

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Just Google “China” ^[1]

The other day The Wall Street Journal ran a good summary of China's conflict with Google. It looks like we're in for another international war of words but, this time, it won't be a classic Cold War confrontation over political-military issues, but rather a war of words **over** words — censorship, to be precise. China's government mouthpiece, The People's Daily, fired the latest salvo yesterday:

...U.S. media have gone all out to “promote” the “Google issue” and American politicians repeated great “noises” in accusation of China's internet management policies and insinuate the nation's restriction on “internet freedom”... These words and deeds, which have taken no heed of reality, are definitely aimed to impair or tarnish China's image

It is not difficult, however, to see the shadow of the US government behind the highly politicized “Google” case. Shortly after Google threatened to quit [China], Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton issued a statement and chastised China on its censorship ...

Some U.S. political figures would defend in a high-profile manner the “internet freedom” as the “diplomatic strategy,” whose goal is to meddle in other nations' affairs on the one hand and to consolidate American hegemony in cyberspace on the other hand....

Around the “Google” incident, the United States has not only focused on the commercial interest of domestic companies and safeguard its own national security and interests rights, but also is trying hard to limit China's cyberspace. This is something totally unacceptable... To date, Google executives have expressed the hope to go on negotiating with the Chinese government and continue to stay in China, and *Google has perhaps come to realize that China could do without it, whereas Google will definitely have no future without China* [emphasis added].

Among the fascinating and disturbing aspects to this commentary is the way it resembles the rhetoric of the Cold War era, in which a nefarious and “hegemonistic” Washington is depicted as acting in lock step with American corporate interests. The State Department and Google team up to “meddle” in Chinese affairs and monopolize China's “cyberspace.” The Chinese people are told to be indignant.

But the larger point at issue appears to be the unfettered access to the Internet in China. Several years ago, Google agreed to allow some censorship in exchange for the right to run its search engines in China. As a result, more people use Google in China than in any other

country except the United States. Google made a profit and many Chinese have more access to information.

But this was also a bad deal because it established the precedent of the Chinese government having the right to censor the Internet. Clinton put it this way in her own remarks:

In the last year, we've seen a spike in threats to the free flow of information. China, Tunisia, and Uzbekistan have stepped up their censorship of the internet. In Vietnam, access to popular social networking sites has suddenly disappeared. And last Friday in Egypt, 30 bloggers and activists were detained.

As the NYT reported (as also noted by FPA blogger Chris Dolen), the most effective way for the Internet to be censored is through cyber attacks against the computers that support Google's search engines. This is precisely what happened earlier this month and resulted in what the Times called "[this] ugly exchange of accusations between Washington and Beijing."

No one outside of China knows exactly what happened in the cyberattack against Google's Chinese computers — only that the "footprint" for the attack was inside China. Perhaps the Chinese authorities had nothing to do with it, but regardless we are faced with the fragility of the the world of Internet-based access to information. If governments may overtly censor topics they consider sensitive, they may also covertly attack the very institutions that make that information available to millions of people.

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