress taking the next step in its decades of exemplary support of Tibet by passing the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act, a bipartisan bill that will push for a peaceful end to China's more than 60 years of illegal occupation in Tibet.

Tibetan Policy Act

When it became law 20 years ago, the TPA codified political and programmatic support for Tibet.

As a result of the legislation, the US' central objective on Tibet became promoting dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama's envoys toward a negotiated agreement on Tibet. From 2002 to 2010, the two sides held 10 rounds of dialogue.

The TPA also codified the position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in the State Department. Under the TPA, the Special Coordinator should work to protect the distinct religious, cultural, linguistic and national identity of Tibet.

Last year, Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya became the seventh Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. Zeya met with the Dalai Lama and elected Tibetan leaders in their exile home of Dharamsala, India in May.

The TPA also addressed a wide range of other issues facing the Tibetan people, including economic development, cultural preservation, education, environmental sustainability, religious and political prisoners, religious persecution and more.

Because of the law, Congressional action on Tibet has gone beyond mere expressions of support to include important, concrete help through various assistance programs.

US, Tibetan leaders

The main sponsors of the TPA were Sens. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., and Reps. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., and Mark Kirk, R-Ill.

While the latter three are no longer in Congress (Thomas passed away in 2007 and Lantos in 2008, while Kirk left the Senate in 2017), Feinstein remains in the Senate as a staunch advocate for Tibet. Last week, she met with participants of Tibet Lobby Day, an event that brought over 100 Tibetan Americans and Tibet supporters to Capitol Hill to meet with their members of Congress and Congressional staff.

Feinstein also provided a video message about the TPA's 20th anniversary for the Tibet Lobby Day reception at the International Campaign for Tibet. In the video, she expands on how her interest in and support for Tibet came about and mentions her late husband, Richard (Dick) Blum, as her inspiration.

During the reception, ICT also debuted a video celebrating 20 years of the TPA.

In addition to the four Congress members who introduced the bill, the TPA had 123 cosponsors—nearly a quarter of Congress.

Outside the legislature, the bill received vital support from Tibetan Americans and the Tibetan community at large.

Lodi Gyari, the late Special Envoy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Executive Chairman of the International Campaign for Tibet, was instrumental in building enthusiasm for the Tibetan Policy Act and working for its eventual passage.

Further Tibet laws

The TPA paved the way for two decades of US policy initiatives on Tibet. It also set the stage for further laws to support the Tibetan people.

In 2006, Congress passed the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Congressional Gold Medal Act, which awarded the US' highest civilian honor to the Tibetan Buddhist leader. When he received the award in the US Capitol Rotunda in 2007 from President George W. Bush and Congressional leaders of both parties, the Dalai Lama said, "This recognition will bring tremendous joy and encouragement to the Tibetan people."

In 2018, Congress passed the bipartisan Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which took aim at China's unfair policy of preventing American diplomats, journalists and ordinary citizens from entering Tibet, even though Chinese citizens could travel freely throughout the United States. As a result of the legislation, the State Department blocked Chinese government officials from entering the US because of their restrictions on American access to Tibet.

In 2020, 18 years after the TPA became law, Congress brought US policy on Tibet up to date by passing the Tibetan Policy and Support Act. The new law dramatically upgraded US support for Tibet in key areas, including by making it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can decide on his succession. If any Chinese officials try to interfere in that process, the US will sanction them.

Resolve Tibet Act

The next step in this prolific era of US policymaking on Tibet is to pass the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act.

Known as the Resolve Tibet Act, the bipartisan bill—which Reps. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and Michael McCaul, R-Texas, introduced in July—will give new strength to the TPA’s central objective of promoting dialogue between Chinese and Tibetan leaders. It will recognize that Tibetans have the right to self-determination and that Tibet’s legal status remains to be determined under international law.

The Resolve Tibet Act will carry US policy on Tibet forward while helping to bring Tibet’s long crisis to a peaceful end.

Two decades after the TPA, the best way to celebrate its 20th anniversary is to pass the Resolve Tibet Act.



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