

Obama to meet Dalai Lama at White House
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The White House Thursday said President Barack Obama would meet the Dalai Lama next week, sparking an immediate demand from Beijing for the withdrawal of the diplomatically explosive invitation.

Obama's meeting with the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader is sure to further strain increasingly testy US-China relations, as the president seeks to overcome Beijing's reluctance to place a choke hold of sanctions on Iran.

In one step apparently meant to mollify China, the February 18 talks will take place in the White House Map Room, not the symbolic surroundings of the Oval Office, where Obama normally meets foreign leaders and VIP guests.

"The Dalai Lama is an internationally respected religious leader. He's a spokesman for Tibetan rights. The president looks forward to an engaging and constructive meeting," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said.

It was not clear whether Obama would meet the Dalai Lama in front of the cameras, or whether the meeting would be purely private.

Within hours of the White House announcement, China offered its riposte, its foreign ministry lodging a solemn representation urging the United States to immediately withdraw the decision, ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said.

"We firmly oppose the Dalai Lama visiting the United States and US leaders having contact with him," Ma said.

"We urge the US side to fully understand the high sensitivity of Tibet-related issues, and honor its commitment to recognize Tibet as part of China and to oppose 'Tibet independence'," he added.

"China urges the US... to immediately call off the wrong decision of arranging for President Obama to meet with the Dalai Lama... to avoid any more damage to Sino-US relations."

Tough regime of sanctions

Despite political pressure at home, Obama avoided meeting the Dalai Lama when the revered Buddhist monk was in Washington last year, in an apparent bid to set relations off on a good foot with Beijing early in his presidency.

Obama, however, warned Chinese leaders on a visit to Beijing in November that he intended to meet the Dalai Lama, who is widely respected in the United States but branded a separatist by the Chinese government.

Next week's meeting comes at a time when Sino-US relations have soured over the sale of a 6.4-billion-dollar package of US weapons to Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a Chinese territory to be reunified by force if necessary.

Obama also knows Chinese support is vital if he is to succeed in winning unanimous backing at the UN Security Council for the tough regime of sanctions he wants to impose on Iran for stepping up its suspect nuclear work.

Gibbs sidestepped a question about whether US attempts to win China's support on Iran would be hampered by the inevitable new row with Beijing over the Dalai Lama's visit.

"We think we have a mature enough relationship with the Chinese that we can agree on issues that are of mutual interest," Gibbs said.

"But we also have a mature enough relationship that we know the two countries... are not always going to agree on everything, and we'll have those disagreements."

Obama publicly admitted on Tuesday that it was still unclear how a newly assertive China would come down on new sanctions on Iran.

"We are confident right now that the international community is unified around Iran's misbehavior in this area," Obama told reporters.

"How China operates at the Security Council as we pursue sanctions is something that we're going to have to see."

Several people executed

China is a veto-wielding, permanent member of the council and has hesitated to step up pressure on Iran, which insists that its sensitive uranium enrichment work is for peaceful civilian purposes.

US and Chinese relations have also been strained over Internet censorship, with Google threatening to leave the fast-growing market because of cyberattacks against the email accounts of rights activists.

The Dalai Lama, 74, fled his Tibet homeland to exile in India in 1959, after a failed uprising against Chinese rule. That came nine years after Chinese troops were sent to take control of the region.

Since the 2008 round of talks, China has maintained a tough crackdown in Tibet it launched following a wave of anti-Chinese unrest that erupted in March of that year and which Beijing blamed on the Dalai Lama.

Several people have reportedly been executed for their roles in the violence, and last month China named a military veteran, Padma Choling, as Tibet's new governor.

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