

China uses NSA revelations to highlight US hypocrisy on cyber security

By John Chan
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After a week of silence, the Chinese government has begun to use the revelations of former CIA operative Edward Snowden about the National Security Agency's (NSA) vast electronic spying to hit back at the Obama administration's allegations of Chinese cyber hacking.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chungying declared on Monday that the US "should pay attention to the international community's concerns and demands and give the international community the necessary explanation" over its surveillance programs. She flatly rejected as "nonsense" insinuations by American officials that Snowden was a Chinese agent.

In an unprecedented step, China's state-controlled media highlighted protests in "democratic" Hong Kong last weekend over Snowden's disclosure that the NSA had hacked hundreds of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese computers. Led by pro-Beijing parties such as the Democratic Alliance for Betterment and Progress, a few hundred protesters marched to the US consulate, holding banners and shouting slogans such as "Defend free speech," "Protect Snowden" and "No Extradition."

Protest leaders submitted a letter to the US Consul General, denouncing Washington for having "publicly supported the cause of Internet freedom and criticised other governments for conducting cyber attacks, surveillance and censorship" when it was operating its "own blanket surveillance systems and allegedly conducting cyber warfare against Hong Kong."

These pro-Beijing parties, which consistently oppose the extension of democratic rights in Hong Kong, are exploiting widespread public anger over the NSA revelations to discredit the local opposition Democratic Party and its "democratic" allies, which have

longstanding relations with Washington and have been silent over the issue.

Snowden is currently in hiding in Hong Kong, a Chinese territory. According to the *Hong Kong Economic Journal*, the local authorities not only know where he is hiding, but have assigned special personnel to protect him "to prevent any incident." Snowden has warned that he could be the target of assassination by the US intelligence agencies or their third party proxies.

The Chinese government, which maintains its own police-state apparatus, is not a defender of Snowden or democratic rights. It has an extensive Internet surveillance system, manned by an estimated 30,000 police, to monitor web activity and block access to sites regarded as politically dangerous. Dissident writers and workers seeking to organise strikes have been jailed for their Internet postings.

However, Beijing, for its own political purposes, is able to point to the utter hypocrisy of the US administration, which in the lead up to the recent summit between Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, launched a strident public campaign against Chinese hacking. The Chinese foreign ministry's comments about the NSA spying come ahead of next month's US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, where cyber security will be a paramount issue.

The state-run *Global Times* pointed to the geo-political considerations involved when it called on China and Hong Kong not to allow the extradition of Snowden to the US, as it "would not only be a betrayal of Snowden's trust, but a disappointment of expectations around the world."

The article commented: "Cyber attacks, a weapon frequently used by the US government, have turned out to be its own Achilles' heel. China is generous enough

not to hype this incident in consideration of the Sino-US relationship.” Nevertheless, it insisted: “The Chinese government has no responsibility to help the US quench the fire... Beijing needs to demonstrate it can’t just be pushed according to Washington’s needs.”

Despite the devastating nature of the NSA revelations, Obama continued to brand China as the greatest threat to global cyber security. In a PBS TV interview this week, Obama claimed that Xi had understood his blunt message on alleged Chinese hacking, which could “adversely affect the fundamentals of the US-China relationship.”

Obama alleged that China was engaged in “stealing” the commercial and technical secrets of major American companies such as Apple, rather than the “standard fare” of other intelligence agencies, which seek to uncover military and diplomatic information. He said Chinese spying would affect “our long-term prosperity.” In reality, corporations like Apple are based on parasitic economic relations. They make huge profits by exploiting their brand monopolies in global markets to sell products made by poorly-paid workers in countries such as China.

So far, Washington has not requested Snowden’s extradition from Hong Kong, which Beijing has the legal power to veto. But as the *Global Times* article indicates, any decision by Beijing on the issue will be based on political expediency. The Chinese regime currently regards Snowden as useful for its propaganda, but could just as readily sacrifice him in negotiations with the US.

The Chinese government will quickly dump Snowden if his presence begins to threaten China’s own anti-democratic measures. Polls by the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong found that more than half the respondents opposed Snowden’s extradition. Many regarded him as a “hero.” The same sentiments certainly prevail among China’s own 700 million “netizens,” who resent the pervasive intrusion of China’s Internet police.

Snowden’s revelations have also raised serious security concerns in Chinese business, government and military circles. These particularly relate to the role of American IT giant Cisco Systems, which is one of the largest global suppliers of networking systems. Snowden exposed the fact that Cisco has provided US

intelligence agencies with the means to electronically access its equipment and thus networks, not only in the US, but around the world, including China.

A Chinese financial journal, *Securities Times*, warned on Monday that Cisco was involved in virtually every major network in China, including those of the government, customs, postal services, finance, railways, civil aviation, healthcare and even the military. China’s two largest telecommunication networks, operated by China Telecom and China Unicom, carry more than 80 percent of the country’s Internet traffic. Cisco’s equipment accounts for 70 percent of the two network’s traffic. “Security experts are worried that in the event of war, the US government is very likely to use the products deployed by Cisco around the globe, to wage cyber war, launching fatal attacks on enemy states,” the journal reported.

Securities Times wrote that ever since Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE were blocked from the US market last year on “national security” grounds, China has begun to replace US equipment inside China with Chinese technology.

Snowden’s revelations demonstrate that US “national security concerns” about these two companies did not relate so much to Chinese spying, as to worries that Chinese-installed equipment would not allow the NSA to so easily spy on the American population.

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