

China upset with Google's Taiwan map

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Mainland media control over Chinese-language content took a blow Wednesday with state press claiming rage after Mountain View, Calif.-based Internet giant Google removed referrals to Taiwan as a province.

Chinese media reports said "Google.com, world's largest Internet search engine, deleted the words 'Taiwan, a province of the People's Republic of China' on a map of Taiwan linked to its maps search engine maps.google.com. This has drawn rage from Chinese officials and the people."

Google made the changes "under pressure of extremists in Taiwan's pan-Green camp (a pro-independence alliance between the ruling Democratic Progressive Party and the hard-line Taiwan Solidarity Union party)," Xinhua reported.

Company spokeswoman Debbie Frost claims the changes were just a "regular update" of all of the site's map pages, not a deliberate effort targeting the Taiwan page.

The backlash on Google's mainland business operations remains to be seen, with analysts monitoring China's latest attempt to impose its version of Taiwan sovereignty on the borderless world of the Internet.

While China claims the island of Taiwan, a handful of countries in Latin America, Africa and the Pacific Rim recognize its democratically elected government as an independent nation.

Companies' obligation to espouse a host government's political policy rather than follow its laws and China's ability to control Chinese-language content are two of the big-picture issues.

The best-case scenario on possible repercussions would be for the incident to quickly die down as a minor flap. Kai-fu Lee, Google's new country manager for China after a nasty separation from rival Microsoft, has the connections and experience in the mainland tech sector necessary to make this a minor glitch in the overall long-term business relationship.

Chinese officialdom has many options at its disposal to make things difficult for Google if it decides to make an example of the search-engine giant. Increased bureaucratic red tape, fines, even orders to shut their doors are feasible options that have all been used on tech and telecom firms not toeing the regulatory line.

Until now, major U.S. Internet companies have been careful to abide by China's rule, including Microsoft's Web site MSN, which actually became the target of activists outside China for abiding too closely to the Chinese authorities' rules for keeping a lid on free speech.

By labeling Asia's map against China's wishes in favor of Taiwan, however, Google has not only triggered the wrath of the government but has shaken the national pride of many Chinese Internet users as well at a time when fierce patriotism has found many of its nationals taking to the streets to demonstrate their allegiance. In fact, Chinese media have been reporting that many cyberspace chatters are now suggesting a boycott of the search engine's Chinese service in retaliation against Google's labeling of territories.

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