

## Next President Needs More Substantive Tibet Policy

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Democrats and Republicans agree that China must moderate its aggressive, oppressive policies concerning religious and personal freedom in Tibet and establish some kind of detente between the Chinese government and the Dali Lama. There is no doubt that Tibet will remain a central part of foreign policy in the new administration regardless of who wins the November election. The question most want answered is will the U.S. help formulate a substantive plan for religious and political autonomy for Tibet.

Just this week both Barack Obama and John McCain outlined their proposed China policies in the American Chamber of Commerce in China's monthly magazine for the American ex-patriate community. Sen. Obama argues that the protection of human rights in China and Tibet "Will not weaken China as its leaders may fear, but will provide long term stability and prosperity ... Protection of the unique cultural and religious traditions of the Tibetan people is an integral part of such an agenda." In April, Obama echoed this theme in a personal letter to Tibetan religious leader, the Dali Lama, saying "The right to practice their religious beliefs without punishment or obstruction is one that should be accorded the people of Tibet, and I will continue to encourage the Chinese government to put aside its suspicions and act in accordance with its own Constitution."

In his essay, Sen. McCain takes a similar stance on human rights but uses broader strokes. He writes that "combined with its rapid military modernization, lack of political freedom ... tend(s) to undermine the very international system upon which its rise depends." Although he doesn't go into detail here, McCain has a strong record on human rights for Tibet. He has called for reconciliation between China and the Dali Lama. He has also publicly demanded the release of Tibetan prisoners and genuine autonomy for Tibet. McCain has also said good relations are welcome between the U.S. and China, but the suppression of rights there must be addressed.

The religious and political conflict between China and Tibet is often overshadowed by and confused with the widespread Western interest in Tibetan Buddhism and its spiritual leader the Dali Lama. Most nations, including the U.S., consider Tibet part of China, as does the Dali Lama himself. He has expressly disclaimed any intention to seek sovereignty or right of nationhood for Tibet - only greater autonomy and freedom for Tibet within China.

Elliott Sperling, director of the Tibetan Studies program at Indiana University explains the conflicting historical claims of the Tibetans and the Chinese In an Op-Ed column for the New York Times. In the modern era, from 1912 until the invasion by Mao Tsedong's People's Republic of China in 1949, The Dalai Lama's government alone ruled the land

until 1951 when it was forced into exile. Religion is tightly regulated as is the number of men who may become monks. Any references to the current Dali Lama including photographs are forbidden. Foreign tourists are advised to remove information about Tibet's history and religion from guidebooks and from talking politics or religion with the locals - to do so could lead to detention and arrest. The Chinese have established a strong military presence in Lhasa, Tibet's capital and spiritual center. There is also a rapid influx of Chinese to the region that bring with them shopping malls hotels and high end restaurants. There is concern that Chinese may eventually squeeze out native Tibetan culture by assimilation if not by force.

Policy analysts who have been involved with human rights issues in Tibet know the U.S. wants China to ease its grip on Tibet, but are concerned that neither side has an articulated policy beyond urging the two sides to meet. For many Americans, both campaigns offer more of the same. Commenting on the essays in AmCham, the China Law Blog, a business law blog run by Harris & Moure, a Seattle law firm is much more cynical, as are many China-watchers and Americans living in China. They wrote: "The summary of both is that China has done great things(duh!), still has a ways to go(duh!), and the US should cooperate, except where it does not make sense to do so (duh!). Yada, yada, yada."

"Both will explore the realm of the possible and will put their weight behind it. All of the recent administrations have met with the Dali Lama and have spoken out on human rights in Tibet," said Mary Beth Markey, vice president for International Advocacy for the International Campaign for Tibet in a phone interview. Markey has more than 20 years experience in the area of China and Tibet policy and believes the candidates' intentions are good - as far as they go. "Obama has a world vision," she says. "And McCain believes very deeply about people who are deprived of freedom. Both will explore the realm of the possible," she said, " They will certainly meet with the Dali Lama - every recent administration has met with the Dali Lama -- and they will put their weight behind the realm of the possible... the question is, will they push the envelope beyond the possible?"

"I'm looking to see if they could do something more substantive," said Michael C. Davis, a law professor at Chinese University in Hong Kong and author of numerous articles and papers on human rights policy and territorial sovereignty in China. "The message to China so far is 'talk to the Dali Lama.' It's a nice sentiment, but [U.S. policy] never goes any farther than that."

China began to emerge as an economic power 20 years ago and there have been many other milestones since then such as China's entry into the World Trade Organization. At that time Markey said the U.S. was in a position to be more forceful and have a greater effect on China-Tibet relations. "We would have created a more open system in China today, but we were thinking about short term gain. "Now we see a China that has emerged as a China that can say no."

"Hardliners are in charge of the Tibet policy," Davis said. "There are some people in the Chinese government who understand the overseas argument, but the people in charge of the policy don't get it at all and they aren't willing to give up anything."

He said the protests during the Olympic Torch Relay earlier this year raised hopes that the Chinese would respond to the global outcry. Instead, the Chinese people saw the protests as an insult to the Chinese people and culture as a whole and China remained unmoved.

Davis leans toward a policy similar to Obama's which will show the Chinese the benefits of relaxing its grip on Tibet. Davis said if the U.S. is going to move forward on Tibet, it is going to have to articulate a policy that allows China to deal with Tibet in a special way. "We have to start putting meat on the bones of our policy and have a vision of what a solution will look like. "Otherwise this will just spin out of control."

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