

The Dalai Lama's Reincarnation: India's Enduring Dilemma

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Summary

Context is everything. This adage was again proven right as the 14th Dalai Lama announced his reincarnation plans on 2 July 2025 and confronted India with the prospect of a huge crisis in its relations with China after his passing. For India, such a prospect is hardly new. What is new, however, is the international context. It is this context that is likely to make India's policy choices after the Dalai Lama's reincarnation more difficult.

The Dalai Lama's [reincarnation plans](#), presented in his July 2025 statement, and their strategic implications have long been expected. Despite years of public musings that he [might not choose reincarnation](#) or identify an [external emanation](#) to succeed him, there was little doubt that the Dalai Lama would be reincarnated. All other options would have undermined both the institution of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan movement he leads. His public musings about alternative plans likely sought to disorient Beijing and pressure it to negotiate. The only surprises in the Dalai Lama's announcement were its mildness, compared to his [2011 statement](#), and the fact that it did not say that he will be reincarnated outside China. These surprises might be part of an [effort to seek a negotiated agreement](#) with Beijing but they are unlikely to change the big picture. The big picture is that [two claimants](#) are likely to emerge after the passing of the current Dalai Lama, one supported by Beijing in China's Tibet Autonomous Region and the other supported by the Tibetan movement and the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) in Dharamsala, India.

This prospect presents New Delhi with a huge dilemma. If two Dalai Lamas emerge, the Indian government will have to recognise one of them, either officially or de facto. In practice, this means that India will have to recognise the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala for moral, domestic and strategic reasons. Not only is the Dalai Lama deeply revered in India, with many Indians feeling that *Bharat* has a moral obligation to help both him and the Tibetan movement, but New Delhi likely recognises that the Dalai Lama represents an important lever vis-à-vis China, India's so-called "[Tibet card](#)". However, supporting the Dalai Lama claimant in Dharamsala will be perceived by China as a direct challenge to Chinese sovereignty over Tibet. [China's retaliation](#) is likely to be severe and might involve provocations along the disputed border, increased support for [separatists in India's unstable Northeast](#) or shifts in Beijing's position on the Kashmir dispute. Hence, the reincarnation dilemma for India is not which Dalai Lama to choose but how to support the one in Dharamsala without provoking a huge crisis in relations with China. Behind this dilemma lurk the bigger questions about the future of the CTA and Tibetan movement in India as well as the role of the Tibet issue in China-India relations.

Fortunately, India has long prepared to confront the reincarnation dilemma. New Delhi has likely drawn plans or at least [carefully considered](#) how to handle the complex politics of the

reincarnation, the possibility of mass instability in Tibet after the Dalai Lama's passing, and Beijing's policy responses to these and to India's positions. Unfortunately, the changing international context of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation has complicated India's plans. There are four ways in which the international context of the Dalai Lama's reincarnation in recent years has shifted and, hence, made New Delhi's reincarnation dilemma more difficult.

First, the rivalry between China and India has greatly intensified, raising the likelihood of conflict. While even in the best of times, the Dalai Lama's passing would have produced tensions, they might, at present, provoke a crisis which will deliver a heavy blow to the shaky foundations of the China-India relationship. In the worst case scenario, it might even be the straw that will turn the two sides into full-blown adversaries.

Second, the territorial dispute between China and India has escalated in recent years, particularly after the deadly [Galwan clash of 2020](#). As there has long been an intimate connection between the Tibet issue and the territorial dispute, the reincarnation might easily scupper any chance for progress on the dispute or reignite military tensions. Importantly, as Beijing has historically [used the territorial dispute to pressure India](#) on Tibet-related issues, it is likely to do so again after the Dalai Lama's reincarnation.

Third, the ongoing United States (US)-China Cold War has reshaped the international environment. This environment has made Beijing more sensitive to external challenges, with the reincarnation likely to be one, and more willing to respond harshly to them. As the US has consistently been a [leading supporter of Dharamsala](#), the reincarnation might easily turn into a flashpoint in the US-China Cold War and reduce New Delhi's ability to manage tensions around the reincarnation. The fallout of these tensions will affect India as Beijing retaliates against New Delhi, which it will suspect of colluding with Washington.

Finally, the international position of the Dalai Lama and the CTA has weakened in recent years. This is the result of Chinese pressure, in tandem with the [weakening of the Tibetan community](#) on Indian soil and the strengthening of Beijing's position in Tibet. Admittedly, this has slightly reduced Beijing's great sensitivity on the issue. However, it also means that New Delhi will have to play a much bigger role in sustaining the CTA and establishing the Dharamsala Dalai Lama in the [difficult times](#) after the passing of the current one. This increased Indian role will antagonise China even further and invite its response.

In sum, the Dalai Lama's reincarnation presents India with an old and very consequential dilemma, put in a new context which makes it harder. This does not mean that the reincarnation will certainly produce a huge crisis. After all, if the two sides communicate and manage the reincarnation carefully, tensions will remain within tolerable limits. Nevertheless, it means that New Delhi's reincarnation dilemma will be more acute and its policy responses to it will have to be more skillful.

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