



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Bipartisan support for Tibet as US election draws near

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With the primaries concluded and Kamala Harris and Donald Trump confirmed as presidential candidates, the stage is set for the 2024 election. In addition to the White House, control of the House and Senate will be decided. For Tibet supporters, one question looms large: What will this election bring for Tibet?

The People's Republic of China's occupation of Tibet has long struck a chord with the American public. Beijing's repressive tactics have led to the hyper-securitization of the Tibetan plateau, recurring and egregious violations of the economic, social, and cultural rights of the Tibetan people and institutionalized an extremely oppressive environment to stifle their dissent, increase interference with Tibetan Buddhism, and inflict systematic and widespread use of arbitrary detention and torture.

Meanwhile, fourteen years have passed since the last of the contacts between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government, which aimed to resolve the Tibet conflict. Beijing's plan seems to be to eschew dialogue while cementing its control.

American Interest

The situation in Tibet is contrary to the fundamental values of human rights and democracy espoused by the United States. More than 60 years after the PRC's invasion and occupation of Tibet, its rule remains completely illegitimate in the eyes of the Tibetan people, whose political, ethnic, social, cultural and religious identity is historically distinct from the Chinese.

Meanwhile, Tibetan resistance to Beijing's decades-long campaign to erode the Tibetan people's civilization remains overwhelmingly nonviolent. This is largely due to the leadership provided by the Dalai Lama. This peaceful approach is one of the key elements in the widespread public support that the Tibetan people enjoy among the American public.

Tibet also lies within the parameters of US security interests; more than human rights are at stake. Tibet occupies a geostrategic location, representing an Asian fault zone of clashing interests and big power politics. Russia, China and British India vied with each other in the past for control of Tibet. To this day tensions rise between China and India due to the PRC's occupation of Tibet. This holds implications for the Indo-Pacific region as well as potential global consequences. A stable Tibet would contribute greatly to peace in this sensitive region.

The importance of Tibet in US-China relations argues for a vigorous approach from the new Administration. In a change from the days when the United States had no coherent formalized policy toward Tibet and the Dalai Lama, today there is an institutionalized position that provides for both programmatic and policy support. American presidential administrations are mandated to implement American law which supports the Tibetan people.

Today, multiple reinforcing laws should define the next administration's approach to the Tibet conflict. In accordance with the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-228; 22 U.S.C. 6901) the United

States of America must continue efforts to preserve and promote the “unique religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage” of the Tibetan people, ask China “to respect fully their human rights and civil liberties,” and encourage a peaceful resolution to the Tibetan dispute.

Additionally, these laws reflect the US position on Tibet and the Dalai Lama: the Congressional Gold Medal to H.H. the Dalai Lama 2007 (PL 109-287; 31 U.S.C. 5111), the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 (PL 115-330), the Tibetan Policy & Support Act of 2020 (PL 116-260), and the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act of 2024 (PL 118-70).

Specifically, the following aspects of the Tibetan conflict (or situation) require the new administration’s policy formulation and implementation:

US Policy: Supporting unconditional dialogue to resolve Tibet dispute

Since 1979, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama first visited the United States, there has been a consistent move towards overt American support for the Tibetan people. Many of the initiatives in recent decades have been led by Congress. Reflecting the broad support for Tibet among the American public, Congress continues to display a consistent bipartisan support when it came to Tibet-related matters.

As reiterated in the most recent Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act, which became law on July 12, 2024, the “long-standing policy of the United States (is) to encourage meaningful and direct dialogue between representatives of the People’s Republic of China and the Dalai Lama, his or her representatives, or democratically elected leaders of the Tibetan community, without preconditions, to seek a settlement that resolves differences.”

The United States actively supported the Tibetan-Chinese dialogue process, including the nine rounds of talks held between 2002 and 2010. Since then, the Chinese authorities have not resumed the process. Every year, the administration must report to Congress on the state of the Tibetan-Chinese negotiations. In the past, [these annual reports highlighted](#) the problems in Tibet and rightly outlined that “the lack of resolution of these problems leads to greater tensions inside China and will be a stumbling block to fuller political and economic engagement with the United States and other nations.”

On Aug. 21, 2024, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Uzra Zeya during her meeting with the Dalai Lama in New York City, “[reaffirmed the U.S. commitment](#) to advancing the human rights of Tibetans and supporting efforts to preserve their distinct historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage.”

The United States must encourage China to create conditions for a sustainable settlement, which is essential to the long-term stability of the region. Lodi Gyari, who led the Dalai Lama’s delegation in the talks with China [between 2002 and 2010 wrote in 2014](#), “... American Presidents, Cabinet members and Members of Congress have continuously encouraged the Chinese government to engage in a dialogue with His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s representatives. President Bill Clinton and President George W. Bush gave the Tibet issue high priority, and I worked very closely with their senior aides. Their involvement was of immense value and helped sustain our dialogue with the Chinese government.”

Clarity in US policy assertions on Tibet

The most recently codified law, the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act, now provides clarity on how the administration should define United States policies on different aspects of Tibet, particularly on the dialogue process and history. The bill, popularly called Resolve Tibet Act, asserts that “the dispute between Tibet and the People’s Republic of China must be resolved in

accordance with international law, including the United Nations Charter, by peaceful means, through dialogue without preconditions.”

It also calls on China to “cease its propagation of disinformation about the history of Tibet, the Tibetan people, and Tibetan institutions, including that of the Dalai Lama.”

Recent administrations have maintained that they consider Tibet to be a part of the People’s Republic of China. However, this does not accord with history and the State Department has never been able to provide a sound historical basis for the assertion. It has also sparked opposition from Congress, which has included a prohibition against funds appropriated to the State Department to be used to produce any map or document that depicts Tibet as a part of China.

The Resolve Tibet Act clarifies that at no time has the US recognized Tibet to be part of China “since ancient times,” a key component to the PRC’s stated claim over Tibet.

Policy on reincarnation of the Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama will be 90 years old in July 2025 when a new President takes office. He remains in good health. However, his level of active involvement in the Tibet issue will be reduced as he ages.

The strong bond between the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people is deeply grounded in centuries of history and has not been broken despite China’s propaganda machine. The Dalai Lama continues to enjoy enormous respect and loyalty inside Tibet. Internationally, he remains one of the most respected religious leaders on the world stage.

Beijing’s continued disregard for religious freedom and its systematic effort to claim authority over Tibetan Buddhist traditions, including the reincarnation system, particularly that of the Dalai Lama, is a matter of paramount significance to followers, many of whom are American citizens. The Dalai Lama’s succession is essential to the Tibetan people, represents a key test for the respect of religious freedom worldwide and is therefore vital to US national interests.

The [Tibetan Policy & Support Act of 2020](#) provides clear direction for the new Administration on Tibetan religious freedom, particularly on the issue of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama:

(1) 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;

(2) the wishes of the 14th Dalai Lama, including any written instructions, should play a key role in the selection, education, and veneration of a future 15th Dalai Lama; and

(3) interference by the Government of the People’s Republic of China or any other government in the process of recognizing a successor or reincarnation of the 14th Dalai Lama and any future Dalai Lamas would represent a clear abuse of the right to religious freedom of Tibetan Buddhists and the Tibetan people.

(c) Holding Chinese Officials Responsible for Religious Freedom Abuses Targeting Tibetan Buddhists.-It is the policy of the United States to take all appropriate measures to hold accountable senior officials of the Government of the People’s Republic of China or the Chinese Communist Party who directly interfere with the identification and installation of the future 15th Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, successor to the 14th Dalai Lama, including by--

(1) imposing sanctions pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 U.S.C. 2656 note); and

(2) prohibiting admission to the United States under section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1182(a)(2)(G)).

Implement the principle of reciprocity on Tibet

The Chinese government promotes Tibet as being open to the world. This flies in the face of reality. Tibet remains closed to outsiders. The Chinese government's current strategy is to encourage Chinese tourists to visit Tibet and allow only a select few international visitors, quite a few of which are social media content creators. These people are used to drive the Chinese narrative on Tibet.

In contrast, multiple requests for visits of American diplomatic personnel and intergovernmental organizations have been refused. Scholars are routinely denied visas because of their writing, and international journalists thrown out of the PRC because they were critical of its policies in Tibet.

These delegations are an integral part of China's sophisticated strategic disinformation operations, designed to manipulate and influence perceptions of target audiences in Western countries on Tibet and the Dalai Lama.

The Tibetan overseas community is frequently subjected to harassment, monitoring, and cyberattacks carried out by the Chinese government.

It is incumbent upon the United States government and the international community to insist upon the principle of reciprocity in its dealings with the PRC, to address the asymmetry of authoritarian influence in Tibet. The concept of reciprocity is increasingly being cited by governments as an instrument for countering China's one-way influence operations and in order to seek compliance with international standards and long-term mutual obligations.

The United States and some European governments have referred to reciprocity as a key principle in terms of their bilateral relations with the PRC. Acknowledging that reciprocity is an important tenet of international relations, members of Congress introduced and passed bipartisan legislation, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, to promote freedom of movement and an open and accessible Tibet for American citizens and for Tibetans themselves, including the Dalai Lama.

Tibetan water and international security

Tibet, which is coterminous with the Tibetan plateau, is the third largest repository of fresh water after the South and North Pole. Eight of the major rivers that serve 1.8 billion people across Asia originate in Tibet. The PRC's plan to construct dozens of hydroelectric dams and other infrastructure over the next decades presents a direct threat to many downstream countries and is a cause of increasing regional volatility.

Underlying the importance of water on the Tibetan plateau, [the TPSA mandates](#) the Administration "to encourage a regional framework on water security through mechanisms such as the Lower Mekong Initiative, to facilitate cooperative agreements among all riparian nations that would promote transparency, sharing of information, pollution regulation, and arrangements on impounding and diversion of waters that originate on the Tibetan Plateau."

Highlighting the importance of the strategic location of Tibet to the global environmental conditions, TPSA further says that the Administration should "monitor the environment on the Tibetan Plateau, including glacial retreat, temperature rise, and carbon levels, in order to promote a greater understanding of the effects on permafrost, river flows, grasslands and desertification, and the monsoon cycle".

Where do the candidates and parties stand on Tibet?

On foreign policy, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli assault on Gaza have been dominant in the campaign so far. China has remained peripheral, mainly coming into focus in regard to trade issues and its policies toward Taiwan.

During every presidential election cycle, both the Democratic and the Republican parties release their platforms. These are considered as reflecting their respective policy priorities and positions on domestic and foreign affairs. Even though these documents are considered non-binding to the presidential candidates, the fact that efforts are made to form platform committees, amend wording, and formally adopt them, do indicate that they carry weight.

This year's platforms by both parties do not contain any specific reference to Tibet, in contrast to some previous platforms. The [Democratic Party Platform](#), which was adopted by the Platform Committee before Kamala Harris became the nominee, states that China is "America's most consequential strategic competitor." [The Republican platform](#) says "countering China" will be one of the ways the party will "return peace."

Both the platforms focus on trade relations with China. The Republican platform says, "Republicans will revoke China's Most Favored Nation status." The Democratic platform says, "we seek to "de-risk" and diversify the economic relationship between our countries, not decouple. We will protect a targeted number of sensitive technologies with focused restrictions, creating a "small yard and a high fence" that preserves our national security."

In their acceptance speeches at their respective party conventions, Trump and Harris made only tangential reference to China. In the case of [Harris she refers to China while talking about AI](#) and space saying, "I will make sure that we lead the world into the future on space and artificial intelligence; that America, not China, wins the competition for the 21st century; and that we strengthen, not abdicate, our global leadership."

[Trump's reference to China](#) is on trade saying, "I will bring auto jobs back to our country, through the proper use of taxes, tariffs, and incentives, and will not allow massive auto manufacturing plants to be built in Mexico, China, or other countries..." Neither of the candidates talk about freedom and human rights in Tibet and China.

The new administration is congressionally mandated to articulate a China policy that frames the lack of a solution on Tibet as an impediment to more harmonious relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

The State Department has responsibility to coordinate with other governments in multilateral efforts toward a negotiated settlement of the Tibetan issue. It should appoint a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the earliest and work with like-minded countries, including the EU, in undertaking coordinated initiatives to help alleviate the plight of the Tibetan people and to find a lasting solution to the issue. In the [U.S.-EU Summit Joint Statement in October, 2023](#), the two committed to "keep voicing our concerns" about Tibet.



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