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## President Obama's June 2016 Meeting with Tibet's Dalai Lama

### Introduction

President Barack Obama met with Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, at the White House on June 15, 2016. This was the fourth and likely final White House meeting between the two men during the Obama presidency. The day before, the Dalai Lama visited Capitol Hill for meetings with Members and a lunch hosted by the House Speaker and House Minority Leader. The President and Congress are among a small number of national leaders and legislatures to meet publicly with the Dalai Lama; most of the rest of the world's national leaders and legislatures avoid such meetings, many under pressure from the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC opposes all meetings between foreign officials and the Dalai Lama, whom it considers to be "not a pure religious figure, but a political exile who has long been engaged in anti-China separatist plots under the cloak of religion." After the President's meeting with the Dalai Lama, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson said U.S. "meddling with China's domestic affairs will inevitably inflict harm on bilateral mutual trust and cooperation."

The Dalai Lama has called for "genuine autonomy" for Tibetan districts within the framework of the PRC, an approach he refers to as the "Middle Way." According to an account of the Dalai Lama's June 14, 2016, visit to Capitol Hill posted on his website, the Dalai Lama told Members that Tibet is an "occupied land" and "not part of China," but he also said, "We are not seeking independence because we don't want to enter into confrontation with our Chinese brothers and sisters."

The President's previous White House meetings with the Dalai Lama took place in February 2010, July 2011, and February 2014. President Obama and the Dalai Lama also exchanged greetings at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. in February 2015. Consistent with the practice of previous administrations, none of President Obama's White House meetings with the Dalai Lama has been in the Oval Office, which the White House describes as "the official workplace of the President." All President Obama's meetings with the Dalai Lama have taken place in the White House Map Room, which the White House Curator describes as "a formal, but private, drawing room."

### Background on Tibet and the Tibetan Exile Movement

The Chinese Communist Party established the PRC in 1949. In 1950, the Party's People's Liberation Army entered eastern Tibet to bring the region under Beijing's control. The Dalai Lama fled Tibet in March 1959, after a failed Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule. He settled with fellow Tibetan exiles in the Indian hill town of Dharamsala, where he has been based since.

After the Dalai Lama's flight from Tibet, Beijing established the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), one of five province-level ethnic minority regions in China today. Beijing also established Tibetan autonomous prefectures and counties within China's provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan, with their aggregate land area approximately equal to that of the TAR. Just under half of the six million ethnic Tibetans in China live in the TAR, with most of the remainder living in Tibetan jurisdictions outside the TAR.

In Dharamsala, India, the Dalai Lama established an exile government, now known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The CTA has an elected leader, the Sikyong, sometimes also known as Prime Minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile. The current Sikyong is Dr. Lobsang Sangay, a Harvard-educated legal scholar. He was re-elected to a second five-year term in April 2016 with 57% of nearly 59,000 votes cast by members of the global Tibetan diaspora. An estimated 130,000 Tibetans now live in India and Nepal in 58 Tibetan refugee settlements administered by the CTA. The U.S. State Department's position on the CTA is outlined in the department's annual report to Congress on Tibet negotiations: "The U.S. government does not recognize Tibet as an independent state and therefore does not conduct official diplomatic relations with the Central Tibetan Administration, an organization based in Dharamsala, India." The government of India treats the CTA as a non-governmental organization.

### U.S. Policy on Tibet

The White House said that in his June 2016 meeting with the Dalai Lama, the President "emphasized his strong support for the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural and linguistic traditions and the equal protection of human rights of Tibetans in China." The President encouraged "meaningful and direct dialogue" between Chinese authorities and the Dalai Lama and his representatives. The President also "reiterated the longstanding U.S. position that Tibet is a part of the People's Republic of China, and the United States does not support Tibetan independence."

U.S. policy is guided by the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 (P.L. 113-228) (TPA). It does not take a position on Tibet's political status, but it sets broad goals for U.S. policy towards Tibet, including "to support the aspirations of the Tibetan people to safeguard their distinct identity" and "to promote substantive dialogue" between the PRC and the Dalai Lama or his representatives. The TPA also establishes in statute the State Department position of Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues; establishes reporting requirements related to Tibet; requires programming and sets project principles; mandates the availability of Tibetan

language training to foreign service officers in the U.S. government; requires U.S. government officials to raise issues of religious freedom and political prisoners in exchanges with officials of China; and urges the State Department to seek establishment of a U.S. Consulate in Lhasa, the capital of the TAR.

Areas of concern for U.S. policymakers related to Tibet have included human rights conditions in Tibetan areas in China and the impact of China's policies on Tibet's culture, on traditional Tibetan Buddhist religious practices, and on Tibet's fragile environment. U.S. policymakers have also expressed concern about Beijing's efforts to control the reincarnation process for a 15<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama; self-immolations among Tibetans protesting China's policies; stalled negotiations between Beijing and envoys of the Dalai Lama; and official restrictions on access to Tibet for U.S. diplomats, journalists, and ordinary citizens.

## Congress and Tibet

Since the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's first visit to the United States in 1979, Congress has shown consistent support for him and concern about conditions for Tibetans in China. Among other relevant actions, Congress passed the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002 and in 2006 approved awarding the Dalai Lama the Congressional Gold Medal. In the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Senate passed S.Res. 200, recognizing the Dalai Lama's contributions "to the promotion of nonviolence, human rights, interfaith dialogue, environmental awareness, and democracy." The House passed H.Res. 337, calling, among other things, for the U.S. government to strongly encourage representatives of China and the Dalai Lama to hold substantive dialogue, without preconditions. Pending legislation includes H.Res. 584, urging the President to seek an independent investigation into the death in custody of Tibetan Buddhist leader Tenzin Delek Rinpoche; H.R. 1112, making certain PRC officials ineligible for entry into the United States while China continues to restrict access for foreign travelers to Tibet; and H.R. 2679, making 3,000 immigrant visas available in FY2016-FY2018 for Tibet-born individuals who have been continuously residing in India or Nepal.

Congress has long authorized U.S. assistance for programs for Tibetan communities in China and for Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. Economic Support Fund (ESF) assistance supports the preservation of Tibetan cultural traditions and promotes sustainable development, education, and environmental conservation in Tibetan communities in China. (In FY2015, actual ESF assistance in this category totaled \$12.2 million. The State Department has requested \$6.8 million for FY2017.) Congressional appropriations also support humanitarian protection and assistance programs for Tibetan communities in India and Nepal; a fellows program for Tibetans in China; Voice of America and Radio Free Asia Tibetan-language broadcasting; a scholarship program for Tibetans living outside Tibet; and National Endowment for Democracy human rights and democracy programs related to Tibet.

## China's Policy on Tibetan Areas

China's Communist Party convened its sixth-ever Tibet Work Forum in 2015, to recalibrate its policy toward Tibet.

Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that Tibet policy should focus on "ensuring national unity and consolidating ethnic unity." Referring to the Dalai Lama, he commanded officials to "wage struggle against the Dalai clique in an unwavering manner." He also called for integrating "socialist core values" into school curricula, ensuring patriotism among Tibetan Buddhists through "effective" management of monasteries, and encouraging interpretations of the canons and rules of Tibetan Buddhism "that are compatible with a socialist society." China's Premier, Li Keqiang, spoke of the need to tackle poverty. He also outlined plans to build "major world tourism destinations," accelerate the building of transportation infrastructure, and expand power grids, all while ensuring "ecological security." Between 2002 and 2010, Chinese official and envoys of the Dalai Lama engaged in nine rounds of talks, but failed to come to any agreement.

## Human Rights Conditions in Tibet

In its *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2015*, released in April 2016, the State Department asserts that, "Under the professed objectives of controlling border areas, maintaining social stability, and combating separatism, the government [of China] engaged in the severe repression of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage...." The State Department also reports, "a perception among many Tibetans that authorities systemically targeted them for political repression, economic marginalization, and cultural assimilation, as well as educational and employment discrimination." The Congressional-Executive Commission on China has identified 645 Tibetan political prisoners believed to be currently detained or imprisoned in the PRC. Since 2009, 145 Tibetans in China are known to have self-immolated, many apparently to protest PRC policies, and 117 are known to have died.

## Dispute over the Future of the Institution of the Dalai Lama

The present Dalai Lama is the 14<sup>th</sup> in a lineage that began in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, with each new Dalai Lama identified in childhood as the reincarnation of his predecessor. Concerned about Beijing's efforts to control the selection of his successor, the Dalai Lama asserted in 2011 that, "the person who reincarnates has sole legitimate authority over where and how he or she takes rebirth and how that reincarnation is to be recognized." He also said that when he is "about 90" he will "re-evaluate whether the institution of the Dalai Lama should continue or not." Beijing contends that it should control the reincarnation process and has rejected the Dalai Lama's suggestion that he might have no successor. The U.S. government has criticized Beijing's position on the issue. In June 2015, Under Secretary of State Sarah Sewall, who serves as the U.S. government's Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, stated that, "The basic and universally recognized right of religious freedom demands that any decision on the next Dalai Lama must be reserved to the current Dalai Lama, Tibetan Buddhist leaders, and the Tibetan people."

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