

News Analysis: Questions Turn to U.S. Competence in Snowden Saga

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration has spent the past few weeks arguing that it can wield power responsibly after Edward Snowden unveiled its sweeping spying programs. Now the administration must prove it can wield power effectively.

As the 30-year-old leads the world's lone superpower on a global game of hide-and-seek, U.S. government officials faced questions about whether they had botched the effort to extradite Snowden from Hong Kong to face charges related to his leak of classified information.

The latest wrinkle in the Snowden saga poses a different set of questions for an administration that has spent weeks fending off questions about whether it has abused its power to collect taxes, investigate criminal activity and fight terrorism.

On Monday, administration officials said they had done all they could to bring Snowden

to justice. Chinese defiance, rather than bureaucratic bungling, had allowed the 30-year-old former contractor to slip out of Hong Kong as officials there weighed Washington's request for extradition, they said.

"This was a deliberate choice by the government to release a fugitive, despite a valid arrest warrant," White House spokesman Jay Carney said at a briefing.

Other administration officials tried to dispel any notion of foot-dragging since Snowden first went public on June 9 and dismissed suggestions that they could have taken other steps to detain Snowden, who had gained access to highly sensitive information as a contract systems administrator at a National Security Agency facility in Hawaii.

Obama first learned that Snowden had turned up in Hong Kong on June 9 as he flew back from a weekend of talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

But Obama does not appear to have played a direct role in trying to get him back. Obama declined to say on Monday whether he had spoken directly with President Vladimir Putin or other foreign leaders about the extradition efforts. Obama had an icy meeting with Putin a week ago at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland.

"We're following all the appropriate legal channels and working with various other countries to make sure the rule of law is observed," Obama told reporters at an unrelated event on Monday on immigration reform.

Obama's public schedule leaves little room for the extradition effort. He makes a major speech on climate change on Tuesday, and then leaves on a week-long trip to Africa.

Michael Chertoff, a former Homeland Security Secretary under Republican President George W. Bush, said extradition laws are riddled with loopholes and the United States has a limited ability to get other countries to do what it wants.

"You can do all the paperwork, but it becomes a question of leverage," he said. "Either they didn't have enough, or they didn't exercise enough."

Though the White House has distanced itself from the Snowden affair, other agencies have taken pains to show that they have done all they could to bring Snowden back to face charges.

The Justice Department said it had filed espionage and theft charges against Snowden on June 14, one week before it made the charges public, and asked Hong Kong to arrest Snowden the next day.

Officials from the FBI, the Justice Department and the State Department worked with their counterparts in Hong Kong to extradite Snowden over the next several days, culminating in a telephone call between U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and Hong Kong's Secretary for Justice, Rimsky Yuen, on June 19.

"There was a sense that the process was moving forward," a Justice Department official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Hong Kong officials asked for more information and evidence two days later, but did not give

the United States enough time to respond before Snowden left the Chinese territory on June 23.

Administration officials dismissed suggestions that they had mishandled the extradition effort. Using a so-called "red notice" to ask Interpol, the international police organization, for help was unnecessary because Snowden should not have been able to leave Hong Kong if his passport had been revoked, a Justice Department official said.

U.S. officials said privacy laws prevented them from describing the status of any individual's passport, but Carney hinted that it had indeed been revoked.

"Hong Kong authorities were advised of the status of Mr. Snowden's travel documents in plenty of time to have prohibited his travel," he said.

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