

Google shuts down search services in China

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After a protracted brawl with the Chinese government over censorship, the Internet giant Google shut down its search engine inside China, *Google.cn*, on March 22. While Google's tactics were primarily driven by commercial considerations, the issue has become entwined with the Obama administration's more aggressive stance toward Beijing since the beginning of the year.

Google claimed its move would "meaningfully increase access to information for people in China". In fact, the company simply redirected *Google.cn* users to its Hong Kong site. That switch does nothing to challenge China's notorious Great Firewall, which continues to filter out sensitive Internet search results, including those related to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Tibetan separatism and the banned Falungong religious movement.

Throughout the dispute, Google has postured as a fighter for freedom against China's Internet censorship system. In fact, the US-based conglomerate, with its revenue of \$23.6 billion and assets of over \$40 billion, has been engaged in protracted campaign to secure a dominant place in the world's largest Internet market, with its estimated 380 million users.

The corporation launched *Google.cn* in 2006 to replace the Chinese language version of *Google.com* that was established in 2000 but blocked by China's Internet authorities. Google agreed to abide by China's censorship rules and block banned web sites and search results in order to establish its local service and tap into vast online advertising revenues.

Beijing was always reluctant to allow Google to operate in China, fearing that the international search engine would eventually provide a means for Chinese users to access what it regarded as dangerous political ideas. It was not until September 2007, more than 18 months after *Google.cn*'s launch, that the authorities

issued a licence approving the service.

Google's censorship included blocking the names and websites associated with a political dissident Guo Quan in its search results in 2008. Guo wrote an open letter declaring that "to make money, Google has become a servile Pekinese dog wagging its tail at the heels of the Chinese Communists".

With a growing share of China's search engine market, Google chief executive Eric Schmidt confidently declared in 2007 that his company would dominate the Chinese market. Before shutting its operations in China, the company held 35 percent of the market, compared to 60 percent for its main rival, the local firm Baidu.

The eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008 heightened social tensions in China, prompting Beijing to tighten its Internet censorship. Beijing initially targetted the entire Internet industry for running advertisements for unapproved medical sites. In January 2009, authorities singled out Google for allowing pornographic content in its search results, forcing Kai-Fu Lee to step down as Google China CEO.

Beijing increased the pressure on Google last June by suspending its ability to search foreign websites and use its associative word search function. This was "punishment" for its alleged failure to remove pornographic content from its search results. Google announced an end to self-censorship this January. Supposedly in response to the hacking of Google Gmail accounts of Chinese human right activists, the move was aimed at pressuring Beijing to make concessions.

The Obama administration promptly seized on the issue. Washington's use of "human rights" is always geared to US economic and strategic interests. During her first visit to China in 2009 in the midst of the global financial turmoil, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Beijing to keep buying US bonds, saying the

human rights issue should not “interfere” with financial cooperation.

On January 21, however, Clinton suddenly became a champion of “Internet freedom,” demanding that Beijing investigate the alleged Gmail hackings. She connected the issue to US geopolitical interests, saying the Obama administration would work closely with industry and academia to “harness the power of connection technologies and apply them to our diplomatic goals”.

Clinton’s statement on Internet censorship was part of a broader diplomatic offensive on a range of issues. Since the beginning of 2010, Washington has imposed tariffs on Chinese-made tyres and steel pipes, approved a major arms sale to Taiwan and proceeded with a White House meeting with the Dalai Lama, despite Beijing’s strong opposition. The US has pressured China to support new UN sanctions against Iran and repeatedly demanded the revaluation of the yuan against the dollar.

China has rejected Google’s accusations that it was behind the hacking attacks. However, the Obama administration has given the green light to the National Security Agency to work with Google to investigate its allegations. Sections of the US media have inflated the incident with ominous warnings of China’s capacity to wage “cyber war” against Western corporations and governments.

Speaking to the British-based *Guardian* last week, Google’s co-founder Sergey Brin suddenly discovered that China reminded him of the police-state in his birthplace—the former Soviet Union. He made a direct appeal to Washington to confront Beijing, saying: “Human rights issues deserve equal time to the trade issues that are high priority now... I hope this gets taken seriously.”

With trade tensions rising as the Obama administration prepares to decide whether to name China as a “currency manipulator” later this month, the issue of Internet censorship could again come to the fore. Washington is not concerned about the rights of Chinese Internet users, but rather defending the rights and market share of the many large American corporations operating in China.

The American Chamber of Commerce in China issued a cautious statement last week saying it “regretted” Google’s decision to shut down *Google.cn*,

but was pleased that it was continuing to maintain other operations such as advertising in China. “We understand both the reasons Google made its decision and the determination of the government of China to maintain its existing legal and regulatory regime,” it stated.

Just as Washington is beating the drum of “Internet freedom,” Beijing is using the issue to stir up nationalism at home. The *Global Times* published an editorial last week citing an online survey purporting to show that 80 percent of Internet users could not care less if Google withdrew from China. The editorial declared that China had to develop its own technology against foreign rivals, saying: “This is a high-tech competition, and also a competition to uphold the state’s sovereignty.”

Desperate to avoid being caught in the middle, Chinese companies are severing or reconsidering their ties with Google. China Unicom announced that mobile phones using Google’s Android operating system would no longer feature its search function. China Telecom said it would no longer use Google’s search engine in a handset. Sina, a leading Chinese Internet news portal, is reviewing its operations powered by the Google search function.

At present, Google’s search services in China have not been blocked, despite reports of disruptions this week. While determined not to bow to pressure from Washington, Beijing is also concerned that any overt move against Google could damage China’s business image and undermine foreign investment. That could change, however, if the Obama administration escalates the tensions between the two countries.



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