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Obama Tells Chinese He's Disappointed Over Snowden Case

By Nicole Gaouette and Michael Shepard - Jul 11, 2013

President [Barack Obama](#) told Chinese officials that he's disappointed with [China](#)'s treatment of U.S. demands that [Hong Kong](#) hand over fugitive security contractor Edward Snowden, who instead was allowed to flee to [Russia](#).

The issue surfaced during a meeting in [Washington](#) yesterday between Obama, Vice Premier Wang Yang and State Councilor Yang Jiechi, who were representing China at strategic and economic talks in the city, according to a White House statement.

"The President expressed his disappointment and concern with China's handling of the Snowden case," according to the White House statement summarizing the meeting.

Snowden, who exposed classified U.S. programs that collect telephone and Internet data, left Hong Kong for Russia on June 23 even as American authorities were pressing for his return to face prosecution. He's believed to be at a Moscow airport, where he's pursuing asylum in another country.

The U.S. pursuit of Snowden has emerged as a sticking point in international relations, particularly with Russia and China. Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) last month warned China and Russia of "consequences" for their actions and ridiculed Snowden for choosing them "as assistants in his flight from justice because they're such powerful bastions of Internet freedom."

U.S. officials have since softened their tone, with Obama saying June 27 that he wouldn't jeopardize cooperation on broader issues with China or Russia over Snowden. The 30-year-old systems administrator was in Hong Kong when he revealed himself last month as the source of leaks on the top-secret National Security Agency surveillance programs.

Trust 'Undermined'

Prosecutors in the U.S. are seeking Snowden's return and have brought theft and espionage charges against the former employee of McLean, Virginia-based government contractor [Booz Allen Hamilton Holding Corp. \(BAH\)](#)

Earlier yesterday, Deputy Secretary of State [William Burns](#) said at an event concluding the strategic and economic

talks that the decision by authorities in Hong Kong and Beijing to let Snowden leave for Moscow “undermined the trust needed to manage difficult issues.”

Yang, China's State Councilor, who spoke next, said Hong Kong officials' treatment of the case was “beyond reproach.”

“With regard to Snowden case, the central government of China has always respected” the Hong Kong government's handling of cases in accordance with law, Yang said. Hong Kong “handled the Snowden case in accordance with law and its approach is beyond reproach,” Yang said.

Hacking Concerns

Obama's Oval Office meeting with the Chinese officials covered a range of economic and strategic matters, including cooperation on curtailing [North Korea's](#) nuclear ambitions and efforts to open [China's economy](#) to further U.S. investment, according to the White House.

The discussions also touched on the issue of computer hacking, a subject that has been complicated by the Snowden case. Obama reiterated U.S. concerns over the computer theft of [trade secrets](#) and welcomed joint U.S.-Chinese efforts to develop norms for behavior in cyberspace, the White House said.

While U.S. officials have accused the Chinese government of orchestrating attacks on American networks, Snowden has asserted that the U.S. has been hacking into computers in Hong Kong and mainland China since 2009. Yang alluded to Snowden's allegations in his remarks yesterday.

“China is a victim of hacking attacks,” Yang said. “China's view is that the relevant international cyber rules should be developed” by the [United Nations](#), he said.

‘Sunnylands’ Spirit

Snowden, who's believed to be in the transit lounge of Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport, had been based in [Hawaii](#) while working as a contractor at the NSA. He fled to Hong Kong before his revelations were made public. Officials in Hong Kong let him to travel to Russia, despite U.S. requests to extradite him.

“Over the past two days, we have made clear that China's handling of this case was not consistent with the spirit of Sunnylands,” the private estate in [California](#) where Obama held a summit last month with Chinese President Xi Jinping, “or with the type of relationship, the new model that we both seek to build,” Burns said.

With his U.S. passport revoked, Snowden can't leave the Moscow airport transit zone without a new travel document. He dropped his request for asylum in Russia after President [Vladimir Putin](#) said July 1 that the American must stop hurting U.S. interests if he wants to remain there.

Snowden has instead sought refuge in 26 other countries. While most have spurned his requests, the leaders of Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua have indicated they would be willing to take him in.

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