

# AMID TENSIONS WITH CHINA, US UPS TIBET SCRUTINY WITH NEW APPOINTMENT

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Secretary of State Michael Pompeo names Robert Destro as the U.S.'s new Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues

The Trump administration appointed a senior official to oversee [Tibetan](#) issues after a vacancy for almost four years, as the U.S. increases pressure on China over its human rights record, including the use of forced labor among ethnic minorities.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on Wednesday named Robert Destro as the U.S.'s new Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues. Destro will primarily be responsible for advancing dialogue between Beijing and the Dalai Lama and protecting the religious, cultural and linguistic identity of Tibetans, according to the State Department.

"The United States remains concerned with the PRC's repression of the [Tibetan](#) community, including the lack of meaningful autonomy, the deteriorating human rights situation in Tibetan areas, and severe restrictions on Tibetans' religious freedom and cultural traditions within China," Pompeo said in a statement, referring to the People's Republic of China.

Destro is currently assistant secretary of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the special coordinator post had been vacant since January 2017. The commission had urged the State Department to fill the job, saying the role was "crucial to raising the profile of religious freedom issues in Tibet and mobilizing government resources to address the issue."

China's authority over Tibet has long been an irritant in U.S.-China relations, with support for the region's autonomy and its exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, often a bipartisan issue in Washington. The U.S. in July imposed travel restrictions on Chinese officials determined to be "substantially involved" in restricting access to Tibet.

Tibet and the neighboring region of Xinjiang have long endured intense social, security and religious controls, as China seeks to suppress what it calls terrorist and separatist elements. Last month, prominent researcher Adrian Zenz released a report alleging that China is instituting a mass labor system in Tibet similar to the one that has ensnared Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang.

In response to Zenz's research and additional reporting on the subject by Reuters, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement to the news organization saying that forced labor "simply does not exist" in the country and that workers participated voluntarily and were properly compensated.

"We hope the international community will distinguish right from wrong, respect facts, and not be fooled by lies," according to the statement.

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