

Google's wake-up call to the world

Written by □ Nat Bellocchi

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Google's announcement on Jan. 12 that it would pull out of China because of hacking and restrictions on searches keyed on the google.cn platform was a shot heard around the world.

While the shot fired in 1775 by a US minuteman in Concord, Massachusetts, was a sign that the colonies were no longer willing to endure restrictions imposed by a repressive British Empire, the Google shot may be a wake-up call to those in the business and political communities that have chafed under restrictions imposed by Beijing.

Companies angling for a share of China's market have largely turned a blind eye, or even aided and abetted Beijing in its restrictions and censorship. The prevailing justification was that companies have to follow local laws and, as Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer once said, "want to be part of the solution."

Private companies have in fact aided the isolation of Taiwan at the behest of China by declining to do business there. It is all the more remarkable (and somewhat embarrassing) then that the first shot of resistance comes from a private US firm rather than a Western government.

But the submissive stance of Western companies and governments is giving way to a rebellion in the ranks, caused by China's increasingly aggressive and haughty positions on everything from Internet hacking and repression in Tibet and East Turkestan to the climate talks in Copenhagen and support for the regimes in Sudan and Iran.

Google's step is a courageous move that has prompted considerable rethinking among businesses and governments around the world: People are losing patience with Beijing's heavy-handed ways. Many in the West are reconsidering the wisdom of engagement policies that assumed that economic development would lead to political liberalization in China.

Against this background, what are the implications of rapprochement across the Taiwan Strait? As has been stated before: Everyone is in favor of reduced tensions — but under what conditions? Placating an aggressive neighbor could temporarily lead to reduced tensions, but in the long run it only temps the aggressor, aggravating the situation.

Three basic conditions that must be met in order for progress to be made in the Taiwan Strait are: a clear consensus in Taiwan on the way ahead; equity, balance and transparency in cross-strait negotiations (with mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty); and the promotion of Taiwan's international standing and reduction of its international isolation.

Economist Thomas Friedman recently wrote in the New York Times that the rapprochement is "the most important peace breakthrough on the planet."

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He is right to laud the Taiwanese for their hard work and entrepreneurship, but misses the point: A rising, authoritarian, China is trying to undermine a democratic Taiwan.

What has been achieved so far does not meet any of the three conditions mentioned above.

Moreover, Friedman's conclusion is premature given that China has not removed any of its missiles aimed at Taiwan. Victory cannot be declared in battle before the first shot has been fired.

This brings us back to the earlier question: What are the implications of Google's move for cross-strait rapprochement?

While Western companies and governments rethink how to approach China, Taiwan's government should do its own reflecting. If it continues to drift toward China, it will meet increasing hesitation from Western governments and companies.

Until now, the West has been willing to maintain informal but solid ties with Taiwan. Closer links with China will widen the gap between Taiwan and the democratic West.

Much will also depend on how the US deals with these issues. The administration of US President Barack Obama has said it would lodge a formal diplomatic protest in Beijing over the cyber attacks against Google and other US corporate interests. But it needs to go further than that: It needs to engage China forcefully on the wide array of matters mentioned earlier, including cyber-security, Tibet and the climate.

Just as the shot heard around the world in 1775 marked the end of "business as usual" and the start of a new vigilance, Google's move should mark the start of a renewed emphasis on the principles of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This should factor into the US' — and Taiwan's — interaction with China.

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