

The China-Google dispute

US plans to harness Internet to its hegemonic goals

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23 January 2010

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's January 21 speech on internet freedom marks a major escalation of Sino-American tensions. Amid a censorship dispute between China and the search engine firm Google, Clinton unveiled a global policy of Internet-driven regime-change, under the guise of freedom of speech.

On January 12, Google posted a statement, "A New Approach to China," on its blog. It charged that a series of cyber security attacks originating from a computer in Taiwan were being controlled from China. These attacks targeted dozens of US defense and communications firms—including Northrop Grumman, Adobe Systems and Juniper Systems—and the email accounts of Chinese human rights activists.

Google said it was taking the "unusual step" of reporting the attacks because they went "to the heart of a much bigger global debate about freedom of speech." The company threatened to undo internet censorship programs it had installed at Beijing's request on its Chinese *Google.cn* search engine. It noted this might "well mean having to shut down Google.cn, and potentially our offices in China."

The US government did not immediately comment, and international media were initially skeptical of Google's position. A *Financial Times* video asked for the motives behind Google's threat to leave China, noting that Google had not shut its operations in Pakistan after that country blocked all access to Youtube, a Google subsidiary, amid allegations of vote fraud in its February 2008 election. A *Wall Street Journal* article called Google's decision "provocative."

In a January 15 piece, "After Google's Stand on China, US Treads Lightly," the *New York Times* cited James A. Lewis of the US Center for Strategic and International Studies: "Everything we are learning is that in this case the Chinese government got caught with its hand in the cookie jar. Would it hold up in court? No."

The *Times* added that the event laid bare "the degree to which China and the United States are engaged in daily cyberbattles, a covert war of offense and defense on which America is already spending billions of dollars a year."

This comment underlines the real state of US relations with

China, which the US views as a rising strategic competitor. Washington is occupying Afghanistan, a country bordering China's troubled western region of Xinjiang, and is launching attacks into Pakistan, China's main ally in the Indian subcontinent. The US is expected to soon resume large-scale weapons sales to the Taiwanese regime, China's historical rival, and US alliances with India, Australia and Japan implicitly aim to block China.

Sino-American economic interdependence—the US is China's biggest export market, and China is the single largest holder of US government debt—is also destabilizing global politics. The US has repeatedly demanded that Beijing increase the value of its currency, undermining China's export competitiveness and costing millions of jobs in China. In the aftermath of Obama's trip to Asia last year, US officials have increasingly pushed for punitive tariffs on Chinese exports.

It was in this context that Clinton delivered her speech. Though the US press focused its attention on her remarks on the China-Google dispute, Clinton's comments were part of a far broader agenda. She delivered the hour-long speech to a high-level gathering, including several senators and foreign ambassadors. Clinton said "representatives of our International Visitor Leadership Program on internet freedom from China, Colombia, Iran, Lebanon and Moldova"—all countries hosting or targeted by US intelligence efforts—were also present.

Clinton attacked Chinese Internet censorship, saying, "Even as networks spread to nations around the globe, virtual walls are cropping up in place of visible walls. Some countries have erected electronic barriers that prevent their people from accessing portions of the world's networks. They've expunged words, names and phrases from search engine results. They have violated the privacy of citizens who engage in non-violent political speech."

This was, however, only a cover for the assertion of a global mandate for Washington to destabilize or overthrow governments worldwide. Clinton praised the Twitter and Internet organizing behind US-backed "color revolutions," including most recently the June 2009 Green Revolution that unsuccessfully tried to overturn the reelection of Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. She noted, "In Iran and Moldova and other countries, online organizing has been a critical tool for advancing democracy and enabling citizens to protest suspicious election results."

Other US-backed "color revolutions" include the 2003 Rose Revolution that installed President Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine that placed President Viktor Yushchenko in power, and the failed 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan and 2006 Denim Revolution in Belarus.

Clinton reserved the right to engineer such "revolutions" anywhere in the world: "The United States is committed to devoting the diplomatic, economic and technological resources necessary to advance [Internet] freedoms. We are a nation made up of immigrants from every country and every interest that spans the globe... We will work with partners in industry, academia and nongovernmental organizations to establish a standing effort that will harness the power of connection technologies and apply them to our diplomatic goals."

She cited as an example the possibility of extending State Department funding to create mobile phone applications to "allow people to rate government ministries," and "also to ferret out and report corruption."

Clinton singled out China for criticism: "There are so many people in China now online. But countries that restrict free access to information or violate the basic rights of Internet users risk walling themselves off from the progress of the next century." She said the US would raise its differing views with China "candidly and consistently" in the coming period.

Immediately after this public rebuke of Beijing, she issued the following remarkable warning: "Information freedom supports the peace and security that provides a foundation for global progress. Historically, asymmetrical access to information is one of the leading causes of interstate conflict. When we face serious disputes or dangerous incidents, it's critical that people on both sides of the problem have access to the same sets of facts and opinions."

Taken at face value, such comments suggest that US-China relations have become so tense that Washington foresees the risk of war unless the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does an about-face and allows pro-US political tendencies to freely express their views. This would include religious and pro-democracy activists, as well as Tibetan or Xinjiang separatist groups.

Stripped of its cynical rhetoric, Clinton's speech is a US challenge to the CCP's monopoly of political power in China, and a threat to use "color revolution" methods against Beijing, or any other state, should it refuse to bow to Washington's strategic interests.

In the lead-up to Clinton's speech, Chinese officials had played down the importance of the dispute with Google. Vice-Foreign Minister He Yafei told China's state wire service Xinhua that the Google dispute should not be "over-interpreted"

or linked to US-China relations.

After Clinton's speech, however, Chinese media took a harsher tone. Yesterday, the Chinese *People's Daily* ran an editorial calling US Internet plans a "shot in the arm for US hegemony." It charged Washington with having a stranglehold on Internet infrastructure, and with using Twitter and other communications resources to destabilize regimes in Iran and Libya.

The *Global Times*, another state-run Chinese newspaper, wrote: "The hard fact that Clinton has failed to highlight in her speech is that the bulk of the information flowing from the US and other Western countries is loaded with aggressive rhetoric against those countries that do not follow their lead." It added, "Countries disadvantaged by the unequal and undemocratic information flow have to protect their national interest, and take steps towards this. This is essential for their political stability as well as normal conduct of economic and social life."

Though it carefully censors news of popular protest, the Chinese state press is well aware of massive discontent in China, and fears that it could come under the control of political forces hostile to the CCP. The number of "mass incidents"—that is, protests, strikes or riots, typically repressed by mass police or paramilitary actions—reached 120,000 in 2008, up from 90,000 in 2006 and 74,000 in 2004.

According to some estimates, the figure for 2009 could be 230,000. A Chinese Academy of Social Sciences study in December found that of the 77 major "mass incidents" in 2009, 30 percent were spread by the Internet and mobile phones.

In this context, Clinton's speech amounts to a threat that the State Department might try to seize upon and direct protests to undermine the Chinese government—as it already has done in Eastern Europe, the ex-USSR and the Middle East.

One does not have to be a supporter of the Beijing Stalinist regime to realize the reactionary character of such plans. The "color revolution" regimes have all proven to be unpopular and anti-democratic pawns of Washington, with Yushchenko being voted out in the recent Ukrainian election. In China—an enormous state, riven by internal ethnic, regional and class divisions—such a policy by the US would pose the risk of unleashing large-scale violence and civil war.



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