

Barack Obama attacked by Chinese media for 'chumming with' Dalai Lama

US president had called the Tibetan spiritual leader 'a good friend' at a prayer meeting in Washington

Jonathan Kaiman in Beijing

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Chinese state media has admonished US president Barack Obama for hosting the Dalai Lama and calling him 'a good friend' at a prayer meeting in Washington on Thursday, claiming that receiving the Tibetan spiritual leader "is a political liability which backfires".

"Chumming with a secessionist is playing with fire, which severely harms the mutual trust between China and the United States, and downgrades Obama's credit as a national leader for breaking his commitments to China on the Tibet issue," the state newswire Xinhua wrote in a commentary just before the meeting.

Xinhua continued: "What lies under their hypocritical relationship is nothing but political deals and cold calculations."

Obama did not meet directly with the Dalai Lama at the annual prayer breakfast on Thursday, but bowed to the Buddhist monk and called him a "good friend".

The Dalai Lama is "a powerful example of what it means to practice compassion and who inspires us to speak up for the freedom and dignity of all human beings," he said in a speech.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters on Friday that Beijing is "against foreign countries interfering in China's domestic affairs under the pretext of Tibet-related issues".

"The Dalai Lama is seeking support from foreign countries to realise his political end, but he cannot succeed," Hong added, calling the spiritual leader "a political exile who has long been engaged in anti-China separatist activities under the pretext of religion"

China has long opposed any meetings between the Dalai Lama and foreign heads of state, and smaller economies that depend heavily on China for investment have taken pains to avoid incurring Beijing's wrath. South Africa has refused three times to grant the Dalai Lama visas to visit the country, including one to attend a summit of Nobel peace laureates in October.

In December, Pope Francis declined to meet with the Dalai Lama amid a push by the Vatican to improve ties with Beijing.

David Cameron's decision to meet with the Dalai Lama in 2012 led Beijing to break off diplomatic ties with the UK for about a year. Relations resumed after the British prime minister said he had no plans to meet the spiritual leader again in the near future.

The Dalai Lama and Obama, both Nobel peace prize laureates, have met three times, including once last February. A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson called that meeting "a gross interference in China's domestic politics" and "a severe violation of the principles of international relations."

US officials have said repeatedly that the US recognises Tibet as part of China, and supports the Dalai Lama's "middle way" approach of advocating increased autonomy for the region under Chinese rule.

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