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The Straits Times (Singapore)

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Dalai Lama ▼ goes from being adored to ignored; West steering clear 25 years after awarding him Nobel Peace Prize

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DHARAMSALA (India) - As the Dalai Lama ▼ marks his 25th year as a Nobel laureate this week, a row over South Africa's failure to grant him a visa underscores the huge challenge facing the movement he launched more than half a century ago.

The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 amid international condemnation of Beijing following a deadly crackdown on peaceful protesters in Tiananmen Square earlier that year.

A quarter of a century later, some Western leaders are turning their backs on the Dalai Lama ▼ - albeit often reluctantly - under pressure from rising power China.

Last Thursday, a planned summit of Nobel Peace laureates in Cape Town later this month was cancelled after several pulled out in protest against the South African government's failure to give the Dalai Lama ▼ a visa.

The decision provoked an outburst of fury from fellow laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who said he was "ashamed to call this lickspittle bunch my government".

The Dalai Lama ▼ accused South Africa of "bullying a simple person", using uncharacteristically undiplomatic language.

But South Africa is by no means alone in its reluctance to antagonise China, its largest trading partner.

Even Norway, one of the world's wealthiest countries and the home of the Nobel Peace Prize, snubbed the Dalai Lama ▼ when he visited earlier this year in what it called a "necessary sacrifice" to normalise its relations with China.

"Given the economic growth of China... you can clearly see some countries, even European countries, have some hesitation in dealing with sensitive issues like Tibet," said Mr Lobsang Sangay, who took over as head of the exiled Tibetan government in the Indian hill town of Dharamsala after the Dalai Lama ▼ retired from politics in 2011.

"Nonetheless, at the people level, I think the interest for Tibet still remains."

Mr Sangay called for more international help in June, when he renewed a push for the Dalai Lama's ▼ "Middle Way" path of peacefully advocating greater autonomy for Tibet.

Since then, the Dalai Lama ▼ has said he is "optimistic" about the current administration in Beijing, in what some see as a possible sign of a thaw in relations.

In an interview last week, he praised China's President Xi Jinping ▼ for cracking down on official corruption and seeking to introduce "proper rule of law".

"These things show he (Xi) is approaching these problems more realistically" than his predecessors, the Dalai Lama ▼ said.

Mr Barry **Sautman**, a Tibet expert at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, said the Dalai Lama's ▼ praise for Mr Xi was likely tactical.

"He said some nice things about Hu Jintao and he said some nice things about Jiang Zemin," said Mr **Sautman**, referring to Mr Xi's predecessors.

"If you want to have a political dialogue with somebody, it is better to use the honey."

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