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The Future of Tibet: Between Erasure and Resilience

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Abstract: The evolving Tibetan struggle in the 21st century reflects a complex interplay of cultural erasure, political uncertainty, global disengagement, and the people's continued struggle and resilience, casting a long shadow of uncertainty over the region's future. While the quest for an independent Tibetan state has faded, even the more pragmatic demand for autonomy under China's "Middle Way Approach" faces mounting obstacles. The piece critically examines China's aggressive policy of cultural assimilation, the aging of the 14th Dalai Lama and the risks surrounding his succession, diminishing international support, and the weakening of Tibetan institutions in exile. Despite these challenges, the article argues that Tibetan identity continues to survive through non-state resilience, sustained by peaceful resistance, cultural preservation, diaspora networks, spiritual leadership, and limited foreign support. Although the political prospects for Tibet remain bleak, the enduring cultural and moral resistance of the Tibetan people ensures that the spirit of Tibet persists beyond China's control.

Introduction

As the world is celebrating the 90th birthday of the 14th Dalai Lama, we are reminded that these festivities are not only a tribute to a leader but also a moment of reflection on the uncertain future that lies ahead for the people of Tibet. More than six decades after the 1959 uprising and the Dalai Lama's subsequent exile, the Tibetan cause stands at a critical crossroads. The dream of an independent Tibet has long receded from official discourse, supplanted by the more pragmatic "Middle Way" approach, which seeks genuine autonomy within the framework of the Chinese state. Yet, even this modest vision appears increasingly elusive in the face of China's tightening internal controls, aggressive cultural assimilation policies, and a global landscape less inclined to challenge China's authoritarian assertiveness.

China's Aggressive Policy of Integration and Assimilation

China asserts its sovereignty over Tibet based on historical claims, formalized through the 1951 Seventeen-Point Agreement signed with Tibetan representatives. This agreement guaranteed the preservation of Tibet's religious, cultural, and political institutions while recognizing Chinese authority. In principle, the Chinese Constitution grants regional autonomy to minority regions such as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

However, in practice, this autonomy has been significantly curtailed. Over time, China has moved from initial military and administrative control to a tightly managed assimilation strategy, aimed at reinforcing national unity and weakening Tibetan distinctiveness. China has systematically eroded local governance structures, dissolved the traditional Tibetan administrative system, and enforced top-down rule dominated by Han Chinese officials.

China's approach to Tibet has centred on a policy of comprehensive integration, political, economic, and cultural, into the framework of the People's Republic. China's strategy has relied heavily on state-led infrastructure development and economic investment, not only to modernize the region but also to facilitate the movement of Han Chinese migrants into Tibetan areas. The influx of non-Tibetan populations has gradually altered the region's demographic composition, contributing to the dilution of Tibetan cultural and political influence.¹ This approach was further reinforced through the Western Development Strategy (Xibu Da Kaifa), adopted in 1999. Through extensive state-led projects including railways, mining operations, and urbanization, Tibet has been increasingly integrated into the national economy, thereby deepening its administrative dependency and facilitating greater central control.²

China's policy of integration also involves a deliberate campaign of cultural and religious assimilation. The 2005 "Living Buddha" law, which mandates state approval for reincarnated lamas, exemplifies the extent of China's intrusion into spiritual life. Under President Xi Jinping, Tibet has witnessed a sharp escalation in surveillance, compulsory Mandarin-language education, suppression of religious practices, and patriotic indoctrination in schools. In May 2021, to mark the 71st anniversary of the signing of the 17-Point Agreement, the Chinese government released its latest white paper on Tibet, the third under Xi Jinping's leadership after similar publications in 2015 and 2019. All three white papers reiterate a consistent narrative: that China liberated Tibet from a feudal-theocratic regime, ushered in economic and social development, and has since maintained political autonomy and religious freedom in the region. The papers attribute unrest in Tibet to "malicious forces," allegedly supported by the Dalai Lama and Western actors.³

The 2021 white paper goes further by placing greater emphasis on tightening state control, especially over religion and succession, asserting China's authority in selecting the next Dalai Lama. It promotes "Sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism" by aligning religious practice with socialist values and reiterates the Party's claim that Tibetan Buddhism is part of Chinese cultural heritage. This approach aligns with Xi Jinping's 2013 policy dictum: "To govern the country, one must first govern the frontiers; and to govern the frontiers, one must first ensure stability in Tibet."⁴ These themes are central to the hardline policies advanced under Xi Jinping's administration and are reinforced through repeated Tibet Work Conferences and top-level Party directives, leaving very limited scope for genuine Tibetan autonomy or preservation of identity.

The Aging Dalai Lama and Succession Uncertainty

The 14th Dalai Lama arrived in India in 1959 as a refugee and assumed both spiritual and political leadership of the Tibetan community in exile. Over time, he initiated democratic reforms and, in 2011, formally transferred political authority to an elected Sikyong. While he no longer holds political office, he continues to serve as the spiritual leader of Tibetans worldwide, guiding the community through teachings and moral leadership.

For decades, the Dalai Lama has been more than just a spiritual leader, he has sustained a nation in exile and helped build a resilient community that has preserved Tibetan culture and identity. He remains the most unifying and globally recognized symbol of Tibetan identity. However, his advanced age of 90 raises uncertainty about his future influence, effectiveness, and the succession process. China has insisted it will control the appointment of the next Dalai Lama, a claim firmly rejected by the Central Tibetan

¹ Bhattacharya A. (2013 May) China and its Peripheries China and its Peripheries Strategic Significance of Tibet Available at: https://www.ipcs.org/issue_select.php?recNo=510

² *ibid*

³ Joshi, M. (2021, June). *China's 2021 White Paper on Tibet: Implications for India's China Strategy* (ORF Special Report No. 149). Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-s-2021-white-paper-on-tibet-implications-for-india-s-china-strategy>

⁴ Joshi, M. (2021, June). *China's 2021 White Paper on Tibet: Implications for India's China Strategy* (ORF Special Report No. 149). Observer Research Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-s-2021-white-paper-on-tibet-implications-for-india-s-china-strategy>

Administration (CTA) and the global Tibetan community. This looming succession battle threatens to fracture Tibetan unity and may further weaken the coherence of the movement, particularly in the absence of a successor with comparable global stature. While the Dalai Lama continues to serve as a powerful moral force, the political momentum behind his autonomy campaign appears to be waning. The Chinese government seems to be advancing a long-term strategy of "attritional assimilation," while the CTA faces growing challenges in maintaining its relevance both within the Tibetan diaspora and on the international stage.

Upon his passing, the global Tibetan community is likely to face prolonged uncertainty as well confrontation between Dalai Lama Supporters and China. The search for his successor, guided by the traditional process of reincarnation, could take years. However, China has made it clear that it will not recognize any successor who is not approved by Beijing.¹ It is to be noted that Previous Dalai Lamas were traditionally identified by senior monks through religious rituals, signs, and oracles, often involving searches for children who showed traits of the previous incarnation. Years of religious education and training are needed before the identified successor grows up and takes up full responsibilities as spiritual leader. All of this will take years of effort, certainly leaving a leadership vacuum.

Diminishing Global Support

The Tibetan cause once enjoyed wide moral and diplomatic backing from the West, particularly during the post-Cold War liberal globalised era. However, in recent years, global support has dwindled. The shift reflects a broader trend in global politics, where normative support for Tibet is giving way to realpolitik and economic pragmatism. Most states now avoid confronting China over Tibet, prioritizing bilateral economic ties and geopolitical concerns. Multilateral institutions have largely remained silent on the matter. While the U.S. has passed legislation like the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (2020) they remain limited in their effect and global relevance. In the current climate, Tibet is no longer a central concern in international diplomacy, a reality that limits the CTA's leverage on the global stage.

Tibet suffers a similar fate from India, despite its foundational support to as a host, a safe haven, and a silent patron, India does not formally acknowledge the CTA or the Tibetan government-in-exile. It has not recognised Tibetans as a refugee.² Merely choosing not to interfere with their lawful activity.³ It has not taken a position on their demands for self-determination marked by its diminishing political and diplomatic endorsement of the Tibetan movement. In recent years, Indian officials have avoided high-level official meetings with the Dalai Lama and leaders of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). Markedly, in 2018, the Indian government issued an internal directive asking senior officials to avoid attending events celebrating 60 years of the Dalai Lama's exile, citing the need to maintain diplomatic "sensitivity" with China.⁴ While India-China relations remain tense (especially after the 2020 Galwan clash), India has been strategic and conversative, not provocative, in its Tibet policy. Official Indian documents and foreign policy speeches now rarely mention Tibet explicitly. Instead, India maintains a policy of recognizing Tibet as a part of China, while offering asylum to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees. India has taken a neutral stand on the Dalai Lama succession issue, stating that the Government of India does not take any position or speak on matters concerning beliefs and practices of faith and religion.⁵ Public support for the Tibetan cause is becoming less vocal and less visible in the mainstream compared to earlier decades. Despite the waning prominence of Tibet in mainstream Indian political discourse, a growing chorus of concerned voices continues to call for India to adopt a more assertive and principled stance on the Tibetan issue.⁶ Several NGOs and dedicated activists such as Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV), the Norbulingka Institute in

¹ Masquelier A. (July 3, 2025) Associated Press. "Tibetans in Exile Wonder: Will the Next Dalai Lama Be as Charismatic as This One?" *Associated Press*, 2025. <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2025/tibetans-in-exile-wonder-will-the-next-dalai-lama-be-as-charismatic-as-this-one/>.

² Tibetan Centre for Justice. *Tibet's Stateless Nationals III: Tibetan Refugees in India*. Boston: Boston University Law School, 2016. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/law/files/2016/09/Tibets-Stateless-Nationals-II-FINAL-report.pdf>

³ Gokhale, Vijay. (Nov. 2024) "The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2024. Accessed June 6, 2025. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/the-next-dalai-lama-preparing-for-reincarnation-and-why-it-matters-to-india?lang=en>

⁴ Krishnan M. (2018) "Is India Snubbing the Dalai Lama?" DW. Accessed June 14, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-india-snubbing-the-dalai-lama/a-42846107>.

⁵ Haidar, S. (July 2025) The Hindu. "MEA Says Government Has 'No Position' on Dalai Lama Succession; Rijiju Clarifies That He Spoke as a Devotee." <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/mea-says-govt-has-no-position-on-dalai-lama-succession-rijiju-clarifies-that-he-spoke-as-a-devotee/article69773518.ece>.

⁶ Haidar, S. (2024, March 24). *It's time for India to reclaim its voice on Tibet*. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/its-time-for-india-to-reclaim-its-voice-on-tibet/article68336465.ece>

Dharamshala, and the recently formed Tibet Advocacy Alliance, India (TAA India) continue to pursue advocacy efforts in support of Tibetan rights and identity, while working to preserve the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Tibetan people.

From Independence to a Softened Autonomy Demand

The Central Tibetan Administration has, since the late 1980s, pursued the Middle Way Approach, seeking meaningful autonomy under Chinese sovereignty rather than outright independence. The Middle Way Policy was first articulated formally in the Strasbourg Proposal wherein Dalai Lama issued a statement in the European parliament in Strasbourg on 15 June 1988 which formed the basis of the negotiations as to what the Tibetan people defined as autonomy.

The Dalai Lama emphasized that the Tibetans neither accept the present status nor seek Tibet's independence. They hope to achieve a genuine autonomy that operates 'within the framework of the People's Republic of China'. The Tibetans claim that this approach does not hurt China's territorial integrity and satisfies the aspirations of both sides. It involves giving up the claim for independence and demanding genuine autonomy in China. The Central Tibetan Administration strives for the creation of a political entity comprising the three traditional provinces of Tibet; Such an entity should enjoy a status of genuine national regional autonomy; This autonomy should be governed by the popularly-elected legislature and executive through a democratic process and should have an independent judicial system; As soon as the above status is agreed upon by the Chinese government, Tibet would not seek separation from, and remain within.¹ Dalai Lama believes his 'Middle-Way Approach' is the most realistic and pragmatic course to resolve the issue of Tibet peacefully. This approach meets the vital needs of the Tibetan people while ensuring the unity and stability of the People's Republic of China.² The Middle-Way policy was adopted unanimously by the 4th session of the 12th Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies on September 18, 1997.³

However, ever since conceiving the Middle Way Policy, there has been little improvement in the status quo inside Tibet. Nine rounds of talks with the Chinese since 2002, have not produced any meaningful outcome. China has time and again accused the Dalai Lama of being a 'splittist', and seeking 'Independence in disguise', despite him having conceded his political powers entirely.⁴ China has consistently rejected the Middle Way, characterizing it as a "disguised form of separatism." , for them this proposal undermines national unity and sovereignty by seeking a "Greater Tibet," which would involve reconfiguring provincial boundaries and undermining the Communist Party's control.

China's consistent dismissal of the Middle Way policy has effectively closed the door on any potential compromise regarding the Tibet issue. In response, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) has moderated its stance, shifting focus from political autonomy to the protection of cultural and religious rights. While this adjustment aims to preserve space for future dialogue, it also underscores the movement's waning leverage and declining international support.

A Shrinking Diaspora and Weakening Institutional Base

Compounding these challenges is the shrinking Tibetan diaspora, the Tibetan exile population primarily located in India, Nepal, and Bhutan, has experienced a consistent decline since the early 2000s. As of 2022, estimates suggest that the number of Tibetans in India has fallen to approximately 85,000, a significant reduction from the earlier estimate of 150,000 recorded in Indian government data and CTA documents. Data from the CTA shows a 17 percent decline in population since 2007, from approximately 123,000 to 102,000 in 2022. The decline has been especially pronounced since 2014.⁵ In contrast, the population of ethnic Tibetans residing within the PRC is estimated to be over 7 million. With a shrinking diaspora and no direct access to his followers in the TAR, the Dalai Lama's ability to act as a de facto political representative of the majority of Tibetans is increasingly symbolic rather than functional.⁶ This

¹ The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His Holiness's Middle Way Approach for Resolving the Issue of Tibet. <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach>.

² Central Tibetan Administration. "The Middle Way Policy." <https://tibet.net/important-issues/the-middle-way-policy/>.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Parikh, R. (2018, January 5). *Tibet's way forward: Marching down the middle path. The Bastion*. <https://thebastion.co.in/ideas/tibets-way-forward-marching-the-middle-path/>

⁵ Dorjee T. and Tsewang Rigzin (2024) "South Asia's Tibetan Refugee Community Is Shrinking, Imperiling Its Long-Term Future." Migration Policy Institute. Migration Information Source, February 8, 2024. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/tibetan-refugees-india..>

⁶ Dorjee T. and Tsewang Rigzin (2024) "South Asia's Tibetan Refugee Community Is Shrinking, Imperiling Its Long-Term Future." Migration Policy Institute. Migration Information Source, February 8, 2024. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/tibetan-refugees-india..>

demographic contraction weakens the institutional base of the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) and reduces the Dalai Lama's immediate constituency outside China, affecting both policy reach and community mobilisation capacity. This leads to a crisis of legitimacy of Dalai Lama's leadership as the head of the entirety of the Tibetan community.

Voices of Resistance and Resilience

Despite the authoritarian grip of the Chinese state over Tibet, expressions of dissent continue to emerge, through various acts. These acts represent not only protest against cultural and religious suppression but also the enduring spirit of resistance. Framing these actions as "voices of resistance and resilience" acknowledges the powerful, if constrained, agency of Tibetans who refuse to be silenced, even in the face of extreme repression.

Despite harsh assimilation efforts, Tibetans continue to assert their cultural identity through nonviolent, creative means. Movements like Lhakar, popularly known as "White Wednesday" have grown significantly.¹ Despite intense Chinese repression, the Dalai Lama has actively shaped the reignition of Tibet's identity by selecting his own successor outside China's sphere, a move widely seen as a bold reaffirmation of Tibetan religious and political autonomy. In early July 2025, just before his 90th birthday, he declared that his next incarnation would be identified by a conclave of trusted followers in the "free world," explicitly out of reach from Chinese interference.² This act of defiance highlights a critical assertion of Tibetan self-determination preserving the spiritual lineage on Tibetan terms. Though the Tibetan population and its protests remain under strict control and surveillance, there have still been episodes of widespread public dissent.

These acts of protest have also taken the form of self-immolation, a deeply tragic and symbolic expression of despair and resistance. Since 2009, it is estimated that over 150 Tibetans including monks, nuns, and laypeople, have set themselves on fire to protest Chinese rule and policies aimed at eroding Tibetan identity, religion, and freedoms.³ Another most prominent instances occurred in March 2008, when Tibet known for its deeply religious and peaceful Buddhist population erupted in widespread protests across the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and in ethnically Tibetan areas of neighbouring provinces. Some of these protests were peaceful, but others turned into riots and violence including the burning and looting of stores owned by Han Chinese, China's majority ethnic group. When violent rioting broke out in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, on March 14, 2008, after four days of peaceful protests, businesses owned by Chinese were looted and burned. At least 19 people were killed, most of them Han Chinese.⁴ The Chinese government's response to the protests and riots throughout Tibet was swift and extreme. By some estimates, the March protests culminated in the deaths of over 100 "unarmed" Tibetans many of them Buddhist monks.

Tibetan communities in exile also remain active in sustaining their heritage and political advocacy. In Dharamshala, gatherings such as "Tibet Alive: 65 Years of Resistance and Resilience" bring together diaspora leaders and U.S. policymakers to reaffirm commitment to Tibetan rights.⁵ Meanwhile, annual U.S.-based events like Tibet Lobby Day continue attracting lawmakers, activists, and celebrities—including Richard Gere, who recently urged the Tibetan youth to uphold the cause beyond the Dalai Lama's tenure.⁶ These high-profile initiatives ensure that Tibet remains present in international policy debates. NGOs focused on Tibetan rights, like the International Campaign for Tibet, Tibet Advocacy Coalition, Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), Free Tibet (UK) not only lobby world governments but also document ongoing repression in Tibet, sustaining global awareness.

Conclusion: Between Lost Statehood and Enduring Spirit

¹ Pasricha A. through Marsha James, Voice of America. "Tibetans Emphasize Cultural Identity Through 'Lhakar'." VOA Learning English, December 11, 2014. <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/tibetan-culture-identity-lhakar/2547877.html>.

² The Explainer (The Week) "What Has the Dalai Lama Achieved in Exile?" The Week, April 6, 2023. <https://theweek.com/world-news/what-has-the-dalai-lama-achieved>

³ U.S. Department of State. (2019). *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: China (includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau) – Tibet*. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/tibet>

⁴ Stokes D. (2010) "Conflict over Tibet: Core Causes and Possible Solutions." Beyond Intractability, University of Colorado. <https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/stokes-tibet>

⁵ International Campaign for Tibet. (ICT) "Events Showcase 65 Years of Tibetan Resistance and Resilience." ICT, March 10, 2024. <https://savetibet.org/events-showcase-65-years-of-tibetan-resistance-and-resilience/>

⁶ Das Krishna N. Reuters (2025) 'Many lifetimes of commitment': Richard Gere vows to keep fighting for Tibetan cause, 3 July. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/many-lifetimes-commitment-richard-gere-vows-keep-fighting-tibetan-cause-2025-07-03/>

Chinese authorities consistently characterize Tibetan nationalism as a fabricated, foreign-backed agenda, rather than a genuine expression of indigenous political identity. The Chinese state narrative portrays the Tibetan struggle not as a legitimate demand for autonomy or cultural preservation, but as a Western-influenced separatist movement orchestrated by the Dalai Lama and his supporters to undermine China's sovereignty. China frequently issues stern warnings to the international community, urging states and institutions to refrain from engaging with or legitimizing the Dalai Lama, viewing such actions as interference in its internal affairs.

Despite this hostile domestic environment and shrinking international political space, the Tibetan community has managed to sustain its nationalist aspirations and preserve its distinct identity.¹ Through strategic engagement with diaspora networks, human rights advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and the moral authority of the Dalai Lama himself, Tibetans have continued to attract meaningful international attention and support, even if limited in formal diplomatic terms. This endurance highlights the resilience of Tibetan nationalism, which, while politically constrained, remains symbolically powerful on the global stage.

Realistically, the future does not hold space for an independent Tibetan state. Nor, under current conditions, does there appear to be a viable path toward genuine autonomy within the People's Republic of China. China's stance is unyielding, and international interest is fading. Yet, this is not the end of Tibet. While political aspirations may falter, the resilience of the Tibetan people, both within Tibet and across the diaspora, continues to preserve the spirit of Tibet. Through education, religious practice, digital activism, and cultural expression, Tibetans are keeping their heritage alive. With limited but crucial support from sympathetic governments, NGOs, and civil society actors, this non-state resistance will endure, even as the political future remains uncertain.

Tibet's future may be uncertain but its spirit is resilient.

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