



America's Dalai Lama Dilemma

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President Barack Obama's first public appearance with the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Buddhists around the world, made headlines on Feb. 5. While the setting was an ostensibly religious occasion, the National Prayer Breakfast, China was quick to take offense. "This action by the U.S. to 'drive a nail' into the hearts of the Chinese people is harmful to the political trust between the two countries," opined the state-run Xinhua news agency.

The paranoia stirred by the 79-year-old religious leader is remarkable. "A jackal in Buddhist monk's robes and an evil spirit with a human face and the heart of a beast," is how the former Party Chief of Tibet, Zhang Qingli, once described him. China's ire stems from the belief the Dalai Lama is leading a campaign for Tibetan independence and actively working to undermine Chinese rule in Tibet.

Such anger is misplaced. Far from encouraging violence, the Dalai Lama has served as a potentially irreplaceable check on the passions of frustrated—and potentially more militant—Tibetans now convinced that negotiations with China are a futile endeavor. Nearly four decades of on-again, off-again talks (including the latest round, which stretched from 2002 to 2010) have yielded little progress.

The Dalai Lama has not shied away from criticizing Beijing, calling Tibet an "ancient nation that is dying and its people are in danger." And he is unafraid of taking jabs at the Communist Party itself: "telling lies has unfortunately become part of their lives."

Yet the Dalai Lama also reiterates that he is "not seeking independence from the People's Republic of China." He has even signaled his readiness to accept China's existing political system and constitution.

The Dalai Lama's "middle way" approach seeks a "high degree of autonomy" of the sort China has granted to Hong Kong or Macau. This, he believes, will preserve Tibet's unique religious, cultural and linguistic heritage, something he argues is under threat in China. Under such conditions, he and the Tibetan exile community insist they would happily return to Tibet.

In 2013, there was a spike in optimism about fresh opportunities that China's new president, Xi Jinping, might bring to the equation. However, early overtures to Beijing were received coldly and it now appears the window for negotiations has likely shrunk, not grown, under Mr. Xi. In December Chinese outlets accused the Dalai Lama of "sabotaging China's ethnic unity to create opportunities for himself."

More important, Mr. Xi has accelerated China's increasingly successful international campaign to intimidate foreign leaders into denying His Holiness an audience. While the meeting with Mr. Obama was a victory for the Dalai Lama, he is arguably losing the battle for global acceptance.

Only two national leaders met with the Dalai Lama in 2013, compared with 11 in 2001. Mongolia, a country that is 80% Buddhist, cancelled plans for a visit shortly after a two-day visit from Mr. Xi in August 2014. Last year, not a single leader from the European Union hosted the Dalai Lama.

No less than the Pope himself has seemed to buckle under Chinese pressure. At a December ceremony in Rome to honor past Nobel Peace Prize winners, he could not meet with His Holiness, the Pope's representatives made clear, "for obvious reasons concerning the delicate situation."

Even the White House has gotten skittish. President George W. Bush was unashamed of public meetings with the Dalai Lama, presenting him with the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007. Mr. Obama has been more cautious, preferring to meet the Dalai Lama in unofficial, low-profile capacities. Ahead of his first trip to Beijing in 2009, the White House denied a meeting request by the Dalai Lama. When he was welcomed to the White House a year later, he was seemingly hurried out of the back door, famously sidestepping several piles of garbage on his way out.

A study by European researchers in 2010 revealed there is little economic retribution for countries whose leaders had met with the Dalai Lama. A modest slowdown in exports to China, when present, lasted on average only two years.

China's response was more likely to be diplomatic, as when it suspended contacts with Britain for 18 months after Prime Minister David Cameron met the Dalai Lama in 2012. Yet China-Britain trade reached an all-time high a year later.

The U.S. certainly has nothing to gain from needlessly antagonizing Beijing. On a range of global foreign-policy challenges, from the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs to terrorism and global trade, engagement with the Chinese is not only critical but often more productive than engagement with some of its peers on the Security Council.

Yet there are myriad geopolitical and moral reasons for the U.S. to remain engaged with the Dalai Lama. For most Americans, however, just one is more than sufficient: Under no circumstances can the U.S. allow any country to dictate who it can and cannot talk to. In this case, that's justification enough.