

# Tibet Leadership in Exile and the Indo-Pacific Strategy

By: Ellen Bork

The Trump administration is overhauling the United States’ policy toward the People’s Republic of China (PRC, China). Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo has rejected decades of an approach that “accommodated and encouraged China’s rise ... even when that rise was at the expense of American values, Western democracy, and security and good common sense.”<sup>1</sup> Among the misguided positions Secretary Pompeo identified: downgrading relations with the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan), minimizing the PRC’s Marxist-Leninist system and human rights abuses, and enabling Beijing to join international organizations that it now undermines from within. “The list,” he says, “goes on.”<sup>2</sup>

Tibet deserves to be on the list of policies set for revision. Indeed, the Trump administration has started pushing for greater access to Tibet for travelers, journalists, and diplomats. On September 2, 2020, Secretary Pompeo called for unconditional dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the PRC.<sup>3</sup>

These are useful steps. However, in order to be effective, Washington must examine the historical basis for its Tibet policy and the strategic assumptions that underlie it.

Historically, U.S. policymakers subordinated Tibet to China—first as governed by the Republic of China (ROC), which exerted no authority there, and afterward to the communist PRC which invaded and occupied Tibet in the 1950s. America’s approach to Tibet is inconsistent with the principled stances Washington took against communist aggression in Europe during the Cold War, as well as the emphasis the United States’ free and open Indo-Pacific strategy places on democracy. Washington’s establishment of a relationship with the PRC in the 1970s led the U.S. to treat Tibet and the Dalai Lama as liabilities in its relations with China, even after the Tibetan leader democratized the theocratic government-in-exile.

While the U.S. has tried to minimize Tibet as a point of contention in relations with the PRC, the conquest of Tibet in the 1950s had—and continues to have—underappreciated geopolitical consequences of great significance to the United States and the liberal world order. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been able to pursue an ambitious and corrosive agenda on Tibet and the Dalai Lama in foreign capitals and international institutions, laying a cornerstone for its projection of power and influence in its periphery and beyond. The U.S. has not been able to respond effectively to the

*Ellen Bork is a Visiting Fellow at the Project 2049 Institute. She writes about democracy and human rights as a priority in American foreign policy. Her articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, and The American Interest, where she is a contributing editor. She has worked at the U.S. State Department, on Capitol Hill, and for Freedom House and the International Republican Institute.*

<sup>1</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “The China Challenge,” The Hudson Institute’s New York Gala, October 30, 2019, at <https://www.state.gov/the-china-challenge/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability,” U.S. Department of State, September 2, 2020, at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-a-press-availability-12/>.

CCP's insidious Tibet agenda due to a policy based not on the facts of history or international law, but on an outdated perception of America's strategic interest.

### **The CCP's Strategic Approach Inside Tibet and Beyond**

The PRC is challenging the U.S. for leadership in the Indo-Pacific, diminishing the importance it once gave its bilateral relations with Washington, and building influence in its periphery. Tibet used to be on China's periphery. Until the People's Liberation Army (PLA) invasion in 1950, Tibet was a vast buffer between China and its South Asian neighbors. The PRC cloaked its invasion of Tibet in the language of Marxist liberation, but its main objective was strategic. "Although Tibet's population is small," Mao said in 1949, "its international position is extremely important and we must occupy it."<sup>4</sup> Once inside Tibet, the PRC built roads and railways to secure control, settling an ethnic Han Chinese population, extracting natural resources, and militarizing the Tibetan plateau. Since 1950, the Chinese Communist Party has repressed Tibetan national identity, language, culture, and religion, trying especially to destroy loyalty to the Dalai Lama.

From early on, CCP leaders approached Tibet expansively. They pursued policies beyond Tibet's territory to achieve their objectives by shaping the surrounding environment. In the 1960s, Beijing made concessions in border negotiations with Nepal in exchange for access to remote areas to eliminate the remnants of Tibetan rebels. Since then, Beijing has amassed influence in Nepal to limit the country's role as a way station for fleeing Tibetans. New agreements signed during Xi Jinping's 2019

visit to Kathmandu may lead to the deportation of Tibetan refugees and authorize intervention by Chinese security forces inside Nepal.<sup>5</sup> Nepal is also a target of the CCP's use of investment and infrastructure projects to appropriate Buddhist sites and to sow disloyalty to the Dalai Lama.

Tibet is also a major factor in the CCP's rivalry with India. Beijing has built up forces on the Tibetan plateau and stages incursions across the lengthy Sino-Indian border, including cultivating Indian herders to undermine Delhi's authority. Chinese officials have begun to speak of their claims to a large part of northeastern India, as "Southern Tibet." The area includes a major monastery affiliated with the Dalai Lama's Gelug sect in the district of Tawang. Indian strategists anticipate greater pressure on the border in connection with the Dalai Lama's death and reincarnation. In the spring of 2020, tensions renewed as Chinese and Indian troops engaged in the deadliest cross border violence since the 1960s.

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### **China's Global Tibet Agenda**

The CCP's Tibet agenda extends beyond its immediate neighbors. Beijing considers Tibet, as well as Taiwan and Xinjiang, "core interests," meaning they are non-negotiable matters, the defense of which might justify the use of force.<sup>6</sup> Initially, the CCP's assertion of a core interest was defensive, intended to rebuff criticism of repression and preempt (non-existent)

<sup>4</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> "New China-Nepal Agreements could deny Tibetans Freedom," *International Campaign for Tibet*, February

11, 2020, at <https://savetibet.org/new-china-nepal-agreements-could-deny-tibetans-freedom/>.

<sup>6</sup>Michael Swaine, "China's Assertive Behavior," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 21, 2010.

challenges to CCP rule. As the Party grew more powerful, Beijing added new “core interests,” such as the South China Sea, and broadened the concept so that it might include other territorial interests, norms, and policies.

The CCP’s demands for deference on Tibet and the Dalai Lama are linked to aid, investment, and diplomacy around the world. In one example, Beijing manipulated proceedings at the United Nations Human Rights Commission by blocking Tibetan and Chinese witnesses and motions of censure. Thus, Tibet became both a means and an end in China’s assault on liberal democratic norms.

All of this helps lay the groundwork for the Party’s ultimate goal of installing an impostor Dalai Lama when the current Tibetan spiritual leader, born in 1935, dies. Beijing’s plan to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession is part of the CCP’s attempt to recover the grandeur and territorial reach of past imperial regimes. To achieve this, Beijing has revived a ritual used by the Qing emperor to intercede in the reincarnation process. In 1995, Beijing used the ritual (which involves drawing a name from a golden urn) to install an impostor Panchen Lama, the second most prominent lama of the Dalai Lama’s Gelug order. That same year, just days after being named by the Dalai Lama, CCP agents seized the authentic Panchen—a young boy—who has not been seen since.<sup>7</sup> The impostor, rejected by Tibetans as the “Chinese” or “fake” Panchen, is being groomed to play a role in promoting the Party’s international Tibetan Buddhist agenda. In 2019, Chinese state media reported that the Chinese Panchen praised the “greatness of the Motherland and the

Chinese Communist Party” during a trip to Thailand.<sup>8</sup>

The Dalai Lama has said a decision on his reincarnation may come by the time he is 90. He rejects any Chinese role in his reincarnation, noting:

“It is particularly inappropriate for Chinese communists, who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives ... to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas and the Panchen Lamas ... Such brazen meddling contradicts their own political ideology and reveals their double standards.”<sup>9</sup>

The Dalai Lama has allowed for the possibility that he may emanate in one or more living adults. This scenario, which is consistent with Buddhist teachings, would obviate the instability that often accompanies the period between the identification of a reincarnation in a young child and his assumption of power at the time of his maturity.

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China’s plans for installing an impostor Dalai Lama—and getting the world to acquiesce to it—are well developed. Despite this, American officials have yet to appreciate the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation as a matter of strategic

<sup>7</sup> “China urged to release Panchen Lama after 20 years,” *BBC*, May 17, 2015, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32771242>.

<sup>8</sup> “China Says its Panchen Lama visited Thailand in May,” *Bangkok Post*, June 11, 2019, at <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1693232/china-says-its-panchen-lama-visited-thailand-in-may>.

<sup>9</sup> Statement of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the Issue of His Reincarnation, September 24, 2011, at <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2011/statement-of-his-holiness-the-fourteenth-dalai-lama-tenzin-gyatso-on-the-issue-of-his-reincarnation>.

competition. Furthermore, Washington overlooks yet another powerful asset in the toolkit of strategic competition with Beijing: the democratization of Tibet’s government-in-exile.

### Tibet’s Democracy in Exile

Soon after arriving in exile in India in 1959, the Dalai Lama began efforts to democratize Tibet’s theocratic government-in-exile. For some time, democracy in the new polity was “more nominal than real,” writes Lobsang Sangay, now the elected prime minister of the exile government.<sup>10</sup> Resettling the 80,000 Tibetan refugees who arrived in India after 1959 presented an enormous challenge. Reverence for the Dalai Lama also complicated the democracy project as Tibetans found it difficult to accept a reduction in his absolute authority. A clause authorizing his impeachment was incorporated in the new 1963 Tibetan charter only when the Dalai Lama insisted. Gradually, writes Sangay, “something like a civil society began to emerge; the use of voting and consultative measures became commonplace even in monasteries; Tibetan exiles were making the custom of rule by consent part of their everyday lives,” changing the habits of Tibet’s hierarchical society.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1990s, democratic reform advanced more rapidly as the exiles adopted a new charter that gave greater responsibilities to the legislature. In 2001, a prime minister was elected for the first time and the Dalai Lama stepped back from the day-to-day affairs of the government. In 2011, the Dalai Lama relinquished his political power and transferred it to an elected government, ending more than three hundred years of Tibet’s theocracy. At last, the Dalai Lama joked, he was no longer a

hypocrite who espoused democracy while embodying unified religious and political authority. “Now we are completely changed from the theocracy of the past,” he told Melissa Mathison. “Our decision is a real answer to the Chinese communist accusation that the whole aim of our struggle is the restoration of the old system.”<sup>12</sup>

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In 2011, Lobsang Sangay became the first prime minister under the fully democratized system, elected by voters in the Tibetan diaspora, mainly in India and Nepal, but also in Europe and North America. The Tibetan government-in-exile, known formally as the Central Tibet Administration (CTA) has limited—but meaningful—jurisdiction over matters such as education, finance, health, and some judicial matters subject to Indian law. The CTA maintains representatives in more than a dozen countries including the U.S., United Kingdom, and Europe. Yet when the Tibetan prime minister visits the U.S., he cannot set foot in the State Department, let alone the White House.

### The Foundations of America’s Tibet Policy

Washington had little involvement with Tibet until World War II. At the time, the U.S. was allied with Chiang Kai-shek, then the leader of the Republic of China, in the war against Japan. (Chiang also faced a looming threat from the rebel Chinese communists.) The U.S. had historically supported China’s territorial integrity since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, despite the fact that imperial China was disintegrating, and

<sup>10</sup> Lobsang Sangay, “Tibet: Exiles’ Journey,” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 14, Number 2, July 2003, pp. 119-130, at <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Lobsang-Sangay.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Melissa Mathison, “A conversation with the Dalai Lama,” *Rolling Stone*, July 21, 2011, at <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/a-conversation-with-the-dalai-lama-243335/>.

Washington had little will or ability to stop it. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chiang Kai-shek claimed Tibet and other regions as he sought to recover parts of the broken empire. As an ally, the United States did not wish to weaken Chiang by questioning his Tibetan claim, even though he exerted no authority there. Washington's first statement of its position on Tibet in 1942 was written with that in mind.

“The Chinese Government has long claimed suzerainty over Tibet, the Chinese constitution lists Tibet among areas constituting the territory of the Republic of China, and this Government has at no time raised question regarding either of these claims.”<sup>13</sup>

This passive and equivocal formulation reflected American knowledge that Tibet had been *de facto* independent since the collapse of Chinese imperial rule in 1911, and that the Republican government did not—and had never—exerted authority in Tibet. As for “suzerainty,” it was a British contrivance, an antiquated European concept that had no relation to Sino-Tibet relations. It was ambiguous, implying a low level Chinese administrative presence, and did not indicate sovereignty. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain, then ruling imperial India, applied suzerainty to Tibet in order to fend off Russian encroachment by bolstering China's claim.

<sup>13</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Diplomatic Papers, 1942, China, eds. G. Bernard Noble, E. R. Perkins, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1956), Document 525, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942China/d525>. The background to this statement is significant. It came about while the allies were making an effort to gain Chiang's help in gaining access to Tibet for resupply of Chiang's forces. Chiang had no authority there and could not secure access. Nonetheless, the U.S. continued to support his claims, albeit in these equivocal and passive terms. See Warren W. Smith, Jr., *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations*, (New Delhi, Rupa: 2009), p. 244.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, pp. 290-291.

Rather than limiting China's power in Tibet, it achieved the opposite, shaping foreign perceptions of Tibet's status, and ultimately helping the PRC consolidate full sovereignty in decades following.

Although American officials gave lip service to China's territorial integrity, they did not feel bound to support it when doing otherwise served U.S. interests. In 1945, President Roosevelt compelled Chiang to allow Outer Mongolia's “independence,” albeit under Soviet domination, as an inducement to Stalin to enter the war against Japan. Moreover, as the prospect of a communist takeover of China loomed, American officials debated the merits of recognizing Tibet's independence.<sup>14</sup> American position papers on Tibet at this time expressed discomfort with the suzerainty concept and indeed reflected a willingness to take different positions. The State Department advised diplomats against “references to China's sovereignty or suzerainty unless such references are clearly called for,” and gave notice that diplomats inform “China of [the United States'] proposed moves in connection with Tibet, rather than asking China's consent for them.”<sup>15</sup>

Although America did not recognize Tibet's independence, U.S. officials did begin to speak of Tibet's right to self-determination.<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State Christian Herter endorsed the concept in a 1960 letter to the Dalai Lama. That

<sup>15</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1949, The Far East, China, Volume IX, eds. E. Ralph Perkins, Frederick Aandahl, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1974), Document 1025, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v09/d1025>.

<sup>16</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, East Asia and the Pacific, Volume VI, eds., Neal H. Petersen, William Z. Slany, Charles S. Sampson, John P. Glennon, David W. Mabon (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976), Document 376, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v06/d376>.

See also, Smith, p. 291, n. 86.

position also had little practical effect. Even covert U.S. support for Tibetan rebels in the late 1950s and 1960s was not intended to reverse the invasion, or achieve concessions from Beijing, but rather to harass the PRC from its Western flank. Eventually, all qualification of Chinese authority in Tibet was abandoned as America adopted a new strategic rationale for its relations with China (by then the People's Republic of China). In 1978, President Jimmy Carter established diplomatic relations with Beijing, abruptly breaking ties with Taipei, completing the process of normalization begun by President Richard Nixon in the early 1970s.

Visiting Beijing in August 1979, Vice President Walter Mondale, told Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping “our position, whenever asked, is that Tibet is part of China.” The Dalai Lama would be received “as a religious figure, not a political leader.”<sup>17</sup> “Up to that point,” says J. Stapleton Roy, a career ambassador who participated in the normalization talks, “we had never explicitly stated that Tibet was part of China, but we acknowledged Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.”<sup>18</sup> The U.S. would no longer take a position short of full Chinese sovereignty, with major consequences for Tibet policy. Once building relations with Beijing became paramount, the matter of Tibet and America's support for the Dalai Lama became, “an embarrassment ... no longer relevant to the U.S. national interests—in fact, it was potentially harmful.”<sup>19</sup>

From then on, Tibet policy was guided by the imperative of smooth relations with Beijing. “We want to have a good U.S.-China relationship, not for its own sake, but because if we don't, we won't be able to help Tibet,” a senior official said in 2009, explaining why

President Obama had decided not to meet with the Dalai Lama before traveling to Beijing for the first time. “If the Tibet relationship is seen as an irritant to the U.S.-China relationship, then that will cripple our ability to be of help.”<sup>20</sup>

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As a result, Tibet policy diverged from other, emblematic American foreign policies, such as the principled opposition to Soviet communist aggression in the Baltics. In 1940, Washington refused to recognize the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In the following decades, Washington went to great lengths to uphold the principle by maintaining contacts with Baltic diplomats and hanging national flags at the State Department. These measures, and America's steadfastness, have been recognized as vital to the eventual independence of the Baltics, even as Washington had to deal with the Soviet Union on other matters. One obvious distinction must be acknowledged: the United States never established relations with an independent Tibet, as it had with the Baltic governments. That only underscores how shortsighted it was not to have recognized the Tibetan government. It also does not preclude greater emphasis on Tibet's exile democracy now.

Nor was America's approach to Tibet consistent with the greater emphasis the U.S. placed on democracy in its Asian alliances as the Cold War ended. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the U.S.

<sup>17</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980*, Volume XIII, China, ed. David P. Nickles, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2013), Document 264, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d264>.

<sup>18</sup> J. Stapleton Roy, e-mail to author, March 8, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Landler, “Critics Protest Gap in Dalai Lama's Schedule,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2009, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/world/asia/06dalai.html>.

responded to democracy movements in South Korea and the Philippines by withdrawing support for their authoritarian leaders at crucial moments. In Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, lifted martial law in 1987, and democratic elections followed in the 1990s. In 1991, as Mongolia held its first democratic elections since emerging from Soviet domination, Secretary of State James A. Baker, welcomed it into "a new order for Asia and the world—an order based on democratic values and free markets."<sup>21</sup> During this period, despite the collapse of Soviet communism, and Beijing's crushing of the 1980s democracy movement, Washington did nothing to revise the "tacit alliance" it struck with the PRC in the 1970s to keep it onside during the Cold War. Instead, the U.S. continued an engagement policy that minimized, or even ignored, the regime's Marxist-Leninist ideology and repression. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the historic democratization of the Tibetan government-in-exile was at best marginalized, if not unnoticed.

### A Second Chance for U.S. Policymakers

Today, Tibet would be far down a list of most Americans' global concerns. In the Indo-Pacific alone, the U.S. is preoccupied with security issues including China's aggression in the South China Sea, the defense of Taiwan, and the North Korean nuclear threat. Compared to these concerns, Tibet may seem a closed, if tragic, chapter of history. However, for China's

communist leaders, Tibet remains a top priority that justifies interference in the affairs of its neighbors and leads to the corruption of democratic norms.

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A look back at history may help policymakers see Tibet policy not as a product of immutable historical facts, or principles of international law, but rather as an outdated perception of America's strategic interest. There is an additional consideration that should also inform U.S. policymakers. For most of the PRC's history, Tibet was not a significant concern in China's democracy movement.<sup>22</sup> Yet, in 2008, when wide-scale protests spread across the Tibetan plateau, dissidents began to discuss Tibet in terms of democratic legitimacy rather than of territory and nationalism. "The roots of the crisis in Tibet are the same as the roots of the crisis in all of China," Liu Xiaobo wrote in April 2008. "A confrontation between freedom and dictatorship has been made to look like a clash between ethnicities."<sup>23</sup> Dissident intellectuals criticized the Party's "one-sided propaganda" for inciting ethnic tensions, decried "Cultural Revolution-style" verbal attacks on the Dalai Lama, and called for independent media access to Tibet.<sup>24</sup> A public-interest law group blamed

<sup>21</sup> Jim Mann, "Western Ideals Draw Baker to Remote Mongolia," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1991, at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-07-27-mn-193-story.html>.

<sup>22</sup> A prominent exception is Wei Jingsheng, the electrician imprisoned for his posters calling for democracy in 1978. From prison, he addressed a lengthy takedown of the Party's historical claims and chauvinistic attitudes toward Tibet directly to Deng Xiaoping. His letter linked democracy, and the illegitimacy of PRC rule over Tibet, and by implication China. "The will and aspiration of the people are the main constituting fact of sovereignty." Wei Jingsheng,

"Letter from Prison: To Deng Xiaoping On the Tibetan Question," in *Tibet Through Dissident Chinese Eyes: Essays on Self-Determination*, eds. Cao Changching and James D. Seymour, (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 75 – 89, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Liu Xiaobo, "So Long as Han Chinese Have No Freedom, Tibetans Will Have No Autonomy," April 11, 2008, *No Enemies, No Hatred*, Perry Link, Tienchi Martin-Liao, Liu Xia, editors, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 263.

<sup>24</sup> Howard French, "Intellectuals in China Condemn Crackdown," March 24, 2008, *The New York Times*, at

government policies for the protests and Chinese lawyers stepped forward to defend Tibetans arrested in the protests.

Later that year, Chinese democrats issued *Charter 08*, a blueprint for a future democratic China under the rule of law. Tibet, perhaps too sensitive to mention explicitly by name, was referenced by the call for a “federation of democratic communities of China,” and the resolution of “disputes in the national-minority areas of China ... to find a workable framework within which all ethnic and religious groups can flourish.”<sup>25</sup> *Charter 08* alarmed CCP leaders who, fearing a Color Revolution, arrested many of its signers and imprisoned Liu, the Charter’s most prominent signer, on subversion charges.<sup>26</sup> The idea of democracy as the basis of governance in Tibet (and China) remains taboo for Party leaders. However, the ideas and empathy expressed by Chinese democrats hold out the prospect of a different future.

The Trump administration has begun to revise China policy, citing the geopolitical competition between free and repressive regimes in the Indo-Pacific. A historical perspective demonstrates that current Tibet policy is tailored to America’s perceptions of a strategic interest that no longer exists. An approach that emphasizes democratic legitimacy would put America in the same company as Tibetans who have built democracy in exile and Chinese democracy advocates alike.

Specifically, Washington should:

- Adopt democratic legitimacy as the basis of Tibet policy.
- Enlist European and other democracies in establishing a united position of support for the integrity of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation and greater recognition of the democratic exile government.
- Make Tibet a priority in the counter influence efforts the Trump administration is pursuing at the UN and within other international organizations.
- Engage the Tibetan leadership at higher levels and include Tibet in organizations such as the alliance on religious freedom.

Changing Tibet policy will be difficult, at least at first. The PRC has created a dynamic of demand and concession, while the U.S. has long considered Tibet to have little geopolitical relevance. However, U.S. perceptions of its strategic interests toward the PRC have changed dramatically. By taking these steps, Washington would begin to challenge the CCP’s insidious, global Tibet agenda, and bring Tibet policy into line with the emphasis on democracy in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24china.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Translated from the Chinese by Perry Link, “China’s Charter 08,” *New York Review of Books*, January 15, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> Liu died in jail in 2017.