

The Dalai Lama Succession Question: New Statements and Old Dilemmas

July 4, 2025



The Declaration and Its Immediate Aftermath

Nearly 14 years after expressing uncertainty in a 2011 statement about whether, and how, he would reincarnate, the Dalai Lama laid the matter to rest on 2 July, [affirming](#) “that the institution of the Dalai Lama will continue.” The 14th Dalai Lama also reiterated that “the Gaden Phodrang Trust has sole authority to recognise the future reincarnation; no one else [read: Beijing] has any such authority to interfere in this matter.”

Expectedly, China [reacted](#) merely hours later and a Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that, “the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and other great Buddhist figures must be chosen by drawing lots from a golden urn, and approved by the central government,” in line with Beijing’s policy since at least 2007.

The Indian media widely covered the Dalai Lama's announcement as a counter-move to pre-emptively deny China control over the reincarnation process. As one news anchor [framed](#) it, "the spiritual succession issue has become a high-stakes test of religious freedom vs authoritarian control." Multiple news outlets also questioned the wisdom of India's 'cautious approach,' [speculated](#) over whether India's 'Dalai Lama' card (or Tibet card) affords it any leverage over China, and brought into focus what the revered leader means to the past, present, and the future of the global Tibetan community in exile.

Historical Context and Geopolitical Stakes

The Dalai Lama's succession has long been a highly contentious issue between China and the Tibetan community in exile, nearly half of which continues to reside within India.

While Tibetans believe that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is a holy tradition, completely subject to his will and instructions, Beijing has undertaken a range of efforts over the decades to ensure a role in the recognition of the 15th Dalai Lama. In May 1995, China detained the Panchen Lama (the second most important Tibetan religious leader) when he was six years old, and he has never been seen again. In his stead, China has installed its own Panchen Lama candidate, who's likely to play a role in the appointment of a China-backed Dalai Lama, and asserted his legitimacy through its international media network. In 2007, China passed 'Order No. 5' – a legal framework that states all Reincarnations (the Dalai Lama and other High Lamas, known as tulkus) must be born within PRC territory in order to be recognized.

In recent times, this contestation has spilled over, albeit symbolically, into larger geopolitical dynamics between China and the US, and occasionally drawn in third countries from the Buddhist world, as well as India. To understand the implications and stakes of the succession issue, it's

necessary to briefly trace the recent history of the Dalai Lama's institution and the state of affairs in Tibetan exile politics.

A year after negotiations with China on the Tibet issue came to an abrupt and decisive end, in 2011, the Dalai Lama abdicated all his political responsibilities and transferred them to an elected "government in exile," or the Central Tibetan Administration. The CTA, however, is technically a non-profit political organization and not recognized as a sovereign government by any nation. Shortly thereafter, in September that year, the Dalai Lama issued a comprehensive statement on reincarnation, which explained the various mechanisms involved in the process and debunked the China-backed 'Golden Urn' method, but kept the question of his succession itself wide open. Observers at the time determined that the Dalai Lama was keen to instill a degree of 'strategic ambiguity' over the future of his institution, so as to deny China the privilege of extensive preparation over what the Chinese experts call "the post-Dalai era."

Since then, it is the CTA that has primarily undertaken efforts to lobby countries in support of the Tibetan movement and looked after the welfare of the Tibetan community in exile. However, its non-sovereign nature and its absolute financial dependence on governmental aid (US and India) and private donations (with the help of organizations such as the Tibet Fund) considerably diffuses its mandate and power. Matters are further complicated by the trend of large-scale outward migration of Tibetans from India, mainly to Western countries such as the US. As per GoI data, the number of Tibetan refugees in India [dropped](#) by 44%, from 150,000 in 2011 to 85,000 in 2018. In addition, over the last two decades, the inward migration of Tibetans has also dramatically reduced, from an estimated 3,000 per year to 100. These trends have emerged as arguably the most urgent threat to the Tibetan culture and language preservation project.

Nevertheless, the CTA has also had notable successes in the recent past. For instance, in 2020, Tibetan leaders successfully lobbied Washington to pass the Tibet Policy and Support Act, which asserts that the succession of the 15th Dalai Lama is the prerogative of the Tibetan Buddhist community and the 14th Dalai Lama, and even allows Washington to sanction Chinese officials that attempt to interfere with the process. Notably, it was signed into law by President Trump. Last year, they succeeded again to get the US Congress to pass the Resolve Tibet Act, which authorized the US State Department to push back against PRC propaganda on the Tibet issue (for instance, the claim that Tibet has been an integral part of China since “ancient times”), and called for dialogue between Tibetan leaders and China to resolve the Tibet issue.

Despite its successes, however, the Tibetan community in exile continues to be dependent on the Dalai Lama in myriad ways. The international state of the Tibetan movement, for instance, continues to be characterized by his meetings with world leaders (or lack thereof) and, at home, Tibetan leaders and people remain psychologically dependent on his “guidance,” politically and culturally. In other words, his institution is still seen as central to keep the ‘Tibetan movement’ alive and the Tibetan identity intact, which is why the question of his succession assumes much significance.

Strategic Trajectories and Policy Considerations

In this context, India’s position and policy choices (if any) on the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation question will be informed by Tibetan exile politics as well as the international support (mostly by the US) accorded to the Tibet movement, given that India does have a range of imperatives and stakes in the same.

To begin with, the 15th Dalai Lama is more likely to be found in India than any other “free country.” The Gaden Phodrang

Trust is registered in Dharamshala, for instance. Consequently, New Delhi will be expected to accord the same status to the 15th Dalai Lama as it does to the 14th (“an honored guest” and “a respected religious leader”). Indeed, in the past, the CTA has also requested New Delhi to issue an official statement of recognition for the next reincarnation, to further legitimize the Dalai Lama’s authority over the succession issue, and push back against Beijing’s attempts to exploit uncertainties around it.

A considerable Buddhist population across India, especially in the Himalayan belt and the sensitive border states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, who deeply revere the Dalai Lama, also creates domestic political imperatives for New Delhi. These are further exemplified by public sentiments to counter China on politically charged fronts, despite the recent thaw in bilateral relations. As a prominent news anchor [put it](#), “If India recognizes a successor chosen by the Tibetan exiled community, it directly challenges Beijing’s legitimacy in Tibet. If India remains silent, it abandons Tibetan to Chinese control.”

Internationally, India’s continued welfare support to the Tibetan community in exile earns it much goodwill, particularly in Buddhist countries in its neighborhood and beyond. For his part, the Dalai Lama has acted as an “unofficial brand ambassador” for India. Consequently, there are expectations, albeit minor, placed upon India elsewhere to extend support to the Dalai Lama and his supporters.

Yet, India is unlikely to upgrade its policy approach to the reincarnation issue or “reclaim its voice on the Tibet issue,” as prominent members of the Indian strategic community have [advocated for](#), in the past. This is because “India’s positions on the Tibet question have been vague and ambiguous in an attempt to adhere to the non-interference principle,” as one expert [recently put it](#), given Chinese sensitivities on the

issue. The same also explains the wide gap between the respective positions adopted by New Delhi and Washington (see *Annexure*), despite much past advocacy for India to coordinate with its partners. The sole exception could arguably be India's use of the Dalai Lama's status, or the Tibet issue, as a means of signaling to Beijing, as it indeed has in the past. However, with India's clear interest in keeping the bilateral thaw afloat, even this na is likely to fade in significance.

At the same time, the international support for the Dalai Lama and the Tibet issue has also significantly ebbed in the recent past. For instance, Trump's recent cuts to USAID [slashed](#) Tibet aid and took away nearly half of the CTA's funds. This further reinforces the fact that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation issue and the Tibet issue have largely been relegated to the symbolic support level in global politics. Such an environment further disincentivizes New Delhi to revise its approach. Therefore, India is likely to maintain its distance from the Dalai Lama's succession issue, even as it maintains continuity in its current position, which simply put, is: the Tibetans are free to practice their religion under the protection of Indian law; and the Dalai Lama is an honored guest of the country.

Annexure

US Position/Policy	Indian Position/Policy
---------------------------	-------------------------------

<p>The US position on Tibet has long underlined the right of the Tibetan people to self-determination. The Resolve Tibet Act tacitly highlights China's obligation on the same as a signatory of both 'The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights' and 'The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,' and urges China to ratify the ICCPR.</p>	<p>The Indian position on Tibet has never underlined the Tibetan people's right to self-determination, and New Delhi has instead focused solely on the welfare of Tibetans in India. Moreover, the 2003 Vajpayee-Wen Joint Declaration reiterated that India does not allow any "anti-China" political activities on its territory.</p>
<p>The US TPSA (2022) acknowledged the legitimacy of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, elected by Tibetans worldwide, as well as the Central Tibetan Administration.</p>	<p>India does not formally recognize the Tibetan Parliament in Exile or the CTA, even as Indian officials continue to engage with CTA officials unofficially.</p>
<p>The US has repeatedly called for dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama or his representatives, as well as democratically elected representatives of the Tibetan community, to resolve the "Tibet-China Dispute"</p>	<p>India has not called for any such dialogue, nor has it ever acknowledged any unresolved disputes between Tibet and China.</p>

<p>The US policy on the succession of the Dalai Lama opposes any interference by Beijing and authorizes the use of sanctions on Chinese officials who are found interfering in the matter. Furthermore, the TPSA recognizes the sole authority of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people to determine (or recognize) the 15th Dalai Lama in accordance with Tibetan beliefs and traditions.</p>	<p>While India considers the Dalai Lama a revered spiritual leader who is free to engage in religious activities within Indian territory, New Delhi has not taken an official stance on the question of his succession.</p>
<p>The US has reproached China for violations of human rights, environmental rights, and the religious freedom of Tibetans.</p>	<p>India has not publicly articulated any concerns on reports of the violations of Tibetan rights.</p>