



Chinese policy on Tibet and foreign attitudes

By Charles Parton

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since its invasion in 1950, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has exerted increasing control over Tibet, using political means, surveillance and imposing restrictions on Tibetan culture and language.
- The Dalai Lama provides significant soft power for the Tibetan diaspora, but his reincarnation is highly politicised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which seeks to control the appointment of lamas.
- The Tibet issue gains less international attention than the CCP's actions in Xinjiang due to less cross-border interaction and lower economic output from Tibet, which is exacerbated by the unwillingness of the so-called 'Global South' to risk losing Chinese investment.



On 2nd July, just before his 90th birthday, the Dalai Lama made an announcement about his reincarnation. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long been preparing for his death. It intends to control his reincarnation, and thereby weaken the power and appeal of the Tibetan diaspora movement.

Few, if any, individuals can match the Dalai Lama's soft power. When he dies, people and governments alike will focus on Tibet. The CCP will attempt to minimise immediate adverse pronouncements and actions before moving to an aggressive strategy to ensure that both inside and outside Tibet the issue fades quickly, and that any threat to its continued colonisation is contained.

This Explainer examines the importance of Tibet to Beijing; the measures initiated by Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, to tighten controls over all aspects of life in Tibet; the differences between Tibet and Xinjiang (the other main area of Chinese colonialism); the challenges facing the Tibetan diaspora in terms of the reactions and support of foreign countries; the weaknesses of the CCP's position on Tibet; and the need for governments of free and open countries to maintain support for the diaspora and to continue raising it in high-level meetings with Chinese counterparts. If Tibet is to regain the autonomy originally promised when the People's Republic of China (PRC) invaded in 1950, it will be in the long term, almost certainly after seismic changes to CCP rule.

Key features of Beijing's policies in Tibet under Xi

Why Tibet is important to the CCP

Economic, domestic political, geostrategic and even personality factors lie behind the CCP's tight control policies in Tibet.

ECONOMIC REASONS

Economic factors centre upon water and mineral resources. The major rivers within the PRC rise in territory which was historically Tibetan. Since 2000, the CCP has constructed or planned 193 hydroelectric dams on the Tibetan Plateau, of which the large majority are mega-dams.¹ The latest to be announced, at Medog ('Motuo' [墨脱] in Mandarin), will be three times larger than the Three Gorges Dam.² For the power-hungry PRC, which has developed ultra-high voltage transmission

¹ India Hauteville, 'Water management issues on the Tibetan plateau', *Défis Humanitaires*, 03/01/2025, <https://defishumanitaires.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

² Holly Chik, 'China approves Tibet mega dam that could generate 3 times more power than Three Gorges', *South China Morning Post*, 26/12/2024, <https://www.scmp.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



technology to take electricity to population centres in the central and eastern parts of the country, this is highly important. Tibet also has extensive deposits of minerals such as copper, lithium, gold, chromium, zinc, lead and silver. In 2023, geologists discovered large deposits of rare earths.³ According to one report, these deposits may amount to 40% of the PRC's mineral deposits, although how easy or commercially viable it would be to exploit them is another matter.⁴

DOMESTIC POLITICAL FACTORS

The CCP does not legitimise its rule via the ballot box. The main 'legitimacy' underpinning its monopoly on power is fulfilling the people's economic aspirations. But other lesser 'legitimacies' include the claim that only the CCP has been able to restore the PRC's historical territorial integrity. The recovery of Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and Macao are central to this narrative. It is also why the CCP maintains its claim over 'South Tibet': the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (the strategic importance of Tawang is another reason).

GEOPOLITICAL NEEDS

Tibet and the Himalayas are a natural border against India, a major rival of the CCP. Indian – or other – influence in Tibet would be a threat to security. Moreover, holding Tibet ensures a second route into Xinjiang from the south. Finally, size matters. Aspirations of being a global power demand control over Tibetan areas (including those in Qinghai and Sichuan), which represent a quarter of the PRC's land mass.

ISSUES LINKED TO XI'S RULE

Since its invasion in 1950, the CCP has always tightly controlled Tibet, but Xi has raised this control to new levels. More broadly, he believes that tight control is needed for ruling a large country of 1.4 billion people. He also – and unsurprisingly – believes that his version of Marxism (or, in reality, Leninism) is the best form of governance, one essential to the mission of 'Chinese modernisation' and achieving the 'Second Centennial Goal'. Clearly, Tibet cannot be an exception: thus, the title 'autonomous region' loses most of its meaning. Xi also believes in the 'sinicisation' of everything, and particularly of religion. In his eyes, this is a political necessity, because no alternative focus of loyalty other than the CCP can be allowed, lest it grow to challenge the party. Here the parallel with Christianity is informative, particularly with the Catholic Church and relations with the Vatican (which naively

³ Sriparna Pathak, 'China's Rapacity for Mining in Tibet: An Indian Perspective', Institute for Security and Development Policy, 22/04/2025, <https://www.isdp.eu/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

⁴ 'Train to Lhasa to take out Tibet's mineral riches', *Asia News*, 23/02/2007, <https://www.asianews.it/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



assumed that agreements over areas such as the appointment of bishops would be honoured).

It is worth parsing the CCP's 'Second Centennial Goal'; namely to 'build a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious' by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Each of those adjectives is doing serious work in the context of ethnic minority policy (see: Box 1).

BOX 1: THE CCP'S 'SECOND CENTENNIAL GOAL':

- **Prosperous:** Mobilising all resources within the PRC's borders;
- **Strong:** Controlling the borders, especially that with India;
- **Democratic:** Ensuring that Chinese Marxist-Leninism thrives throughout the PRC;
- **Culturally advanced:** Culture means ideology for the CCP, and there can be only one version;
- **Harmonious:** The quickest way to ensure harmony is to eradicate differences, to 'sinicise'.

Finally, in Xi's PRC, where national security has become the mainspring of policy, the *People's Daily* (the CCP's newspaper) underlines the importance of tight control over Tibet: 'maintaining the security and stability of border areas is not only a prerequisite for border governance and development, but is also directly related to national security and overall stability.'⁵

Changes to policy since the 2014 Central Ethnic Work Conference

In September 2014, within two years of coming to power, Xi largely abandoned the previous policy of allowing ethnic minorities some social and cultural autonomy; of waiting for growing prosperity to lead slowly to harmonisation and the absorption of minorities into Han culture. He is a man in a hurry. Xi may also have had in mind the disintegration of the Soviet Union into separate countries: the lack of strength and will of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union featured in his earliest internal

⁵ 杨子强 [Yang Ziqiang], '推进边疆治理体系和治理能力现代化，是中国式现代化的应有之义' ['Promoting the modernisation of border governance systems and governance capacity is the inherent meaning of Chinese-style modernisation'], 人民网 [People's Daily], 14/02/2025, <http://paper.people.com.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



party speech, and he is determined that the same fate should not befall the CCP. The main elements of increased control and assimilation have been:

- **‘Ethnic mingling policy’:** Han Chinese have been encouraged to immigrate into Tibet, mainly into urban areas. Topography, climate, employment opportunities and other factors have kept this rate lower than in Xinjiang. There is no evidence of a forced labour programme along the lines of that in Xinjiang. Tibetans have been encouraged to work in other parts of the PRC.
- **Education – ‘forging the soul’:** Xi holds a strong general belief that the CCP should forge the soul of the youth. In the case of Tibet, around three quarters of children are now in boarding schools from an early age.⁶ Xi has declared that children of the right age should ‘study in school, live school, grow up in school.’⁷ Mandarin is the medium of instruction from the start in kindergartens, a deliberate attempt to marginalise the Tibetan language. A conference in 2021 on ethnic affairs made it clear that a ‘common national language’ is the policy, even if lip service was paid to ‘ensuring the learning and use of minority languages according to actual needs’.⁸
- **Cultural harmonisation:** Beneath the language, the intention is clear: to replace ethnic culture with a unified national culture. In March, Pan Yue, Director and Party Secretary of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, wrote of the need to:

Improve the system and mechanism for enhancing the identity of Chinese culture, and innovatively use multiple carriers, such as art performances, cultural and museum exhibitions, literary creation and sports events, to promote the education of forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation...Establish and highlight the Chinese cultural symbols and the image of the Chinese nation shared by all ethnic groups, and enhance the Chinese cultural identity and cultural confidence of the people of all ethnic groups.⁹

- **‘Sinicisation’ of religion:** Control over the monasteries has been greatly strengthened, as has control over the training of religious teachers. As with

⁶ Some campaigners put the figure at over 80%. For example, see: Micky Bristow, ‘Tibet boarding schools: China accused of trying to silence language’, BBC News, 10/03/2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 21/07/2025). For a full discussion, see: ‘When They Came to Take Our Children’, Tibet Action Institute, 06/05/2025, <https://tibetaction.net/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

⁷ Chris Buckley and Isabelle Qian, ‘How China is Erasing Tibetan Culture, One Child at a Time’, *The New York Times*, 09/01/2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

⁸ 尤权 [You Quan], ‘做好新时代党的民族工作的科学指引’ [‘Scientific Guidance for Doing a Good Job in the Party’s National Work in the New Era’], 求是网 [Qishi], 01/11/2021, <http://www.qstheory.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

⁹ 潘岳 [Pan Yue], ‘铸牢中华民族共同体意识’ [‘Forge a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation’], 求是网 [Qishi], 16/03/2025, <http://www.qstheory.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



other religions, teaching the young is forbidden. Lamas are required to promote the CCP. In 1995, the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama ‘disappeared’ and has not been seen since. In his place, the CCP located its own approved reincarnation. Since 2007, the reincarnation of lamas requires central permission, and since 2022, reincarnated lamas must be born inside the PRC.

- **Social control, the grid management system, ‘Sharp Eyes’ project ‘xueliang gongcheng’ [雪亮工程]:**¹⁰ The grid management and ‘double-linked household’ systems divide up urban and rural households into between five and ten units. The person appointed to be in charge is responsible for informing the police and other authorities of the activities, movements and behaviour of those in the households. These grid areas are also monitored by CCTV cameras. Such surveillance systems are not limited to Tibet, but the perceived likelihood of trouble means that they are imposed more rigorously.
- **Stationing of officials and cadres in villages:** The CCP has sent large numbers of officials and cadres to Tibet to stay in villages and lead the people. There are claims that this has happened in all villages. This seems plausible: there are 4,382 villages in Tibet.¹¹ This is similar, although not as extensive, as the policy of sending Han cadres to stay in homes in Xinjiang. 12,000 cadres have also been sent in ‘counterpart assistance to Tibet’, helping with administration.¹²
- **Party building in border areas:** As ever, the CCP’s answer to solving problems is to strengthen the party itself and its controls. A long article in the ideology page of the *People’s Daily* from 21st January 2025 quotes extensively from Xi’s words at the 18th collective study of the politburo in December 2024. Xi emphasised ‘the political requirements for strengthening grassroots party building...and the party’s political leadership, ideological leadership and organisational leadership in border areas’. He also stated that the CCP should ‘insist on implementing the party’s overall leadership in all aspects of border governance throughout the process’, with the aim that ‘people of all ethnic groups in border areas are more consciously firm believers and faithful practitioners of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.’¹³

¹⁰ Dave Gershgorin, ‘China’s “Sharp Eyes” Programme Aims to Surveil 100% of Public Space’, 02/03/2021, <https://cset.georgetown.edu/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹¹ Palden Nyima, ‘Roads make all the difference in rural Tibet’, *China Daily*, 08/03/2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹² ‘在建设社会主义现代化新西藏上展现更大作为’, [‘Show greater achievements in building a socialist modern new Tibet’], 人民日报 [*People’s Daily*], 28/03/2025, <http://paper.people.com.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹³ ‘加强基层党建工作推进边疆治理现代化’ [‘Strengthening grassroots party building work and promoting the modernisation of border governance’], 党建 [*Dangjian*], 21/01/2025, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



Xi's call at the 2021 Central Ethnic Work Conference sums up this stance:

We must take the forging of a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation as the main line of the party's ethnic work in the new era, promote all ethnic groups to firmly identify with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Communist Party of China and socialism with Chinese characteristics, and continuously promote the construction of a community for the Chinese nation.¹⁴

This leaves little room for autonomy.

Differences between Tibet and Xinjiang

The situation in Xinjiang has gained far more attention internationally than has Tibet, even though many of the features of the Xinjiang repression model were first developed in Tibet, where Chen Quanguo had been Party Secretary before his transfer to Xinjiang, along with his methods. Part of the reason for less global interest is greater knowledge of crimes against humanity in Xinjiang. The Uyghur homeland is more open, with more cross-border trade, ties and blood links to Uyghurs in Central Asian countries, which generally maintain good relations with the PRC. Tibet, by contrast, has fiercer mountain ranges and is more heavily militarised against the external enemy of India. This means cross-border flows and knowledge are much less.

A further difference which reduces knowledge of, and attention to, Tibet is the lack of extensive industrial output and exports. Xinjiang's cotton, polysilicon, tomatoes and aluminium, combined with verified forced labour, have led to moves in liberal democracies to ban their exports. Evidence of the forced mass movement of Uyghur labourers to other parts of the PRC has not been matched by the same for Tibetans. While scholars and media in free and open nations have investigated events in Tibet, their efforts have not been on the same scale as for Xinjiang. The Uyghur Tribunal, which delivered its judgement of genocide on one count in December 2021, also played a large role in publicising the suffering and the cause of the Uyghur people.¹⁵

While CCP repression in Tibet undoubtedly constitutes crimes against humanity, the situation in Xinjiang is worse. The party has made Xinjiang a laboratory for its technological repression, in what might be termed 'second mover disadvantage'. The experiments started in Tibet have been transferred and

¹⁴ 尤权 [You Quan], '做好新时代党的民族工作的科学指引' ['Scientific Guidance for Doing a Good Job in the Party's National Work in the New Era'], 求是网 [Qishi], 01/11/2021, <http://www.qstheory.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹⁵ 'Uyghur Tribunal Judgement', Uyghur Tribunal, 09/12/2021, <https://uyghurtribunal.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



perfected in Xinjiang with greater resources and more advanced technology (those lessons are of course being ploughed back into Tibet).

Behind this lies a greater fear of minorities in Xinjiang than in Tibet. Where unrest has led to deaths, violence by Tibetans has been largely directed against themselves. Self-immolation claimed at least 159 lives between 2009 and April 2022.¹⁶ In Xinjiang, unrest on a bigger scale has been more frequent. 1995 and 1997 saw serious disturbances, and in 2009, 200 people were killed in riots in Ürümqi. 2011 saw further outbreaks of violence in Hotan and Kashgar as ethnic minorities protested against discrimination by Han Chinese.¹⁷ Whereas the Dalai Lama advocates peaceful protest, the CCP sees Islam as an international source of terrorism, which it does not distinguish from violent protest caused by its own suppression and discrimination. The Uyghurs are also more populous than Tibetans, further exacerbating the scale of fear.

Challenges facing the Tibetan diaspora

The attitude of foreign countries to Tibet

The CCP wants three things from foreign countries:

1. No meetings of foreign officials with the Dalai Lama, his representatives, or the Central Tibetan Administration – the government in exile (a concept which the CCP does not of course recognise);
2. No endorsement or expressions of support for Tibet. This would be an ‘unlawful act’ and would invite ‘retaliation’; and
3. No interference in what is a Chinese ‘internal matter’. This includes accepting the right of the CCP to choose the Dalai Lama’s successor, not endorsing any successor chosen by Tibetans outside the PRC and ensuring that the Tibet issue is not prominent within foreign countries.

The governments of most liberal democracies (the United States is likely to be an exception) will continue as they have for the last decade. For the most part, they will accede to CCP wishes because they fear retaliation aimed at their exports or the

¹⁶ ‘Self-immolation fact sheet’, International Campaign for Tibet, 06/04/2022, <https://savetibet.org/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹⁷ Michael Dillon, ‘Death on the Silk Route: Violence in Xinjiang’, BBC News, 03/08/2011, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



withdrawal of investment – fears which are exaggerated.¹⁸ The death and reincarnation process of the Dalai Lama are likely to occasion considerable clamour and accusations against the CCP by parliaments, the press and civil society, but not by ministers and senior officials.

India is a natural ally of the Tibetans, given that the PRC is one of its two primary rivals. Chinese designs on Arunachal Pradesh are a major concern (something which Tibetans in exile should highlight as a parallel to the PRC's colonisation of Tibet). For India, the greatest concern over Tibet centres on water and the effects of Chinese dam building. This is also an area which Tibetans could use to consolidate Indian support.

The so-called 'Global South' will not support the Tibetan cause, even those countries with large Buddhist communities (Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia and Sri Lanka). They are beholden to Beijing, while the Government of Japan has bigger fish to fry in its PRC relations. The Global South made its stance clear last year:

On October 22nd, at the Third Committee of the 79th session of the United Nations [UN] General Assembly, Pakistan delivered a joint statement on behalf of 80 countries. They pointed out that issues related to Xinjiang and Xizang [Chinese translations no longer use the name 'Tibet'] are China's internal affairs. They spoke against the interference in China's internal affairs under the pretext of human rights, and stood for abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and respecting the right of people of each state to choose independently the path for development fit for their national conditions. Another 20 plus countries, by making statements either individually or collectively, expressed support for China and opposition to politicising human rights issues and applying double standards.¹⁹

This mirrors the far weightier (in terms of international relations) issue of Taiwan. Over 70 countries have endorsed the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan and agreed that Beijing can pursue all efforts to achieve unification, whether peaceful or not.²⁰ Neither Tibet nor Taiwan are important issues for states in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa or Asia – particularly smaller ones – compared to their hopes for Chinese finance or investment. For many leaders, human rights in their own countries are a low priority, let alone such rights in the PRC.

¹⁸ Charles Parton, 'Putting trade and investment with China into perspective', Council on Geostrategy, 04/03/2025, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

¹⁹ 林剑 [Lin Jian], Regular Press Conference, 中华人民共和国外交部 [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China], 23/10/2024, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/> (checked: 21/07/2025).

²⁰ 'China's stunning new campaign to turn the world against Taiwan', *The Economist*, 09/02/2025, <https://www.economist.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



David versus Goliath

A small diaspora faces the might of a global giant in a case of soft power versus hard power. At some point in the coming years, the Tibetan cause will lose the Dalai Lama, its strongest asset. It will need to move quickly to find someone who can speak authoritatively for Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism during the interregnum between the death of the Dalai Lama and the growth to maturity of his reincarnation.

The contest may be uneven, but it is long term and will not end with the death of the Dalai Lama. 75 years after the invasion and colonisation of Tibet, the diaspora, its religion, culture and wider appeal remain strong. And the CCP's position has vulnerabilities, three of which immediately spring to mind:

1. Chinese historical and legal claims to sovereignty do not stand up to examination. CCP colonialism in Tibet undermines its signature foreign policy claim of a 'community of shared future for mankind'.
2. Climate change and the environment are crucial issues for the world. The unbridled exploitation of natural resources, in particular timber and water/dams, has led to considerable environmental degradation in addition to destroying the traditional Tibetan way of life, which had preserved the land for centuries.
3. The 'sinicisation' of religion by an atheist regime, the anti-religious actions of the CCP and the lack of religious freedoms disturb others beyond the Buddhist world.

But while Xi remains in power, the likelihood of meaningful negotiations between Beijing and Dharamsala is remote. Xi's political longevity may well outlast the Dalai Lama, and even after Xi's departure, the CCP is unlikely to allow Tibet the degree of autonomy which would satisfy Tibetans (the Dalai Lama does not claim sovereignty).

In his first politburo meeting, Xi – in a different context – quoted the scholar Gong Zichen: 'To destroy a people, you must first destroy their history.'²¹ That surely includes their culture, language and religion. Governments of free and open countries may be tempted to conclude that they can do little to halt this. While it is for Tibetans outside Tibet to preserve their present for their future, foreign governments should also offer them support, resist CCP pressure to close down diaspora activities and ensure that Tibet remains on the agenda whenever there are high-level meetings with Chinese counterparts.

²¹ Tanner Greer, 'Xi Jinping in Translation: China's Guiding Ideology', *Palladium*, 31/05/2019, <https://palladiummag.com/> (checked: 21/07/2025).



This Explainer is based on a presentation made at a conference entitled 'Reconfiguring and Reframing Tibet for the Shifting Geopolitics of Asia and the World', held at Birmingham University on 26th June 2025.

The author would like to thank Robert Barnett for his useful comments on the draft of this paper. Any infelicities are entirely the author's responsibility.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Parton is Chief Adviser to the China Observatory and a Distinguished Fellow at the Council on Geostrategy.

“Dedicated to making Britain, as well as other free and open nations, more united, stronger and greener.”

ISBN: 978-1-917893-08-4

Address: Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street, London, SW1H 0QS

Phone: 020 3915 5625

Email: info@geostrategy.org.uk

© 2025 Council on Geostrategy

Disclaimer: This publication should not be considered in any way to constitute advice. It is for knowledge and educational purposes only. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council on Geostrategy or the views of its Advisory Board.

Please do not print this document; protect the environment by reading it online.

Geostrategy Ltd., trading as Council on Geostrategy, is a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales. Registration no. 13132479. Registered address: Geostrategy Ltd., Alliance House, 12 Caxton Street, London, SW1H 0QS.