

Testimony of Ellen Bork
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. I am also grateful to the Commission staff for their advice and expertise.

The Trump Administration began, and the Biden Administration continues to chart a profound change in American policy toward Communist Party ruled China.

So far, however, Tibet has not been the focus of significant policy revisions by the executive branch. Certainly, Tibet today would be far down the list of most Americans' concerns when it comes to China. Compared to China's aggression in the South China Sea, coercive financial diplomacy and the threat to Taiwan, Tibet is sometimes viewed as a closed albeit tragic chapter of history.

By contrast, more than 70 years after the invasion, Tibet remains a high priority, for the Chinese Communist Party. This priority is evident in the attention and resources the Party devotes to surveillance, repression and control, to General Secretary Xi Jinping's goal of Sinicizing religion, to the exploitation of natural resources and to building up military forces along Tibet's border with India.

Furthermore, the Party's ambitions regarding Tibet are international and expansive. They are a part of China's assault on liberal democratic norms. This in turn serves Beijing's ultimate goal of gaining international deference to its choice of the next Dalai Lama. Preventing that, reversing the diminution of support for the Dalai Lama and building support for Tibetan democracy should play a much greater role in America's response to China.

The foundations of American Tibet policy make this more difficult than it should be. A look back at history shows that America's Tibet policy is not the product of historical facts, or principles of international law, but rather of outdated perceptions of America's strategic interest in subordinating Tibet to China.

Washington had little involvement in Tibet until World War II. Before then, the US favored China's territorial integrity even while its empire was disintegrating. During World War II, Washington was allied with Chiang Kai-Shek. That relationship had profound and lasting effect on Tibet.

Chiang hoped to recover lost imperial territory, including Tibet. American officials did not wish to undermine him, even though officials knew that he exerted no authority there and they considered that Tibet had been *de facto* independent for decades since the collapse of imperial rule.

Also damaging was Washington's acceptance of imperial Britain's assertion of Chinese "suzerainty" over Tibet. Less than sovereignty, suzerainty is an anachronistic and inapt concept which neither Tibet nor China accepted but which imperial Britain introduced in order to fend off Russia's eastward advance during the geopolitical competition in the region known as the Great Game.

Even so, American officials seemed uncomfortable with the term, and resisted using it. From the 1940s through the 1960s, in internal documents, officials considered different views of Tibet's status in response to developments. At the time of the invasion, a memo by the State Department's legal advisor suggested that recognition of Tibetan independence was a possibility. Later on, in the 1960s, there was sympathy for the idea of Tibetan self-determination, including in a letter from the Secretary of State to the Dalai Lama. But it was easy enough to say this while doing little except provide some support to Tibetan rebels, and while the US was still allied with Chiang Kai-shek who had fled to Taiwan.

Only decades after the invasion did the US recognize Chinese sovereignty. In 1987, the State Department, responding to questions about unrest in Tibet, dated this position to 1978. That reference appears to have been an internal decision rather than a public statement. And it took place around the time of the break in relations with Taipei. Visiting Beijing in August 1979, Vice President Mondale told Deng Xiao-ping, "our position, whenever asked, is that Tibet is part of China." The Vice President also said that henceforth, the Dalai Lama would be received as a religious figure, not a political leader."

In short, America's approach to Tibet fluctuated according to its perception of its strategic interests with regard to China – and with regard to which Chinese

government it favored – the Republic of China or the People’s Republic of China. Ultimately, Washington transferred its deference to China over Tibet from a cultish dictatorship that that never exerted authority there to a cultish totalitarian regime that invaded and repressed it.

Once this was done, Tibet became problematic within US-PRC relations. As Melvyn Goldstein writes, “with policy focused on improving its accommodation with China, Tibet became “an embarrassment for the United States,” “no longer relevant to U.S. national interests” and even “potentially harmful.”¹ The characterization of Tibet as a problem in US-China relations that should be neutralized, including for Tibet’s own sake, has persisted.

Of course, this approach to Tibet, and the decision to accept the PRC’s sovereignty, meant that the democratization of the theocratic government in exile – and the illegitimacy of Party rule there -- could not be a major factor in America’s policy. The extraordinary accomplishment of Tibet’s democracy in exile would not be discussed alongside among the democratic transitions in the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea at the end of the last century which have shaped America’s approach to the region ever since. It should also be noted that America’s approach to Tibet had been out of step with the principled stance Washington took against communist aggression in Europe and the annexation of the Baltic states.

For its part, the CCP has maintained an ambitious agenda for Tibet, and not only inside its borders. In neighboring countries, it has used border settlements, security relationships, investment and the development and appropriation of Buddhist sites to advance its interests. In fact, even today, Chinese officials maintain territorial ambitions with regard to Tibet, speaking of parts of northeastern India as “Southern Tibet” and putting pressure on India across the Tibet-India border.

¹ Melvyn Goldstein, *Snow Lion and the Dragon*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 57-58.

Beijing also pursues its Tibet agenda aggressively in foreign capitals and international organizations. Beijing uses its self-proclaimed “core interest” in Tibet to impose litmus tests in the United Nations, and in foreign capitals. In this way, Tibet is an instrument of the Party’s assault on liberal democratic norms. It is also intended to help the Party win international deference to its selection of the next Dalai Lama.

In 2019, I convened a group with expertise in Tibet, China, India, and American foreign policy for to consider how governments would respond when the Dalai Lama dies, and China seeks to install an impostor. The group concluded that the Dalai Lama’s succession is a matter of strategic competition and should be viewed as such by the U.S. and its democratic allies.

A final note: the Party’s intense propaganda and control makes it seem that Chinese people are irredeemably nationalist when it comes to Tibet. This has an effect inside China, of course, but also outside, making new thinking about Tibet seem hopeless. In fact, leading Chinese dissidents have offered criticism of Party policies in Tibet. Going back to Wei Jingsheng, and continuing to Liu Xiaobo and Xu Zhiyong, pro-democracy activists, lawyers and others have bravely linked Tibet’s fate to China’s, stressing that the solution for both Tibetans and Chinese is democracy. Liu Xiaobo wrote in 2008, “a confrontation between freedom and dictatorship has been made to look like a clash between ethnicities.”² The democracy manifesto, Charter 08, referenced Tibet indirectly in its call for a “federation of democratic communities of China” and the resolution of “disputes in the national minority areas of China... to find a workable framework within which all ethnic and religious groups can flourish.”

This is a message from inside China that American officials should consider. Taken together with the democratic achievement of the Tibetan people in exile, the U.S. can chart a new approach based on Tibet’s strategic importance, not only in the territorial sense, but in the ideological one.

² Liu Xiaobo, “So Long as Han Chinese Have No Freedom, Tibetans Will Have No Autonomy,” April 11, 2008, *No Enemies, No Hatred*, Perry Link, Tienchi Martin-Liao, Liu Xia, editors, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 263.

A few recommendations follow:

Renew and redouble support for Chinese and Tibetan political prisoners, dissidents, democracy activists, independent journalists and lawyers

Conduct an independent review of U.S. Tibet policy since the end of Chinese imperial rule, including the diplomatic history, and internal deliberations that have influenced America's approach to Tibet.

Bring Tibet policy into line with America's interest in combating China's assault on democratic norms, including international law, and in advancing democracy in the Indo-Pacific by enlisting allies in a united position on the integrity of the Tibetan process for selecting the next Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, or his designee, should regain the access he once had in foreign capitals.

Receive elected officials of the Central Tibet Administration (CTA), the Sikyong, his cabinet and other Tibetan officials at the highest levels of government and include them in the Summit for Democracy and other gatherings.

Make Tibet a part of efforts to counter Chinese influence in international organizations, on university campuses and at the state and local level.