

Another US provocation: Obama meets the Dalai Lama

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In another sign that the US is stepping up the pressure on China, President Obama ignored objections from Beijing and met last Friday with exiled Tibetan leader, the Dalai Lama. The 45-minute meeting in the White House was designed to reinforce US support for the Tibetan government-in-exile in India and the threat of Tibetan separatism.

Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama is the first since July 2011 and takes place as his administration is taking a more aggressive stance towards China on a range of issues. During his trip to China earlier this month, US Secretary of State John Kerry insisted that Beijing took tougher measures against North Korea and implicitly blamed the Chinese leadership for tensions with neighbouring countries over territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas.

Obama was well aware that his meeting with the Dalai Lama would anger Beijing, as did the last encounter in July 2011. In 2012, the Chinese government cut off all high-level diplomatic ties with Britain for more than a year after British Prime Minister David Cameron met the Dalai Lama.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying warned last Friday that Obama's meeting would "grossly interfere in the internal affairs of China, seriously violate norms governing international relations and severely impair China-US relations." She declared that the Dalai Lama was a "political exile who has long been engaged in separatist activities under the cloak of religion."

The US and international press routinely describe the Dalai Lama as a "Tibetan spiritual leader", but there is no doubting his political role. While the Dalai Lama stood aside as political leader of the Tibetan government in exile in 2011 and now calls for "Tibetan autonomy" through negotiations with Beijing, he heads a movement that ultimately seeks an independent Tibet.

Tibetan separatism only has any support as a result of

Beijing's heavy-handed methods in dealing with the social and cultural aspirations of China's Tibetan minority. As in the rest of China, capitalist restoration over the past three decades has created a huge social gulf between rich and poor. In Tibetan areas, this has been accentuated by Beijing's promotion of Great Han chauvinism that has marginalised ethnic minorities such as the Tibetans and the Uighurs. Bitterness towards the Chinese leadership has been compounded by the harsh repression of any political opposition.

However, Obama's expressions of concern about the plight of Tibetans are completely hypocritical. Once again, the US is using the banner of "human rights" to pursue the economic and strategic interests of American imperialism. Obama is exploiting Tibet as another issue calculated to weaken China as part of his administration's "pivot to Asia"—a diplomatic offensive and military build-up in the region against Beijing.

As reported in a White House press release, Obama reiterated that "Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China and that the United States does not support Tibet independence." For the US to state otherwise would provoke an immediate major diplomatic crisis with China. Nevertheless Obama did express support for the Dalai Lama's "Middle Way"—the demand for greater Tibetan autonomy within China and for talks with Beijing.

Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama was deliberately provocative. One only has to consider Washington's reaction to Chinese criticisms of the atrocious US "human rights" record towards Native Americans or support for greater autonomy for the Inuit population of Alaska. Such comments would be rejected outright.

Yet Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama, still regarded as the leader of a government-in-exile claiming to represent a large area of China, is treated by a compliant media as completely benign. Obama declared his strong support for "Tibet's unique religious, cultural

and linguistic traditions” and hailed the Dalai Lama for his “commitment to peace and nonviolence.”

In fact, the Dalai Lama is a longstanding right wing political operator whose only commitment is to the interests of the Tibetan elites. Their “unique traditions” derive from the oppressive Tibetan theocracy that ruled prior to the seizure of the area by the People’s Liberation Army in the wake of the 1949 Chinese revolution. While the Dalai Lama claims not to have been involved, two of his brothers were recruited by the CIA and heavily embroiled in its plots and provocations inside Tibet in the 1950s. Following a defeated uprising in 1959, the Dalai Lama and his entourage fled to India. He only finally renounced the armed struggle against Beijing in 1974, after Washington’s rapprochement with Beijing in 1972 and its acceptance of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

The Chinese leadership has justifiable fears that the US will revive the methods of the 1950s and 1960s, not only in relation to Tibet, but also the Uighurs and other ethnic minorities, in a bid to sow internal divisions within China and ultimately dismember it. US imperialism has a long history of exploiting religious, linguistic and ethnic differences to further its ends, including during its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the war on Libya, its regime change operation in Syria, and most recently in the Ukraine.

On the same day that Obama met the Dalai Lama, US Secretary of State Kerry signalled a greater emphasis on Tibet by appointing Sarah Sewall as the US special co-ordinator for Tibetan issues. The position was created in 2002 by congressional act under the Bush administration and maintained under Obama, but had been vacant for more than a year. Kerry chose last Friday to name Sewall to emphasise the administration’s intention to use Tibet to ramp up the pressure on China.



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