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Enabling China
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American technology companies are eager to do business in China, sometimes too eager.
Cisco Systems and others are working on a government project in the city of Chongqing, for example, that includes creating the biggest police surveillance system in the world. A year and a half after Google pulled its search engine out of China to avoid censorship, Microsoft's Bing still censors searches in China. Earlier this month, it agreed to provide search results in English for Baidu, China's leading - and heavily censored - engine.
The United States needs enforceable standards of ethical behavior when American companies work with authoritarian governments.
In May, Chinese practitioners of Falun Gong sued Cisco, accusing it of helping the Chinese government design and maintain the so-called Golden Shield system used to track and target dissidents online, including Falun Gong followers who were apprehended and tortured.
Cisco denies the accusation. It says it does not customize equipment to help any government censor content, intercept communications or track users. It says it only sells the Chinese government standard-issue equipment and that it is not selling cameras or image-management software in Chongqing, only general network equipment.
Nevertheless, Cisco's experience confirms that we need uniform principles to guide corporate behavior.
After Yahoo handed over data five years ago about a Chinese journalist who was condemned to 10 years in jail, Yahoo, Microsoft and Google joined in the Global Network Initiative to set principles that include protecting "the freedom of expression rights of their users when confronted with government demands, laws and regulations to suppress freedom of expression." Voluntary guidelines are insufficient. Just as the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act establishes that companies cannot bribe foreign officials, legislation is needed in this area.
Internet companies should not keep user data inside countries where courts convict people for what they write, speak or think. They should warn users about their risks, and they should never censor content. American firms were barred from selling crime-control products to China after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The list must be broadened and kept up to date. Firms could be barred from selling technology to eavesdrop on VoIP communications or powerful antispam systems that could be used to target political speech. Technology companies should be barred from tailoring goods to a repressive end.
An article this month about the Chongqing project in The Wall Street Journal quoted an executive at Hewlett-Packard, which is planning to bid on the project. "It's not my job to really understand what they're going to use it for," he said. That's not nearly good enough.

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