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When Faith and Geopolitics Collide

The Dalai Lama Succession Crisis and the Global Struggle for Tibet's Future

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Henrietta Levin
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A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies

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Introduction

On July 2, 2025, in advance of his 90th birthday, the 14th Dalai Lama—the world-renowned leader of Tibetan Buddhism—announced that through reincarnation, the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue after his death. The circumstances surrounding this transition will present a complex geopolitical challenge to governments around the world.

How the Dalai Lama’s succession unfolds will have major implications for millions of Tibetans, but also for the risk of conflict at contested Himalayan borders, for the future of U.S.-China competition, and for the viability of China’s efforts to establish an alternative regional and international order. Beijing views Tibet as a “core interest,” and control over Tibetans and their culture is central to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s vision of national rejuvenation. In preparation for the Dalai Lama’s passing, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is accelerating efforts to suppress Tibetan identity, consolidate CCP control over religious life and the selection of Tibetan reincarnations, and perfect its high-tech surveillance apparatus in Tibet.

Most other governments have not begun to seriously grapple with the far-reaching consequences of a Dalai Lama succession. Tibet is often framed solely as a human rights issue, leading policymakers to downgrade its importance. The Chinese government often warns against supposed “interference” in Tibet issues, convincing some governments to uncritically echo Beijing’s position or avoid the issue entirely.

Yet governments urgently need to reexamine their policy frameworks on Tibet, preparing for the geopolitical, economic, environmental, and humanitarian challenges the approaching Dalai Lama succession will spark. Heightened tensions along the Line of Actual Control and throughout the

Himalayan region; aggressive economic coercion impacting water security, critical minerals, and cross-border trade; brazen transnational repression; and new domestic challenges within China will all interact in unpredictable and consequential ways.

To that end, this report offers a brief overview of the succession process, the complex array of players who will be affected, and the geopolitical risks and flashpoints a succession crisis will generate, concluding with recommendations for policymakers.

Tibet as a Geopolitical Actor

For most of its history, Tibet was independent. At its height in the seventh and eighth centuries, Tibet's territory stretched from the Tarim Basin in what is now Xinjiang all the way to northern India and, by some accounts, extending to the Bay of Bengal. The early Tibetan empire clashed with Mongol and Chinese empires, at one point becoming a tributary of the Mongolian empire, and at another capturing Chang'an, China's Tang dynasty capital.

In 1903, Great Britain invaded Tibet to deter Russian encroachment and establish a buffer zone between British India, Central Asia, and Qing China.¹ The resulting Lhasa Convention, signed by Tibet and Great Britain in 1904, was Tibet's first treaty with a European power. The treaty effectively made Tibet a protectorate of the British empire and established a border between Tibet and India's Sikkim. China, which claimed suzerainty over Tibet, did not recognize the treaty. In 1907, Great Britain and Russia signed a convention that recognized Chinese suzerainty of Tibet but did not clarify the border issue.² The 1914 Simla Convention between China, Tibet, and Great Britain established the McMahon Line dividing India and Tibet, but was quickly repudiated by China.³ While India has continued to use this line as a de facto border, Beijing rejects it, fueling the China-India border tensions that persist today. In 1950, the People's Liberation Army occupied Tibet, incorporating it into the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC).

From at least 1642, Dalai Lamas served as Tibet's spiritual and political leaders, often brokering relationships with regional powers to protect Tibet's autonomy. The current Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, and he devolved political power to a democratically elected government-in-exile, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), in 2011. But the Dalai Lama's moral authority remains

paramount, looming large in the lives of Tibetans within China and beyond its borders, and posing a vexing challenge to the CCP.⁴

Dueling Dalai Lamas

A Contested Succession Process

The Chinese government has famously demanded that “the reincarnation of Living Buddhas including the Dalai Lama must comply with Chinese laws and regulations . . . and follow the process that consists of search and identification in China.”⁵ Yet the Dalai Lama has rejected Beijing’s interference and insisted he will be reincarnated in a free society—in other words, not in China.

On July 2, 2025, the Dalai Lama further clarified that the Gaden Phodrang Trust, also known as his Private Office, will have the sole authority to identify his reincarnation.⁶ The trust is governed by a board of high-ranking lamas and professional staff members from diverse backgrounds.⁷ Some were born in China and escaped into exile, some were born and raised in Tibetan refugee communities in India, some hold dual citizenship with Western countries, and some have family ties with the current Dalai Lama. Nearly all reside in India, and none reside in China.

Reincarnation of a Dalai Lama is not a speedy process. Following an initial 49-day mourning period, a search committee consults oracles, sacred texts and sites, and visions to gradually narrow a pool of potential successors, usually small children, over the course of an estimated two to three years. The search committee poses a series of tests to the candidates, observing any behavior that signifies a link to the prior Dalai Lama. Depending on the reincarnated successor’s age, a young Dalai Lama can then spend a decade or more in religious education, during which time a regent may represent him.⁸

In certain respects, this reincarnation process will differ from past Dalai Lama successions. For the first time, the high lamas of the search committee will be separated from the religious sites

inside China that have traditionally been used to identify reincarnations, and the committee is also separated from the Tibetan community inside China. But putting aside these atypical conditions, there is no exact standard for how succession unfolds, and the Dalai Lama has not yet published detailed instructions for how his reincarnation should proceed, leaving the process vulnerable to outside manipulation.

For its part, Beijing has been preparing to control the Dalai Lama's reincarnation for many years. It will almost certainly orchestrate the selection of its own party-approved Dalai Lama, and it is likely to do this more rapidly than the Tibetans-in-exile can identify the legitimate reincarnation. Thus, for a period of time, the only purported Dalai Lama may be in China, controlled by the CCP.

Beijing has put in place a series of laws and regulations tightening party control over religious life and the selection of religious leaders. State Religious Affairs Bureau Order No. 5 outlines government approval requirements for the reincarnation of "Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism" and lists the State Council as a final approver for particularly influential lamas.⁹ It falsely posits that reincarnation candidates must be selected by drawing lots from a Golden Urn, and that any exemptions must be approved by the government.¹⁰ In fact, the Golden Urn is a little-used method the Manchus first imposed on Tibetans during the Qing Dynasty; it is now a symbol of China's attempts to control the reincarnation.¹¹

As this process unfolds, Beijing will supercharge relevant propaganda, censor any commentary that questions the legitimacy of their Dalai Lama, and co-opt or coerce religious figures in China and abroad to lend legitimacy to the Golden Urn process. Already, the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) has financed and directed community groups, academics, and other stakeholders to discredit the current Dalai Lama and sow divisions within the Tibetan community.

The Dalai Lama's reincarnation will force leaders, governments, and communities around the world to grapple with what China considers one of its most sensitive issues. Many stakeholders hope to stay out of the fray. But at a time when Beijing will be placing the full power of the Chinese state behind a global campaign to secure international endorsement of its hand-picked Dalai Lama, this is likely to be impossible.

Key Players in a Contested Succession

The number of players involved in a Dalai Lama succession is a testament to the process's far-reaching significance. The stakes could not be higher for Beijing, and the CCP will spare no expense to engineer its preferred outcome within China and around the world. India continues to host the Dalai Lama and large Tibetan refugee communities, and it views Tibet issues in the context of its fraught relationship with China—as a potential point of leverage, but also an irritant and a potential trigger for instability along its disputed border, where Tibet meets northern India. Nepal and Mongolia will be in China's crosshairs; these countries have significant Tibetan Buddhist populations and long-standing religious and political connections to Tibet, which guarantees they will face enormous pressure from Beijing to legitimize its co-opted reincarnation process. The United States has traditionally served as a stalwart supporter of Tibet's autonomy and the Dalai Lama, but the current administration has shown less interest. Other stakeholders across Asia and Europe will surely be pulled into the fray.

A review of key players' interests and policies vis-à-vis Tibet and Dalai Lama succession can be found below.

Tibetan Stakeholders

The Tibetan movement is a complex tapestry of diverse communities, united by the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration.

Gaden Phodrang Trust: The current Dalai Lama has endowed the Gaden Phodrang Trust with full authority over the search for the next Dalai Lama. The Gaden Phodrang Trust is comprised of high

lamas and staff members who manage the public appearances, audiences, messaging, and outreach programs of the Dalai Lama. Its mission is to “preserve and uphold the institution of the Dalai Lama and his spiritual work, while advancing his humanitarian mission,” and it is registered as a private trust in India.¹² The search for the 15th Dalai Lama will likely be led by Venerable Samdhong Rinpoche—a high lama, former prime minister of the CTA, and second-in-command of the trust (after the Dalai Lama).

- **Gaden Phodrang Foundation of the Dalai Lama:** The Gaden Phodrang Foundation of the Dalai Lama is registered in Zurich, Switzerland, and conducts programs that promote basic human values and preserve Tibetan culture. The foundation may provide funding for religious activities and gatherings that help identify and legitimize a future Dalai Lama candidate.

Central Tibetan Administration: The CTA is the democratically elected Tibetan government in exile, based in Dharamshala alongside the Dalai Lama. The CTA is headed by an executive office (Kashag) and elected president (Sikyong), and includes departments of religion and culture, home affairs, finance, security, education, information and international relations, and health. The CTA maintains a network of “Office of Tibet” representatives, roughly equivalent to ambassadors, worldwide. Current Sikyong Penpa Tsing will run for a second term during the next election cycle between February 1 and April 26, 2026. Tsing has confirmed the CTA maintains backchannels for dialogue with Beijing, while acknowledging these intermittent discussions are unlikely to lead to concrete gains as the CCP accelerates efforts to subordinate Tibet’s cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions to state control.¹³ While the CTA does not have a formal role in the Dalai Lama’s succession, its officials will be the primary messengers to foreign governments as the process unfolds.

Tibetan NGOs and Grassroots Groups: Tibetan nongovernmental organizations play a crucial role in documenting the CCP’s policies toward Tibetans inside China and encouraging global stakeholders to support Tibetans’ human rights, including on religious freedom issues related to Dalai Lama succession. They engage frequently with foreign governments and sometimes advocate for policies that diverge from the official CTA stance. For example, the Tibetan Youth Congress advocates an independent Tibet, diverging from the Dalai Lama’s Middle Way Approach.

Non-Gelug Schools: The Dalai Lama is head of the Gelug tradition, one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism (Gelug, Nyingma, Kagyu, and Sakya). There are also smaller schools beyond these four. Each school plays an important role in confirming and legitimizing a Dalai Lama reincarnation. For example, the Dalai Lama convened religious leaders across sects to discuss his July 2025 reincarnation statement.

- **Shugden Sect:** The Shugden sect refers to those who worship Dorje Shugden, sometimes referred to as Dolgyal Shugden. The sect has strong backing from the PRC’s United Front Work Department. Particularly active in Mongolia and India, the Shugden reject the current Dalai Lama and often lead Dalai Lama counterprotests. In a succession scenario, Beijing would likely leverage the Shugden to question the legitimacy of a Tibetan-led reincarnation process.

- **Karmapa(s):** The Karmapa is the spiritual head of Karma Kagyu, the oldest reincarnated lineage in Tibetan Buddhism. This lineage has significant influence among Tibetan Buddhists inside China, lending the Karmapa's position on the Dalai Lama's reincarnation more weight. A rift in the Karma Kagyu school has led to two concurrent 17th Karmapas: Ogyen Trinley Dorje and Trinley Thaye Dorje. Notably, Ogyen Trinley Dorje is one of the only high-ranking Tibetan lamas both endorsed by the CCP and recognized by the Dalai Lama.¹⁴

China

National Rejuvenation: Beijing considers Tibet a “core interest,” alongside Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and occasionally the South China Sea—issues that implicate Chinese sovereignty, territorial integrity, and sense of nationhood. Tibet was also a key part of the CCP’s initial claims to governing legitimacy. Early in the PRC period, the CCP presented itself as a foil to the Kuomintang’s “Han chauvinism” by officially recognizing ethnic minorities, promising self-determination, and establishing the system of autonomous regions, prefectures, and townships that remains today, at least in name.¹⁵ More recently, the CCP has framed Tibetan integration as an important component of Xi’s “Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.” In recent years, Beijing has used increasingly repressive policies to force the assimilation of Tibetans and establish party control over Tibetan culture and religion. The draft Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress, introduced in 2025, promises to institutionalize this approach.¹⁶ The CCP sees resistance from Tibetans as a fundamental threat to its regime, and authorities can mete out harsh punishments for even small acts of reverence toward the Dalai Lama.

Resource Wealth: Tibet is rich in natural resources, providing important contributions to China’s economic development and resilience that will only increase in importance as national economic growth stagnates. Neighboring nations’ dependence on the resources and infrastructure of the Tibetan Plateau, particularly downstream nations dependent on China’s dam management, endows Beijing with significant geopolitical leverage.¹⁷ As the “roof of the world,” 10 major rivers originate in the Tibetan Plateau, providing one-fifth of the world’s freshwater supply as well as mass hydropower generation.¹⁸ There are 193 dams in service or under construction on the plateau, providing electricity to more populous provinces under China’s West-to-East Power Transmission Program.¹⁹ In Tibet, state-owned China Yajiang Group recently began construction on what will be the world’s largest dam, sparking concerns from India, Bangladesh, and other downstream nations that fear water shortages.²⁰ China has also exploited the plateau as a rich platform for solar power, recently installing 162 square miles of solar panels intended to meet the electricity demands of China’s burgeoning AI industry.²¹ Finally, Tibet is rich in critical minerals deposits, with substantial confirmed reserves of lithium, copper, and over 100 other minerals. By 2016, it was home to nearly 100 active mines, and a decade of industrial policy intended to spur mining in the region has surely increased this number.²²

Soft Power and Propaganda: Beijing hopes to use its control over Tibetan culture and religion as a source of soft power, but it could also become a major reputational liability. The CCP has utilized Tibetan monasteries, relics, and lineages to bolster its influence over regional and international

Buddhist networks, draw tourists, and contest allegations of repression. The Buddhist Association of China, administered under the CCP's United Front Work Department, and China's triennial World Buddhist Forum have become high-profile platforms through which Beijing attempts to assert leadership over Buddhist communities in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Russia, whose Buryatia, Kalmykia, and Tuva republics are home to Buddhist populations that recognize the Dalai Lama.

Yet a heavy-handed effort to co-opt the Dalai Lama's succession could undermine these propaganda gains by clearly illustrating the degree to which the CCP privileges its efforts to control minority communities over the desires of China's Buddhists. In this, the CCP's 1995 abduction of the Dalai Lama-recognized 11th Panchen Lama is instructive. The original Panchen Lama was never seen again, and the party appointed its own Panchen Lama in his place. The CCP regularly pays or forces Tibetans to attend his teachings, but the party's Panchen Lama has failed to win a following domestically or abroad.²³

Dual-Use Infrastructure: To maintain its control over disputed border areas with India, China has fast-tracked the development of railways, roads, and villages in contested areas, which CSIS experts unpack in "China's Gray-Zone Infrastructure Strategy on the Tibetan Plateau."²⁴

India

Cultural and Religious Ties: India has longstanding cultural and religious connections to Tibet and the institution of the Dalai Lama. Religious masters from India played a foundational role in the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet beginning in the eighth century, and India is now home to the Dalai Lama, the CTA, and the world's largest Tibetan diaspora community, with approximately 70,000 people. The CCP's 1950 invasion of Tibet, destruction of monasteries across the Tibetan Plateau, and imprisonment and persecution of monks prompted Buddhist monks to flee China and establish exile branches of their monasteries, many of which maintain quiet contact with the mother monastery inside Tibet. India is home to many influential monastery-in-exile branches, including Namgyal (the Dalai Lama's monastery), Drepung, Sera, Tashi Lhunpo (the seat-in-exile of the Panchen Lama lineage), and Rumtek (the seat-in-exile of the Karmapa lineage). India has leveraged its long history of Buddhism to strengthen ties and influence within global Buddhist networks. The International Buddhist Confederation, based in New Delhi, regularly organizes events that engage Buddhist leaders of various traditions, including the Dalai Lama. The confederation, with support from India's Ministry of Culture and Air Force, recently organized Buddhist relic expositions in Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Russia's Kalmykia.²⁵

Managing China: Widespread admiration for the Dalai Lama and anti-China sentiment among the Indian public guarantee the Indian government will maintain at least limited support for the Dalai Lama and Tibetan communities over time; for example, India is extremely unlikely to expel the CTA, let alone the Dalai Lama himself. But Indian government officials carefully calibrate their public support for the Dalai Lama as part of broader efforts to manage the tense China-India relationship.

Friction in Sino-Indian relations have often coincided with more robust Indian support for Tibetans. During the “Hindi-Chini bhai bhai” period in the 1950s, when Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru courted warmer relations with China, the two nations adopted the Panchsheel Agreement and the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.”²⁶ In this agreement, India effectively recognized China’s control over Tibet and relinquished India’s claims to formal interests there. But after the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, the CCP encouraged a “Hate India” campaign and bilateral tensions increased, arguably setting the stage for the 1962 border war.²⁷ These hostilities coincided with India’s most generous Tibetan refugee policy. Tibetan refugees who arrived in India from 1959 through the early 1960s received an allotment of land as well as a registration card allowing them to work legally. In late 2002, on the cusp of diplomatic breakthrough with China, India’s policy toward Tibetan refugees became more restrictive. To enter India, refugees were required to secure special permits at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu and enter through specific border checkpoints.²⁸ In the 2003 India-China Joint Declaration, India went further by officially recognizing China’s sovereignty over the Tibetan Autonomous Region and establishing a framework for dialogue to address the simmering border dispute.²⁹

Starting in late 2024, India began another effort to deescalate tensions with China, after the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes derailed Sino-Indian relations. Accordingly, Delhi has become more restrained in its public support for the Dalai Lama and Tibetans. For example, following the Dalai Lama’s 2025 birthday celebrations, Indian Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju announced the Dalai Lama had a right to determine his own successor. Diplomatic chaos ensued when China warned India against interference and the Indian Ministry of External Affairs issued a statement declaring India has no position on the issue.³⁰ Rijiju then clarified he was speaking in his personal capacity as a devotee, effectively withdrawing his earlier statement.³¹

Domestic Security and Stability: Dalai Lama succession also raises questions for India’s security and domestic stability.

- **Chinese Transnational Repression and Intelligence Activities on Indian Soil:** Beijing already tries to control the Tibetan community in India with pressure, bribes, and threats again family members inside China. It has infiltrated the diaspora community, collecting information on the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan leaders in Dharamshala.³² The Chinese government also routinely targets Tibetan communities in India with disinformation campaigns.³³ Attention to Chinese spycraft in the Tibetan diaspora spiked in 2011, when the Indian government seized over \$1.4 million worth of cash, presumed to be Chinese bribes, from Rumtek Monastery. Ogyen Trinley Dorje, one of two Karmapas, was accused of spying for China.³⁴ India will be on heightened alert for unauthorized Chinese activities on Indian soil during the Dalai Lama succession. At the same time, India’s security and intelligence services also monitor Tibetan diaspora activities, and in some cases, they have suppressed pro-Tibet protests during high-level India-China engagements. In 2021, leaked data indicated the Indian government may have used Pegasus spyware to monitor Tibetan leaders’ communications, though the government has denied the allegations.

- **Border Tensions and Violent Protests:** Any reincarnation search conducted in Arunachal Pradesh (which China claims as South Tibet) or Ladakh (parts of which China claims as Laksai Chin) will generate Chinese backlash and raise tensions. Beijing sharply condemned the Dalai Lama's 2017 visit to Arunachal Pradesh and a 2025 conference venerating the sixth Dalai Lama, who was born in Arunachal Pradesh—decrying both as challenges to Chinese sovereignty and its core interests.³⁵ A scenario in which the Gaden Phodrang Trust identifies the Dalai Lama's reincarnation in a part of India over which China claims sovereignty would be viewed in Beijing as an unacceptable provocation. Tensions would also be high in Ladakh, where the Dalai Lama conducts annual teachings. Ladakh has long held ambitions of autonomy, which erupted into violent protests in October 2025.³⁶ The Ladakh Buddhist Association, which often hosts the Dalai Lama's annual teachings, reportedly organized the protests.³⁷

Mongolia

Mongolia seeks to retain its independent national identity, of which Buddhism is an important part, while navigating its significant dependence on Beijing and Moscow. The United States has sought to be a “third neighbor,” but as a landlocked country sandwiched between China and Russia, Mongolian policy is inevitably constrained.

Deep-Rooted Ties Under Pressure: Links between Buddhism in Mongolia and Tibet span centuries, dating back to the priest-patron relationship between the Mongolian khans and early Dalai Lamas. In fact, a seventeenth century Qing-era decree mandated that reincarnations of the Bogd Jebtsundamba, the head of the Gelug lineage of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia, must be found in Tibet.³⁸ But when the direction of Buddhism in contemporary Mongolia runs counter to CCP policy, Mongolia can become vulnerable to coercion. For example, Beijing retaliated against the Dalai Lama's 2016 visit to Mongolia with border restrictions, the imposition of tariffs and transit fees, and a freeze on bilateral diplomacy. Only after Mongolia apologized and signaled the Dalai Lama would not return were these punitive measures lifted.

The 10th Bogd Jebtsundamba: In 2023, tensions resurfaced when the Dalai Lama introduced the new Bogd Jebtsundamba—the first Bogd from Mongolia in nearly 300 years. Now 10 years old, the 10th Bogd is a dual Mongolian-U.S. citizen named A. Altannar. Further complicating matters, his family owns Monpolymet, one of the largest mining conglomerates in Mongolia. Beijing has placed tremendous pressure on the Mongolian government to prevent the child from developing a close relationship with the Dalai Lama.³⁹ Beijing fears that Dalai Lama influence over the boy's religious education would increase Tibetan influence over the future of Buddhism in Mongolia, which could weaken Beijing's standing in Mongolia and complicate the CCP's efforts to influence Buddhism globally. Beijing may also fear that the Bogd's American citizenship could catalyze additional U.S. involvement in Mongolia. Acquiescing to Chinese pressure, the Mongolian authorities raided the Bogd's family home, initiated a corruption investigation targeting the family's mining company, and froze family bank accounts.⁴⁰

Nepal

Nepal has large Tibetan refugee communities, as well as ethnic communities of Tibetan origin (e.g., Sherpas) and deep cultural and religious ties with Tibet. Tibetan refugees live across 12 settlements concentrated in Pokhara and Kathmandu. Many live in poverty, in part due to the government's hesitance to provide identification cards or work authorization.⁴¹ Beijing routinely uses its political and economic influence to demand Nepal's allegiance on Tibetan affairs.⁴²

Controlling Border Movements: Tibetan refugees were previously able to freely transit Nepal en route to Dharamshala, pursuant to a so-called gentlemen's agreement between Nepal and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. However, refugee rights were called into question during President Xi's visit to Kathmandu in 2019, when Nepal and China signed a boundary management agreement and a treaty on mutual legal assistance in criminal matters.⁴³ Beijing has sought to expand the scope of the agreement even further vis-à-vis security cooperation, but the Nepali government has demurred for now.⁴⁴

Chinese Surveillance and Interference: Because of the importance of Nepal to Tibetan Buddhism, the Nepali government and religious leaders in Nepal will be subject to extreme pressure from Beijing in a Dalai Lama succession scenario. Nepal is home to many influential Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, as well as Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. In recent years, Lumbini has transformed into a battleground for global Buddhist influence as India and China vie for development rights and political influence over religious education and practice there.⁴⁵ In late 2024, Beijing tried to send its handpicked Panchen Lama to Lumbini for a religious function, but the visit was canceled after rumors leaked to the press, prompting public blowback.⁴⁶

Celebrations of Tibetan cultural and religious holidays in Nepal are carefully monitored and periodically prohibited, with border communities often facing interference from Chinese authorities.⁴⁷ In 2024, Nepali villagers reported that Chinese security forces pressured them not to display photos of the Dalai Lama.⁴⁸ A recent investigation also revealed that Chinese-built surveillance systems in Nepal have focused on the activities of Tibetan refugees. This surveillance infrastructure includes an "observation dome" just inside China's border to monitor Nepal's Mustang district, the historic hub of Tibet's CIA-supported resistance fighters.⁴⁹

United States

The United States recognizes Tibet as part of China, while advocating for Tibet's meaningful autonomy within China and a return to dialogue between representatives of the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. The United States also has a long history of supporting Tibetans' human rights and providing humanitarian assistance to Tibetan refugees.⁵⁰ The United States appointed its first special coordinator for Tibetan issues in 1997, a position that was institutionalized in the Tibet Policy Act of 2002.

The Succession Challenge: Dalai Lama succession will pose an important test for the United States' ability to compete with China on a global basis. The human rights and humanitarian implications of the succession crisis are significant, but the United States should also recognize that if Beijing succeeds in cowing Washington into quiet disengagement, or if U.S. officials simply decide not to engage on

this issue as a matter of prioritization, Chinese leaders will see weakness and distraction, increasing the aperture for Beijing to aggressively contest U.S. interests across the board. Washington's ability to rally its allies and partners around the world to reject the CCP's handpicked Dalai Lama will serve as an illustration of the United States' enduring power and influence, or lack thereof. The United States' ability to protect American citizens and American sovereignty from Beijing's likely efforts to manipulate local politics and silence Tibetans inside the United States will test whether it can defend its borders from hybrid threats. And if tensions rise along the China-India border, policymakers could face a make-or-break moment for the U.S.-India security partnership.

Congressional Action: In general, U.S. congressional focus on Tibet has outstripped that of the executive branch. There is longstanding bipartisan congressional support for the Dalai Lama and the rights of Tibetans, spurred by an influential Tibetan advocacy community and large Tibetan diaspora, particularly in New York. Four major laws underpin U.S. Tibet policy: the 2002 Tibetan Policy Act; the 2018 Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act (RATA); the 2020 Tibetan Policy and Support Act; and the 2024 Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act, or "Resolve Tibet Act." The Tibetan Policy and Support Act formalized a U.S. policy of rejecting PRC interference in the succession or identification of Tibetan Buddhist lamas, including the Dalai Lama. The Resolve Tibet Act sought to reinvigorate prospects for dialogue between Beijing and the Dalai Lama, but angered the Chinese government by contesting its claim that Tibet has been a part of China "since ancient times."⁵¹

Support for Tibet and the Dalai Lama: The executive branch has significant leeway in the degree to which it utilizes these laws, but the United States has generally made a good faith effort to engage Tibetan religious leaders at a high level, support Tibetan communities around the world, and signal resolve on Tibetan issues in U.S.-China diplomacy. To that end, the United States has welcomed Tibetan refugees, provided financial support for the Tibetan movement, and imposed visa restrictions and financial sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for abuses against Tibetans. Even during the 2025 foreign assistance "freeze" and elimination of USAID, most foreign assistance programs aimed at supporting the Tibetan community continued. But over time, U.S. leaders have engaged less frequently with the Dalai Lama, signaling a general deprioritization of Tibet issues. The Dalai Lama last met a U.S. president in 2016.⁵²

Table 1: The Dalai Lama's Meetings with U.S. Presidents

President	Year	Location	Protocol (<i>not necessarily comprehensive</i>)
George H. W. Bush	1991	White House residence	Private meeting, reported by media after
Bill Clinton	1993	White House	Drop-by on Vice President Al Gore's meeting; White House statement followed
Bill Clinton	1994	White House	Drop-by on Vice President Al Gore's meeting
Bill Clinton	1995 ⁵³	White House	Drop-by on Vice President Al Gore's meeting
Bill Clinton	1997	White House	Drop-by on Vice President Al Gore's meeting; meeting with president and vice president; White House statement followed
Bill Clinton	1998	White House Map Room	Drop-by on Vice President Al Gore meeting; meeting with president, vice president, and first lady; White House statement followed
Bill Clinton	2000 ⁵⁴	White House	Meeting with president and national security advisor; White House statement followed
George W. Bush	2001	White House Oval Office	White House statement and photo released
George W. Bush	2003	White House	White House photo released
George W. Bush	2005	White House private residence	White House photo released
George W. Bush	2007	White House and Capitol	Meeting at White House, followed by Congressional Gold Medal of Honor ceremony
George W. Bush	2008	Phone call from New York	CTA and Tibetan media reported call
Barack Obama	2010	White House Map Room	White House statement and photo released
Barack Obama	2011	White House Map Room	White House statement and photo released
Barack Obama	2014	White House Map Room	White House readout and photo released
Barack Obama	2016	White House Map Room	White House readout and photo released

Japan

Japan maintains longstanding cultural and religious connections to Tibet, and it has traditionally been the most vocal country in East Asia on Tibetan issues aside from China. Alongside India, Japan has acted as an important soft power counterweight as China positions itself as the leader of global Buddhism. Accordingly, Japan will have an important voice in a future Dalai Lama succession scenario. At the same time, the Japanese government is careful to balance its support for Tibetans with other priorities in the Sino-Japanese relationship.

Buddhist Linkages Drive Action: Japanese Buddhist organizations are active proponents of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan rights, creating a political context in which the Japanese government has a domestic rationale for maintaining a principled Tibet policy. For example, in 2023 the Japan Buddhist Conference for World Federation issued a statement confirming Tibetans' right to determine the Dalai Lama's successor and condemning interference from Beijing. These sympathies have deep roots; in the early twentieth century, Japanese monks in Tibet and Tibet specialists in Japan acted as intermediaries with the 13th Dalai Lama, leveraging their relationships to request Japanese government support for Tibetan independence. The government declined, but these maneuvers illuminate a history of multilayered ties between Tibetan and Japanese society.⁵⁵

The Dalai Lama in Japan: The Dalai Lama has visited Japan 25 times since 1967, when Japan was the Dalai Lama's first ever international destination after his exile to India.⁵⁶ The Dalai Lama met with Prime Minister Suzuki Zenko in 1980, his only meeting with a sitting Japanese prime minister. The Japanese government has consistently resisted pressure from Beijing to prohibit the Dalai Lama from returning.⁵⁷

Parliamentary Support for Tibet: The Japanese Tibet Parliamentary Support group lends its convening power and rhetorical support to Tibetan stakeholders and often encourages the Japanese Foreign Ministry to be more forward leaning in supporting Tibetans. The Diet boasts the largest Tibet caucus of any parliament, and its members regularly engage with the CTA, Tibetan Parliament in Exile, and Dalai Lama. In June 2025, Tokyo hosted the ninth World Parliamentarians Convention on Tibet, resulting in the release of a region-wide action plan on Tibet and a resolution celebrating the legacy of the Dalai Lama.⁵⁸

Multilateral Engagement: By comparison, the Japanese Foreign Ministry has been more cautious. Rather than issue unilateral statements on Tibet, Japan has preferred to support multilateral statements addressing Tibet issues and leverage UN processes such as China's 2024 Universal Periodic Review, in which Japan submitted a recommendation on Tibet. During a Dalai Lama succession scenario, Japan could play a powerful role in building support for multilateral measures, including joint statements in support of the Tibetan-led process.

Europe

Tibet policy in Europe stems from strong people-to-people ties, a history of values-based engagement on Tibet issues, and the Dalai Lama's enduring soft power. Collectively, Europe hosts the largest Tibetan diaspora outside India and the United States, with the largest populations

in Switzerland (the first Western country to accept Tibetan refugees), France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.⁵⁹ The European Union and individual European countries periodically issue statements and multilateral interventions on the human rights of Tibetans, and in some cases, their senior officials have met the CTA Sikyong and the Dalai Lama. In July, Czechia's president, Petr Pavel, became the first head of state to travel to India to meet with the Dalai Lama and CTA leaders, building on a close friendship between the Dalai Lama and former Czech President Václav Havel.⁶⁰

In a Dalai Lama succession scenario, European countries—particularly Switzerland, Germany, France, and the Netherlands—should be prepared to prevent and respond to an uptick in Chinese-perpetrated transnational repression targeting Tibetan refugees within their borders. In February, a Swiss Government Federal Council report concluded that “Tibetan and Uyghur community members in Switzerland are systematically monitored, threatened, and co-opted by PRC actors.”⁶¹ International and Tibetan NGOs have documented similar cases across Europe, and these violations of sovereignty will spike during the succession period.⁶²

Mekong Countries

A Reluctant Battleground: Countries of the Mekong subregion—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam—have deep-rooted Buddhist traditions. All except Cambodia share a border with China. Their governments generally endeavor to avoid Tibet issues entirely, not wishing to irritate Beijing by supporting the Dalai Lama nor disrespect his adherents by endorsing Beijing’s stance, nor trigger backlash from Western countries, including the United States. While these five countries have widely divergent systems of government, levels of development, and perspectives on China, they will encounter similar challenges in a Dalai Lama succession scenario. They will face intensive pressure from Beijing to legitimize a CCP-backed candidate and prevent their Buddhist communities from engaging with a Tibetan-backed search committee or successor. Before and during a Dalai Lama succession scenario, it will be important for the United States and like-minded governments to support these countries’ autonomy, with the objective of helping them remain neutral, shield their Buddhist populations from Chinese coercion, and remain resilient in the face of threats from Beijing. (In Myanmar, any such engagement should be limited to civil society, taking care to avoid legitimization of the military regime.)

Major Vulnerabilities: Beijing has ample leverage in this region, including through its control of the headwaters of the Mekong River—an irreplaceable source of water for the downstream countries. Beijing also has strong economic leverage and extensive law enforcement cooperation in this region, which could be withdrawn or weaponized.⁶³ Beijing may simply take matters into its own hands; in March 2025, after a senior Tibetan lama fled Tibet, he was found dead in Vietnam under suspicious circumstances.⁶⁴

Not Wanting to Choose: Mekong governments will seek to avoid explicit support for any Dalai Lama successor, Beijing-backed or otherwise. But they will face monumental pressure from Beijing to back the CCP’s new Dalai Lama, and some degree of pressure from the United States and other democracies to support the Tibetan-led process. Beijing will also pressure the countries’ monks and Buddhist communities directly. Beijing will place particular weight on these countries’ positions

because they can plausibly offer a Buddhist-inflected stamp of approval for a reincarnation managed by the party, and because it will want to keep its perceived backyard in line. Tellingly, Beijing prioritized a trip to Thailand in 2019 for its handpicked Panchan Lama, who has struggled to achieve domestic or international legitimacy.⁶⁵ It is difficult to assess what will emerge from this pressure cooker, particularly in a barely governed country like Myanmar whose deeply revered monks have an ultranationalist streak, or in a country like Thailand with strong economic ties to China but a treaty alliance with the United States. The Dalai Lama's succession will present a serious test of the region's strategy of "refusing to choose" between outside powers.

Geopolitical Flashpoints and Policy Dilemmas

Immediately after the current Dalai Lama passes and continuing through the succession process, decisionmakers around the world must be prepared to manage a wide range of risks and flashpoints, spanning geopolitical, security, economic, environmental, and humanitarian domains. Key areas of concern are outlined below.

Possible Unrest in China

After the Dalai Lama passes, there will be a heightened risk of domestic unrest across the Tibetan Plateau. Mourning and other religious displays are likely to be widespread, and these may be met with an escalatory police response. The Dalai Lama has powerfully advocated for nonviolence, including during Tibet's most recent mass protests in 2008, which likely prevented a more violent turn.⁶⁶ Without his mitigating influence, the chances of a Tibetan uprising and a subsequent crackdown will increase.

The CCP's systematic repression and surveillance across the Tibetan Plateau are designed to maintain control and dissuade dissent. Authorities routinely scale up these efforts during Tibetan holidays, anniversaries, and other key dates that bear even a small chance of inspiring dissent, often restricting access to Tibetan areas. Beijing is also training new AI models to recognize photos of the Dalai Lama and process ethnic minority languages, including Tibetan, to automate surveillance and censorship.⁶⁷ In the aftermath of the Dalai Lama's death, Beijing will go to great lengths to prevent protests from occurring in the first place. But it is unlikely to succeed in every instance, and in this context a small disturbance could rapidly ignite a broader movement. Tibetans retain

a deep emotional and spiritual attachment to the Dalai Lama, and his death will surely inspire demonstrations of collective mourning.

We cannot be sure whether Tibetans inside China will manage to come together to commemorate the Dalai Lama after he passes—or to protest the CCP’s effort to impose an illegitimate Dalai Lama. But we can be sure that if protests or other mass mobilizations do grow to a significant scale, the party will crack down on them, potentially leading to violence and instability. Unrest may prompt a resurgence in attempted escapes to India, triggering additional border controls and aggravating border tensions. Even if the party is reasonably successful in preventing unrest, a stifled population could nonetheless generate a spike in refugee flows, triggering tensions.

Heightened Tensions in Disputed Border Areas

Starting in late 2024, Sino-Indian border tensions have incrementally decreased and both sides have sought to normalize relations. But there has been no progress toward resolving the underlying territorial disputes and significant distrust remains, in part because of disagreements over Tibet and Beijing’s continued irritation with the Dalai Lama’s residence in Dharamshala.

Many disputed border areas are home to significant Tibetan Buddhist populations, pilgrimage sites, and cross-border trade. The Dalai Lama conducts annual teachings in Ladakh, and the sixth Dalai Lama hailed from Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, prompting the Tibetan community to speculate that these are likely places for a search committee to identify a successor.

If the new Dalai Lama is found in one of these disputed areas, it would raise complex questions linked to sovereignty and control. Will Beijing claim a child of disputed territory is a Chinese citizen? How will governments manage the borders when a large wave of pilgrims seek to pay respects to a new Dalai Lama? Against the backdrop of India’s and China’s heavily fortified border infrastructure, the presence of a new spiritual leader may prompt additional soft and hard power posturing. Border tensions and even skirmishes could easily be reignited, and the Dalai Lama’s succession will severely test the tenuous Sino-Indian rapprochement.

Beijing’s Weaponization of Water, Critical Minerals, and Other Economic Dependencies

Water Resources: Beijing may leverage its control over Tibet’s rivers to secure international endorsement of China’s actions in a standoff sparked by Dalai Lama succession. Tibet is a major freshwater source for the region. How China manages those rivers has vast implications for freshwater access, fish supply, and natural disaster risk for downstream nations in South and Southeast Asia.⁶⁸ China has constructed over 80,000 dams and created more than 98,000 reservoirs across the country.⁶⁹ Beijing has already weaponized water management in the context of Sino-Indian tensions. For example, during the August 2017 Doklam standoff, China withheld hydrological data on the Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra River, violating bilateral data-sharing agreements dating back to 2002. The data is crucial to flood management during monsoon season,

and India, Nepal, and Bangladesh had recently experienced record levels of rainfall contributing to catastrophic floods.⁷⁰

Critical Minerals: Beijing is likely to wield its dominance over critical mineral and rare earth supply chains to press other countries to endorse a party-selected Dalai Lama, or to at least refrain from endorsing the Tibetan-led succession process. Notably, the Tibetan Plateau is itself a major source of critical minerals. It has four major metallogenic belts rich in copper, lithium, silver, and more than a hundred other minerals.⁷¹ China accounts for 10-16 percent of the world's lithium reserves, and at least 85 percent of China's known reserves are on the Tibetan Plateau.⁷² Tibetan areas are a major source of China's copper deposits, and additional large-scale copper deposits were recently discovered on the Tibetan Plateau, promising to boost China's role in global copper supply chains.⁷³ The Tibetan Plateau has also become an important location for critical mineral processing.

Other Economic Weapons and Inducements: Beijing is adept at using combinations of economic coercion and co-optation to achieve international acquiescence on its policy priorities, particularly with respect to its claimed "core interests." In fact, approximately 42 percent of China's acts of economic coercion targeting bordering countries relate to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, or Xinjiang.⁷⁴ Sanctions imposed on Mongolia following the Dalai Lama's 2016 visit are a typical example. China is also adept in linking large-scale foreign investment to respect for its "core interests." For example, soon after the Nigerian government secured a \$40 billion commercial agreement with China, it ordered Taiwan to remove its representative office from the capital city of Abuja.⁷⁵ In a Dalai Lama succession scenario, policymakers should expect Beijing to threaten punitive economic and diplomatic measures while holding existing investments at risk, in order to deter governments and religious leaders from supporting the Tibetan-led succession process and encourage them to endorse the party's chosen Dalai Lama. These coercive tactics are less effective when third countries come together in coalition and achieve strength in numbers; the onus will be on the international community to maintain some degree of solidarity.

Spike in Foreign Interference, Transnational Repression, and Violations of Sovereignty

While the Dalai Lama reincarnation process is unfolding, Beijing will try to control the public position of governments, media organizations, companies, diaspora communities, and thought leaders around the world. This will likely result in a worldwide campaign to manipulate democratic politics; deploy undeclared law enforcement or intelligence personnel; threaten the Tibetan diaspora, including by punishing family members inside China; and promote disinformation. Countries like Nepal and Mongolia, which are home to communities that revere the Dalai Lama but also have strong economic and political ties to China, will face pressure from Beijing to silence those communities at any cost.

Policy Recommendations

The challenges presented by a Dalai Lama succession scenario defy conventional policy taxonomies. To successfully grapple with them, governments must view succession and the Tibet issue writ large not only as a human rights or humanitarian matter, but as a cross-cutting geostrategic issue with potential to inflame border tensions, destabilize supply chains and water resources, and trigger aggressive Chinese interference around the world. Furthermore, if Beijing secures international endorsement of a party-selected Dalai Lama, it will be emboldened to act with further aggression around the world, increasing the risk of conflict and posing an intensified challenge to its rivals and its neighbors.

To that end, like-minded governments should proactively develop action plans for protecting their interests and supporting the Tibetan community during a Dalai Lama succession. Beijing has been crafting its succession plans for decades, preparing to create a fait accompli that advances its international standing while asserting greater control over Tibetans within and beyond China's borders. The rest of the world must catch up.

Reject Beijing's interference in Dalai Lama succession and support Tibetans' right to choose the next Dalai Lama.

- The United States and like-minded governments should adopt a policy of opposing China's interference in the succession process for Tibetan Buddhists and respecting the Dalai Lama's authority over his own reincarnation. This policy should be reflected in public statements prior to the Dalai Lama's passing, including in G7 declarations.

- The United States and like-minded governments should actively contest the CCP's false narratives on Tibet and the Dalai Lama. In a succession scenario, they should anticipate an intense, global disinformation campaign and prepare to counter it with worldwide diplomatic engagement, support to credible Tibetan voices and platforms, and a surge in Tibet-focused public diplomacy programming.
- Like-minded governments can use existing tools, such as financial sanctions and visa restrictions, to hold CCP officials accountable for abuses in Tibet and the targeting of Tibetans globally. Even if these measures have a limited impact on their individual targets, they are important in establishing the terms of the debate in a succession scenario. Countries that do not want to "choose" between China and the United States must be convinced the United States and other partners have a clear position.

Elevate the issue of Dalai Lama succession and ensure cross-functional policy coordination.

- The United States should urgently appoint a special coordinator for Tibetan issues, as required by law. Like-minded governments should designate similar focal points who are empowered to unite siloed policy communities; create linkages across foreign policy, defense, law enforcement, and intelligence establishments; and incorporate Tibet issues into broader strategic planning vis-à-vis China, strategic competition, and the maintenance of regional peace and stability.
- The United States and like-minded governments should elevate their public engagement with the Dalai Lama and CTA leaders. Beyond the symbolic importance of these meetings, they provide officials with important information regarding the Dalai Lama's succession plans. Beijing will protest, but it appears to view these engagements as part of the status quo geopolitical environment, and they are unlikely to do meaningful damage to a country's bilateral relationship with China.
- The United States and like-minded governments should require training on Tibet and the institution of the Dalai Lama for foreign service officers, particularly for diplomats stationed in China, India, Nepal, and Mongolia, and for those serving in "China watcher" roles.

Develop whole-of-government plans for addressing the circumstances surrounding Dalai Lama succession, and coordinate plans among like-minded countries.

- Foreign ministries should plan to deploy a wide range of diplomatic tools immediately after the Dalai Lama's passing, including high-level engagement with vulnerable stakeholders, tailored démarches delivered by ambassadors around the world, and public statements affirming Tibetans' right to choose the next Dalai Lama.
- Foreign ministries should prepare a UN General Assembly joint statement, which would be delivered upon the Dalai Lama's passing. They can also develop common talking points regarding Dalai Lama succession for individual interventions in UN fora.
- Defense ministries and intelligence agencies should integrate risks associated with Dalai Lama succession into their plans for supporting India along the Line of Actual Control.

- Governments should develop plans for providing humanitarian assistance and resettlement options for new Tibetan refugees, working with Tibet's neighbors to ensure refugees are not refouled to China.
- In high-level engagements with the Indian government, the United States should seek opportunities for bilateral collaboration on succession issues.
- Like-minded governments should hold multi-ministry, multi-country tabletop exercises on Dalai Lama succession, testing policymakers' readiness to address the diplomatic, economic, security, and humanitarian risks it will generate. This will improve countries' preparedness and clarify planning gaps, while linking planners in the United States, Europe, and Asia.
- Governments should include Tibetan voices in relevant policy discussions, including with respect to water security and the development of renewable energy infrastructure on the Tibetan Plateau.

NGOs should:

- Establish and expand resilient networks within Tibet that can document human rights abuses and other developments on the plateau, now and after the Dalai Lama's passing.
- Invest in the development of censorship-resistant technologies, secure communication platforms, and information-sharing mechanisms that would be resilient to internet shutdowns or throttling on the Tibetan Plateau.
- In coordination with the CTA and Gaden Phodrang Trust, develop and distribute analysis on the history of Dalai Lama succession and the succession process as determined by the current Dalai Lama, preemptively debunking CCP disinformation.

Increase economic and societal resilience to heightened pressure and interference from Beijing.

- Governments should prepare for an onslaught of Chinese-sponsored foreign interference, developing plans to prevent Beijing from manipulating democratic politics (especially at the local level), to ensure the safety of Tibetan diaspora communities, and to counter an increase in transnational repression more broadly. This will be particularly important for the United States, India, Nepal, Mongolia, and other countries home to large Tibetan communities. Specifically:
 - Develop law enforcement and diplomatic information-sharing mechanisms to better understand and prevent Beijing's interference, as well as metric-based improvement plans through the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism.⁷⁶
 - Provide civil society organizations with safe opportunities to consult on these plans and exchange information on the targets and tactics of Chinese interference.
 - Coordinate with subnational authorities to ensure resources are available to monitor and prevent transnational repression in Tibetan communities in the lead-up to the

Dalai Lama's passing and afterward, with a focus on religious communities and Tibetan community centers.

- Governments should develop concrete measures to support countries facing threats of economic coercion from Beijing, including fast-tracking loans from development finance institutions and matchmaking between targeted industries and replacement markets, paired with longer-term efforts to increase resilience and reduce dependencies.
- Through the Quad and other groupings, governments should accelerate supply chain diversification for minerals heavily mined and processed in Tibet, such as copper and lithium.

Use foreign assistance to support Tibetan communities and organizations, while countering Chinese propaganda.

The United States should:

- Establish earmarked funding for implementation of existing legislation on Tibet, which often authorizes new funds without appropriating corresponding resources. Earmarks should support the CTA as well as independent Tibetan NGOs.
- Restore funding to Radio Free Asia, whose journalists were responsible for the majority of credible reporting on developments across the Tibetan Plateau. Lack of visibility on developments within China severely hampers policymaking.
- Coordinate closely with India on Tibet-focused assistance. Even as Delhi balances sensitivities in its relationship with Beijing, India has hosted the Dalai Lama and the preponderance of the Tibetan diaspora for many decades, and it will be at the forefront of any post-Dalai Lama scenario.

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