Tibet, Geopolitics, and U.S. National Interests

Testimony before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing on
"Tibet from All Angles: Protecting Human Rights, Defending Strategic Access, and Challenging China's Export of Censorship Globally"

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Michael J. Green
Senior Vice President for Asia, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
Director of Asian Studies, The Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
Georgetown University

I welcome the opportunity to appear before the Commission to address the geopolitical context of U.S. policy on Tibet. Those who argue that U.S. "policy" should somehow be distinguished from our "values" as a nation display a fundamental misunderstanding of our national interests and our own history. As I argued in a recent book on U.S. strategy since the birth of our Republic, American statecraft has successfully prevented the rise of hostile hegemonic powers in Asia not by force of arms or realpolitik alone, but also by investing in democratic norms and open societies. In Tibet, as in many other parts of Asia today, our consistent support for those same universal norms will have an important impact on whether China uses its growing power for coercion and hegemonic control, or finds ways to contribute to regional prosperity consistent with the needs and expectations of her people and her neighbors.

The powerful aspirations of the Tibetan people for dignity, religious freedom, and cultural autonomy intersect with rising geopolitical tensions along the Himalayan plateau. China's insecurity about this region is deeply rooted. Britain intrigued against Russia in Tibet as part of the "Great Game" at the turn of the 20th century. Some historians argue that the iconic Tibetan flag was inspired by Japanese spies fomenting anti-Chinese nationalism and offering Japan's own "rising sun" flag as a model. The first CIA agent killed in the line of duty died smuggling guns and money to Tibet. In 2008 China's Central Military Commission ranked Tibet as the most critical sovereignty challenge, ahead of Xinjiang and Taiwan.

The flipside of insecurity is expansionism and Beijing has made dramatic moves to assert strategic dominance over the Himalayan plateau at the expense of rival India. India and China have 37% of the world's population but only 10% of the world's water supply, with India and much of the rest of South and Southeast Asia relying on the Brahmaputra and other rivers flowing from the Himalayas. Beijing has already completed two of three water transfer programs diverting billions of cubic meters of river waters yearly into China. The highly controversial

third leg of that plan is designed to divert waters from the Tibetan plateau into China. Beijing suspended agreements on hydrological information sharing with India in 2017 and has refused international demands for transparency on plans for damming rivers in and around the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Beijing has also made moves to establish military dominance in areas contested with India – paralleling similar moves to militarize artificial islands in the South China Sea, but in this case at an altitude of over 10,000 feet. Satellite photos have revealed PLA militarization of Doclam, with new helipads, roads, and hardened fortifications only dozens of meters from the Indian Army's forward outposts. When India tested a ballistic missile capable of hitting China's coastal cities in January (a capability China already has against India), the official Chinese media called for the PLA Navy to expand into the India Ocean to outflank Indian forces. The Tibetans struggle is thus occurring at the epicenter of China's aggressive attempt to consolidate and expand control of its periphery within the Eurasian continent.

Finally, the Tibetan people's aspirations are colliding with the greatest vulnerability of the Chinese Communist Party –that party's inability to accommodate the growing and legitimate spiritual and social demands of all its 1.4 billion citizens. This includes the most senior figures in the Communist Party. We know, for example, that Li Peng, the premier who ordered the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, converted to Tibetan Buddhism in his old age. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama put it in an address at CSIS in 2007, "when you're 80 years old, socialism with Chinese characteristics is not so useful!"

Driven by these insecurities, Beijing has chosen to turn away from dialogue with His Holiness on legitimate questions of religious and cultural autonomy and instead to try to break the will of the Tibetan people through a combination of repression, Han-ization of the Tibet Autonomous Region, massive economic infrastructure investment, and political control of the succession to the 15th Dalai Lama.

Steady U.S. support for the Tibetan people is therefore both morally and strategically imperative. U.S. support is necessary to demonstrate that we will not turn a blind eye to coercion by China in any one part of Asia in order to win China's support in another. Because if it is Tibet today, it could be Taiwan tomorrow, or even Japan. U.S. support is also necessary to demonstrate to the Tibetan people that His Holiness was right to champion the "Middle Way" of dialogue with Beijing within the context of China's own constitution and that those brave and long-suffering people do not have to choose either surrender or violent revolution. In addition, U.S. support is necessary to reinforce solidarity behind Tibet in the broader democratic world, which faltered in 2009 –particularly in Europe--when President Obama chose not to meet His Holiness in Washington. And, finally, U.S. support is necessary because China's closing of Tibet to the

outside world is exacerbating geopolitical tensions with India that will have ramifications for Asian stability writ large.

The Trump administration has not fully stepped up to this reality. The administration's announcement of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy certainly points to the right framing of how to incorporate our values in regional policies. However, this is the first President and the in two decades who has chosen not to raise Tibet in meetings with his Chinese counterparts, at least as far as we know. Finally, the United States still does not have a Tibet Coordinator as required under legislation. I understand that Secretary Tillerson responded to Senator Corker's letter on this subject by explaining that the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights would be double-hatted to fulfill the role as coordinator, but no one has been nominated for that post and a search on the Under Secretary's home page for "Tibet" produces multiple hits noting that Tibet is part of China and a few references to the last human rights report, but little else.

The administration should also support the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2017. CSIS hosted some of the party officials from the TAR to discuss the situation in Tibet in 2008 and I found it useful. If necessary, a Presidential waiver can be used to accommodate officials interested in genuine dialogue on Tibet in the future, but the legislation is necessary to help blunt Beijing's effort to close off Lhasa and the surrounding region to outside journalists, scholars, officials and tourists. Reciprocity of access is a fundamental principle of stable international relations.

I would conclude by emphasizing that U.S. policy has been aimed at achieving what Beijing itself has claimed to support in its own constitution and in prior dialogues with representatives of His Holiness – respect for the cultural, religious, and social rights of the Tibetan people. To retreat from that now would be to signal acceptance of the logic that Chinese power must be accommodated, even when that power is used to reverse rules, norms, and understandings that have contributed to peace, prosperity and U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific for many decades. Thank you.