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China's Greatest Fears

By Richard Lourie

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China picked the United States' pocket, then slapped its face.

In other words, the current hacking scandal is political as well as economic. Much is murky about that scandal, but one thing is certain: The Chinese will be paying very close attention to the U.S. response. They will want to see if Washington's response is weak, inappropriately harsh (a sort of weakness in itself) or a perfect blend of rhetoric and action, which mark diplomacy at its best.

When pressed about the United States' own alleged cybernetic incursions in Iran, U.S. officials are quick to point out that if any such actions took place, they were done for purposes of national security, not mere economic gain. But that's not a very useful distinction, because at some point, economic damage becomes a national security issue. It already has with China.

It's possible that the U.S. has already attacked the Chinese cyber realm in a way sufficient both to cause genuine harm and to convey the severity of U.S. displeasure. Still, it's difficult to imagine just what that damage might be. In the world of espionage, just as it is easier for a closed society to steal secrets from an open one, there is also more motivation for a lesser

developed society to steal from an economically more developed one. For that reason, it is unlikely that a U.S. cyber response would be a tit-for-tat theft of economically valuable information. The U.S. could penetrate the political side of China, say, obtaining the records of the standing committee or aspects of defense doctrine that have not been made public. But politics is always part public perception. Even if the U.S. pulled off some covert cyber coup in the political or military realm, it would still look weak in the world's eyes if there were no visible, public response to the insult and injury from China.

So the U.S. must publicly inflict damage on China. China is vulnerable in the west of the country where two minorities, the Tibetans and the Muslim Uighurs, are struggling for independence, or at least genuine autonomy. China also feels vulnerable along its eastern coast where it receives large amounts of energy and raw materials by sea and from where it exports finished goods. A quick glance at a map shows why China feels vulnerable there. To enter the South China Sea, ships must pass through the pirate-infested Straits of Malacca, then sail past the Philippines and Thailand, both of which are wary of China's growing power. Two of the United States' closest allies, South Korea and Japan, hold commanding positions over access to the East China Sea.

China's sensitivity and aggressiveness about the barren rocky islands in the South China Sea have less to do with national pride and the natural resources those islands may contain, than with a desire to exert increasing control over those vital sea routes. The situation along those sea routes is currently too complex and volatile to risk a direct U.S. response there. But China has been invited to Hawaii for the Rim of the Pacific naval exercise in 2014, which U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Locklear has termed the "world's largest exercise." Invitations can be withdrawn, but that seems inadequate.

The number of Tibetans lighting themselves on fire has increased lately, and the Chinese government has attempted to impose a news blackout in the region. The Dalai Lama, though no longer the official leader of the Tibetan nation in exile, is still its spiritual leader and its symbol in the eyes of the world. Unfortunately, inviting him to the White House against Chinese protest is an option that was already exercised by President Barack Obama in July 2011. Moreover, Americans are somewhat overexposed to Tibet, whose Buddhism fit in so nicely with New Age spirituality. There is a sense that the Tibetan card has been played and beaten.

That leaves the Uighurs of Xinjiang. They have several advantages. Largely unknown, they aren't yet overexposed. They are Muslims, and the U.S. can always use a few points in the Islamic world. What's more, the leader of the Uighur movement in exile lives in Virginia. Through her own skill and efforts, Rebiya Kadeer became China's richest woman. She also attained political prominence but ran afoul of the regime by speaking out for her oppressed people. She was sent to prison for six years, all of which is described in harrowing detail in her book "The Dragon Fighter." Beijing tried to prevent a documentary about her called "The Ten Conditions of Love" from being shown at the 2009 Melbourne International Film Festival. A massive cyber attack followed on Melbourne's refusal to yield.

The Chinese are more afraid of the Uighurs than of the Tibetans who have no natural allies, although they have sentimental support in the West. As Muslims, the Uighurs don't feel at home in Han China but have a natural affiliation with the other Muslim countries to China's

west. The two main Central Asian strongmen, Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, are both in their 70s and have no obvious heirs or successors. Central Asia could easily go the way of North Africa, Yemen and Syria. And so the Chinese have good reason for looking on that 66-year-old Uighur woman with trepidation. Perhaps some high U.S. official should invite her over for tea.

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