

**Testimony of Bhuchung K. Tsering, Vice President, International Campaign for Tibet, at a Hearing
on “ARIA in Action: Human Rights, Democracy, and the Rule of Law”**

Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy

Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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Chairman Gardner, Ranking Member Markey, and Members of the Sub-Committee. I thank you for this opportunity to testify on the situation in Tibet and its impact on the Indo-Pacific region before your subcommittee. I would like to submit the full text of my report, including three attachments mentioned in my testimony, for the record.

The International Campaign for Tibet is a non-profit organization that has been advocating for over three decades for the democratic freedoms and human rights of the Tibetan people.

My testimony will focus on the 60 years of political subjugation of the Tibetan people by the Chinese Communist Party that includes a consistent pattern of violation of their fundamental human rights. I will outline China’s attempt to isolate Tibet from the rest of the world and show why Tibet matters to the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, I will have some recommendations to the United States that will include consideration of Tibet’s water resources within the discussion of US security interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

60 Years of Political subjugation

In 1959, China took over complete political control of Tibet. Beginning on March 10, 2019, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people began marking the 60th anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising, the escape of the Dalai Lama and his eventual crossing over into freedom in India, and the establishment of a democratic governance system in exile, known as the Central Tibetan Administration.

In the past 60 years, the Dalai Lama had the farsighted vision to undertake initiatives and establish institutions in exile that have empowered the Tibetan people to preserve and practice their religion, traditions and way of life. At the same time, the Dalai Lama has continued to look for a peaceful resolution of the Tibetan problem. In this regard, his steadfast commitment to keeping the Tibetan struggle nonviolent in the face of tremendous challenges remains an inspiration to nonviolent movements throughout the world. Here I would like to take the opportunity to thank the successive American Congress and Administration for the policy and programmatic support rendered to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people. Legislations like the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002, Congressional Gold Medal to H.H. the Dalai Lama of 2007, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 as well as the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 have all contributed in institutionalizing support for Tibet in the United States.

In Tibet, the Tibetan people have endured 60 years of political subjugation at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese leaders say they seek stability in Tibet, but they strive to achieve it through an iron fist rather than through an understanding of the grievances of the Tibetan people and finding ways to address them. These hardline measures are sowing seeds of instability in Tibet, exemplified in acts of protest, including self-immolation.

Since 2008, after the heavy-handed clampdown of the pan-Tibetan demonstrations, human rights in Tibet have deteriorated greatly. In reality, Tibetans today are second-class citizens in their own homeland. Their capacity to engage in religious activities, move and associate freely, express concerns, access information, and enjoy due process is severely curtailed. Their right to enjoy a healthy environment, access resources to achieve an adequate livelihood, and access Tibetan medium language education is also restricted. Freedom house has ranked Tibet as the second least free region in the world for four years in a row, behind only Syria.

In an indicator of China's focus on total ideological control and deepening suppression in Tibet, China announced in January 2019 the opening of a new training camp in Tibet under paramilitary supervision aiming to "correct" and mold the thinking of Party cadres carrying out political "education" in broader Tibetan society.¹

Tibetans seeking recourse to protest by self-immolation is one consequence of the deteriorating situation in Tibet. Since 2009, 155 Tibetans have self-immolated in Tibet and China.² The common messages coming from the Tibetan self-immolators are freedom in Tibet and the return of the Dalai Lama. It is important to note that the self-immolators have conducted themselves in a non-violent way, making sure that nobody else would be hurt or any other property damaged or destroyed in the course of their action. In rest of the world, even one political self-immolation would attract media attention. However, in the case of Tibet, the Chinese authorities have restricted communications, including access to journalists, and the self-immolations have been under-reported. It is incredible that even after 155 self-immolated not one independent journalist has been allowed to investigate them. This is implementation of the Chinese government's strategy to isolate Tibet from the rest of the world.

Restricted access to Tibet

The problems faced by journalists wanting to cover Tibet has been clearly outlined in a position paper issued by The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC).³ Released on March 29, 2019, the FCCC paper says, "obstacles to reporting pose a serious impediment to obtaining accurate information about the lives of ethnic Tibetans in China." It further said, "Unlike other provinces and regions in the country, journalists who seek to report in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) are

¹ New training camp for Party cadres in Tibet demonstrates tougher approach and challenges in ensuring loyalty <https://www.savetibet.org/new-training-camp-for-party-cadres-in-tibet-demonstrates-tougher-approach-and-challenges-in-ensuring-loyalty/>

² Self-Immolations in Tibet <https://www.savetibet.org/resources/fact-sheets/self-immolations-by-tibetans/>

³ The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China Position Paper: Foreign Journalists Access to Tibet, March 2019 <https://www.dropbox.com/s/prcupbzyvi33kdf/FCCC%20Tibet%20Position%20Paper%20March%202019.pdf?dl=0>

required to first obtain permission from the government. This permission is rarely granted.” **I would like to submit the full text of the FCCC report for the record.**

The FCCC paper also corroborates the rationale for the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act (RATA), which drew renewed attention to China’s isolation of Tibet. It was signed into law in December 2018.

The RATA takes aim at China’s double standard of preventing American journalists, diplomats and ordinary citizens from traveling to Tibet even though Chinese citizens travel unhindered throughout the US and Chinese state media operate freely in this country.

On March 25, 2019 as mandated by RATA, the State Department submitted to Congress a first-of-its-kind report on US access to Tibet. We would like to commend the State Department for the report, which finds that China “systematically” impeded Americans’ travel to the region in 2018. The Chinese authorities should now be getting the message: for too long, China has exploited the freedoms provided by democratic societies to spread its propaganda around the world even as foreign media, diplomats and tourists are prevented from entering Tibet.

Reciprocal access to Tibet is an issue faced not just by the United States. Other countries are increasingly citing the concept of reciprocity as an instrument for countering China’s attempt to assert itself internationally while not allowing the international community to have access to Tibet. On March 14, 2019, more than 30 parliamentarians across Europe published an op-ed drawing inspiration from RATA⁴ and saying, “It is now up to us in Europe to consider concrete ways to rebalance our relationship with China – not only in terms of trade, but also in regard to respect for fundamental rights like freedom of movement and of the press.” **I would like to submit the full text of this op-ed for the record.**

From Destruction to Control of Tibetan Buddhism

In the past 60 years, the Chinese authorities have adapted from a policy of total destruction of Tibetan religious institutions and system to one of controlling them to serve its own political objectives. The most visible aspect of this is China’s atheist, authoritarian government asserting its right to select the next Dalai Lama. They tried doing so with the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, the second most well-known Tibetan Buddhist leader, by kidnapping him when he was six years old (the youngest political prisoner ever) and by appointing one controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.. Since China has not been able to put the present Dalai Lama under its control, it wants to see that the next one will be someone that is subservient to the Communist Party of China. Not only do the Chinese government’s claims completely disregard centuries-old Tibetan religious tradition, they also violate the universal principle of religious freedom.

The Dalai Lama has categorically maintained that only he can make a decision on his reincarnation. In 2011, he came out with a formal statement explaining the reincarnation system and how he intends

⁴ Time to rebalance EU-China relations and demand unfettered access to Tibet, March 14, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/opinion/time-to-rebalance-eu-china-relations-and-demand-unfettered-access-to-tibet/>

to handle the issue of his succession.⁵ **I am attaching the statement here and would like to submit for the record.** The Dalai Lama says, “It is particularly inappropriate for Chinese communists, who explicitly reject even the idea of past and future lives, let alone the concept of reincarnate Tulkus, to meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas. Such brazen meddling contradicts their own political ideology and reveals their double standards. Should this situation continue in the future, it will be impossible for Tibetans and those who follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to acknowledge or accept it.”

China’s plans to control the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation under the present situation will not be accepted by Tibetan Buddhists inside and outside Tibet. It will also not get endorsement from the international community. Senator Cory Gardner spoke forcefully on this issue at a hearing by this Subcommittee in December 2018. In addition, on March 8, 2019 the US Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, speaking at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Hong Kong, stated: “This is the Chinese government’s record, and it indicates that they are likely to interfere with the selection of the next Dalai Lama. The international community must make clear now that we believe that members of the Tibetan communities, like members of all faith communities, should be able to select, educate, and venerate their religious leaders without government interference.”

By selecting the next Dalai Lama, the Chinese government aims also at extending its control on Tibetan Buddhism and its many institutions in the Indo-Pacific region with clear geopolitical implications. If not challenged vigorously by free countries, this decision would affect the religious freedom, not only of Tibetans, but also of millions of followers of Tibetan Buddhism worldwide as also the national security interests of the US and other countries in the region.

Among those individuals who are responsible for China’s misguided policies in Tibet is Chen Quanguo, currently heading the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. He was the Party Secretary in the Tibet Autonomous Region in August 2011 and formulated a militarized strategy that pushed for accelerated assimilation backed by a sophisticated security architecture of surveillance and control. His security architecture, which has since been expanded into other Tibetan areas and is being implemented on the Uyghurs and Kazakhs, consists of numerous ‘convenience police stations’, a neighborhood grid surveillance system, cadres stationed in local communities and monasteries, and new technologies that enable face-recognition and integration with big data analytics.

The Dalai Lama Matters to Tibetans

However, the human rights violation in Tibet is symptomatic of a bigger political problem. A new generation of Tibetans have grown up in Tibet without any experience of life before the Chinese takeover. Nevertheless, these Tibetans take pride in their language, culture, traditions and

⁵ Statement of H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso on the issue of his reincarnation, September 24, 2011 <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2011/statement-of-his-holiness-the-fourteenth-dalai-lama-tenzin-gyatso-on-the-issue-of-his-reincarnation>

spiritualism, including the historical bond between the Tibetan people and the Dalai Lama, which are the targets of Chinese oppressive policies.

A majority of the several hundred Tibetan political prisoners have been detained solely for their assertion of their Tibetan identity, whether calling for the protection of their culture or displaying their reverence to the Dalai Lama. The fact that, even after 60 years under Chinese occupation, the historical bond between the Tibetan people and the Dalai Lama remains strong is a reminder to the Chinese Government that they have failed to understand the Tibetan people.

However, China still attempts to falsify the situation. On March 27, 2019, it released its latest White Paper on Tibet, “Democratic Reform in Tibet – Sixty Years On”, in an attempt to justify its continued control over Tibet and to seek legitimacy. Ironically, the White Paper, in which China’s claim about everything being fine in Tibet, was released in Beijing even as much of Tibet remained closed to foreigners.

If the situation of the Tibetan people is as good as they claim, China should have nothing to fear in providing access to Tibet to independent observers, journalists and diplomats. If Beijing seriously believes the people of Tibet have benefited greatly under its rule, it should allow them freedom of movement and expression so that they can travel and make this case themselves.

The fact is that to the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama symbolizes their identity, religion and culture. The Chinese government knows that there is a political problem in Tibet and that the Dalai Lama is the key to resolving it. The only way for China to have genuine stability in Tibet and respect in the international arena is for it to engage directly with the representatives of the Dalai Lama and find a mutually agreeable solution. During the lifetime of the present Dalai Lama, there is the possibility of a lasting solution.

Tibet’s water resources and the Indo-Pacific Region

What should the United States do? The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 rightly places the issue of Tibet within the parameters of US security interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Tibet occupies an Asian fault zone of clashing cultures and big power politics. Tibet is where Russia, China and British India played the Great Game in the past. A stable Tibet would contribute greatly to peace in this sensitive region.

The issue of water in Asia is a fundamental reason why Tibet is relevant to the Indo-Pacific region. Water security in many countries of the Indo-Pacific region is a matter of daily survival and so has geopolitical implications. The United Nations recognizes access to water as human rights. The Tibetan plateau is today the third largest repository of fresh water after the South and North Pole and around ten rivers that originate in Tibet serve over a billion people in the Indo-Pacific region. China’s plan on management of the Tibetan water resources, including construction of dams on rivers arising in Tibet, has implications to many downstream countries. For example, the Mekong River (known to Tibetans as *Dzachu*) which originates on the Tibetan plateau, flows through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. According to observers, China has built ten dams

on the Upper Mekong mainstream that is directly affecting the lives of 60 million people downstream living in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The Mekong is a source of living to these people and China has the capability of its upstream position to dictate on these countries, as China has refused to join multilateral regional mechanisms to manage water resources.

Similarly, on the Indian subcontinent, countries like India and Bangladesh have expressed concern at China's water diversion projects along the Brahmaputra River (known to Tibetans as *Yarlung Tsangpo*) that flows from Tibet to India and Bangladesh.

In this connection, the Atlantic Council came out with a timely report on April 4, 2019 on water security in the Himalayan Asia titled "Ecology Meets Geopolitics".⁶ It says, "Across much of Himalayan Asia, water has become part of a geopolitical chess match, viewed as an asset to be protected against encroachment by one's international rivals." The report defines the term Himalayan Asia as "referring to the Asian countries that depend on river water from the high mountain ranges of the Tibetan Plateau."

The report recommends that the United States create a coherent strategy toward Asia incorporating water as a pivotal element. It further calls on the United States to "support the protection of the Himalayan Asia's water tower". The report suggests that the Arctic Council is an appropriate model. Accordingly, the report calls for "the inclusion of water security into the National Security Strategy (NSS) and other strategy documents at the highest levels of governance."

In the light of the above, the following are our recommendations:

- **Highlight Tibet as a key element in the Indo-Pacific region strategy:** The US government should work multilaterally with like-minded countries, including the EU, in undertaking coordinated initiatives in developing a united Tibet policy, including at the UN and other regional and international forums, that puts Tibet as a key element in the Indo-Pacific region.
- **Update and strengthen the Tibetan Policy Act:** The Tibetan Policy Act is a comprehensive expression of United States support for the Tibetan people, including on resolving the issue through dialogue. Since its enactment in 2002, there have been several developments. Therefore, Congress should explore amending the TPA to reflect these developments, including clarifying U.S. policy on the issue of reincarnation of the Dalai Lama.
- **Organize congressional delegations to Tibet** and ask American diplomats as well as organizations, including representatives of multilateral organizations, to seek access to Tibet to as part of the implementation of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act.
- **US should support the findings of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China position paper on Tibet** and ask China to do away with the restrictions on journalists access to Tibet
- **US should continue humanitarian assistance to Tibetan refugees in the Indo-Pacific region** to preserve and promote their distinct identity and culture;

⁶ Ecology Meets Geopolitics: water security in Himalayan Asia, The Atlantic Council, April 2019
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/ecology-meets-geopolitics>

- The Administration should be asked to pursue the United States' long-stated goal of establishing a consulate in Lhasa.
- China should be urged to release Tibetan political prisoners, including the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima.
- Secretary Pompeo should be asked to appoint the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the earliest.
- **Work with like-minded countries, including the EU, to have a coordinated and united Tibet policy**
- **The United States should incorporate water security into the National Security Strategy** and explore using platforms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Lower Mekong Initiative to create awareness about China's usage of Tibetan water and its impact on the Indo-Pacific region.

Attachments:

1. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China Position Paper: Foreign Journalists Access to Tibet, March 29, 2019
2. [Joint Op-Ed by European Parliamentarians: Time to rebalance EU-China relations and demand unfettered access to Tibet, March 14, 2019](#)
3. H.H. the Dalai Lama statement on his reincarnation, September 24, 2011