

**REMARKS OF ROBERT A. DESTRO**  
**BEFORE THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**  
**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2025**

Madam Chairman Hartzler, Vice Chair Mahmood, and Members of the Commission:

It is an honor and a privilege to join you today in my first appearance before the Commission. I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to be of service.

Because the topic for discussion is State Control of Religion in China, and I view my role as sharing some of the most important lessons I learned as Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and Special Representative for Tibetan Issues, this written statement frames my oral testimony. The focus of my oral testimony, dubbed here as “Negotiating with China,” will (I hope) illustrate why our continuing focus on *specific* human rights violations in China misses the mark. The implementation of the Congressional vision for the ways in which advocacy *and action* to use American foreign policy “tools” requires a bilateral approach with China, and strategy to implement that vision that operates around the world.

The subject matter of this hearing – “State Control of Religion in China” – provides us with a case study for why the Commission needs to partner more closely with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. This statement is organized as follows:

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**INTRODUCTION: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE INTER-AGENCY**

Today’s topic – State Control of Religion in China – provides an excellent opportunity for me, a former Assistant Secretary of State and Special Representative for Tibetan Issues, to bring attention to the “practical politics” of our nation’s efforts to protect religious freedom internationally. Given Secretary Rubio’s efforts to implement a long-overdue restructuring at the State Department, this written testimony is the operational backdrop for my oral testimony, which will focus on State Control of Religion in China.

Congress has made it both possible and necessary for this Commission to work closely, on a practical, political level, with the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and through DRL, with other federal agencies whose respective international missions must reflect the priority of religious freedom in foreign affairs. Today’s topic “State Control of Religion in China” offers a wonderful opportunity to address not only some of the enormous problems that exist in our bilateral relationship with China, but also some practical, political steps we can consider,

together, to provide our Nation's diplomats with the knowledge and strategies they need to negotiate effectively. In sum, greater collaboration is both necessary and proper.

### THE STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

We begin, as we must, with the statutes that define the powers and duties of both the State Department and this Commission. Congress has provided that:

The United States shall, in accordance with its international obligations as set forth in the Charter of the United Nations and in keeping with the constitutional heritage and traditions of the United States, promote and encourage increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the world without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion. Accordingly, a principal goal of the foreign policy of the United States shall be to promote the increased observance of internationally recognized human rights by all countries.

[22 U.S.C. §2304\(a\)\(1\).](#)

It is obvious from this general statement of policy and from other statutory commands concerning international religious freedom<sup>1</sup> that the desired “outcome” of the Commission’s work is to inform both the development *and implementation* (i.e. “on the ground”) of robust U.S. Government policies that “promote and encourage increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms throughout the world without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

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<sup>1</sup> See, International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, Pub. L. 105-292, October 27, 1998, 112 Stat. 2788, as amended, and codified at 22 U.S.C. Chapter 73; Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, Pub. L. 114-281 (December 16, 2016).

Since our Nation's policy on religious freedom is clear, we must now turn to the manner in which the President, working through the Secretary of State, executes American policy on international religious freedom.

As DRL Assistant Secretary, I had the following authorities and responsibilities:

(A) There shall be in the Department of State an Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor who shall be responsible to the Secretary of State *for matters pertaining to human rights and humanitarian affairs (including matters relating to prisoners of war and members of the United States Armed Forces missing in action) in the conduct of foreign policy and such other related duties as the Secretary may from time to time designate.* The Secretary of State shall carry out the Secretary's responsibility under section [2304](#) of this title through the Assistant Secretary.

(B) [The Assistant Secretary] *shall maintain continuous observation and review all matters pertaining to human rights and humanitarian affairs (including matters relating to prisoners of war and members of the United States Armed Forces missing in action) in the conduct of foreign policy including the following:*

- (i) Gathering detailed information regarding humanitarian affairs and the observance of and respect for internationally recognized human rights in each country to which requirements of sections [2151n](#) and [2304](#) of this title are relevant.
- (ii) Preparing the statements and reports to Congress required under section 2304 of this title.
- (iii) Making recommendations to the Secretary of State and the Administrator of the Agency for International Development regarding compliance with sections 2151n and 2304 of this title, and as part of the Assistant Secretary's overall policy responsibility for the creation of United States Government human rights policy, advising the Administrator of the Agency for International Development on the policy framework under which section 2151n(e) projects are developed and consulting with the Administrator on the selection and implementation of such projects.

- (iv) Performing other responsibilities which serve to promote increased observance of internationally recognized human rights by all countries.

22 U.S.C. §2651a (A)(B) (emphasis added)

Because the DRL Assistant Secretary has statutory oversight authority over “*all* matters pertaining to human rights and humanitarian affairs (including matters relating to prisoners of war and members of the United States Armed Forces missing in action) in the conduct of foreign policy”<sup>2</sup>, we must next consider the importance of the word: “all”.

Secretary Rubio’s recent reorganization of the State Department, and his efforts at the NSC to consolidate the President’s control over foreign policy (including foreign assistance programs), is only the first step in a much longer-term effort to ensure that our government’s commitment to international religious liberty is reflected in both country- and region-specific policies. After the reorganization, the effort to coordinate foreign policy strategies are the responsibility of the newly created office for an [Undersecretary for Foreign Assistance, Humanitarian Affairs, and Religious Freedom](#).

And coordination is essential. There are many federal agencies that develop and implement policies and supervise funding streams that “*pertain[] to [international] human rights and humanitarian affairs.*” Among them are this Commission, and (to name only a few) the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, War, Agriculture, and

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<sup>2</sup> 22 U.S.C. §2651a (emphasis added).

the U.S. Trade Representative. As far as I can tell, there is no such interagency collaboration by DRL, not because it lacks the power to oversee our human rights and humanitarian policies, but because of the way in which it has, to date, conceived and implemented its statutory mission.

This needs to change, and the Commission can and should play an important role in making this change possible.

### **IRF POLICY – DISCOVERY, DEVELOPMENT, AND IMPLEMENTATION**

Talk is cheap. It is one thing to *say* that our foreign policy should foster and protect the unalienable right to the free exercise of religion;<sup>3</sup> it is quite another to translate that

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<sup>3</sup> The International Religious Freedom Act, codified at 22 U.S.C. §6401(b), proves that:

**(1) In general**

The following shall be the policy of the United States:

- (A) To condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion.
- (B) To seek to channel United States security and development assistance to governments other than those found to be engaged in gross violations of the right to freedom of religion, as set forth in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 [22 U.S.C. 2151 et seq.], in the International Financial Institutions Act of 1977, and in other formulations of United States human rights policy.
- (C) To be vigorous and flexible, reflecting both the unwavering commitment of the United States to religious freedom and the desire of the United States for the most effective and principled response, in light of the range of violations of religious freedom by a variety of persecuting regimes, and the status of the relations of the United States with different nations.
- (D) To work with foreign governments that affirm and protect religious freedom, in order to develop multilateral documents and initiatives to combat violations of religious freedom and promote the right to religious freedom abroad.
- (E) Standing for liberty and standing with the persecuted, to use and implement appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels, to promote respect for religious freedom by all governments and peoples.

**(2) Evolving policies and coordinated diplomatic responses**

Because the promotion of international religious freedom protects human rights, advances democracy abroad, and advances United States interests in stability, security, and development globally, the promotion of international religious freedom requires new and evolving policies and diplomatic responses that—

- (A) are drawn from the expertise of the national security agencies, the diplomatic service and other governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations; and
- (B) are coordinated across and carried out by the entire range of Federal agencies.

policy into vibrant, country-specific and culturally sensitive diplomatic efforts that can, over time, demonstrate measurable “outcomes”.

The first step in the evaluation process is the “discovery” phase; that is: We must know what our religious freedom policy *is* on a country-by-country and region-by-region (e.g., Europe, the Sahel) basis. Only then can we determine how (or if) the President’s policy is being implemented in a manner consistent with the Congressional and Presidential directives that shape America’s bilateral relationships around the globe.

Let that point sink in. There are many instances when we simply do not know *what* our policy is. We *think* we know, but the inexorable march of events shows, beyond a reasonable doubt, that we have no idea. We are failing – and not simply on religious liberty. Our bilateral relationship with China is a case in point.

When the Senate confirms high-level foreign policy officials (Secretary, Undersecretary, Assistant Secretary, Ambassadors, and certain Special Envoys), the President invests them with the authority *and duty* to use what the International Religious Freedom Act describes as “appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding what our diplomats and government

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<sup>4</sup> Id., 22 U.S.C. §§6401(b)(1)(E).

contractors *do* to effectuate our Nation’s commitment to international religious freedom is an essential “first step”.

Have you seen such an analysis? I have not – and I have looked. It is one thing to report, as DRL and the Commission do, on the “state” of human rights in a country, region, or international organization (e.g., U.N. peacekeeping forces). It is quite another to do the tedious analytical work necessary to develop a robust understanding of how regional offices at the State Department and in other agencies with significant international programs (e.g., HHS) weigh our nation’s historical commitment to religious freedom in the balance as they develop the country policies that guide our diplomats in the field.

If you have not done so already, I respectfully recommend that the Commission meet, informally and as soon as possible, with our newly confirmed DRL Assistant Secretary, Riley Barnes. As you know, the Assistant Secretary is a strong advocate for religious freedom and has enormous experience from his prior service in the Office for International Religious Freedom.

Now – at the beginning of Assistant Secretary Barnes’ service – is the time for DRL and the Commission to devise a strategy to learn what our country’s international religious liberty policy actually *is* “on the ground.” To ask, together, for policy briefs that will help you to understand how that operational policy (if there is one) is viewed and integrated (if at all) into policy plans in the regional offices and Consular Affairs,

and by country desk officers. You should ask, together, how (assuming there is a religious freedom element to that country policy) it is being *implemented*, “in-country” by Ambassadors and embassy personnel.

### FOLLOW THE MONEY

The Commission has explicit statutory authority to “secure directly from any Federal department or agency such information as the Commission considers necessary to carry out the provisions of this section.”<sup>5</sup> Now that the State Department has been reorganized, the uncertainty that arises after a major reorganization offers religious freedom (and other human rights) advocates an enormous opportunity. In order for the State Department bureaucracies to coordinate, they need a project that will allow the newly restructured offices to assess the parameters of their authority and to suggest new or different approaches that integrate religious liberty into the fabric of all of our bilateral relationships. Human rights policy – including religious liberty – is not a “stand alone” or marginal issue in bilateral and multilateral affairs: it is at the center.

None other than George Washington reminded us that:

The unity of government which constitutes you one people is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad, of your safety, of your prosperity, of that very liberty which you so highly prize.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 22 U.S.C. §6432a(b).

<sup>6</sup> George Washington, *Farewell Address to the People of the United States* (September 19, 1796), [https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons\\_Farewell\\_Address.pdf](https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf) at 5.

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. ...

It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule indeed extends with more or less force to every species of free government. ...

Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all—religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.<sup>7</sup>

Washington’s words remind us of the central role of religious liberty in both domestic and international policy. The Commission should also have a close, working relationship (coordinated through DRL and IRF) with the regional bureaus that now control most of the State Department’s foreign assistance programs. *See* [22 U.S.C. §6432](#). **And that’s not all!**

Now that Secretary Rubio has rightly assumed direct control of all of foreign assistance funds administered through the State Department, and the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE.gov) is ingesting and processing both domestic and foreign assistance spending data, there is an enormous opportunity to “follow the money.” Unless the Commission seeks access to the spending data and you use your policy analysts to make sense of it, you will never learn the *actual* content, direction, and

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<sup>7</sup> Id., at 16-18.

emphasis of our government’s international religious liberty policies. I assure you: You will not like the conclusions that you will be forced to draw.

#### NEGOTIATING WITH CHINA

When all is said and done, a Congressional policy that requires the President and his diplomats to utilize all “appropriate tools in the United States foreign policy apparatus, including diplomatic, political, commercial, charitable, educational, and cultural channels”<sup>8</sup> to advance religious freedom must be implemented. Even if a political or career diplomat is 100% committed to religious freedom (many are not, and a substantial number are hostile to the proposition), it often takes great creativity and enormous energy to integrate the religious liberty mandate into a myriad of other competing interests. Negotiation is done on a country-by-country basis, in a manner that must respect both the sovereignty (self-government) interests of our negotiating partners, and their cultural sensitivities. Just as it does here, religion plays an important role in shaping the internal cultures and foreign policies of every country around the world. We need to understand *how* it does so. Otherwise, we will fail to respect the inherent human dignity of those who sit across the negotiating table and the people they serve.

China is a fascinating case study because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is, itself, a religious organization. It demands total fealty to whatever “message” or

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<sup>8</sup> Id., 22 U.S.C. §§6401(b)(1)(E).

“thought” the Leader *du jour* thinks necessary to maintain the “Mandate of Heaven” and it brutally represses both non-belief and any competing moral or ethical framework that it considers to be heretical views. Control of religion is, thus, politics 101. It is “a feature, not a bug” of China’s operating system.

There is no better example of China’s efforts to control religion than its actions in Tibet. Given way in which Tibetan Buddhism is woven seamlessly into the fabric of Tibetan life and government, the Chinese Communist Party began a systematic effort in the 1950s to control not only the Tibetan government, but also Tibetan Buddhism itself. The ideology and culture of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP] is completely incompatible with the beliefs and traditions of Tibetan Buddhists.

The most obvious example is the claim that the CCP has the right to select the senior leadership of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhists, by contrast, believe that the Dalai Lama is a reincarnated person – a living [Bodhisattva](#), specifically an emanation of [Avalokiteśvara](#) (in Sanskrit) or Chenrezig (in Tibetan), the Bodhisattva of Compassion.<sup>44</sup> The current supreme authority in Tibetan Buddhism is the 90-year-old Dalai Lama, Jetsun Jamphel Ngawang Lobsang Yeshe Tenzin Gyatso (Tenzin Gyatso). The CCP claims the right to choose his successor – and it undoubtedly will attempt to do so. It has in the past. On April 25, 1995, the Chinese Communist Party kidnapped the six-year-old Pachen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, whose position makes him the second highest authority.

If American diplomats are to be successful in negotiations with the Chinese Communist Party, they must understand the mindset of those who sit across the table from them. I will use the rest of my testimony to provide examples.