



Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 727
SEPTEMBER 2024

Bursts of Sympathy, Teetering Commitment: U.S. Policy on Tibet

Sujan Chinoy

Abstract

In July 2024, United States (US) President Joe Biden signed into law a bill espousing the Tibetan people's right to self-determination. The spirit of this law, 'Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act', stands in contrast to historical US recognition of Tibet as a part of China. This brief examines the evolution of US policy towards Tibet, beginning in the 1950s when its primary concern was the alleged human rights violations committed by China on the Tibetans, to the subsequent relegation of the Tibet question following rapprochement with China in the 1970s, and the 1990s when the US appointed a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. The brief highlights the inconsistencies in US policies towards Tibet over the decades, and argues that the lack of continuity in approach has done little to promote the cause of the Tibetan people.

Two recent events involving the United States (US) have refocused the spotlight on the issue of Tibetan sovereignty. Even as China urged US President Joe Biden not to sign the ‘Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act’,¹ a bipartisan US Congressional delegation led by former Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Dharamsala in June 2024 to meet the Dalai Lama and express solidarity with the Tibetan people.^{a,2} In July, President Biden signed the Act into law.³

It would be instructive to examine how this Act differs from earlier legislation in the US on Tibet and its impact on the future of the Tibetan people.

a Nancy Pelosi, a long-time supporter of the Tibetan’s quest for sovereignty, has met the Dalai Lama several times in the past two decades, first as Minority Leader of the US House of Representatives in 2003 and 2005, then as Speaker of the US House of Representatives in 2007, 2008, and 2009 (<https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/dignitaries-met/dignitaries-met-2005-2010>). During the June 2024 visit, Pelosi made pointed remarks at President Xi Jinping, stating that the “Dalai Lama legacy will live, you will be gone.” See: <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/nancy-pelosi-dalai-lama-us-delegation-visits-dharamshala-dalai-lama-legacy-will-live-youll-be-gone-nancy-pelosis-xi-jinping-jab-5923358>

Previous US Legislation

The US first appointed a Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in 1997.⁴ The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 laid the foundation for renewed activism through further legislative measures to preserve the heritage of the Tibetan people.⁵ The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018⁶ and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020⁷ put further pressure on China, with the latter categorically rejecting any interference by China in the selection of the Dalai Lama.

The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 focused on the protection of Tibet's distinct historical, religious, cultural, and linguistic identity and sought accountability for human rights violations. Unsurprisingly, the task assigned to the Secretary of State to establish a branch office in Lhasa of the US Consulate General in Chengdu to monitor political, economic, and cultural developments in Tibet remained unrealised, even as the emphasis on Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Tibetan language broadcasts continued.⁸ The US also failed to establish contact with the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedun Choekyi Nyima, who was taken from his home in 1995 and has since been replaced by a China-appointed lama, Gyaltzen Norbu.⁹ The 2002 Act also upheld the UN General Assembly resolutions of 1959, 1961, and 1965, calling on the People's Republic of China to cease practices that deny the Tibetan people their right to self-determination.

Many of the earlier positions of 2002 were incorporated into the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 which, under then President Donald Trump, emphasised the need to protect Tibet's unique identity and human rights and called for the establishment of a consulate in Lhasa. The 2020 Act, perhaps reflecting a certain *modus vivendi*, did not refer to the right to self-determination for the Tibetan people. However, the Act opposed any effort by China to interfere in the matter of reincarnation and succession, including the manifestation of the Dalai Lama in the future.^b The applicability of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act to Chinese officials who violate human rights in Tibet and the protection of the environment and water resources of the Tibetan Plateau were other notable features of the law.

^b The Dalai Lama's succession is considered the sole preserve of the Gaden Phodrang Trust, guided by the written instructions of the 14th Dalai Lama.

New Elements in the New Law: Tibet and Self-Determination

The Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act directly refers to a “dispute” between Tibet and China, implying that they are two distinct geographical and political entities. This is different from the relatively restrained language used in the 2002, 2018, and 2020 Acts. Additionally, the latest legislation focuses on exerting pressure on China to have a meaningful dialogue with the representatives of the Dalai Lama without the usual preconditions imposed by China, such as acceptance by the Dalai Lama that Tibet has always been a part of China. Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama has been ready to reconcile to the fact that Tibet is (today) part of China. He has also declared that he is not seeking independence for Tibet and that he is committed to arriving at a negotiated settlement.¹⁰ The Dalai Lama has not accepted the additional Chinese demand that he declare Tibet as always having been a part of China.¹¹

Clause 5 of Section 2 [Findings of US Congress] of the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act states that the “US government has never taken the position that Tibet was a part of China since ancient times.”¹² However, this reaffirmation does nothing to question the US position, shared by the global community, that Tibet is today part of China. The protection of human rights in Tibet and its right to self-determination have been revived in the new Act. It also introduces policy measures to counter efforts by the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to spread disinformation about Tibet. The Act, like its predecessors, covers not just the Tibet Autonomous Region but also the areas of Greater Tibet, which have long since been carved and merged with neighbouring Chinese provinces such as Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan.

The Evolution of US Policy

The US displayed scant interest in Tibet's independence or autonomy in the years leading to the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and its military takeover of Tibet in 1950.¹³ Indeed, in 1908, William Woodville Rockhill, a US diplomat who served in the US embassy in China, described the Dalai Lama as a "vassal prince".¹⁴

With its Tibet policy outsourced to Great Britain, the US was inclined to reflect British positions in the early 1940s. However, the US, unlike Britain, could not distinguish between the implications of the term "sovereignty" as against "suzerainty".

Chinese suzerainty over Tibet was crafted by the British in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to ascribe conditional legitimacy to its nebulous claims over the Outer Tibet provinces of western Kham and Ü-Tsang and to encourage China to not limit itself to the Inner Tibet provinces of Amdo and eastern Kham. This was part of the Great Game, which aimed to prevent Imperial Russia from making inroads into High Tartary.¹⁵ The British were loath to stretch themselves and contented themselves with the fig leaf of Chinese claims. At the same time, in the context of the Simla Convention of 1914 between Great Britain, China, and Tibet, the British, while recognising Chinese suzerainty over Tibet, recognised the autonomy of Outer Tibet. Article 2 of the Convention also committed Great Britain and China to abstain from interference in the administration of Outer Tibet (including the selection and installation of the Dalai Lama), which was to remain with the Tibetan government at Lhasa.¹⁶

For a brief period during the Second World War, US President Franklin Roosevelt also directly reached out to the Dalai Lama's administration in Lhasa to gain access to Tibet's territory to aid the war effort,¹⁷ although this was episodic. In the 1940s, the Communists gained ground in the civil war and became increasingly determined to consolidate territory across Tibet. Chinese officials and soldiers had left Tibet after the collapse of the Qing dynasty; between 1912 and 1950, China had no presence in Outer Tibet, though the Kuomintang government had attempted to re-establish presence following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama by dispatching a "condolence mission" to Lhasa, headed by General Huang Musong.

The Evolution of US Policy

As China's ally during the Second World War, the US supported Chiang Kai-shek's position.^{c,d} This support led to cautious US policy towards Tibet leading up to 1949. The Chinese Nationalist government had claimed "suzerainty" over Tibet, whereas the Chinese constitution identified Tibet as an integral part of the Republic of China.¹⁸

It is no surprise then that the US was circumspect in dealing with the Tibetan government in Lhasa.^e This was when the Dalai Lama, the Regent, and the Kashag had written to the president of the US expressing a desire to establish good relations between the two governments. There was a proposal to send a Tibetan Trade Mission to India, China, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US later in 1947;¹⁹ the mission, led by the Tsepon Shakabpa, a Tibetan nobleman, eventually travelled in 1948,²⁰ on passports issued by the Tibetan government in Lhasa.²¹ Tsepon Shakabpa's Tibetan passport bears the immigration stamps of India, US, UK, France, Italy, Switzerland, Iraq, Pakistan, and Hong Kong but not China, though the trade mission did visit Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou as part of its itinerary.²² This may indicate the Republic of China's unwillingness to countenance any suggestion of independence although Tibet enjoyed independent status at the time.

The policy circumspection of the US is also evident in a 1 August 1947 letter to the Secretary of State, in which the US envoy in Delhi took the position that "in view of the Department [of State]'s desire to avoid any action which may reflect

-
- c However, telegrams sent by the US government to the British Foreign Office in 1942 stated that "Tibet must be recognized to have autonomy under Chinese suzerainty" (See Guangqiu Xu, *The United States and the Tibet Issue*, 1063). This reference to "Chinese suzerainty" in the US's Tibet policy has remained an isolated reference, suggesting no real understanding of the term. There is also a contradiction between "autonomy under Chinese suzerainty" and subsequent references to "self-determination".
- d Chiang Kai-shek, who staunchly upheld the One China concept, was committed to "recovering" the mainland after his flight to Formosa (Taiwan). US Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Parsons cites him as having said that his government would "assist the Tibetan people to realize their own aspirations in accordance with the principle of self-determination" (See: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v19/d394#:~:text=However%2C%20President%20Chiang%20Kai%2Dshek,ultimate%20realization%20of%20Tibetan%20self>). But Chiang Kai-shek's endorsement of self-determination was in terms of support for Tibet's autonomy within China, motivated by building a common cause against the Communists on the mainland. He did not support Tibet's independence. In fact, Kuomintang delegates representing the Nationalist government of China had protested Nehru's invitation to a Tibetan delegation to participate in the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi in March 1947 as an independent nation (Yun-yuan Yang, "Controversies over Tibet: China Versus India, 1947-49," *The China Quarterly* 111 (September 1987): 408-409). There is little doubt that, had Chiang Kai-shek prevailed over Mao Zedong's Communist forces on the mainland, he would have reneged on any genuine autonomy for Tibet, let alone self-determination amounting to independence.
- e This is evident from the title of secret cable No. 869 dated 3 December 1947, addressed by the US chargé d'affaires in Delhi George R. Merrell to the Secretary of State, appropriately titled "Policy on Status of Tibet: Desirability of Continuing Non-committal Policy". See: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v07/d496>

The Evolution of US Policy

on the Chinese claim to sovereignty over Tibet, the Embassy has addressed its reply to the letter from the “Foreign Office” [of the Tibetan Government] to the “Foreign Bureau.”²³ The distinction made by the US was perhaps that “Foreign Office” was the equivalent of the foreign ministry of a sovereign state, whereas the “Foreign Bureau” in China denoted the provincial foreign affairs bureau of the central government. The wording indicated the US’s unwillingness to dilute its recognition of China’s claimed sovereignty over Tibet; additionally, the US did not hesitate to reject any suggestion by the Tibetan government’s “Foreign Office” that it represented the equivalent of an independent state’s foreign ministry.

As outlined by then Assistant Secretary of State James Graham Parsons to the Secretary of State in a memo dated 14 October 1959, US policy towards Tibet began to evolve in the 1950s, following the takeover by the Communists.²⁴ Amid growing tensions, including in the Taiwan Strait, the US adopted the approach that the Tibetans had the same “inherent right” to self-determination as any other people. It further acknowledged that, if developments warranted, the recognition of Tibet as an independent state should be considered. However, the US did not move to formulate a definitive legal position on Tibet at the time. According to Parsons, the US considered it adequate “for present purposes” to state that it recognised “the de facto autonomy that Tibet has exercised since the fall of the Manchu Dynasty, and particularly since the Simla Conference (of 1914).”²⁵

Reflecting on US policy since 1950, Parsons stated that the US acknowledged that “arguments against recognition of Tibetan independence under the conditions prevailing in 1959 were stronger than those in favour.”²⁶ Evidently, Chiang Kai-shek, by then restricted to running the Republic of China from Taiwan, continued to influence and moderate the US’s position.

Then Acting Secretary of State C. Douglas Dillon’s Memorandum No. 381 of 16 June 1959 to President Eisenhower mentioned the Dalai Lama’s letter of appeal to the US President and the Secretary of State, in which he insisted that Tibet “be granted full independence as a prerequisite for Communist China’s entry into the United Nations.”²⁷ This came immediately after the Dalai Lama had fled to India in March 1959 and when he was seeking full independence for Tibet on the plea that earlier efforts to secure genuine autonomy within the People’s Republic of China had failed. On crossing into India, he had repudiated the 17-Point Agreement.²⁸ The US had assessed that then Prime

The Evolution of US Policy

Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was “strongly opposed to any independence for Tibet, favouring rather the Dalai Lama’s publicly committing himself to working for the reestablishment of Tibetan autonomy.”²⁹ Today, it is a matter of conjecture how much of the lack of enthusiasm for Tibet’s independence, including in the US, had its roots in India’s policy at the time.^f

Memorandum No. 383 dated 5 August 1959 from the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walter Walmsley) to Secretary of State Christian Herter on Developments with Respect to United Nations Action on Tibetan Issue highlights interesting details.³⁰ After his flight to India in March 1959, the Dalai Lama had reached out to the US government to seek support for his intention to take the Tibet issue to the UN General Assembly and possibly make a public appeal for UN action. The Dalai Lama “had also asked the US government whether [it] would be willing to propose to some other government, preferably in Asia, that it extend recognition to his government-in-exile.”³¹

The US embassy in Delhi was clear in its assessment that, “while the GOI would consider that raising the Tibetan issue in the United Nations would serve no useful purpose, it would concede that the Dalai Lama has the right to appeal and to be heard if the United Nations wishes.”³² The Embassy’s assessment was that “an appeal by the Dalai Lama and his appearance at the United Nations would probably not jeopardize his return to India so long as he avoided insisting on the concept of Tibetan independence.”³³ Additionally, the US was keen on his return to India.

Chiang Kai-shek’s Government of the Republic of China (GRC) was at that time not only a UN Member State but also a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In the US embassy’s assessment, the Republic of China “would not itself raise the Tibetan issue at the General Assembly but would strongly support any other country which might bring up the problem...The GRC delegation would participate in any UN debate that might take place, castigating Chinese Communist actions in Tibet and reiterating President Chiang’s statement of March 26, 1959 promising the Tibetan people the right of self-determination following the overthrow” of the communist regime in Beijing.³⁴

On 20 February 1960, then Secretary of State Herter stated, “It is the belief of the U.S. Government that this principle [of self-determination] should

^f The US and China were already engaged in confidential talks aimed at achieving a *modus vivendi*, which took shape through the rapprochement in 1971. India’s constraints, on the other hand, were of a different magnitude, having to contend with the belligerence of its Communist neighbour.

The Evolution of US Policy

apply to the people of Tibet and that they should have their voice in their own political destiny.”³⁵ According to Guangqiu Xu, “on January 17, 1962, in a letter to the Dalai Lama, Secretary of State Dean Rusk repeated the U.S. position that the principle of self-determination should apply to the people of Tibet.”³⁶ Guangqiu Xu further stated that “successive U.S. administrations of that period strongly condemned Chinese human rights practices and supported all three U.N. General Assembly resolutions [of 1959, 1961, and 1965] that urged China to withdraw from Tibet.”³⁷

It is clear that the US played safe and paid no heed to Tibet’s pleas to the United Nations for assistance. Both the US and the UK wanted India to take the lead, which did not materialise. It was El Salvador that moved a resolution in the UN General Assembly when the Chinese PLA rolled into Tibet in 1950,³⁸ but the debate proved inconclusive and was postponed due to the uncertainty among the big powers. The question of Tibet was raised again in a resolution in the UN General Assembly in 1959, when the unrest in Tibet led to the Dalai Lama’s flight to India. Yet again, smaller powers—Ireland and Malaya—pushed for a resolution on the “Question of Tibet”.³⁹

Between 1959 and 1964, three reports of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) gave a boost to the Tibet issue, with *prima facie* evidence of violation of human rights and attempts by China to destroy the Tibetan nation and the Buddhist religion.

The history of US support^g to the Khampa guerrilla outfit Chushi Gangdruk (four rivers, six ranges that define the Kham region) that was fighting the Chinese PLA is well-documented.⁴⁰ The low-intensity covert operations carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the 1950s involved training the Tibetan resistance units in Colorado as well as the “Mustang Army” of rebels operating from Nepal’s border region with Tibet. US assistance had begun to ebb around the time that the PRC established the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965 and conclusively ended in the aftermath of the Sino-

g As stated by Melvyn C. Goldstein, “At the strategic level, the United States has consistently supported the Chinese position that Tibet is part of China. At the pragmatic or tactical level, Washington has been opportunistic in its dealings with Tibet and has been prone to wide fluctuations, ranging from the provision of financial and military aid to Tibetan guerrilla forces in the 1950s and 1960s to neglect and almost no official contact in the 1970s and 1980s.” See: Melvyn C. Goldstein, “The United States, Tibet, and the Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 145.

The Evolution of US Policy

US rapprochement in 1971. After that, Tibet was relegated in US foreign policy, with all remaining support for the Tibetan guerrillas coming to a halt.⁴¹ Even the latest Tibet-China Dispute Act acknowledges that it “does not change longstanding bipartisan United States policy to recognize the Tibet Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas of China as part of the People’s Republic of China.”⁴²

In the wake of the Sino-US rapprochement, then President Richard Nixon and his successors eased up on the issue of Tibet; it is well known that President Jimmy Carter was reluctant to meet the Dalai Lama.⁴³ The finality of this expedient position was clear from Secretary of State James Baker’s statement of 5 February 1992, during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, that “U.S. policy accepts the Chinese position that Tibet is part of China.”⁴⁴ That position has endured till the present day.

US policy remains key to the future of Tibet. However, the history of US policy on Tibet suggests inconsistencies in commitment, interspersed with occasional bursts of sympathy and activism. Cautious references to self-determination in the 1950s and a focus on human rights violations in the 1960s segued into the appeasement of Beijing for larger trade, economic, and strategic interests against common concerns vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

The unrest in Tibet during 1987-1989 coincided with the Tiananmen protests and the military crackdown of June 1989. When Bill Clinton assumed office as US president in 1992, his country's focus was on human rights violations, trade friction, proliferation concerns, and tensions across the Taiwan Strait. Clinton received the Dalai Lama four times, in 1993, 1997, 1998,⁴⁵ and 2000.^{h,46} Then Vice President Al Gore and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright were present at the 1997 and 1998 meetings; similarly, at the 1993 meeting, Gore and Secretary of State Warren Christopher were present, along with Speaker Thomas Foley. This also set the stage for future meetings of the Dalai Lama with US Presidents George W. Bush in 2001 and 2003,⁴⁷ and Barack Obama in 2010.⁴⁸

The unipolar decade presided over by Clinton gave the US a chance to push harder for a fair deal for Tibet, but this period also coincided with the Clinton administration gradually de-linking human rights issues from the question of granting China Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status. This clearly suggested that human rights violations in Tibet were being relegated to the back-burner.

Before creating the Office of the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in 1997, a Bill to establish the position of United States Special Envoy for Tibet had been introduced in the 103rd Congress. A provision to create the position was also introduced as part of the foreign relations authorisations bills in the 104th and 105th Congress sessions.⁴⁹ The proposed legislation had called for the Special Envoy to be accorded the rank of ambassador to ensure that an important issue in bilateral relations with China maintained centrality in senior-level policy discourse.⁵⁰ The Clinton administration finally settled for a compromise when Secretary of State Albright designated the Director of Policy Planning in the Department of State, Gregory Craig, as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.⁵¹

^h Clinton was not the first US president to do so. The Dalai Lama had his first meeting with a sitting US president when he met President George H.W. Bush and First Lady Barbara Bush in April 1991. See: <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/dignitaries-met/dignitaries-met-1990-1999>

China-Dalai Lama Talks and the US

US support for direct talks between the Dalai Lama's representatives and the Chinese government has long been a key feature of US policy. Direct talks had shown some promise under Deng Xiaoping.ⁱ Thereafter, fact-finding missions were mounted by the Dalai Lama's representatives, without any outcome. The Dalai Lama's address to the European Parliament in 1988 brought his "Strasbourg Proposal" for a negotiated settlement into salience but the Chinese backed off soon thereafter. Between 2002 and 2010, nine rounds of talks were held between the Tibetans and the Chinese, all in China except for one round in Berne in Switzerland in 2005.⁵² The talks were inconclusive. In his statement at the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising Day, the Dalai Lama stated, "The Chinese insistence that we accept Tibet as having been a part of China since ancient times is not only inaccurate, but also unreasonable. We cannot change the past no matter whether it was good or bad. Distorting history for political purposes is incorrect." He added, "We Tibetans are looking for a legitimate and meaningful autonomy, an arrangement that would enable Tibetans to live within the framework of the People's Republic of China."⁵³ There has been no direct dialogue since 2010, although the Dalai Lama's representatives have acknowledged the existence of informal channels of communication.⁵⁴

President Clinton had pressed Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1997-1998 to open a dialogue with the Dalai Lama. President Bush also urged the Chinese government to engage in substantive dialogue with the Dalai Lama or his representatives, stating that the Dalai Lama's call for "genuine autonomy was sincere",⁵⁵ and to respect the unique cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage of the Tibetan people. Bush expressed his support in his meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2003 and also raised the Tibet issue with Chinese President Jiang Zemin during his two visits to China in 2001, besides raising it with visiting Vice President Hu Jintao in 2002 and Premier Wen Jiabao in 2003.⁵⁶

In 2011, Obama met the Dalai Lama in the White House. According to the White House statement issued on the occasion, "The President commended the Dalai Lama's commitment to nonviolence and dialogue with China and his pursuit of the 'Middle Way' approach." The statement also mentioned that President Obama "stressed that he encourages direct dialogue to resolve long-standing differences and that a dialogue that produces results would be positive for China and Tibetans."⁵⁷

ⁱ In the late 1970s, Deng had invited Gyalo Thondup, the Dalai Lama's elder brother, to visit Tibet and had offered to discuss all issues so long as the question of full independence was not raised.

The renewed reference in the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act to the right of the Tibetan people to self-determination in the current context could prove to be more sensitive than it first appears. Notably, no country in the world has recognised Tibet as an independent state.

The US has not taken concrete steps to promote self-determination for Tibet in multilateral forums. While being a permanent member of the UN Security Council accords the US a position to trigger discussions on the issues covered by the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act, it has refrained from doing so. Moreover, even as the US has held consultations with its allies on the situation in the Taiwan Strait, it does not appear to have given the same priority to the Tibet issue. A key mandate of the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues is to engage Tibetans. Naturally, such a remit involves the sizeable number of Tibetan refugees in India, which could create friction between India and China. Additionally, India has long rejected UN resolutions that call for self-determination;^j its position on self-determination for the Tibetan people is unlikely to be different.

Today, China treats US legislation and sanctions with growing disdain.⁵⁸ China has absorbed Tibet and consolidated its integration through demographic changes as well as cultural and educational resets, backed by indoctrination, surveillance, and punitive measures. Enhanced rail, road, and air connectivity has further consolidated Beijing's hold on Tibet. The Dalai Lama has stated that he does not seek independence for Tibet, only genuine autonomy.⁵⁹ Though there is sympathy for the Tibetan people, few concrete steps have been taken that can result in meaningful change. There is scant international appetite or scope for Tibet realising self-determination, the US legislation notwithstanding.

With the forthcoming US elections, it would be instructive to recall that, after Sarah Sewall's term as Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights and concurrent term as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues ended on 20 January 2017,⁶⁰ the Trump administration had kept the post vacant for three years and seven months, until Assistant Secretary

j India does not recognise breakaway or self-proclaimed states such as Kosovo, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Taiwan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Somaliland. See: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/kosovo-taiwan-and-other-countries-india-doesnt-recognise/kosovo/slideshow/66747019.cms>

Conclusion

Robert A. Destro of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor was appointed in October 2020.⁶¹ Given the flux in the US political landscape, there is little guarantee that the current US line will be maintained, especially if Trump returns to office. [ORF](#)

Sujan Chinoy is a former Ambassador of India and a China specialist, currently serving as Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Views expressed are personal.

- 1 Zhao Jia, “Beijing Protests American Act Undermining China’s Interest,” *China Daily*, July 13, 2024, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202407/13/WS669236c5a31095c51c50de3e.html>. All web links in this article were last checked and found active on 21 August 2024.
- 2 “Pelosi Meets with 14th Dalai Lama in India, Reaffirms Congressional Support for Tibet,” June 19, 2024, <https://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/pelosi-meets-14th-dalai-lama-india-reaffirms-congressional-support-tibet>.
- 3 “Statement from President Joe Biden on S. 138, the ‘Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act’,” The White House, July 12, 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/138>.
- 4 “China: Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues,” US Department of State Archive, October 31, 1997, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/briefings/statements/971031a.html>.
- 5 “Tibetan Policy Act of 2002,” Released by the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, May 16, 2003, US Department of State Archive, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rpt/20699.htm>.
- 6 “H.R.1872 - An act to Promote Access for United States Diplomats and other Officials, Journalists, and Other Citizens to Tibetan Areas of the People's Republic of China, and for Other Purposes,” 115th Congress (2017-2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1872/cosponsors>.
- 7 “US President Trump Signs Tibetan Policy and Support Bill; CTA is Recognized and Funding for Tibet Provided,” Central Tibetan Administration, December 28, 2020 at <https://tibet.net/us-president-trump-signs-tibetan-policy-and-support-bill-cta-recognized-and-funding-for-tibet-provided/>.
- 8 Kerry Dumbaugh, *The Tibetan Policy Act of 2002: Background and Implementation*, Congressional Research Service, March 17, 2009, pp. 5-9, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R40453.pdf>; For the emphasis on Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Tibetan language broadcasts see, “(g) Voice of America and Radio Free Asia” in “Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020”, <https://savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TPSA-bill-text-from-consolidated-pending-bill.pdf>.
- 9 “US Demands China to Come Out with Whereabouts of Panchen Lama,” *The Indian Express*, May 18, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/us-demands-china-whereabouts-of-panchen-lama-9337537/>.
- 10 “His Holiness's Middle Way Approach for Resolving the Issue of Tibet,” His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach>.
- 11 His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, “Address to the U.S. Congressional Human Right's Caucus: September 21, 1987 (speech, Washington D.C., September 21, 1987), <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/five-point-peace-plan>.
- 12 “S.138 - Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act,” 118th Congress (2023-2024), Congress, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/138/text>.

- 13 Guangqiu Xu, "The United States and the Tibet Issue," *Asian Survey* 37, No. 11 (November 1997): 1062- 1063.
- 14 Yumiko Ishihama, Makoto Tachibana, Ryosuke Kobayashi, Takehiko Inoue, *The Resurgence of "Buddhist Government": Tibetan-Mongolian Relations in the Modern World* (Osaka: Union Press, 2019), 52, <https://www.union-services.com/upen/book%20data/9784946428890.pdf>.
- 15 David Fromkin, "The Great Game in Asia", *Foreign Affairs* (March 1980), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-asia/1980-03-01/great-game-asia>.
- 16 "Convention between Great Britain, China, and Tibet, Simla (1914)," *Treaties and Conventions Relating to Tibet*, <https://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/treaties/treaties16.html>; H.E. Richardson, *Tibet and Its History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 269, <https://archive.org/details/in.gov.ignca.11408/page/n297/mode/2up?q=outer&view=theater>.
- 17 "The Tibetan Foreign Office to Captain Ilia Tolstoy and Lieutenant Brooke Dolan," Office of the Historian, Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943China/d546>; Melvyn C. Goldstein, "The United States, Tibet, and the Cold War," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, No. 3 (Summer 2006):145.
- 18 "The Tibetan Foreign Office to Captain Ilia Tolstoy and Lieutenant Brooke Dolan," pp. 1062-1063.
- 19 "The Ambassador in India (Grady) to the Secretary of State," No. 100, Office of the Historian, Department of State, August 1, 1947, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v07/d498>.
- 20 "The Chargé in India (Donovan) to the Secretary of State," No. 5, Office of the Historian, Department of State, January 5, 1948, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v07/d631>.
- 21 "Tsepon WD Shakabpa Passport (1947)," Friends of Tibet Foundation, <https://www.friendsoftibet.org/passport/>.
- 22 "The Ambassador in China (Stuart) to the Secretary of State," No. 87, Office of the Historian, Department of State, February 24, 1948, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v07/d633>.
- 23 "The Ambassador in India (Grady) to the Secretary of State".
- 24 "394. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) to Secretary of State Herter".
- 25 "394. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) to Secretary of State Herter".
- 26 "394. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) to Secretary of State Herter".

- 27 “381. Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Dillon to President Eisenhower,” Office of the Historian, Department of State, June 16, 1959, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v19/d381>.
- 28 “Facts about the 17-Point “Agreement” between Tibet and China,” Central Tibet Administration, <https://tibet.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FACTS-ABOUT-17-POINT-AGREEMENT.pdf>.
- 29 “381. Memorandum From Acting Secretary of State Dillon to President Eisenhower”.
- 30 “383. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walmsley) to Secretary of State Herter,” Office of the Historian, Department of State, August 5, 1959, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v19/d383>.
- 31 “383. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walmsley) to Secretary of State Herter”.
- 32 “383. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walmsley) to Secretary of State Herter”.
- 33 “383. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walmsley) to Secretary of State Herter”.
- 34 “383. Memorandum From the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Parsons) and the Acting Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs (Walmsley) to Secretary of State Herter”.
- 35 “402. Letter From Secretary of State Herter to the Dalai Lama,” Office of the Historian, Department of State, October 11, 1960, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v19/d402>.
- 36 Guangqiu Xu, “The United States and the Tibet Issue,” 1065.
- 37 Guangqiu Xu, “The United States and the Tibet Issue”.
- 38 “El Salvador Asks U.N. Tibet Debate; Demands Quick Consideration by the General Assembly of Attack by Chinese Reds,” *The New York Times*, November 16, 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/11/16/archives/el-salvador-asks-un-tibet-debate-demands-quick-consideration-by-the.html>.
- 39 International Campaign for Tibet, “Tibet at the UN General Assembly,” <https://savetibet.org/advocacy/united-nations/un-general-assembly-resolutions/>.
- 40 Carole McGranahan, “Tibet’s Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, No. 3 (Summer 2006): 109-11.

- 41 Melvyn C. Goldstein, “The United States, Tibet, and the Cold War”: 153-54.
- 42 “Statement from President Joe Biden on S. 138, the “Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act””, *The White House*, 12 July 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/12/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-s-138-the-promoting-a-resolution-to-the-tibet-china-dispute-act/#:~:text=The%20Act%20does%20not%20change,JOSEPH%20R>.
- 43 Guangqiu Xu, “The United States and the Tibet Issue,” 1066.
- 44 Guangqiu Xu, “The United States and the Tibet Issue,” p. 1072.
- 45 “Dignitaries Met 1990 – 1999,” His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/events-and-awards/dignitaries-met/dignitaries-met-1990-1999>.
- 46 “Dignitaries Met 2000 – 2004”.
- 47 “Dignitaries Met 2000 – 2004”.
- 48 “Dignitaries Met 2005 – 2010”.
- 49 International Campaign for Tibet, “Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues”, <https://savetibet.org/advocacy/us-government-and-legislative-advocacy/special-coordinator-for-tibetan-issues/>.
- 50 International Campaign for Tibet, “Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues”.
- 51 “China: Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues,” Department of State Archive, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/briefings/statements/971031a.html>.
- 52 International Campaign for Tibet, “Chronology of Tibetan Chinese Relations”, <https://savetibet.org/advocacy/chronology-of-tibetan-chinese-relations-1979-to-2013/>.
- 53 International Campaign for Tibet, “Chronology of Tibetan Chinese Relations”.
- 54 “Back-channel talks between China, Tibetan govt-in-exile going on: Sikyong Penpa Tsering,” *The Economic Times*, July 17, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/back-channel-talks-between-china-tibetan-govt-in-exile-going-on-sikyong-penpa-tsering/articleshow/111815601.cms?from=mdr>.
- 55 “Back-channel talks between China, Tibetan govt-in-exile going on: Sikyong Penpa Tsering”.
- 56 Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Department of State, “Report on Tibet Negotiations,” As Required by Foreign Relations Authorization Act, 2003, Section 611, “Tibetan Policy Act of 2002”, Submitted to Congress on June 23, 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rpt/34266.htm>.
- 57 International Campaign for Tibet, “Chronology of Tibetan Chinese Relations”.
- 58 “China's top legislature condemns U.S. act on Xizang,” *Xinhua*, July 13, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240713/fd0cf3af38aa4f9db8eb192dac283b5a/c.html>.

Endnotes

- 59 “1. Respecting the Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of the PRC,” *Note on the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People*, International Campaign for Tibet, February 19, 2010, <https://savetibet.org/advocacy/note-on-the-memorandum-on-genuine-autonomy-for-the-tibetan-people/>.
- 60 International Campaign for Tibet, “Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues”.
- 61 Sriram Lakshman, “Robert Destro appointed U.S. special envoy to Tibet,” *The Hindu*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/robert-destro-appointed-us-special-envoy-to-tibet/article32856967.ece>.



Ideas . Forums . Leadership . Impact

20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA

Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005

E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org

Website: www.orfonline.org