

Trump 2.0 : Implications for Tibet and the Tibetan Freedom Movement?

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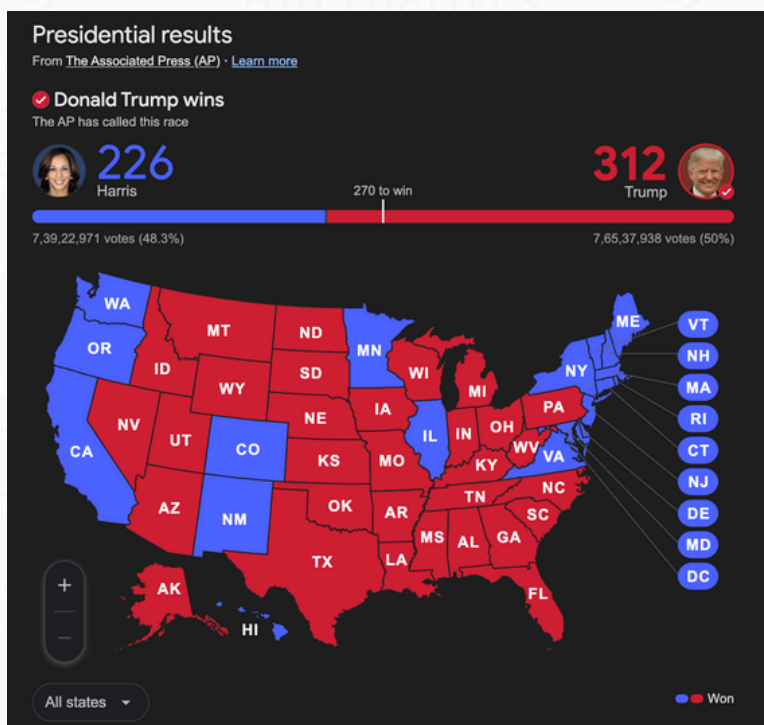


President-Elect Donald Trump speaking during the election party night at West Palm Beach, Florida. Courtesy Politico.

US President Joe Biden recently welcomed US President-elect Donald Trump to the White House, and his recent meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Lima provided further insight into the evolving dynamics between the US and China. During their conversation, Biden recalled, "*I remember being on the Tibetan Plateau with you, and I remember being in Beijing.*" This remark suggests a subtle positioning on US-China relations, particularly in regard to Tibet, signaling how Tibet will be discussed. The full impact of these dynamics on Tibet and the role of Trump 2.0 will become clearer each passing day. Let us know try to understand and see potential possibilities based on trends and events that have occurred and have been laid in the public.

Prologue:

On 6th November, the world stood in anticipation of the results of the 2024 US Presidential elections. The results were announced and Donald Trump emerged victorious, he not only secured the necessary electoral college votes, but won all the 7 swing states and also the popular mandate (which he did not secure during his 1st term) as the 47th President-elect of the United States of America. His opponent, Kamala Harris conceded the election and even incumbent US President Joe Biden congratulated Trump on his victory, showing to us all the essence of democracy. The leaders from the two most populous nation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and President Xi Jinping of China, extended their congratulations. The Central Tibetan Administration and His Holiness the Dalai Lama also congratulated and wished him well. There was an unanimous peak in following of US politics surrounding this election around the world, underscoring the crucial and pivotal that the US continues to have in global affairs.



The results of the US Presidential Elections 2024. Courtesy The Associated Press.

Hence, it is no surprise that the question in the mind of many is how Trump 2.0 might impact their own country, people and community. Many have debated extensively on that besides the American electorate and this debate even percolated among the Tibetan community with differing views generated during the election phase. Tibetans who have acquired US citizenship legally have the right to vote and there were small public campaigns within the community to support either of the two presidential candidates be it Donald Trump or Kamala Harris. Furthermore, this engagement also touched the House of Representatives where Tibetans were supporting those candidates who had and continue to support the Tibetan freedom movement, Rep. Jim McGovern being a notable one here.

With all this said and done, Donald Trump is the President-elect and will begin his second term as president this coming January. What does this mean for Tibetans now? Will Tibetans who have migrated to the US (a community smaller in number compared to other immigrant groups but one that is growing) face deportation under Trump's firm immigration policies? What will it mean for Tibetans who have family in India? How will it affect Tibetans currently living under Chinese occupation? But most importantly, what will it mean for the Tibetan Freedom Movement?

As Bhuchung K. Tsering, the head of the Research and Monitoring Unit at the International Campaign for Tibet, mentioned in his interview with Radio Free Asia (RFA) Tibetan "when it comes to the immigration issue, Tibetans are unlikely to face significant challenges. This is because, unlike many other immigrant groups, Tibetans do not generally enter the US as illegal migrants. Additionally, Tibetans, like other refugees, are eligible to seek asylum in the US under US law." US Under Secretary and special coordinator for Tibetan issues, Uzra Zeya stated "The United States is the world's leading host in welcoming refugees." However, there is a real possibility of a shift in US immigration policy due to Trump's firm stance on it, and there have been commentaries and discussions about people looking to leave the US. It remains uncertain whether Tibetans, even those born in the US, would be privilege enough to undertake this route, though it is a consideration worth pondering. Maybe they might return back to the Tibetan settlements in India? Or even Tibet with Tibetans now being able to travel to Tibet through with US and other passports - there are issues that Tibetans face here though and discussing all this would require in itself another paper.



A group of 400 Tibetan children singing verses wishing His Holiness the Dalai Lama to live long during the Long Life Offering ceremony at the UBS Arena in Elmont, NY, USA. Courtesy Sonam Zoksang.

For Tibetans with family in India, the situation is likely to remain the same unless a significant diplomatic rift occurs between the US and India, akin to the diplomatic tensions currently between Canada and India. In such a scenario, many Canadians have faced difficulties visiting their families in India, and a similar situation could potentially affect Tibetans traveling between the US and India.

The Tibet-US Relations:

Before moving into the main crux, it is important to understand the US-Tibet relations as this will help and guide one in understanding more clearly what the US election results mean for Tibet and the Tibetan people.

The ties between Tibet and the US can be officially traced during the 2nd World War when 2 US officials visited Tibet and carried with them a letter and gift from then-US president Franklin D Roosevelt (the letter is on display at the Dalai Lama Library and Archives in Dharmshala). The two US officers were Ilya Tolstoy and Brooke Dolan from the Office of Strategic Service (OSS). This was followed by the Tibetan Trade delegation in 1948 led by Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa meeting US Secretary of State George C. Marshall. Following Tibet's illegal annexation by the People's Republic of China (PRC), there was a shift in the US approach to Tibet as they did not fully support Tibet openly - dismissing Tibet's request to raise this issue in the United Nations. However they continued to support Tibet's armed resistance against the PRC through their Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This period was where the US supported the Tibetans financially but not backing Tibet's political aims as the former wanted to maintain ties with the Communist-led PRC

The US-China Rapprochement in the 1970's meant Tibet being marginalised in US foreign policy with other countries taking note of this fact. The 1980's however saw a clear shift as the Dalai Lama became more vocal politically on international platforms. It resulted in the 1987 US House of Representatives passing a bill that condemned human rights abuse in Tibet and was also passed in the US Senate, it eventually became a US law as part of the '*Foreign Relations Authorisation Act*' of 1989 signed by then President Ronald Regan. These resolutions laid the foundation for the various acts and laws related to Tibet. Several projects and funding from the US State Government were granted to Tibet and the Tibetan people, including the 1990 Immigration Act, which under section 134 provided 1000 immigrant visas for Tibetans. Thereby being the genesis for the growing Tibetan diasporic community in the USA that plays a pivotal role in lobbying for Tibet in the US. The Tibetan community lobbied extensively and played a significant role among other stakeholders in the passing of the '*Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act*' popularly referred as the '*Resolve Tibet Act*' recently.



From the 2000s onwards there were major engagements between the US and Tibet, often linked to US relations with China including the Sino-Tibetan dialogue and more notably the establishment of the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan issues with Gregory Craig being the first one appointed in 1997. I had the privilege of meeting the 3rd US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issue Paula Dobriansky during the Raisina Dialogue this year in New Delhi, India. The 2007 presentation of the US Congressional Gold Medal (the highest and oldest civilian award in the US) to His Holiness the Dalai Lama drew worldwide attention and showed the bond between the US and the Tibetan people, especially its leader – who would subsequently devolve his political authority in 2011. This award was major news to all Tibetans as well, especially even to those under occupation. I remember having to read this very news in Tibetan from the Tibetan newspaper, Tibet Times (Bod-Kyi-Dus-Bab) to all the students in my school. This award presented to the Dalai Lama by the US government continues to be celebrated every year throughout the different Tibetan communities around the world.



His Holiness the Dalai Lama receiving the US Congressional Gold Medal from US President George W. Bush at Capitol Hill in Washington DC, USA on October 17, 2007. Courtesy His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet.

There was a notable shift since 2008 (Beijing Olympics and mass protest in Tibet) with Tibet being sidelined and appeasement with China at an all-time high considering the US's own financial crisis. Following 2016 no sitting US president has met with the Dalai Lama and also the democratically elected Tibetan leader, Sikyong (President) of the Central Tibetan Administration. Many hoped that incumbent president Joe Biden would fulfil his campaign promise and meet the Dalai Lama, especially when the latter was in the US for his knee surgery but nothing transpired. Yet amidst all this, the support from the US continues to remain visible and bipartisan, this was evident from the recent US Congressional delegation visiting Dharamshala, India and meeting the Tibetan leadership at the Central Tibetan Administration and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Trump 2.0 and the Tibetan Freedom Movement:

Moving into the main crux of this paper, how will Trump's 2nd presidency impact Tibetans, especially the Tibetan freedom movement? I will try to tackle and answer this question in 4 points:

1. There is an underlying theme in the media, commentaries, and discussions surrounding Donald Trump's victory in the US election, which portrays him as a transactional leader with a business-minded acumen. In my opinion, this is not an inaccurate characterisation, as shedding away a professional mindset and way of life is difficult instantly. However, something that many seem to overlook, including the Tibetan community, is that Donald Trump already has the experience of being US president for one whole term. This experience, I believe, will be among his pole star in



guiding his future policies. According to current US law, there is no provision for Trump to contest the 2028 presidential election, so his focus on shaping his political legacy and positioning himself in the future will be this second term.

When it comes to Tibet, his prior experience as president offers Tibetans more leverage when engaging with President Trump and his team. Sikyong (the democratically elected leaders of the Tibetans, president) Penpa Tsering la of the Central Tibetan Administration remarked, "*Unlike the first term of Donald Trump's presidency, when we had to start from scratch in forming our networks of engagement with him (at the time, Penpa Tsering la was the representative at the Office of Tibet in Washington), now we have an established network that enhances our ability to discuss Tibet with him.*" Based on this, there should be more fluid communication between Trump's team and those who lobby for Tibet.

2. Secondly, the Trump administration has been building its team and has assigned several notable personalities to key roles. There is a clear indication of how many of them have taken a strong stance and been hawkish against China including his recently appointed National Security Advisor Mike Waltz and the US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The latter here being sanctioned by China due to his outlook and approach to the country which he has openly criticised time and again. He has even sponsored and introduced several bills on Tibet and the Uyghur people in the US Congress. With such a team being formed in Trump 2.0, it would not be surprising if they view Tibet like past US Governments as a major chip against China. Thereby laying a platform from where Tibet continues to be highlighted and perhaps after a gap of nearly a decade - the US president might once again meet the Dalai Lama. Alternatively, to send an even louder message to China, the US president may meet with the Sikyong of the Central Tibetan Administration popularly referred to as the Tibetan Government in Exile. The last such meeting took place in 2016 between then-US president Barack Obama and the Dalai Lama.



US president Barack Obama hosting the Dalai Lama in the White House's Map Room. Courtesy South China Morning Post.

3. The role of individuals and organisations will be pivotal in highlighting Tibet during Trump's administration. A name that comes to the mind of many is Elon Musk, who along with Vivek Ramaswamy was appointed to lead the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). He has been a vocal supporter of Trump in the lead-up to the elections and has sizeable influence throughout the world, what is unique though is how he will leverage his businesses in China



when the prevailing notion is that the US under Trump will challenge China and its business network. His 2022 November social media post featuring a Vajra (Dorjee), a ritual object associated with Tibetan Buddhism, indicates a certain affinity with the Tibetans here. More significant than Musk's 'X' factor for Tibetans will be the bipartisan support from US Congress members who have consistently advocated for Tibet and the Tibetan people. A key example is the recent passage of the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act a.k.a. the Resolve Tibet Act, which not only garnered bipartisan support in the US congress, it also saw a bipartisan delegation led by Representative Michael McCaul (including long time Tibet supporter Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi) visit Dharamshala, India—where both the Central Tibetan Administration and the Dalai Lama are based.



The Bipartisan US Congressional Delegation and Elon Musk's social media post. Courtesy His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet and Elon Musk.

Furthermore, all the seven members have recently been re-elected in the 2024 elections, except for Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks (leading), whose results are yet to be called due to the tight margin between her and Christina Bohanan, the latter requesting for a recount. Their continued support of Tibet will be strong based on their recent visit to the Tibetan community in India. With their re-election for another 2 years ensuring that Tibet will be looming in the Capitol Hill. Then there are the long-standing supporters and friends of Tibet based in the USA, the most recognised here being Richard Gere. He continues to support Tibet and the Tibetans through various organisations, including his association with the Tibet House US and the International Campaign for Tibet, Washington.

4. Finally, the growing number of Tibetans in the US will play a pivotal role in a. Pushing the US government in implementing the Tibet Policy Act which was further updated recently through the addition of the Resolve Tibet Act and b. Bringing more attention on Tibet at governmental offices with Tibetan securing positions at such offices. An article titled South Asia's Tibetan Refugee is shrinking, imperiling its long future by Tenzin Dorjee and Tsewang Rigzin states "Data from the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) show that approximately 309,000 US residents spoke the Tibetan language at home as of 2020, a 64 percent growth over the 188,000 in 2000 (see Figure 6). Not everyone who speaks Tibetan is a Tibetan national; thousands of Himalayan people—including Nepalese Sherpas and Indian Monpas—are ethnically and linguistically Tibetan but are not Tibetan nationals. Still, this linguistic metric is a useful proxy to show the population's general size and trend." This indicates a significant number of people with Tibetan origins who are associated with the broader Tibetan community are present in the US.



Among these individuals there are those who have secured prominent positions in US government roles. The most notable being Aftab Karma Singh Pureval, the mayor of Cincinnati, Ohio, whose mother is Tibetan. He recently engaged with the Tibetan community in Minnesota and, during the Democratic National Convention at Chicago highlighted his Tibetan roots in his speech.

Epilogue:

These prevailing conditions undoubtedly create a favourable environment for Tibet. However, as many Tibetans who observe US politics note, "*US support for Tibet will continue as it has, with the primary focus being on US national interests, especially under President-elect Donald Trump.*" While Trump 2.0 will certainly have an influence, it is unlikely that there will be a major shift in US policies on Tibet, as many might expect. Notably, major bills such as the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act (RATA) and the Tibetan Policy Support Act (TPSA) were passed during Trump's previous administration. He also met the niece of late Tulku Delek Rinpoche, Nyima Lhamo at the Oval office. This form of support to Tibet is likely to continue.



President Donald Trump during his 1st presidency meeting the niece of late Tulku Delek Rinpoche at the Oval Office, White House. Courtesy Central Tibetan Administration.

A significant concern for not only the US but also for all stakeholders with a vested interest in Tibet, including China and India, will be the issue of the Dalai Lama's succession. I personally see that a shift is already underway, as the Dalai Lama himself has made the decision to devolve his political authority, transferring authority/responsibility to the democratically elected leadership of the Central Tibetan Administration and its institution. However, neither the US nor India as the host country have officially acknowledged this as the de facto exile Tibetan government and centre of Tibetan political power, likely due to the understanding that such an acknowledgment could undermine their respective relationships with China.

There are clear shifting of sands here, as the latest Resolve Tibet Act clearly states that the US aims "*to promote substantive dialogue without preconditions between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Dalai Lama, his or her representatives, or the democratically elected leaders of the Tibetan community, or explore activities to improve prospects for dialogue that leads to a negotiated agreement on Tibet.*" Thereby acknowledging the democratic leaders of the Tibetan



community. Whether Trump 2.0 will build on this remains uncertain, especially given the ‘*uncertainty*’ label he is often associated with. However, what is ‘*certain*’ is that the next four years of his presidency will play a pivotal role in global affairs, including the Tibetan freedom movement. We Tibetans must be prepared for these shifts and if possible capitalise and make the most of the coming opportunities by not losing our identity along the way here.

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 - Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi; California District 11
 - Rep. Jim McGovern, House Rules Committee; Massachusetts District 2
 - Rep. Gregory Meeks, Ranking Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee; New York District 5
 - Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, House Veterans Affairs Committee; Iowa District 1, subject to a recount (current voting results sees her winning but has been called for a recount)
 - Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, House Ways and Means Committee; New York District 11
 - Rep. Ami Bera, House Foreign Affairs Committee. California District 6



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