



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

ADDRESSING THE STRATEGIC CRISIS IN TIBET

Five priorities for the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

<https://savetibet.org/addressing-the-strategic-crisis-in-tibet>

FIVE PRIORITIES FOR THE IRISH EU PRESIDENCY

In line with Ireland's 2026 EU Presidency priorities of "action and delivery", "*Ní neart go cur le chéile - Strength with unity*", and "*strengthening the EU as a principled global actor*," the Irish Presidency should ensure that Tibet receives greater attention across the EU's engagement with China by pursuing five priorities:

Recommendations for the US and Likeminded Governments:

1. **Promote the resumption of dialogue between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama** or the democratically elected Tibetan leadership in exile as the only sustainable path toward a peaceful and negotiated resolution of the Tibet issue.
2. **Defend the fundamental rights of Tibetans** by publicly calling on China to end the repression, arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances of Tibetans and the restrictions on their freedom of expression, religion, and culture, including at the highest level such as during the EU-China Summit.
3. **Promote religious freedom**, in particular the right of Tibetan Buddhists to freely determine their religious leaders, including **the succession of the Dalai Lama**, through a joint EU statement affirming that the selection of Tibetan Buddhist leaders must remain free from state interference.
4. **Strengthen EU coordination on Tibet** by actively supporting the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Tibet or for Human Rights in China, to help ensure a more coherent and resilient European approach, particularly at a time when China is aggressively implementing assimilationist policies on Tibetans.
5. **Ensure that EU-China climate and environmental engagement systematically include** issues related to water security (and in particular hydropower development), biodiversity, and environmental impacts on the Tibetan Plateau.

WHY TIBET MATTERS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION

As the European Union recalibrates its relationship with the People's Republic of China through the lenses of de-risking, economic security, and systemic rivalry, Tibet must not be seen as a marginal or symbolic issue; rather, it should be treated as an urgent strategic concern at the intersection of regional security, geostrategic competition, climate and environmental sustainability, and systemic human rights violations.

Tibet's deepening human rights crisis: a test for EU credibility

Acceleration of repression and assimilation policies

Today, Beijing's policies in Tibet have entered a new and dangerous phase marked by the systematic erosion of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the Tibetan people. Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party has notably intensified efforts to assimilate Tibetans into a singular Chinese national identity, threatening Tibetan language, religion, education, nomadic lifestyles, and the very survival of Tibetans as a distinct people.

In March 2026, China adopted its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030),^[1] outlining major investments in infrastructure, energy, education, tourism, and border development in Tibet. While the Chinese government presents it as economic modernisation, the plan reinforces state control and further embeds existing policies aimed at assimilation through expanded governance measures, state-directed cultural integration, and the promotion of Mandarin-language education. One of the clearest manifestations of these policies is the large-scale boarding school system, in which over one million Tibetan children are separated from their families and educated primarily in Mandarin, with reports of increased emphasis on political and ideological indoctrination.^[2]

In 2026, Chinese authorities also continue one of the most extensive rural governance programs in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), stationing over 22,000 cadres across nearly every village. These actions are part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s long-running strategy to strengthen political control and accelerate forced assimilation policies across the TAR.^[3]

The adoption of China's new law on "Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress", entering into force on 1 July 2026, which was first tested on the Tibetan people from 2010 codifies the ongoing forced assimilation policies and further institutionalises state interference in Tibetan culture and identity.^[4] This law also poses a threat to EU citizens, particularly those of Tibetan heritage for its "long-arm jurisdiction" that could lead to transnational repression.

In April 2026, eight independent UN human rights experts highlighted the systematic nature of these concerns, warning that the law is incompatible with China's own legal framework and its international human rights obligations.^[5] In a resolution adopted the same month, the European Parliament also expressed grave concern over the law's implications for the rights of ethnic groups including Tibetans, calling for its repeal and warning that its enforcement could have "severe consequences" for EU-China relations. ^[6] Similarly, in his Global Update to the 62nd session of the UN Human Rights Council, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk cautioned that the legislation could significantly deepen restrictions on fundamental freedoms, including language, education, religion, culture, expression, and peaceful assembly, and called for the law to be repealed.

Beyond structural assimilation policies, Tibetans continue to face severe human rights violations in the form of arbitrary detention, torture, and deaths in custody. ICT has

documented at least fifteen cases of Tibetans dying in custody or shortly after release between 2014 and 2025, with no independent investigations conducted.^[7] On 22 January, UN experts^[8] also expressed their deep concern about ongoing state-organized forced labor and resettlement programs in China, including against Tibetans. *“In many cases, the coercive elements are so severe that they may amount to forcible transfer and/or enslavement as a crime against humanity,”* the experts said. The labor and land transfers explicitly serve the goal of “reshaping” the cultural identities of Tibetans and others under the guise of poverty alleviation.

Human rights deterioration in Tibet as an indicator of systemic risk

Human rights deterioration in Tibet is an early warning indicator of broader systemic instability and governance patterns with direct relevance for EU policy.

Policies currently implemented in Tibet are indeed not isolated developments, but reflect a broader governance model in which social control, identity management, and political security are tightly interlinked. In some cases, these approaches may serve as precursors or reference points for similar practices elsewhere in China and beyond.

This convergence of governance, repression, and long-term stability considerations highlights the importance of assessing human rights developments in Tibet not only through a normative lens, but also as part of a broader analysis of systemic risk and policy trends relevant to the EU’s external action.

The EU’s China policy should center on human rights

The EU has increasingly defined China simultaneously as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. In this evolving framework, the situation in Tibet illustrates many of the important challenges facing Europe in its relationship with Beijing: authoritarian governance, assimilation policies against Tibetans, Uyghurs and Mongolians, transnational repression, strategic control over natural resources, and the erosion of international norms.

So far, the EU’s fragmented approach has failed to counter China’s abusive practices. Only a coordinated EU strategy that integrates human rights across its foreign policy can reduce Europe’s vulnerability to Beijing’s retaliation and wider security threats.

Tibet’s geostrategic and security relevance

Tibet sits at the heart of Asia, and adjacent to several unresolved and militarized borders. China has transformed the Tibetan Plateau into one of the world’s most heavily militarized high-altitude regions, with extensive military infrastructure, transport corridors, dual-use airports, and rapid troop deployment capabilities. These developments have already played a role in destabilizing dynamics along the Line of Actual Control with India, the longest disputed border zone in the world, and carry direct implications for Indo-Pacific security.^[9]

These dynamics reflect the broader unresolved political status of Tibet, which continues to shape both China’s internal governance of the region and its external security environment. Tibet should indeed be seen as a “muted crisis” - one largely hidden from international scrutiny due to severe restrictions on access, surveillance, and repression. Yet the conflict in Tibet remains unresolved. Tibetans are not merely an “ethnic minority” within China from the perspective of international law and historical reality: China has illegally occupied Tibet for over 60 years and has refused to negotiate with Tibetan leaders since 2010. The unresolved nature of the Tibet conflict continues to shape regional security dynamics across the Himalayas and Asia.

Water, climate and regional stability

The Tibetan Plateau, often called Asia's water tower, is the source of major rivers that sustain nearly two billion people downstream across South and Southeast Asia. China's large-scale dam construction,^[10] water diversion projects, and extractive policies in Tibet raise serious risks for regional water security, climate resilience, and transboundary stability. Recent construction of what experts say will be the largest dam in the world on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo River (Brahmaputra) in Tibet's Medog county - a seismically active and ecologically sensitive area near the border with India - is an especially striking example of China's potentially destabilizing energy and environmental policies on the plateau. The mention of the project by President Xi in his 2026 New Year message,^[11] highlights its strategic significance for China.

The absence of transparency, meaningful environmental impact assessments, and prior consultation with affected populations and downstream states runs counter to principles of responsible global leadership. Tibet therefore represents a critical test case of how environmental governance, authoritarian decision-making, and regional instability intersect.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IRISH EU PRESIDENCY

1. Support the resumption of dialogue between the Chinese government and Tibetan representatives

Between 2002 and 2010, envoys of the 14th Dalai Lama held nine rounds of discussions with representatives of the Chinese government. In 2008, the Tibetan envoys presented a "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People"^[12] which outlined a future Tibet enjoying real autonomy and fundamental rights within the framework of the People's Republic of China. The dialogue has been stalled since 2010 when the last round of talks took place. The absence of dialogue increases long-term instability and deepens repression inside Tibet.

The EU should publicly support and actively press the Chinese government to enter a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of the Dalai Lama to find a political solution to the longstanding grievances of the Tibetan people and to the conflict between Tibet and China. This includes empowering the Tibetans and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) to maintain their institutional structures, so they can effectively promote a democratic vision for Tibet and fulfill their responsibilities as custodians of the Tibetan people and their rights.

The Presidency should also coordinate with like-minded countries, including the United States, which have recently reiterated the importance of this dialogue.^[13]

2. Publicly and vigorously demand the Chinese government respect the civil and political rights of Tibetans

The Irish EU Presidency should use its agenda-setting role to encourage the EU and its Member States to take a public and firmer and more consistent stance on the human rights situation in Tibet, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and the pervasive surveillance of Tibetans exercising their fundamental rights.

It should help strengthen EU coordination to ensure that Tibet-related human rights concerns and individual cases are systematically raised in EU-China dialogues, public

statements, and multilateral forums - including at the highest level such as the next EU-China Summit which is expected to take place during the Irish Presidency.

The Irish Presidency should also promote the use of targeted measures under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights violations in Tibet. In addition, given the gravity and systemic nature of human rights violations committed by the Chinese government, it should actively encourage the EU to work with like-minded partners to support the establishment of a dedicated UN mechanism to monitor, report on, and investigate human rights violations in the People's Republic of China, Tibet and other affected regions, as proposed by more than 50 UN human rights expert.^[14]

3. Adopt a statement on behalf of the 27 EU Member States on religious freedom and the succession of the Dalai Lama

The EU should treat this issue with particular attention - not only in line with international human rights principle on religious freedom and with the EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion and belief, but also in the interest of active conflict prevention in the region.

The Presidency should reaffirm the EU position articulated by European Commissioner Hadja Lahbib during the European Parliament debate on China's ethnic unity law: "When it comes to the succession of the Dalai Lama, the EU remains of the view that the selection of religious leaders should happen without any government interference and in full respect of religious norms."^[15]

The EU should adopt a statement on behalf of its 27 Member States publicly declaring that the decisions regarding the installation of Tibetan Buddhist religious leaders, including a future Dalai Lama, are exclusively spiritual matters that should be made by the Tibetan Buddhist community and the present the 14th Dalai Lama without interference by the government of the People's Republic of China or any other governments.

In addition, the EU should consider adopting sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for these interferences. The EU should also continue demanding credible information regarding the whereabouts and well-being of the 11th Panchen Lama, disappeared since 1995.

4. Strengthen European coordination through the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Tibet

The Irish Presidency should support growing calls across Europe for the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Tibet - or, more broadly, for human rights in China - along the lines of existing EU Special Representative mandates in other strategic policy areas. Such a mandate would contribute to greater coherence, visibility, and coordination of EU engagement on Tibet.

The proposal has gained increasing support among parliamentarians in several EU Member States. In April 2025, the Dutch House of Representatives notably adopted a cross-party motion calling on the Dutch government to advocate for the appointment of an EU Special Representative for Tibet and the development of a coordinated EU strategy on Tibet.^[16]

Since the Dalai Lama has devolved all political authority to the elected Tibetan leadership in exile, namely the Central Tibetan Administration, the EU should adopt a long-term

strategy to strengthen policy and programmatic support to the CTA, starting now, given the implication in the post-Dalai Lama period.

Support for enhanced EU coordination was further demonstrated at the Riga Tibet Conference held on 3 June 2026 in the Latvian Parliament. In the Joint Declaration adopted at the conference, parliamentarians from across the Baltic states emphasized the importance of closer cooperation among EU institutions and member states on Tibet-related issues.^[17] The declaration highlighted that stronger coordination would help ensure that engagement on Tibet is pursued collectively and consistently across the EU, reducing the risk of individual member states being subjected to bilateral political or economic pressure.

By supporting discussion of such a mandate, the Irish Presidency would contribute to reinforcing the EU's strategic coherence, strengthening solidarity among member states, and ensuring that European engagement on Tibet is guided by a coordinated and principled approach.

5. Integrate Tibet into EU-China environmental and climate engagement

The Irish Presidency should encourage the systematic inclusion of Tibet-related environmental issues within existing EU-China dialogues on climate change, biodiversity, water governance, and sustainable development. The EU should also urge the Chinese government to pursue development and environmental policies that respect the economic, social and cultural rights of Tibetans and are inclusive of local populations in line with the United Nations Sustainable Goals.

In this context, the EU should make greater use of existing channels of engagement with China - including the EU-China Environment and Climate Dialogue whose 7th High-Level meeting in 2026 will be co-chaired by the Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Teresa Ribera responsible for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition, and China's Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang, exchanges on biodiversity and water management, and broader discussions on climate security - to encourage transparency, scientific cooperation, and information-sharing regarding environmental developments on the Tibetan Plateau.

The EU should also:

- strengthen monitoring and analysis of environmental and climate-related developments on the Tibetan Plateau;
- support independent scientific research, data-sharing, and international cooperation on glacial melt, biodiversity loss, and water security;
- encourage greater transparency regarding the environmental and social impacts of major infrastructure and hydropower projects.

CONCLUSION

The future of Tibet is increasingly tied to the broader trajectory of EU-China relations and to Europe's defence of international norms, cultural diversity, religious freedom, and democratic values.

As the EU moves toward a more realistic and strategic China policy based on de-risking and resilience, Tibet can no longer remain peripheral to European policy discussions.

The Irish Presidency has an opportunity to help shape a more coherent, principled, and strategic European approach - one that recognises Tibet not only as a human rights concern, but as a geopolitical, environmental, and international security issue central to the future of Asia and the international order.

Endnotes

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