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The U.S. Should Continue to Promote Freedom for Tibetans

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The primary goal of China’s leadership is to maintain its hold on power. To that end, the Chinese leadership prioritizes territorial integrity (which is linked to the legitimacy of the ruling party) and internal stability. China has long viewed Tibetan unrest as a threat to both of these priorities. As a result, it treats Tibet as a politically sensitive challenge in need of major social control and suppression.

Tibetans are facing an increasingly difficult situation. The U.S. can and should do much more to alleviate Tibetans’ suffering without changing its position that Tibet is part of the People’s Republic of China.

The Current State of Affairs in Tibet

Over the years, China has instituted some of its strictest policies against Tibetans—policies principally developed by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) member and former party secretary for Tibet Chen Quanguo—to manage the Tibetan population’s every thought, word, and deed.¹

The 19th Party Congress in December 2017 inaugurated new restrictions on religious minorities, including a new law, Regulations on Religious Affairs,² instituted in February 2018. Restrictions on religion are a part of the Chinese government’s attempt to “Sinicize” all religions.³ Sinicization involves secular-

izing religion, or more accurately, ensuring that religion conforms to the interests of the CCP.

In Tibet, Sinicization has taken place for years. It is, perhaps, one of the reasons why the Chinese government regards the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama, as a predominately political figure, not a religious one. In short, the Dalai Lama does not serve the CCP’s ends because he commands both religious and political allegiance from Tibetans, diverting their allegiance away from the Chinese Communist state.

Even before the 19th Party Congress, there were signs that President Xi Jinping’s government was consolidating power in Tibet:

- **Destruction of Tibetan religious sites and homes.** In early 2017, Chinese authorities began destroying monastic dwellings and evicting monks and nuns from both the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy and the Yachen Gar Buddhist monastery, claiming that the regions that are home to these institutions were “overcrowded.”⁴ In total, the U.S. Department of State’s 2017 International Religious Freedom report estimated that nearly half of the 20,000 people residing at Larung Gar were evicted and 4,000 residences were demolished.⁵ The same report documented that at Yachen Gar, 2,000 residences were destroyed and 2,500 monks and nuns were evicted.⁶

- **Social control over Tibetans.** Chen Quanguo rolled out a policy known as “grid-style social management,” which, according to the Jamestown Foundation “segments urban communities into geometric zones so that security staff can systematically observe all activities with the aid of new

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technologies.”⁷ Surveillance at monasteries is high; in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) an estimated 8,000 government employees were surveilling activities taking place in 1,787 monasteries.⁸

- **Self-immolations.** In protest of China’s treatment of Tibetans, at least 153 Tibetans have immolated themselves since February 27, 2009, according to the International Campaign for Tibet.⁹ In 2017, only five Tibetans self-immolated, representative of a decline in recent years.¹⁰ The decline can be partially explained by new policies the Chinese government instituted criminalizing self-immolation. Family members of persons who self-immolate are often targeted, interrogated, and sometimes even imprisoned for their family member’s decision to self-immolate.¹¹
- **Political prisoners.** In its annually updated political prisoner database, the U.S. Congressional-Exec-

utive Commission on China estimates that at the end of 2017, there were at least 512 Tibetan political prisoners in China.¹² One of the most high-level Tibetan prisoners is Gedun Choekyi Nyima, the Panchen Lama. Both he and his family disappeared three days after the Dalai Lama declared him the reincarnated Panchen Lama.¹³ Neither he nor his family has been heard from in more than 20 years.

Perhaps no political imprisonment is more emblematic of China’s fears over Tibet than that of Tashi Wangchuck. At the beginning of 2018, Tashi was sentenced to five years in prison by the Chinese government for advocating and preserving the use of the Tibetan language.¹⁴ The principle evidence held against him was a *New York Times* video where he was interviewed about the importance of preserving the Tibetan language.¹⁵ He was charged with “inciting separatism.”¹⁶ Tashi’s sentencing reveals China’s

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1. Adrian Zenz, “‘Full Employment’ in Tibet: The Beginning and End of Chen Quanguo’s Neo-Socialist Experiment,” *The Jamestown Foundation China Brief* Vol. 18, No. 3 (February 26, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/full-employment-tibet-beginning-end-chen-quanguos-neo-socialist-experiment/> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 2. The State Department of the People’s Republic of China, State Order No. 686 (in Chinese), August 26, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm?from=timeline (accessed September 18, 2018).
 3. “5 Main Religions in China Agree to Sinicize,” (in Chinese) *Global Times*, September 7, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1065265.shtml> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 4. Steve Shaw, “China Tears Down the Tibetan City in the Sky,” *The Diplomat*, August 3, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/china-tears-down-the-tibetan-city-in-the-sky/> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 5. U.S. Department of State, “China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau) 2017 International Religious Freedom Report,” <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281058.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 6. Ibid.
 7. Adrian Zenz and James Leiboid, “Chen Quanguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing’s Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang,” *The Jamestown Foundation China Brief* Vol. 17, No. 12 (September 21, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 8. U.S. Department of State, “China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau) 2017 International Religious Freedom Report.”
 9. International Campaign for Tibet, “Self-Immolations by Tibetans,” March 7, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 10. Congressional Executive Commission on China, “CECC 2017 Annual Report,” p. 3, https://www.cecc.gov/sites/chinacommission.house.gov/files/documents/AR17%20Tibet_final.pdf (accessed September 18, 2018).
 11. Ibid.
 12. Ibid.
 13. “China Urged to Release Panchen Lama After 20 Years,” BBC, May 17, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-32771242> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 14. Chris Buckley, “A Tibetan Tried to Save His Language. China Handed Him 5 Years in Prison,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/tibetan-activist-tashi-wangchuk-sentenced.html> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 15. Joshua Rosenzweig, “China: Tibetan Activist Handed Grotesquely Unjust 5 Year Prison Sentence After Featuring in New York Times Video,” Amnesty International, May 22, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/china-tibetan-activist-unjust-sentence-nyt-video/> (accessed September 18, 2018).
 16. Chris Buckley, “Tibetan Businessman Battles Separatism Charges in Chinese Court,” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2018, article and video, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/04/world/asia/tibet-china-language-separatism-tashi.html> (accessed September 18, 2018).
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biggest fear—Tibetan independence or separatism—which would violate China’s core interests of preserving territorial integrity, internal unity, and preventing instability.

China’s fear of Tibetan separatism is largely unwarranted. Even during the most politically sensitive moments, for example, the 2008 protests that took place around the 49th anniversary of the Chinese takeover of Tibet, most protesters were not seeking independence. The Dalai Lama, in fact, has long laid out a so-called Middle Way approach, which seeks genuine Tibetan autonomy—not independence—under China’s administration.

U.S. Policy Toward Tibet

U.S. support for freedom in Tibet has wavered over the years, vacillating between active engagement on behalf of Tibetans and tacit acceptance of the status quo. Right now, executive branch support for human rights and freedom in Tibet is waning, seemingly in favor of leveraging Chinese support for U.S. sanctions against North Korea, resolving trade tensions, and dealing with security threats from China in areas like the South China Sea. Support for Tibet in Congress remains strong.¹⁷

In the early part of the Trump Administration, the proposed fiscal year (FY) 2018 budget originally zeroed out all Tibet programming.¹⁸ Proposed budget cuts would have eliminated all USAID programming for Tibet, as well as funding for programs that support Tibetan refugees and persons in Tibet. This budget approach was reversed by Congress.

Current funding for Tibet programming tops \$20 million, with \$8 million for grants to nongovernmen-

tal organizations for sustainable development and cultural preservation in Tibet; another \$2.5 million in assistance to Tibetan refugees; around \$6 million in economic development assistance to Tibetan refugees; around \$3 million for capacity-building; \$1.4 million for the Tibetan Scholarship Program and Ngawang Choephel fellows scholarship program; \$1 million for the Special Coordinator for Tibet; and additional funding to improve information access goes to Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and National Endowment for Democracy.¹⁹ This funding is in question in the proposed FY 2019 budget.

To date, however, the position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the U.S. Department of State—as mandated by the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002—remains vacant.²⁰ During confirmation hearings, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo affirmed his intent to implement the Tibetan Policy Act, which includes filling the Special Coordinator position.²¹ The Tibetan Policy Act also requires the U.S. to encourage and facilitate dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama or his representatives for the purposes of achieving a negotiated settlement to the protracted disagreements between the two parties.

At present, talks between China and the Dalai Lama are stalled. In fact, no meeting has taken place between Chinese authorities and the Dalai Lama since 2010, although there are rumors of closed-door contact.²²

In addition to the vacancy of the Special Coordinator position, China itself has proven an obstacle to any role that the U.S. might play in facilitating dialogue. According to the International Campaign for Tibet, China consistently restricts travel by U.S.

17. News release, “Senate Unanimously Passes Leahy-Led Resolution Urging China to Respect Tibetan Human Rights and Religious Freedom,” U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont, April 26, 2018, <https://www.leahy.senate.gov/press/senate-unanimously-passes-resolution-urging-china-to-respect-tibetan-human-rights-and-religious-freedom> (accessed September 13, 2018).

18. Olivia Enos, “President Trump, Don’t Forget About Tibet,” *Forbes*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaenos/2017/06/09/president-trump-dont-forget-about-tibet/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

19. International Campaign for Tibet, “US Congress Confirms Support for Funding for Tibet Programs in 2018 Budget,” March 23, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/us-congress-confirms-support-for-funding-for-tibet-programs-in-2018-budget/> (accessed September 28, 2018).

20. U.S. Department of State, “Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues: Vacant,” <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/title/as/234989.htm> (accessed September 18, 2018), and Congress of the United States, letter to President Donald Trump, June 21, 2017, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/20170621_Trump_TibetSpecialCoordinator_signed.pdf (accessed September 18, 2018).

21. International Campaign for Tibet, “Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Says He Is Working to Ensure Reciprocal Access to Tibet,” July 13, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-says-he-is-working-to-ensure-reciprocal-access-to-tibet/> (accessed September 13, 2018).

22. Report to Congress on Tibet Negotiations, Department of State Authorities Act, Fiscal year 2017, Improvements Act, Public Law 115-94, Sec. 13, <https://www.savetibet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/5.2118-DOS-Report-on-the-status-of-Tibet-negotiations.pdf> (accessed September 18, 2018).

officials, U.S. citizens, and others to Tibet.²³ In 2015, for example, China refused consular access to State Department officials for 48 hours after three U.S. citizens were killed and scores of others injured in a bus accident.²⁴ Despite congressional efforts to reciprocate with similar bans,²⁵ the U.S. does not currently restrict travel by Chinese officials or Tibetans from Tibet to the U.S.

In contrast to China's own conception of Tibet, the U.S. places Tibet unequivocally in the bucket of human rights issues. China, however, views Tibet primarily as a political and security issue, and sees control over the region as an important geopolitical issue among its top concerns.

U.S. policymakers should consider the relative importance that China places on Tibet and recalibrate U.S. policy in a way that meaningfully acknowledges and mitigates China's attempt to undermine the basic rights of the Tibetan people.

Next Steps to Strengthen U.S. Policy Toward Tibet

Up until now, U.S. policy toward Tibet has been inconsistent. The U.S. should right its path and consider ways that it can strengthen efforts to advance freedom in Tibet.

- **The U.S. government should move quickly to fill the position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.** Since 2001, the Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights at the State Department has been dual-hatted with the position of Special Coordinator for

Tibetan Issues. Marshall Billingslea was recently nominated for the position of Undersecretary, but no reference has been made to him also serving as the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.²⁶ The U.S. government should not eliminate the Special Coordinator position as a part of broader State Department reform efforts or downgrade the position below the Undersecretary level. Keeping it at the Undersecretary level highlights the importance that the U.S. places on Tibet in broader diplomatic efforts.

- **President Donald Trump should meet with the Dalai Lama.** Every President since George H. W. Bush has met with the Dalai Lama.²⁷ In addition to meetings with the President, the Dalai Lama attended the National Prayer Breakfast during President Barak Obama's tenure in February 2015.²⁸ High-level meetings and invitations to attend significant diplomatic events elevate concerns regarding freedom in Tibet and would advance the Trump Administration's focus on promoting international religious freedom. In addition to a meeting with President Trump, the Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State should extend an invitation to the Dalai Lama to attend the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2019.²⁹
- **The U.S. government should consider sanctioning Chen Quanguo and other Chinese officials who are known specifically to be responsible for repressing the people of Tibet.** Earlier

23. International Campaign for Tibet, "Access Denied: China's Enforced Isolation of Tibet, and the Case for Reciprocity," May 9, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/access-denied-chinas-enforced-isolation-of-tibet-and-the-case-for-reciprocity/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

24. Sarah Sewall, "Remarks Delivered at the 'Lockdown in Tibet' Event," U.S. Department of State, June 15, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/remarks/243814.htm> (accessed September 12, 2018).

25. International Campaign for Tibet, "House Judiciary Committee Unanimously Approves Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act," July 25, 2018, <https://www.savetibet.org/house-judiciary-committee-unanimously-approves-reciprocal-access-to-tibet-act/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

26. The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Announces Intent to Nominate, Appoint, and Designate Personnel to Key Administration Posts," August 21, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/president-donald-j-trump-announces-intent-nominate-appoint-designate-personnel-key-administration-posts/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

27. Derek Hawkins, "Dalai Lama, Long Friendly with U.S. Presidents, Says He Has 'No Worries' About Trump," *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/11/23/dalai-lama-long-friendly-with-u-s-presidents-says-he-has-no-worries-about-trump/?utm_term=.973fbae2a15c (accessed September 18, 2018).

28. International Campaign for Tibet, "U.S. Presidential Statements on Meetings with the Dalai Lama, 1991-2016," <https://www.savetibet.org/policy-center/us-government-and-legislative-advocacy/u-s-presidential-statements-on-meetings-with-the-dalai-lama/> (accessed September 18, 2018).

29. U.S. Department of State, "A Message from the Dalai Lama for the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom," July 17, 2017, video, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/religiousfreedom/c79918.htm> (accessed September 18, 2018).

this year, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback called for Chen Quanguo to be sanctioned for the role he played in constructing the social management policies that China institutes in Tibet and Xinjiang.³⁰ For his role in both, he should be evaluated for designation under Global Magnitsky Act authorities, which permit the U.S. government to place targeted financial measures on individuals on human rights and corruption grounds.

- **The U.S. should take additional steps to facilitate discussion between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama or his representatives.** The latest report mandated by the Tibetan Policy Act highlighted how few engagements between senior-level U.S. officials and Chinese authorities about Tibet took place. Higher-level officials in the State Department, especially a Special Coordinator, should raise these concerns in meetings where other important political and security matters are discussed.
- **The U.S. should press for the release of all political prisoners in China, including those from Tibet.** The U.S. should continue to publicly call for the release of high-level Tibetan political prisoners, including the Panchen Lama and Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuck. The U.S. government should also continue to publicly and privately press for the release of all political prisoners in China.

- **The U.S. should reaffirm its support for the right of the Dalai Lama to determine plans for reincarnation.** The Chinese government has repeatedly undermined Tibetans' ability to determine the next Dalai Lama, first by imprisoning the Panchen Lama, and second by strictly regulating plans for reincarnations.³¹ The U.S. promotes the religious freedom of Tibetans by affirming their right to determine plans for the Dalai Lama's reincarnation and succession.

- **The U.S. should find ways to encourage reciprocity of travel and access to information about the Tibet.** At present, U.S. government officials, journalists, and other citizens have access to Tibet that falls far short of the access the U.S. grants to Chinese officials, journalists, and other citizens. The U.S. should work with the Chinese government to improve ease of access to these areas and continue to improve access to information for persons residing in Tibet. This lack of reciprocity impedes necessary awareness about the situation on the ground in Tibet.

The U.S. should consider how it can improve the freedom of Tibetans. It is a matter of principle. Standing for principle in one area of the world makes it more likely that others around the globe enjoy first freedoms as well.

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30. Danielle Paquette, "Trump Official Seeks Sanctions for Chinese Leaders on Human Rights Concerns," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/trump-official-seeks-to-sanction-chinese-leaders-on-human-rights-concerns/2018/06/28/e965c414-7a37-11e8-93cc-6d3beccdd7a3_story.html?noredirect=on (accessed September 18, 2018).

31. U.S. Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2017, p. 42, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?d#wrapper> (accessed September 18, 2018).