

US rejects Beijing's demand to cancel Dalai Lama meeting

Written by Taipei Times

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The US has escalated a mounting row on multiple fronts with China, refusing Beijing's demand to cancel US President Barack Obama's meeting this week with the Dalai Lama.

The deepening public spat over Tibet, a row over US arms sales to Taiwan, China's dispute with Google and trade and currency disagreements, come at a key diplomatic moment, as Obama seeks Chinese help to toughen sanctions on Iran.

The White House announced on Thursday that Obama would hold his long-awaited meeting with the Dalai Lama at the White House this week, drawing an angry reaction from China and a demand for the invitation to be rescinded.

But Obama's spokesman Robert Gibbs signaled the White House would defy China's warning that the encounter would damage already strained Sino-US relations.

"I do not know if their specific reaction was to cancel it," Gibbs said. "If that was their specific reaction, the meeting will take place as planned next Thursday."

Obama avoided the Dalai Lama when he was in Washington last year, in an apparent bid to set relations with Beijing off on a good foot in the first year of a presidency which included several meetings with Chinese President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛).

Obama, however, warned Chinese leaders on an inaugural visit to Beijing in November that he intended to meet the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu (马照旭) said earlier that Beijing firmly opposed "the Dalai Lama visiting the US and US leaders having contact with him."

"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," Ma said.

Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama will take place in the White House Map Room and not, in an apparent effort to mollify China, in the Oval Office, where US presidents normally meet VIPs and visiting government chiefs.

The International Campaign for Tibet said on Friday it welcomed the meeting.

"We believe that President Obama understands what is at stake for the Tibetan people and has a role to play as the leader of a nation founded on universal principles of freedom and justice," said Mary Beth Markey, the campaign's vice president for international advocacy.

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