

Succession and Sovereignty: The Dalai Lama's Reincarnation and Its Implications for India-China Relations

Jnyanendra Barman*

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, 788011

*Corresponding Author Email: jnyanendrabarman59@gmail.com

Abstract: *The forthcoming succession of the 14th Dalai Lama has emerged as a critical juncture in South Asia's geopolitics. While Tibetan Buddhism treats the Dalai Lama's reincarnation as a spiritual matter, China has asserted political authority over the process, framing it as a sovereignty question. India, which has hosted the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and the Dalai Lama since 1959, faces a delicate strategic challenge: balancing its commitment to Tibetan refugees and spiritual traditions with the imperative of managing its strained relations with China. This article examines the intersection of religion and politics in the Dalai Lama's succession, analyzes China's attempts to control Tibetan Buddhism, and assesses how this contestation might influence India-China relations in the coming decades.*

Key Words: Dalai Lama, Reincarnation, Contested Succession, India-China

INTRODUCTION

The Dalai Lama's reincarnation transcended the spiritual domain to become a geopolitical flashpoint in Asia. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is not only a revered spiritual leader but also a global symbol of peace, nonviolence, and Tibetan cultural identity (Shakya, 2000). As he ages, the issue of succession looms large, raising profound implications not only for Tibetan Buddhism but also for international politics. The stakes are particularly high because succession sits at the intersection of religion, sovereignty, and great-power rivalry, especially in the context of India-China relations.

China's claim to exclusive authority over the reincarnation process is rooted in its assertion of sovereignty over Tibet, which it has governed since 1950 (Arpi, 2017). Despite its officially atheist ideology, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has issued regulatory frameworks, such as the 2007 "Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas" to institutionalize state control over Tibetan religious traditions. This reflects Beijing's view that the authority to recognize the next Dalai Lama is not a spiritual matter but an extension of state sovereignty. The CCP's strategy aims to ensure that the succession process yields a compliant spiritual leader who will legitimize Chinese rule in Tibet, mirroring its approach during the contested recognition of the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995 (Ellis-Petersen 2025). Conversely, the 14th Dalai Lama categorically rejected Beijing's claim. He asserted that his reincarnation would be decided exclusively by Tibetan religious authorities and, if necessary, could even occur outside Chinese-controlled territory (Pokharel et al., 2025). By emphasizing the role of the Gaden Phodrang Trust and Tibetan people in the succession process, the Dalai Lama aims to safeguard the institution's spiritual authenticity from political interference. His position not only challenges China's legitimacy but also internationalizes the question of Tibetan religious freedom and human rights (Kugelman 2025).

For India, which has hosted the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile since 1959, the succession issue has profound strategic and diplomatic significance (Arpi, 2017). India's historical engagement with Tibet oscillates between moral support for Tibetan autonomy and cautious diplomacy aimed at preserving stability in its complex relationship with China (Gokhale, 2021). The reincarnation dispute places India in a sensitive position: on the one hand, it is viewed as the natural guardian of Tibetan religious freedom, hosting major monasteries and the exile leadership; on the other, overt endorsement of the Dalai Lama's stance risks deepening tensions with Beijing,

particularly in the aftermath of recent border confrontations in Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020). Thus, the succession issue embodies a clash between spiritual legitimacy and political sovereignty, religious tradition and state control, and India's soft power advantage and China's authoritarian assertiveness. More than a symbolic battle, it has the potential to reshape Asia's strategic architecture by influencing India-China relations, Tibet's political future, and the global discourse on religious freedom (The Times of India, 2025). Therefore, this article seeks to examine how the question of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation is situated within broader geopolitical rivalries, with a particular focus on its implications for India-China relations in the 21st century.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The question of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation has gained renewed urgency in recent years as he 14th Dalai Lama approaches old age and both China and the Tibetan exile community articulate competing positions on succession. While existing scholarship has extensively examined Tibet's historical status, Sino-Tibetan relations, and India's Tibet policy (Shakya, 2000; Gokhale, 2021; Arpi, 2017), comparatively limited research systematically engages with the contemporary implications of the Dalai Lama's succession for India-China relations in the 21st century. Most studies focus on Tibet either as an internal challenge to Chinese sovereignty or as a humanitarian and cultural issue, often overlooking its geopolitical resonance for India's security and diplomacy. Moreover, the literature has yet to fully address how the competing narratives of "sovereignty" (as emphasized by China) and "spiritual legitimacy" (as maintained by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan exile community) shape regional stability and India's strategic choices. This research is thus necessitated by the growing likelihood of a contested succession, which could exacerbate India-China tensions and reshape the Tibet factor in bilateral relations. By situating the Dalai Lama's reincarnation debate within the broader dynamics of Asian geopolitics, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in the literature and contribute to a timely understanding of an issue with profound diplomatic and security implications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative and analytical methodologies to investigate the implications of the Dalai Lama's succession for India-China relations. This research is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, official statements, and credible media reports. These sources provide both the historical background of Tibet's political status and contemporary debates surrounding the succession question.

The methodology follows an interpretive approach, aiming to situate the Dalai Lama's reincarnation issue within the larger geopolitical framework of sovereignty, legitimacy, and strategic rivalry. This study uses a case-oriented strategy, focusing on key developments, such as China's 2007 regulations on reincarnation, the contested recognition of the 11th Panchen Lama, India's evolving Tibet policy, and the Dalai Lama's 90th birthday celebrations, to examine how religious succession intersects with state sovereignty and

international relations. In addition, the study adopts a comparative perspective, analyzing how China and India frame the Dalai Lama's succession differently: Beijing frames it as a matter of sovereignty and territorial integrity, while New Delhi frames it as a question linked to religious freedom, soft power, and security concerns. This comparative lens allows for a deeper understanding of the divergent narratives that have shaped bilateral relations.

HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND: TIBET, THE DALAI LAMA, AND EXILE POLITICS

The Tibet question cannot be fully understood without situating it in the *longue durée* of its historical, religious, and political evolution. Tibet maintained a distinct cultural and political identity prior to its incorporation into the PRC in 1950. For centuries, the institution of the Dalai Lama has occupied a unique position, embodying both temporal and spiritual authority. The "priest-patron" relationship between the Dalai Lamas and successive Chinese, Mongol, and Manchu rulers was historically fluid, often marked by religious legitimacy rather than direct political subordination (Shakya, 2000; Goldstein, 1997). This legacy challenges Beijing's assertion that Tibet has always been an inseparable part of China.

The 13th Dalai Lama's declaration of Tibetan independence in 1913, following the fall of the Qing dynasty, reinforced Tibet's claim to autonomous political status (Goldstein, 1997). Tibet conducted limited foreign relations and maintained internal governance structures until the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered the region in 1950. The subsequent Seventeen Point Agreement of 1951 formalized Tibet's "peaceful liberation," but in practice, subjected Tibet to Beijing's expanding control (Shakya, 2000). The agreement promised autonomy and protection of religious institutions; however, Chinese political consolidation and land reforms provoked widespread discontent.

The 1959 Lhasa Uprising marked a watershed moment, leading to the 14th Dalai Lama's flight into exile in India, where he established the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala. The CTA, often referred to as the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, has become the institutional embodiment of Tibetan political aspirations abroad. It developed a parliamentary system-in-exile, blending modern democratic practices with the religious authority of the Dalai Lama, thereby maintaining its legitimacy among the refugee community (McConnell, 2016). The exiled government institutionalized education, healthcare, and cultural preservation programs for Tibetans in India while continuing to advocate for Tibetan autonomy on the international stage.

Over time, the Dalai Lama's leadership evolved from advocating for full independence to the Middle Way Approach—a framework that seeks "genuine autonomy" within the Chinese constitution rather than outright secession (Bstan-1/dzin-Rgya-Mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 2010). This approach has received international attention but has been firmly rejected by Beijing, which regards it as a veiled attempt

at “separatism” (McConnell, 2016). The CCP’s simultaneous repression of Tibetan identity within Tibet and the delegitimization of exile institutions underscore the enduring contest over sovereignty and legitimacy.

Institutionally, exile politics has been significant for sustaining Tibetan identity and shaping India–China relations. India’s decision to host the Dalai Lama and Tibetan refugees after 1959 provided humanitarian relief but also created a structural irritant in bilateral ties with China (Gokhale, 2021). Dharamsala’s role as a global hub of Tibetan exile politics positions India at the center of the reincarnation debate, reinforcing the link between domestic refugee governance and high-level geopolitics. Thus, the historical trajectory of Tibet, the institution of the Dalai Lama, and the evolution of exile politics together form the foundation on which the contemporary succession question and its implications for India–China relations must be understood.

CHINA’S LEGAL-INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR REINCARNATION AND STATE CONTROL

One of the most contentious aspects of the Dalai Lama’s succession is Beijing’s assertion of its legal and institutional authority to regulate the reincarnation process. China’s approach is rooted in both historical precedent and modern legal instruments, with the Golden Urn system serving as the symbolic foundation of its claims. The Golden Urn system was introduced in 1793 by the Qing Emperor Qianlong through the “Twenty-Nine Article Ordinance for the More Effective Governing of Tibet.” This decree mandated the use of a lottery system, wherein the names of candidates for high reincarnations, including the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, were placed in a golden urn, and lots were drawn before the statue of the Buddha at the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa (Sperling, 2007). While the system was framed as a means of reducing corruption and aristocratic influence, it also institutionalized imperial oversight of Tibet’s religious hierarchy. In practice, the Golden Urn was used inconsistently, sometimes bypassed altogether when recognition was uncontested; however, its symbolic value has been revived by the People’s Republic of China as a key legitimizing device (Ardley, 2002).

In the contemporary period, the CCP has codified its control over reincarnation through a series of legal codes. The most significant of these is the 2007 State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) decree, “Management Measures for the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism.” Article 2 of the decree explicitly states that “no reincarnation of a living Buddha shall be recognized without government approval” (CECC, 2008). This regulation effectively places the authority to recognize tulkus (reincarnated lamas) in the hands of the Chinese state, subordinating spiritual legitimacy to political sovereignty.

By combining the Qing-era Golden Urn system with modern regulatory decrees, the CCP constructs a narrative of historical continuity that serves its sovereignty claim. The institutionalization of state authority over reincarnation reflects China’s broader strategy of securitizing religion in Tibet, framing it as a potential threat to national unity and stability (Goldstein 1997). Thus, the question of the Dalai Lama’s succession is not merely theological but is

deeply embedded in the CCP’s efforts to consolidate control over Tibet and preempt any challenges to its rule that might emerge from Dharamsala or beyond.

PRECEDENT: THE PANCHEN LAMA CASE AND CONTESTED RECOGNITION AS A TEMPLATE

The contested recognition of the 11th Panchen Lama in 1995 provides the most illustrative precedent for the political manipulation of Tibetan reincarnation and offers a template for how the Dalai Lama’s succession may unfold. Traditionally, the Panchen and Dalai Lamas have played complementary roles in recognizing each other’s reincarnations, a practice that institutionalizes spiritual continuity within Tibetan Buddhism (Goldstein, 1997). However, this balance was disrupted when the Chinese state asserted its unilateral authority over the Panchen Lama succession process.

In May 1995, the 14th Dalai Lama announced Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, a six-year-old boy from Lhari in Nagchu, Tibet, as the 11th Panchen Lama after a rigorous process of divination and consultation with senior religious figures. Within days, the child and his family were taken into Chinese custody and have not been seen in public since, leading international human rights groups to describe him as the “world’s youngest political prisoner” (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Beijing swiftly rejected the Dalai Lama’s choice and instead organized its own recognition ceremony, invoking the Golden Urn system as a legitimating mechanism. The result was the state-sanctioned enthronement of Gyaincain Norbu, who has since been groomed by the CCP as the “official” Panchen Lama (Ardley, 2002).

These dual recognitions created an enduring legitimacy crisis. Among Tibetans in exile and within Tibet, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima remains the authentic Panchen Lama, while Gyaincain Norbu is widely dismissed as a political appointee. Internationally, the case drew sharp criticism of Beijing’s interference in religious affairs; however, China consolidated its position by controlling religious institutions, monastic education, and pilgrimage networks to bolster the visibility of its Panchen Lama (Arpi 2017). This episode demonstrates the CCP’s strategy of combining legal authority, historical precedent (Golden Urn), and coercive control to impose its will over Tibetan religious succession.

The Panchen Lama precedent is critical because it provides a blueprint for the Dalai Lama’s succession crisis. Beijing has repeatedly emphasized that the next Dalai Lama must be chosen according to Chinese law and the Golden Urn procedure, thereby signalling its intention to replicate the model used in 1995 (Sperling 2007). This raises the likelihood of two competing Dalai Lamas: one chosen by Tibetan religious authorities in exile, potentially outside Tibet, and another appointed by the Chinese state in Lhasa. Such a dual succession would deepen divisions within Tibetan Buddhism, undermine the Tibetan community’s spiritual unity, and escalate the political confrontation between Dharamsala and Beijing.

For India, which hosts the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration, the Panchen Lama case underscores geopolitical stakes. If Beijing proceeds with its template, India will inevitably be drawn into the legitimacy

contest, as the exile-recognized Dalai Lama would likely reside in Indian territory. The Panchen Lama episode thus foreshadows the polarization of legitimacy vs. sovereignty, which is set to shape the future of Tibet, while simultaneously complicating India–China relations.

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS: INTERNATIONALISATION OF SUCCESSION AND STATE RESPONSES

In mid-2025, the long-running question over the Dalai Lama's succession moved decisively from scholarly debate into active diplomacy when the 14th Dalai Lama publicly clarified that his institution would continue and that the Gaden Phodrang Trust (his office) would have the authority to identify his successor, a statement that effectively rejected Beijing's claim to control the process. This announcement, delivered in the run-up to his 90th birthday, explicitly stated that any legitimate successor would be chosen by Tibetan religious authorities and, if necessary, be born outside Chinese-controlled territory (Das, 2025). China's immediate response was to restate the position it has maintained for decades: the succession of high Tibetan lamas is subject to Chinese law and must be approved by the central government, invoking both modern legal instruments (e.g., SARA measures) and historical devices (the Golden Urn) as the basis for that claim. Beijing publicly warned that unilateral moves on succession were a "thorn" in bilateral ties and signalled that it would not tolerate external interference in what it frames as a matter of sovereignty (Reuters, 2025).

The succession contest quickly internationalized, producing clear and varied responses from different states. India, the Dalai Lama's host country and home to the Central Tibetan Administration, publicly backed the Dalai Lama's prerogative, with government ministers affirming that only the Dalai Lama and his institution could decide his reincarnation; New Delhi's statement directly contradicted Beijing's claim and underscored how the issue amplified an already fraught India–China relationship (Reuters, 2025a).

The United States moved in parallel to restore targeted assistance to Tibetan communities and urged China to refrain from interfering in succession matters, signalling bipartisan Western interest in safeguarding Tibetan religious freedom (Reuters, 2025b). European actors have also become more visible. Members of the European Parliament and several EU human-rights ambassadors publicly urged Beijing not to interfere and called for protective measures for Tibetan religious rights, while NGOs and human-rights organizations (Amnesty, ICT, International Campaign for Tibet) condemned state interference and called on democracies to defend the Tibetan community's autonomy in choosing a successor (Amnesty International, 2025; International Campaign for Tibet, 2025).

These concrete state responses illustrate two dynamics of immediate relevance. First, succession is no longer merely a ritual or intra-religious question; it has become a diplomatic variable that states can and do use to signal values, press geopolitical advantage, and mobilize constituencies (e.g., diaspora communities, parliamentary human-rights networks). Second, the pattern of responses reveals a bifurcation: China frames succession as an assertion

of sovereignty enforceable through law and administrative practice, whereas democratic states view interference as a human rights and religious freedom issue that requires multilateral attention and protective action. If Beijing attempts to install a state-sanctioned successor while the exile community and sympathetic governments recognize a different claimant, the likely outcome is an institutionalized duality of legitimacy, a scenario that would intensify bilateral tensions (especially between India and China), invite continued internationalization of the Tibet question, and complicate the diplomacy surrounding Himalayan security.

INDIA'S DILEMMA: STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND RELIGIOUS LEGITIMACY

The Dalai Lama's 90th birthday celebrations in July 2025 brought India's delicate balancing act between strategic autonomy in foreign policy and the question of religious legitimacy surrounding Tibetan succession into sharp focus. The festivities in Dharamsala witnessed an unprecedented level of official participation, with several Union ministers, including Minister of State for Culture Meenakshi Lekhi, and chief ministers of Himalayan border states such as Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh attending the events and publicly honoring the Dalai Lama. Their presence was not just symbolic; it demonstrated an official acknowledgement of the Dalai Lama's moral stature within India and the centrality of Tibetan Buddhism to Himalayan communities that constitute the frontier populations of India.

From Beijing's perspective, these gestures reinforced suspicions that New Delhi was tacitly encouraging the Dalai Lama's assertion of authority over his succession. Chinese officials, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued strong statements condemning Indian leaders' participation as interference in China's internal affairs, framing the Dalai Lama's birthday celebrations as "separatist activities" with geopolitical undertones. For India, however, the optics were twofold: on the one hand, participation by ministers and CMs strengthened domestic legitimacy by signalling solidarity with Tibetan refugees and Himalayan Buddhist constituencies; on the other hand, it risked aggravating tensions with Beijing at a time when the border standoff in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh remains unresolved.

This duality encapsulates India's enduring dilemmas. Strategically, India seeks to preserve autonomy in its foreign policy by maintaining dialogue with China while avoiding being subsumed into Western "containment" approaches. However, by permitting and even encouraging the overt political and religious recognition of the Dalai Lama, New Delhi simultaneously affirms the religious legitimacy of the Tibetan leader's authority over succession. This exposes India to accusations from Beijing of undermining the "One China principle," even as it provides reassurance to border populations for whom the Dalai Lama remains a unifying cultural and religious figure. Thus, India's approach reflects a calibrated two-level game: domestically, leveraging the Dalai Lama's moral authority to consolidate support in sensitive border regions, and externally, walking a tightrope between principle and pragmatism, mindful that overt recognition of a successor not approved by China could harden bilateral hostility. This tension between the

imperatives of strategic autonomy and the politics of religious legitimacy is likely to shape India's response to the eventual reincarnation process. As the succession question internationalizes, India's role as the host state of the Tibetan exile leadership places it at the heart of what may become one of the most contentious geopolitical-religious disputes of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The Dalai Lama's succession is set to produce a contested outcome: Beijing will almost certainly appoint a state-backed successor in Tibet, while the exile community and allied states will recognize a rival reincarnation chosen through traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices. This duality institutionalizes competing claims of legitimacy. For India, hosting the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile makes neutrality difficult to achieve. Supporting the Dalai Lama's chosen successor would strengthen ties with Tibetan refugees and Himalayan communities but risk a sharper confrontation with China's government. Conversely, restraint can erode domestic credibility and moral standing. Thus, the reincarnation issue is poised to become a persistent fault line in India-China relations, symbolically entrenching mistrust, complicating border diplomacy, and internationalizing the Tibet question in the future. It will remain both a religious and strategic variable in shaping Asian geopolitics in the 21st century.

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