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SACRED AUTHORITY AND STATE POWER: THE FUTURE OF THE DALAI LAMA INSTITUTION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

SUMMARY BRIEFING

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SUMMARY BRIEFING

The Dalai Lama's 90th birthday in July 2025 arrives at a critical juncture. China is intensifying its campaign to eliminate the spiritual leader's influence and control his succession, regarding this as a 'protracted war' crucial to maintaining its grip on a strategically vital region.

These efforts extend beyond Sino-Tibetan relations, representing a flashpoint at a time of broader geopolitical contests over international order. Multiple intersecting crises, including China's expanding techno-authoritarianism, an aggressive Russia, a new administration in the U.S. and unchecked corporate tech power, present unprecedented threats to freedom, justice and democratic norms.

The 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso has safeguarded Tibet's national, cultural, and religious identity during the most difficult and dangerous period in Tibet's two-millennium history. Throughout his 65-year exile, he has transformed Tibetan Buddhist culture into both a secular and spiritual force, while becoming the first Dalai Lama to relinquish his role as head of state in favour of democratic governance in exile. While inspiring new generations of Tibetans in his homeland seeking freedom and

political change, the Dalai Lama has become a globally respected and popular moral authority known for his progressive leadership in secular ethics, science and education.

The Dalai Lama's public recognition of a Mongolian-American child as the new Bogd Lama, or Jebtsundampa, the nation's spiritual leader, in March 2023 provided an early warning of the political complications of succession. The announcement triggered reactions from China, which seeks to control Buddhist institutions across Asia, threatening the security and religious freedoms of Mongolian Buddhists.

China's strategies have evolved from direct repression in Tibet to a sophisticated matrix of control extending well beyond its borders and imposing mounting pressure on democratic institutions and civil society. Traditional religious and cultural ties across the Himalayas are being subordinated to strategic imperatives as Beijing works to fragment communities and control narratives. The targeting of diaspora groups through both digital and physical means demonstrates China's determination to suppress alternative sources of authority and identity.

Beijing perceives a crucial opportunity during the potential leadership vacuum before the identification and emergence of a 15th Dalai Lama, if the institution continues, and the maturation of the nine-year old Tenth Bogd Lama, Mongolia's spiritual leader. It aims to end international support for Tibet; prevent emergence of an influential successor to the Dalai Lama in exile; consolidate control over Tibetan Buddhism, and project religious and political influence beyond PRC borders.

Soon after the U.S. government adopted legislation in 2020 rejecting any foreign interference in the selection of the next Dalai Lama, China signalled its intention to escalate its extraterritorial interventions over reincarnation by making it illegal for incarnate lamas to be born outside the PRC. This paves the way for heightened pressures on foreign governments to acknowledge PRC authority and not Dharmasala's over the future of the Dalai Lama institution.

It also signals risks for Tibetans and Buddhists not just within PRC borders but internationally in the diaspora(s) and in countries particularly vulnerable to China's pressure as part of broader patterns of transnational repression. In a disturbing recent development, a respected Tibetan reincarnate lama who had apparently refused to host China's official Panchen Lama at his monastery was pursued to Vietnam only for China to announce his death in March. Demonstrating China's efforts to control influential Buddhist figures even beyond China's borders, Humkar Dorje, a 56-year old abbot of a monastery in Tibet, had been detained in a joint cross-border operation by Chinese and

Vietnamese security agents in Ho Chi Minh City.

China's multi-dimensional approach to controlling Tibet and the Dalai Lama's succession presents complex challenges, but is countered by the global influence of the Dalai Lama and the civilisational power of Tibetan Buddhism, together with the resilience of Tibetans in protecting a vibrant culture.

Under the Dalai Lama's leadership, Tibetan Buddhism has become a vital and socially progressive force globally, with the capacity to provide alternative frameworks to navigate a fractured global order and the devastation wreaked historically by communism. What hangs in the balance extends well beyond Tibet's future—it tests the international community's resolve to safeguard pluralism, religious freedom, and cultural autonomy against transnational authoritarian networks whose reach increasingly transcends borders through disinformation, economic coercion, and digital control mechanisms.

The window for establishing effective countermeasures to these threats is narrowing as China accelerates elaborate plans to control Tibet's future and impact Buddhist discourse globally. The situation demands greater preparedness and new forms of multilateral engagement from neighbouring countries, Buddhist regions, and like minded governments.

This summary briefing accompanies a longer report by Kate Saunders published by Czech thinktank Sinopsis in partnership with Czechs Support Tibet.

The report is in four parts:

- (i) The Dalai Lama and China's reincarnation politics;
- (ii) The international dimensions of reincarnation and
- (iii) Return of the Bogd Lama and developments in Mongolia
- (iv) Recommendations and strategic guidelines.



In 2016, following a visit to Mongolia, the Dalai Lama announced that a reincarnation of the Ninth Jebtsundamba (Bogd Lama), equivalent to a Mongolian Dalai Lama, had been found. The identity of the child was kept secret until the boy, then eight years old, was introduced by the Dalai Lama at a public teaching in Dharamsala on 8 March 2023, before thousands of devotees from all over the world. This image depicts the reincarnation of the Jebtsundamba presenting traditional offerings to the Dalai Lama at the start of the Chakrasamvara empowerment at the temple. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL

THE DALAI LAMA'S FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSION

Traditional Tibetan governance uniquely interweaves religious and political authority, based on the belief that leaders are enlightened beings who choose reincarnation to serve humanity. In 2011, the Dalai Lama made a formal declaration on his reincarnation that serves as the definitive statement of his authority, outlining several key principles:

- The reincarnation must occur in a free country, explicitly rejecting Chinese control
- Primary responsibility rests with the Gaden Phodrang Trust, headed by close aide and former Prime Minister in exile Samdhong Rinpoche
- The process requires extensive consultation with:
 - Heads of the major Tibetan Buddhist traditions;
 - The broader Tibetan public and Buddhist followers;
 - Prominent religious figures in exile notably those linked to the Dalai Lama's lineage;
- Any candidate chosen by the Chinese government would be considered illegitimate;
- Clear written instructions will be provided for the recognition process.

The Dalai Lama has indicated he may make a more detailed statement “when he is about 90”. In his 90th birthday month, July 2025, religious leaders from different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and other Tibetan lamas in exile will meet to discuss the future of the Dalai Lama institution.

In his 2011 statement, the Dalai Lama opened up the possibility of a successor being recognised before he dies, although he has not referred to this in more recent years, indicating that preparations for a traditional reincarnation may be taking precedence. While the Dalai Lama has often talked about his wish to return home at least once, he now says that this seems increasingly unlikely.

For the first time in Tibet's history, a process to select a new Dalai Lama – if this goes ahead - must occur without access to traditional sacred spaces and rituals in Tibet, and in an entirely different geopolitical landscape.

- The sacred oracle lake of Lhamo Lhatso, traditionally used to seek visions of future leaders, is under Chinese control;
- Traditional protector rituals and divinations must be conducted in exile;
- Historical practices must be adapted while maintaining authenticity;
- New methods must be developed to validate the recognition process.



The Dalai Lama during opening prayers on the Day of Miracles at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala on 14 March 2025. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL

CHINA'S STRATEGY: POLICY EVOLUTION AND CONTROL MECHANISMS



Troops are seen closing in on the body of Dorje Rinchen after he set fire to himself on 23 October 2012 in Labrang. Smoke can still be seen arising from his body and it is not clear if he was still alive at this point. Laypeople and monks are trying to protect him from being taken away by troops. In Tibetan tradition, it is important to protect the body of someone who has died for religious ritual and offerings in order to ensure an auspicious rebirth. Since a wave of self-immolations began in Tibet in 2009, many Tibetans have taken great risks to retrieve the bodies of those who have self-immolated in order to carry out religious practice. Image circulated by Tibetans in Tibet on social media, used by the International Campaign for Tibet in the report 'Storm in the Grasslands'

China's approach to Tibet and the Dalai Lama reflects a comprehensive strategy that extends far beyond religious control to encompass crucial geopolitical, economic, and environmental interests, notably:

- Control over the borders (border incursions have tripled since Xi Jinping came to power, and China has built entire villages and military installations in Bhutan);
- Expansion of mining based on the rich resources on the Tibetan plateau including more than 85% of the PRC's hard rock lithium deposits as China seeks global supremacy in EVs and renewables;
- Control over Tibet's water, the headwaters of Asia's major rivers, which are critical for addressing China's scarcity, and vital for billions of people downstream.

The CCP views Tibet as essential to its vision of political and economic global dominance, making control over the plateau a non-negotiable element of state policy. China perceives management of the Dalai Lama's succession and installation of an official candidate as an integral element of its 'sovereignty' over Tibet and territorial imperatives. The scope and scale of China's efforts indicate both the importance Beijing places on this issue and its underlying insecurity about maintaining control.

EVOLUTION OF CCP POLICY ON REINCARNATION



This image, distributed on Chinese social media network QQ, shows a fist representing the Chinese Communist Party state smashing into two people representing “black (illegal)” and “evil” forces. The graphic nature of the cartoon is indicative of the Party’s extreme and aggressive approach toward foreign influence. The Dalai Lama has been characterized as a leader of “evil forces” in Chinese propaganda. This cartoon was used by International Campaign for Tibet in a report ‘The Illegality of everything: China’s new campaign offers rewards for information on ‘illegal content’, December 3, 2018.

The accompanying report explores the following aspects and their geopolitical implications in detail.

Early Cooperation Phase (1990s):

- Search teams for reincarnate lamas allowed contact with Dharamsala;
- Cooperation in recognition of the 17th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism;
- Initial collaboration on Panchen Lama search through Chadrel Rinpoche;
- Tacit understanding allowing consultation with exiled Dalai Lama.



Schoolchildren in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba), Sichuan, the Tibetan area of Amdo, with a Party flag a few days before the 70th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party on 1 October 2019. Image from Chinese state media.

Hardline Shift (1995-2007):

- Abduction of Dalai Lama-recognized Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima in 1995, who was then five years old, and has not been seen since;
- Installation of Chinese-selected Gyaltzen Norbu as official Panchen, central to China's plans of controlling the succession of the Dalai Lama;
- Declaration of "chopping off the serpent's head" policy against Dalai Lama;
- Intensified restrictions on religious practice.

Institutionalization of Control (2007-present):

- 'Order No. Five' banning the recognition of reincarnations without Chinese government approval;
- Creation of official database of approved reincarnate lamas;
- Establishment of state-run training institutes for state-approved reincarnations, demonstrating how the Communist Party seeks to mould and control a new generation of monks;
- Integration of religious control with broader 'Sinicisation' campaign, which aims to break and reshape Tibetan Buddhist belief and practices, bring religion under the total control of the Party state, and ensure the religious and personal feelings of monks, nuns and laypeople are supplanted by a Chinese cultural nationalism.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY VERSUS POLITICAL CONTROL: THE BATTLE OVER REINCARNATION

The Chinese Communist Party's efforts to control Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation represent a paradox: a state that promotes “unyielding Marxist atheism”, in Xi Jinping’s words, asserting authority over religious practices and principles that have evolved over centuries. This struggle extends beyond religious doctrine, touching on fundamental questions of legitimacy,

cultural survival, and geopolitical power.

The contest over the future of the Dalai Lama institution involves a complex network of religious figures, political institutions, and power structures, while Tibetans and Buddhist institutions work to maintain authentic religious practice, teachings and authority.

Current Control Mechanisms

- A ‘Sinicisation’ policy that threatens the elimination of Tibetan Buddhist belief and identity. Respected monk and scholar Go Sherab Gyatso, who is serving ten years in prison for his writing, described the process as a “cataclysm of forced cultural integration”. Tibetans can be tortured, imprisoned or killed for expressions of loyalty to the Dalai Lama or keeping his image;
- Party cadres stationed in every village since 2011, representing approximately a quarter of the region’s entire administrative force, which Tibetans believe is linked to managing possible unrest in future when the Dalai Lama dies;
- Secular Party committees embedded within monastic institutions with control over management, finance, even textbooks, designed to produce a new generation of Buddhist teachers trained in Party state ideology;
- Network of state-run Buddhist institutes for training approved religious figures, prioritized by the top Party leader in the Tibet Autonomous Region Wang Junzheng, who is sanctioned by multiple governments including the US and UK for human rights abuses;

- Database containing profiles of more than 1300 state-approved reincarnate lamas in a system that Tibetans fear deepens corruption, a more materialistic approach in monasteries and the risk of 'fake' lamas;
- AI-driven surveillance systems deployed in monasteries as well as lay society;
- Mandatory political education for both religious and laypeople, with a recent emphasis on enforcing Party policy on reincarnation in the secular community as well as the monastic elite, with a particular focus on heavily securitised areas bordering India;
- An expansion in pre-school education with kindergartens for children from the age of two upwards, and boarding schools to implant the "red gene" in the minds of younger generations. A heavy focus on teaching Chinese, depriving Tibetan children of their mother tongue, the basis and core of Tibetan religious and cultural identity;
- Policies that targets the private devotional space of practitioners, with requirements to "draw a clear line" with the Dalai Lama even in personal belief;
- Expansion of United Front Work Department powers and oversight with tripled budget in the Tibet Autonomous Region;
- Active promotion of the Shugden or Dolgyal sect, regarded by the Dalai Lama as a divisive force threatening Tibetan unity, in order to undermine Tibetan Buddhism and its institutions. The sect, that will likely play a strong role in selecting and endorsing a future Chinese Dalai Lama candidate, was officially acknowledged in a 2014 official directive as an "important front in the struggle against the Dalai Clique". The sect has a strong presence in Mongolia and is used to advance Chinese interests.

THE PANCHEN LAMA

China's handling of the Panchen Lama succession illustrates its broader approach. In the past, it was possible for Tibetans to seek advice from the exiled Dalai Lama about the selection of reincarnate lamas. But this policy ceased in 1995 when the Chinese authorities chose their own candidate as Panchen Lama and abducted

the boy recognised by the Dalai Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. His whereabouts is still unknown. Since then China has institutionalized its control through imposing measures that criminalise any individual or entity other than the Chinese state from identifying or selecting the reincarnation of a Tibetan lama.



The official Chinese Panchen Lama meets Xi Jinping, Beijing, 10 June 2015. Chinese state media via Claude Arpi's blogspot.

- The Chinese-installed Panchen, Gyaltsen Norbu, is a critical figurehead in plans for managing the Dalai Lama's succession and has been spending more time in Tibet recently, such as a lengthy visit to the plateau at the same time as Xi Jinping in June 2024;
- Carefully managed public appearances and statements aim to raise Gyaltsen Norbu's profile in the secular as well as the religious sphere including visits to strategic sites such as large-scale hydro projects in areas of high seismic activity, representing high risks downstream, and heavily securitised new settlements close to Tibet's border with India;
- China's Panchen has been associated with the anti-Dalai Lama Shugden sect since his installation.

The CCP's Panchen Lama policy exposes certain political limitations, including:

- Lack of genuine acceptance of the official candidate among Tibetan population;
- Need to maintain heavy security during public appearances and offers of bribes to local people to attend;
- Continued devotion to previous and authentic (Dalai Lama recognised) Panchen Lama among Tibetans;
- Limited political influence despite official positions (and while he has met three successive leaders of China);
- Attempts to build international legitimacy through controlled travel have been of limited success; in May 2022 he was refused permission to visit the Buddha's birthplace Lumbini in Nepal. CCP-aligned Mongolian monks have invited the Chinese Panchen to visit Mongolia, though so far this has not happened.

THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

China's Buddhist Diplomacy and Extraterritorial Strategies

China has launched a comprehensive campaign to reshape the global Buddhist landscape, combining sharp power initiatives with diplomatic pressure to diminish the influence of the Dalai Lama and assert control over Buddhist narratives internationally. This strategy extends beyond mere religious considerations, forming part of a broader geopolitical effort to counter India's historical Buddhist connections and establish China as the

preeminent authority in Buddhist affairs.

Through a combination of financial investment, institutional control, and diplomatic leverage, Beijing has significantly impacted the Dalai Lama's ability to engage with Buddhist communities across Asia while promoting its own version of "Buddhism with Chinese characteristics." This approach involves:

- Escalation in transnational repression, both physical and digital, targeting Buddhist communities in Asia and increasing vulnerability to physical and psychological harm;
- Investment in Buddhist heritage sites such as Lumbini in Nepal and cultural/educational projects across Asia;
- Support for Chinese Buddhist organizations like Fo Guang Shan, which has developed significant presence in Western countries;
- As part of a systematic ideological and political campaign to undermine the Dalai Lama, China's United Front has drawn upon long-term tactics promoting a pro-CCP sect, Shugden. Mongolia appears to be both the frontline and centre of the Shugden offensive globally, with Shugden supporters at the heart of government, business, cultural and religious life and the sect used as a front for advancing Chinese political and business interests;

- Pressuring governments in Asian/Buddhist countries not to offer visas to the Dalai Lama, over the decades prior to COVID when he was travelling internationally;
- Attempts to sideline the Dalai Lama's influence in his exile home of India, including involvement with the Nalanda Buddhist University and China's establishment of a rival institute in Hainan offering scholarships to Buddhists from Nepal and other parts of Asia;
- Strategic use of Buddhist forums and conferences to build international networks, including creation and control of the World Buddhist Forum;
- Takeover of projects like the Common Buddhist Text Project in Thailand, seeking the exclusion of scholars from India and the exile Tibetan diaspora;
- Establishment of the China-ASEAN Buddhism Cultural Center;
- Cultivation of relationships with various Buddhist traditions and schools, with the likely aim of securing endorsements for a future China-installed candidate;
- Direct diplomatic pressure on government officials and interference with media coverage, including pressure to drop publication of work by the Dalai Lama, for instance;
- Monitoring and opposing local Buddhist organizations' attempts to engage with Tibetan Buddhism.

The situation in Mongolia represents a critical test case of China's strategy beyond PRC borders, particularly following the Dalai Lama's recognition of a Mongolian-American child as the Tenth reincarnation of the Bogd Lama (Jebtsundampa), a lineage symbolic of the rich heritage and history of Tibetan Buddhism and of independent Mongolian nationhood. This involves:

- Pressure on Buddhist institutions, interference in monastic practice and pressure on the family of the child Bogd Lama and other Tibetan Buddhists connected to Dharamsala;
- Heightened sensitivity linked to the birthplace of a previous Dalai Lama (the Fourth) in Mongolia;
- Direct interference in religious affairs through economic leverage;
- The complex interplay between religious authority, national identity, and economic dependence.

BUDDHISM, BORDERS AND GEOPOLITICS: INDIA, TIBET AND CHINA



The Dalai Lama waves to fellow pilgrims as he walks around the sacred Mahabodhi Stupa in Bodhi Gaya, India, site of the Buddha's enlightenment. 25 December 2019. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONTEMPORARY STAKES

Tibet is where India and China's competing interests intersect, in a complex and high stakes relationship of rivalry, deadly conflict and partnership. India's position as host to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile administration, combined with its shared Himalayan border with Tibet (now under Chinese control), places it at the center of

ongoing geopolitical tensions. This relationship has taken on new significance under Xi Jinping's leadership, as China pursues aggressive border policies and seeks to reshape Buddhist narratives across Asia, while India seeks to balance its ties to Tibet with its relationship with China.

- Tibet has always held a central place in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Historically, there was no contiguous border between China and India until the PLA took control of Tibet in 1950, a development that permanently altered the region's political and military dynamics.
- As the home of the Dalai Lama and base of the Tibetan exile administration, India is the main target of China's military, economic and diplomatic pressure over Tibet and the future of the Dalai Lama institution. China has warned India not to interfere with any possible reincarnation, and has also indicated that any refusal by India to recognize the future Dalai Lama chosen by China will impact bilateral ties.
- China's assertiveness in the region, extensive infrastructure developments on the border and the Sinicisation of Buddhism threaten India's national security, while the absence of a global figure akin to the Dalai Lama in the future affects India's influence and standing in the region, potentially impacting India's efforts to address Tibet and China relations effectively.
- Since the Dalai Lama's arrival in exile in 1959, Dharamsala has attracted visitors from across the world, and the subcontinent has emerged as a major centre of Tibetan Buddhism, home of the exile administration and a large exile community. China confronts this directly by expanding efforts to deepen alliances with states along the subcontinent's northern frontiers, aiming to weaken India's broader geopolitical influence. This is combined with efforts to coalesce a pro-China grouping of leaders from countries with Buddhist heritage through trade and connectivity networks that include Mongolia and Pakistan and exclude India.
- Despite its significance and the Dalai Lama's role in revitalizing Buddhism in India, the Tibet issue has often been sidelined by Delhi and the exile Tibetan leader treated as an irritant in Sino-Indian relations. But there is an increasing recognition of the need for a more coherent and strategic approach to Tibet that is not only essential for safeguarding national security but also for maintaining diplomatic influence in the region.

BORDER SECURITY AND MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

- Chinese border incursions tripled under Xi Jinping;
- Dramatic militarization of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with new military installations, roads, surveillance systems;
- 2020 Galwan clashes between India and China marked a turning point - first casualties in 45 years, followed by a boycott of Chinese goods, banning Chinese social media apps and government of India taking a stronger position on Tibet;
- Development of strategic border villages ('xiaokang') directly opposite Indian territory;
- PLA modernization includes new high-altitude weapons systems and training;
- Establishment of combined arms brigades and special forces units for mountain warfare. Tibetans recruited on both sides of the border to fight for India and Chinese armies.

Strategic Vulnerabilities

- Control of water resources - China's mega dam construction in Tibet affects Indian rivers;
- No formal water-sharing agreements - China cuts off data during tensions;
- Environmental impacts - Tibetan plateau warming nearly three times faster than global average, impacting the Asian monsoon;
- China's efforts to outmaneuver India across Himalayas through trans-Himalayan alliance excluding India;
- Infrastructure development giving China tactical advantages, including high-speed rail to border areas.

Religious and Cultural Dimensions

- Deep religious and cultural ties between Indian Himalayan regions and Tibet;
- Around 50 million people across 13 Indian states share cultural affinities;
- The Dalai Lama is central to spiritual revitalization across Himalayas;
- Tawang, the birthplace of Sixth Dalai Lama in Arunachal Pradesh, has a strategic significance for both nations;
- China claims Arunachal Pradesh as 'South Tibet'.



Monks dressed as dakinis or 'sky dancers' performing a ritual dance as part of the Long Life Prayers offered to the Dalai Lama by members of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala on 2 April 2025. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL.

Future Considerations

- Potential crisis points: Dalai Lama succession, interregnum period;
- Need to prepare for increased Chinese pressure and influence operations;
- Importance of maintaining cultural and religious connections while addressing security;
- Balancing engagement with China and protection of strategic interests;
- Critical period for establishing effective countermeasures before permanent changes to regional dynamics.



Despite the dangers and restrictions of practising their religion, in September 2023, tens of thousands of Tibetans gathered at a sacred mountain in the grasslands of Dzoeye in Tsoe City, Gannan, Gansu in the eastern Tibetan region of Amdo for a religious empowerment. The Kalachakra ceremony was conferred by the young Seventh Gungthang Rinpoche, who is the reincarnation of a well known Tibetan lama who endured years in prison during the Cultural Revolution and survived to lead a revitalisation of Buddhism across Tibet during the period of relative liberalisation that followed. The current incarnation, the Seventh, has devotees across Tibet and also in China. Photograph circulated on Tibetan social media.

CONTEMPORARY BUDDHIST POLITICS AND POWER



A Chinese tourist poses in colourful Tibetan robe next to the home of the Seventh Dalai Lama in Litang (Chinese: Litang), Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan, the Tibetan area of Kham. Chinese state media publicized efforts to protect this historical site, describing it as a “major measure” taken to protect Tibetan culture and promote tourism by the Chinese government. Name of photographer withheld on request.

The struggle for Buddhist leadership in Asia has become increasingly complex, involving:

- China's efforts to establish itself as the center of global Buddhism, promote 'Sinicised' Buddhism and rewrite historical narratives;
- India's initiatives to reclaim its Buddhist heritage and strengthen ties with Buddhist nations;
- Competing institutional developments, including China's Nanhai Academy versus India's revival of Nalanda. Although Tibet played a crucial role in preserving Nalanda's teachings after its destruction in the 12th century, the Dalai Lama has been sidelined in India from Nalanda's redevelopment;
- Tensions over recognition of reincarnate lamas across the Himalayas for instance in Nepal due to China's interference beyond PRC borders.

The ongoing competition for Buddhist influence carries significant implications:

- Impact on regional stability and international relations;
- Future of Tibetan Buddhist institutions in India;
- Preservation of authentic Buddhist traditions;
- Balance of power in the Asian Buddhist world;
- Long-term effects on cultural and religious heritage.

NEPAL: BETWEEN BUDDHA'S BIRTHPLACE AND CHINA'S INFLUENCE

Nepal stands at a critical crossroads between its rich Buddhist heritage and strong Chinese influence. While historically a center of Tibetan Buddhist culture and refuge for Tibetan exiles, Nepal has increasingly aligned with Chinese interests over the past two decades. This shift has profound implications for Nepal's Tibetan population, religious freedom, and cultural identity, while also affecting regional geopolitics and religious dynamics across the Himalayan region.

Although the Tibetan community in Nepal

(which has shrunk to around 9,000) is demoralized and disadvantaged, Tibetan religious leaders with a strong international profile now have a powerful presence and are attracting people from all over the world to their monasteries in the Kathmandu valley. They are also highly engaged in interactions between Dharamsala and Himalayan Buddhists, while many Chinese Buddhists come to Nepal to experience authentic, as opposed to Sinicised, religious teachings.



Monastery in the Swayambhu area of Kathmandu. Although the Tibetan community is demoralised and disadvantaged, Tibetan religious leaders with a strong international profile now have a powerful presence in Nepal and attract Buddhists from all over the world.

CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN NEPAL

The transformation of Nepal's stance toward Tibet and China is evident in several key developments:

- Formal adoption of the 'One China principle', going beyond the standard 'One China policy' to explicitly support Beijing's positions;
- September 2023 joint communiqué pledging to prevent "separatist activities" on Nepali soil;
- Increasing restrictions on Tibetan cultural and religious expression;
- Enhanced security cooperation, including training of Nepalese police by Chinese forces;
- Growing vulnerability of both Tibetan residents and Nepalese intellectuals who support or simply write about Tibet;
- Removal of Tibetan symbols and expressions of identity in public spaces.



The Nepalese government has made a decisive pivot to China over the last two decades. Since the mid-90s, Kathmandu has de-legitimized the status of a dwindling Tibetan population and under the previous King, closed down the office of the Dalai Lama's representative. Nepalese police also shut down a wave of protests that occurred after China's crackdown on Tibet from 2008 onwards. A police presence like this one at a protest at Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu became routine. Image shared by a Tibetan photographer.

BUDDHISM AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

Despite political pressures, Buddhism remains deeply woven into Nepal's cultural fabric:

- Strong presence of Buddhism among mountain communities including Sherpa, Lopa, Manangi, and other ethnic groups;
- Historical integration of Buddhist practices with Hindu traditions;
- Continuing devotion to the Dalai Lama among many Nepali communities;
- Revival of Buddhist identity among indigenous nationalities;
- Important role of Tibetan lamas in maintaining authentic Buddhist teachings, Tibetan language and culture;
- Growing interest from international Buddhist practitioners, including Chinese visitors.

LUMBINI: CONTESTED SACRED SPACE

The Buddha's birthplace has become a focal point for competing influences:

- Chinese attempts to influence development of Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace, as a rival to India's Bodh Gaya (site of the Buddha's enlightenment);
- Close Chinese cooperation with Nepal over the Lumbini Buddhist University, inaugurated in December 2024 in partnership with the Beijing Language and Culture University;
- India's counter-efforts, including Indian Prime Minister Modi's 2022 visit;
- Local concerns about neglect of the sacred site;
- Competing visions for Lumbini's future development;
- Growing Chinese tourism, Buddhist and otherwise, visa-free, and its implications;
- Efforts by China to send its official Panchen Lama to Lumbini, rejected by Nepal in 2022. A visit by China's Panchen Lama would have been a significant propaganda coup for the PRC as part of their effort to dominate India at a symbolic sacred site close to its border, as well as a stepping stone towards further travel outside the PRC for Gyaltsen Norbu.

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN NEPAL

China's economic engagement through BRI reveals both opportunities and challenges:

- Commitment to Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network;
- Controversial Pokhara International Airport project highlighting debt trap concerns;
- Limited implementation of BRI projects despite formal agreements;
- Growing trade deficit and economic concerns;
- Complex dynamics with India and the US regarding development projects;
- Issues with Chinese-built infrastructure.

BORDER CONTROL AND EXILE ROUTES

China has successfully restricted traditional escape routes for Tibetan refugees:

- Dramatic reduction in Tibetan arrivals from thousands to dozens or less annually;
- Transformation of border town Dram into a military garrison;
- Enhanced border security on both sides;
- Shift in border dynamics from eastern to western crossing points.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL POLITICS

Nepal's positioning between India and China has broader implications:

- Impact on regional Buddhist networks and institutions;

- Strategic importance for China's Himalayan security objectives;
- Influence on India-Nepal-China trilateral relationships;
- Risks of the Nepal government supporting a China-backed Dalai Lama candidate;
- Effects on religious and cultural heritage preservation;
- Future of Buddhist pilgrimage routes and religious tourism;
- Dangers for Tibetans as transnational repression intensifies and due to Nepal's pivot to China;
- Balance between economic development and cultural preservation.

This complex web of religious, political, and cultural factors continues to shape Nepal's role as a crucial intersection point between Tibet, China, and India, with implications extending far beyond its borders into questions of religious authority, cultural preservation, and regional stability.

CURRENT INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Several key developments provide a foundation for international support:

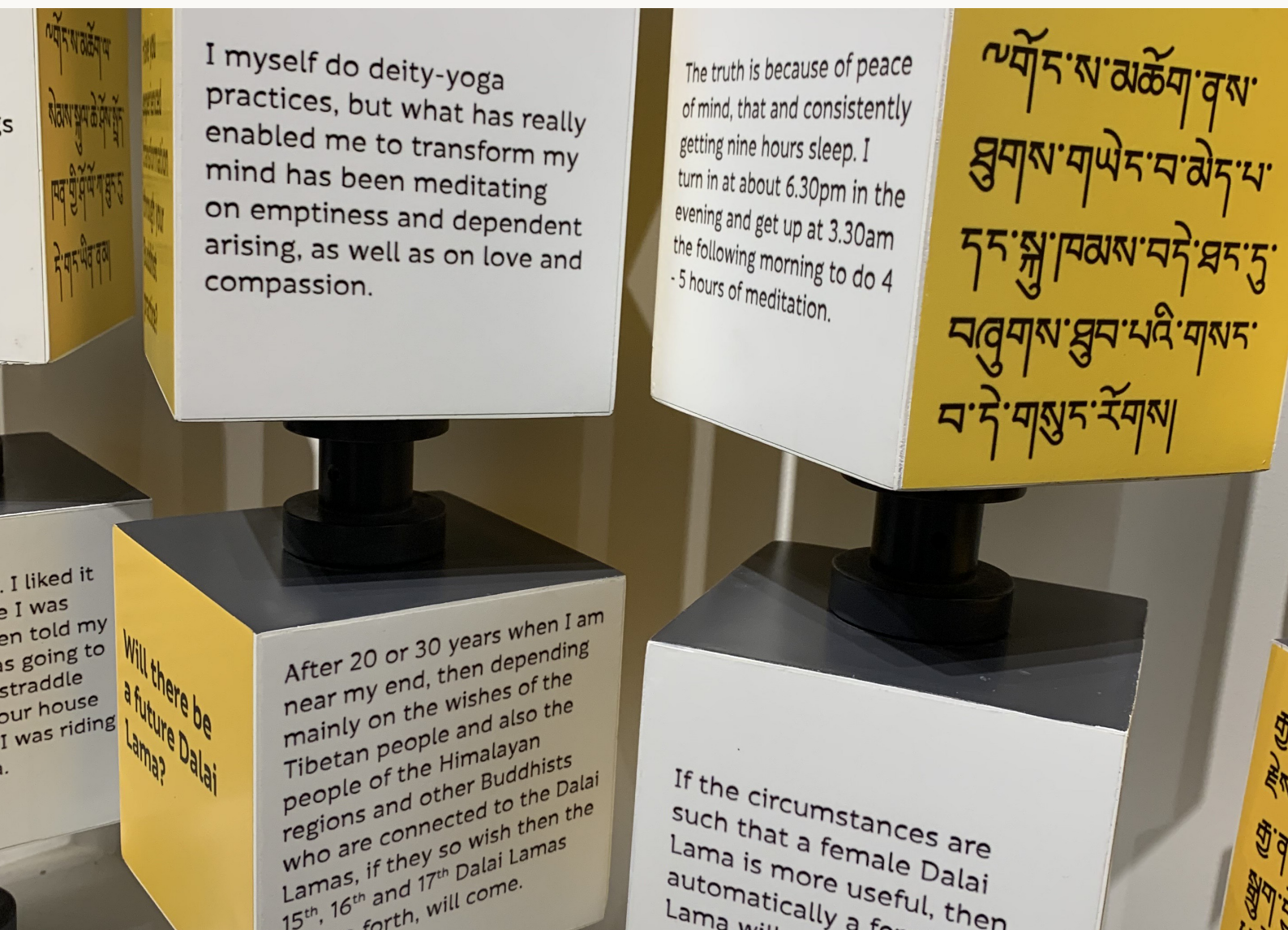
- The U.S. Tibet Policy and Support Act of 2020 states that the succession of the Dalai Lama should be left solely to Tibetan Buddhists to decide, without interference from the Chinese government, including provisions for sanctions against Chinese officials who interfere, such as asset freezes and denial of U.S. entry.
- A Resolve Tibet Act signed into law by President Biden in July 2024 rejects as inaccurate China's claims that Tibet has been part of China since "ancient times" and calls upon the Chinese government to stop propagating such disinformation about Tibet's history, highlighting a political weakness in China's sovereignty claim;
- U.S. competition bills in 2021-22 reject interference in the Dalai Lama's succession;

- European Union guidelines protect religious communities' rights, including legal personality and selection of leaders;
- The Dalai Lama has established the Gaden Phodrang Trust for managing succession matters;
- The Central Tibetan Administration, headed by Sikyong Penpa Tsering, provides legitimate democratic authority in exile.



Former Democrat Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi and long-time supporter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet receives a blessing from the Nechung Kuten in trance as the medium of the State Oracle. Pelosi and other delegation of American lawmakers from Washington including the Republican Chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee Michael McCaul visited the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and later met Prime Minister Modi in Delhi in June 2024. Screenshot from Tibet TV.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY



Questions to the Dalai Lama and his answers. Exhibit at the Tibet Museum in Dharamsala.

Immediate Policy Actions

- Develop clear public positions supporting the Dalai Lama as the legitimate authority on the future of the Dalai Lama institution;
- Issue formal statements at UN Human Rights Council expressing concern about Chinese interference;
- Refuse to endorse Chinese-appointed leaders, including China's official Panchen Lama Gyaltsen Norbu;
- Demand verifiable proof of the authentic Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima's whereabouts;
- Establish Special Coordinators for Tibet in key countries;
- Actively support continuation of the Central Tibetan Administration and Tibetan cultural and religious institutions and communities in exile;
- Vigorous and timely monitoring of China's extraterritorial influence efforts over Buddhism and Tibet and robust responses to same on a case by case basis;
- Engage with Tibetan community representatives and Central Tibetan Administration wherever possible, with particular regard to countering China's digital and physical transnational repression;
- Formulate positions based on Tibet's strategic significance, taking into account its global importance as a climate change epicenter and source of Asia's great rivers, impacting not only the Asian monsoon but also weather in Europe;
- Press for ratification of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights.

Diplomatic initiative

- Coordinate bilateral support to India on matters relating to the succession of the Dalai Lama, protecting his authority;

- Upgrade relations with the Central Tibetan Administration;
- Develop united positions among democratic governments, Buddhist countries, Himalayan nations to resist economic coercion;
- Support Mongolia's democratic and legitimate Buddhist institutions and the welfare of the Bogd Jebtsundampa Khutuktu;
- Develop initiatives to counter China's transnational repression efforts;
- Revise diplomatic language regarding Tibet's status, acknowledging that the PRC never inherited or acquired sovereignty.

The young reincarnation of Bakula Rinpoche from Ladakh, former Indian ambassador to Mongolia. Image courtesy of Thomas Kelly.



SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIA

Political and Administrative

- Develop specific language supporting the Dalai Lama's authority over succession;
- Revive the Adviser on Tibetan Affairs position as a single point of contact;
- Establish a department of Himalayan and Tibetan affairs under the Prime Minister's office;
- Implement the Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy 2014 uniformly across states;
- Address citizenship issues for the growing Tibetan-Indian population;
- Consider OCI status for eligible Tibetans who have taken foreign nationality;
- Simplify documentation procedures for Tibetans for international travel.

Educational and Cultural

- Promote Tibetan studies in Indian universities and maintain the exemption of Tibetan students from international fees;
- Support Mongolian Buddhist monks in Southern India religious institutes;
- Involve the Dalai Lama and legitimate authorities in Nalanda Buddhist University in Bihar;
- Establish specialized hill universities focusing on regional studies;
- Support CTA authority in engagement with the international community and efforts towards dialogue with China.

Strategic Considerations

- Develop clear policies for various succession scenarios, including discovery in Indian territory;
- Plan for access to ritual objects and enthronement ceremonies;
- Consider security implications of potential People's Liberation Army/People's Armed Police mobilization in the event of new developments;
- Review terminology regarding the Indo-Tibet border rather than Sino-Indian border.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEPAL

Institutional Support

- Strengthen Buddhist communities and practitioners in remote areas;
- Establish centers for Buddhist and Himalayan studies in Kathmandu valley;
- Support translation of the Dalai Lama's teachings into Nepali;
- Revise historically Hindu-centric school curricula to include Buddhism;
- Strengthen communications frameworks across Buddhist schools and traditions.

Cultural Preservation

- Support movements of original Buddhists like Tamangs, Magars, and Rais returning to their roots;
- Assist renovation of monasteries in remote areas;
- Develop sustainable income programs for villagers in Buddhist regions;
- Contribute to Lumbini's revival in accordance with Buddhist heritage;
- Support training for Nepalese journalists to counter Chinese propaganda;
- Help revive the rich tradition of Newari Buddhists;
- Strengthen the Nepali Buddhist Federation's political representation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MONGOLIA

Educational Initiatives and Cultural Support

- Support the Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning program in Mongolian schools developed with Emory University;
- Engage Buddhist institutions in practical education like English teaching;



Buddhists from Mongolia who requested the teachings by the Dalai Lama in March 2023 stand beside a traditional Mongolian yurt erected in the courtyard of the main temple in Dharamsala, waiting to welcome the Dalai Lama. Image: Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL.

- Provide secular educational tools promoting critical thinking;
- Promote democracy through civil society events;
- Develop comprehensive religious literacy programs;
- Support translation of the Dalai Lama's works into Mongolian, and the work of Mongolian foundations seeking to promote Tibetan Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in popular culture.
- Fund Buddhist projects appealing to younger generations beyond traditional practices;
- Support translation and preservation of key Buddhist texts;
- Strengthen Buddhist institutions as Mongolia represents a rare free country maintaining Tibetan Buddhist tradition;
- Protect and support the Bogd Lama/Jebtsundampa's role and educational and religious freedom; provide support to monastic institutes;
- Counter PRC influence through strengthened civil society;
- Monitor and expose digital disinformation efforts and activities of anti-Dalai Lama Shugden supporters aligned with the Chinese Communist Party;
- Develop programs promoting peaceful conflict resolution.

Implementation Framework

Success in protecting Tibetan interests requires:

- Coordinated international action through diplomatic channels;
- Clear policy positions from key governments pre-empting Chinese interference;
- Support for legitimate Tibetan institutions during transition periods;
- Protection of religious freedom through legal frameworks;
- Development of future leadership capacity;
- Preservation of cultural heritage through education and documentation.



Butter-lamps blaze at a shrine in Kathmandu.



The Dalai Lama makes his way through the crowd on his way to his residence at the conclusion of the Day of Miracles teaching at the temple on 14 March 2025. Tenzin Choejor/OHHDL