

The Big Read **Tibet**

The looming succession battle over the Dalai Lama

The passing of Tibet's spiritual leader could spark one of the most extraordinary stand-offs in global politics

John Reed in Dharamshala and **Joe Leahy** in Beijing 6 HOURS AGO

On a rainy Thursday morning in July, many thousands of people gathered at the Namgyal monastery in McLeod Ganj, northern India, to mark the 14th Dalai Lama's 88th birthday.

The Tibetan spiritual leader has said he plans to live beyond the age of 113, and will address the matter of his reincarnation — including whether he is reincarnated at all — in two years' time, when he is 90.

“I am still determined to serve everyone for the next few decades,” he told a large crowd of Tibetan exiles, Indians and foreigners, speaking of his mission to “serve all sentient beings”, and joking about the fact that he still had all his teeth. “You should also make your prayers for my long life.”

But behind the scenes, there are already signs that both the Tibetan exile community and the Chinese leadership are stepping up preparations for his passing — an event that has the potential to spark one of the most extraordinary stand-offs in international politics.

The death of the Dalai Lama could set up a contest between the atheist communist leaders in Beijing and exiled Tibetan Buddhists over who gets to orchestrate the opaque spiritual rituals that have been used in the past to “discover” his reincarnation and anoint a successor.

It would be a tug of war that could also draw in India and the US, making the Nobel laureate's health and prospects for longevity a matter of growing international interest well beyond the exile hub of Dharamshala in India.

The exile community's political leadership say the succession process — which they frame in religious terms — lies entirely in the control of the Dalai Lama. Devout Tibetans believe that certain highly accomplished lamas are reborn as *tulkus*, or reincarnated lamas.





“With regards to reincarnation, it lies completely with His Holiness because it is His Holiness who is going to be reborn,” Penpa Tsering, the Sikyong or leader of the India-based Central Tibetan Administration, tells the Financial Times. “So it will be [the] people or institutions that he will entrust [who will] look for his reincarnation and he might leave definite signs as to where he will be born.”

At the same time, the community is starting to make preparations for “logistics” and other arrangements that will accompany the Dalai Lama’s passing, says the Sikyong. This includes how to communicate with the international community and how to accommodate what are expected to be large numbers of international visitors to Dharamshala, if he dies there.

“As an administration or a government, like every government around the world, there needs to be protocols developed in such an eventuality whenever that comes, and those are being prepared,” he says.

Meanwhile, Tibetan exiles and foreign analysts say China, which claims it has the final say over the appointment as its last emperors the Qing dynasty did in the past, is cementing preparations for its own parallel selection process. They believe this might be a rerun of its installation of a Panchen Lama — Tibetan Buddhism’s second spiritual leader — in 1995. (Exiles say the Panchen Lama is not recognised by the majority of Tibetans.)

The transition, when it comes, could emerge as a new and potent source of friction between China and India, which has hosted the Dalai Lama since he fled into exile in 1959, at a time when the two Asian giants are at odds over their shared border. The long-simmering dispute flared into deadly violence in eastern Ladakh in 2020.

It will almost certainly resonate in the US at a time of already intense Sino-American rivalry. The current Dalai Lama has vocal bipartisan support. The Tibet Policy and Support Act, passed in 2020, calls for sanctions to be imposed on any Chinese officials that interfere in the process of selecting Tibetan leaders, including the Dalai Lama. In December, Washington slapped sanctions on two Chinese officials for alleged “serious human rights violations” in Tibet.

The process also promises to be an extraordinary spectacle, as Chinese communist leaders seek to shape and spin a religious ritual guided by visions, portents and centuries of tradition — a notion that Tibetans in exile deride.



The 14th Dalai Lama celebrates his 88th birthday in Dharamsala. The Tibetan Buddhist community is starting to make preparations for 'logistics' and other arrangements that will accompany his passing © AFP via Getty Images

“On the one hand they believe in communism, which calls Buddhism or any religion an opium, and at the same time they are interested in recognising the reincarnation, which is very much a religious thing,” says Lhakdor, a monk who serves as director of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamshala. “This is rank, sheer lying and using force - nothing to do with religion.”

For China’s Communist party, securing a smooth transition is crucial to ensuring not only political control over the country’s roughly 7mn Tibetans but also stability in a region with one of the country’s most volatile international borders.

Known in China as the Tibet Autonomous Region, the area's inhabitants are nominally guaranteed some independence in areas such as education and language as an ethnic minority under Chinese law. But in reality, while China says it has brought greater development and tourism to the region, it has ruled it with an iron hand, critics say, imposing martial law in the 1980s, maintaining tight censorship, controlling religious teaching and arresting dissidents.

One of the foundational elements of the party's own narrative about modern China is that in 1950 it "liberated" Tibet, then an independent country, from economic backwardness and feudal serfdom. If the Tibetan succession process proves messy, or if a potential 15th Dalai Lama is not a docile supporter of Beijing, that version of history will be harder to sustain.

"If there are two Dalai Lamas, it will come down to how people inside Tibet react," says Tansen Sen, professor of history at New York University Shanghai. "Ultimately, are they [the party] going to be able to convince the Tibetan people?" Consulting Tibetans, he adds, "is not something they really have invested a lot of time on".

'A look of joy on his face'

The current, 14th Dalai Lama was identified in 1937, four years after his predecessor's death, in the farming village of Taktser in what is now China's Qinghai province, which then was on the fringes of the Tibetan region of Amdo.

A reincarnated lama can be located on the basis of senior Buddhist clergy's visions, or through other ritual practices. The deceased lama's followers will visit certain children to see whether they are drawn to them or are familiar with the deceased's belongings.





The 14th Dalai Lama in 1939, the year he was formally recognised. Two years earlier, he was found in the farming village of Taktser in what is now China's Qinghai province © Popperfoto via Getty Images

“Normally what they do is when one lama dies, then the followers and others form a search party and go to different places and look for a child of around [the right] age,” explains Lhakdor, the archivist. “And then ask the question whether anything extraordinarily or unusual has happened in the family, things like that.”

After the death of the current Dalai Lama’s predecessor in 1933, then-independent Tibet’s clerical leaders in Lhasa dispatched three search parties. One trekked deep into Amdo on the basis of a vision from the Tibetan regent at the time, the Reting Rinpoche, at the sacred lake of Lhamo La-tso.

Hearing word of a local two-year-old called Lhamo Thondup, the party visited his family. They were impressed when the toddler pulled at a rosary the party’s leader was wearing, and correctly identified him by his Buddhist name.

On a second visit, in the account of the Dalai Lama’s biographer Alexander Norman, they were greeted by the boy, who was wearing a jumpsuit and “had a look of joy on

his face”. He then correctly identified objects that had belonged to the deceased 13th Dalai Lama, including a rosary, a cane, a length of fabric and a drum.

Tibetan exiles have indicated they will follow similar traditional practices after the spiritual leader’s death.

For his part, the Dalai Lama has made it clear that China should have no say in his reincarnation. In a statement released in 2011, he said that when he was “about 90”, he would consult with high lamas, the Tibetan public and other followers of Tibetan Buddhism and “re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not”.

The speech also raised the possibility of an “emanation” who would take the title and role while he was still alive. He said it was “particularly inappropriate” for the Chinese communists, who explicitly reject the idea of past and future lives, to “meddle in the system of reincarnation and especially the reincarnations of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lamas”.



A member of India's security forces guards a highway near the Tibetan border. The prospect of having two competing Dalai Lamas based in China and India threatens to make tensions worse © Reuters

In other remarks, the spiritual leader has said he will not be reborn in a Tibet that is “not free”. He has spent much of his time recently in Buddhist communities outside China, including India’s northern Ladakh territory, prompting speculation that the

next Dalai Lama might come from there. Two previous Dalai Lamas were born outside Tibet — the fourth in Mongolia and the sixth in what is now India’s north-eastern territory of Arunachal Pradesh.

“The succession is something that’s exercising everyone’s minds, because there are so many hopes and expectations centred around the Dalai Lama,” says Amitabh Mathur, a former adviser to the Indian ministry of home affairs on Tibet.

The British and Tibetans drew up the border between Tibet and what was then British India in the Simla treaty of 1914. Today Beijing disputes it, arguing that Tibet was under Chinese control at the time and had no right to negotiate its own boundaries.

The frontier has been a source of lasting conflict between China and India. The two countries fought a war over it in 1962 and have clashed repeatedly along the Line of Actual Control, the disputed de facto border. In 2020 Indian and Chinese troops fought in and around the Galwan valley in Ladakh in brutal hand-to-hand combat at high altitudes that killed at least 24. Chinese troops blocked off at least two areas their Indian counterparts can no longer control; India describes them as “friction points” and an obstacle to restoring normal relations.

In recent years, China has invested heavily in infrastructure in Tibet, expanding existing airports and approving the construction of new ones, according to state media. It has also opened a 435-kilometre high-speed railway to Lhasa. China touts the works as a means to raise low living standards in one of the country’s poorest regions but they also have strategic military objectives, analysts say.

“Now we have a lot of infrastructure in Tibet. I think it’s not only for the people’s prosperity but also because Tibet is very huge, very large,” says Qian Feng, director of the research department at the National Strategy Institute at Tsinghua University in Beijing. “We use good infrastructure to safeguard our borders and we do not want any foreign powers to take our territory again.”





Chinese soldiers look on as Tibetan monks lay down their arms in 1959, the year the Dalai Lama fled into exile © AFP via Getty Images

The infrastructure drive has been watched with alarm in India, which says it will not restore normal relations with China until “peace and tranquillity” at the border have been restored.

The prospect of having two competing Dalai Lamas based in China and India threatens to make tensions between the two countries worse.

Tibetan analysts and exiles believe Beijing’s replacement of a Panchen Lama chosen by the Dalai Lama nearly two decades ago could be a template for what might happen when he dies. Notwithstanding the Communist party’s embrace of atheism — eight years ago President Xi Jinping said members must be “unyielding Marxist atheists” — China’s leadership has steadily inserted itself into the business of metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls, and the identification of *tulkus*.

In the early 1990s, Beijing indicated it would allow Tibetans to use traditional processes to select reincarnated lamas, while reserving the right to confirm them, as Chinese emperors had done in previous centuries.

But in 1995 the party’s stance hardened. That year, after the Dalai Lama chose a new Panchen Lama, Beijing abducted the boy and his family. They have not been seen since, prompting regular calls for their release, including from Washington. Beijing installed its own Panchen Lama, who lives mostly in the Chinese capital and has said that the state alone can select Tibetan spiritual leaders and authorise searches for reincarnated lamas.

In 2007, China’s central government issued an edict formalising these regulations. Beijing has installed four-person Communist party working groups in every Tibetan village, part of whose job is to ensure that everything goes smoothly during the transition, experts believe.

China's propaganda machine has reinforced its claims that it has ultimate control over the selection process. In a recently broadcast documentary, experts describe how the selection process for the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama is controlled by the Communist party. At the Museum of Tibetan Culture in Beijing, an exhibit shows a special identity card that the state issues to Tibet's reincarnated lamas.



The 11th Panchen Lama in Beijing in 2020. He was installed by Chinese authorities after they abducted the original 11th Panchen Lama chosen by the Dalai Lama in 1995 © China News Service via Getty Images

Robert Barnett, a Tibet specialist at Soas, University of London, says there are indications that the party is already preparing for the transition process. The regional government has reportedly set up a 25-person “preparatory search committee” probably led by Tibet’s top official, the party secretary, as it did in the 1990s for the Panchen Lama. “This will almost certainly be the same set-up,” says Barnett.

Tenzin Lekshay, a spokesman for the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamshala, says that Chinese authorities are preparing young lamas inside Tibet “to be in the search team to recruit or appoint the next Dalai Lama”.

The exile communities’ Sikyong is scathing about the notion of “two Dalai Lamas”. If China attempts to control the process, he says, the exiles will choose their own. “Would China want a life-long headache on their hands, or not?” he adds.

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“Let’s see whether his promises the Dalai Lama outlives the Communist party or the Communist party outlives the Dalai Lama,” he says. “It’s something they have to think about.”

He adds: “That’s why I say Chinese leaders need more common sense.”

A middle way?

Some analysts have discerned in the Dalai Lama’s 2011 remarks on his succession a potential source of reconciliation between China and the exiles. “He’s not deciding what the system will be, what he’s saying is it could be anything,” says Barnett. “That’s a pre-negotiating signal.”

While often sharp in his rhetoric about China’s communist leadership, the Tibetan spiritual leader has pursued a “middle way” in relations with Beijing. That means not seeking independence for Tibet — a notion which enjoys no formal support from any country — while pursuing autonomy for all Tibetans living inside China, including in the autonomous region and the two adjoining provinces where many Tibetans live. The Dalai Lama has held talks with China’s government in the past, the last round of which ended more than a decade ago.



Activists in Kolkata, India, protest against China’s treatment of Tibet. There are fears Beijing will seek to hijack the choosing of the 15th Dalai Lama © AFP via Getty Images

NYU's Sen says that if future talks led by the Chinese government could bring exiled Tibetans in India, the wider diaspora, and those inside China together, it could ease tensions both within Tibet and on the border. "I think there is an opportunity there for the Chinese government if they are willing to . . . resolve the issue, without pushing too hard."

But tougher attitudes are also emerging among a new generation of younger Tibetan exiles, some of whom support independence.

"We continue to fight for the complete independence of Tibet, based on our historical independence status," says Sonam Tsering, 31, general secretary of the Tibetan Youth Congress, one of the exiles' largest non-governmental groups. "And we keep on saying that we don't trust the current communist government."

Tsering fled his family home in central Tibet on foot at the age of 10 with a group of about 40 people, many of them children. They went first to Nepal and then Dharamshala, a journey that took more than two months.

Before departing, he remembers being asked by his parents if he wanted to "go to India to get the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama". He says: "Out of five siblings, they chose me." He had to cut contact with his parents out of concerns for their safety, he says.

Tsering takes solace in the fact that the Dalai Lama has said his reincarnation will be born in a "free" country. "He has kindly accepted that he will live long enough to solve the Tibetan issue," Tsering says.

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