

WikiLeaks cables reveal closer US-Japan intelligence relations

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Leaked US embassy cables have revealed closer collaboration between American and Japanese spy agencies. The cables, from 2006 and 2008, underscore the growth of tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, and point to Washington's attempts to undermine Chinese influence, in concert with its allies.

A cable from September 2006 documents the initial moves to greater collaboration between the intelligence agencies of the two countries. According to the cable, Randall Fort, head of the US State Department Intelligence and Research Bureau, told Japanese officials: "A deep-rooted intelligence relationship could—and should—become part of the bedrock of the US-Japan alliance, just as it was with our British and Australian allies ..."

The cable reveals that further meetings were arranged between Japanese and US officials. According to Fort, the purpose of these meetings was to "exchange views on China and where it was headed in the next five years".

The central focus of the 2006 cable, however, was Iran. Fort referred to the "under-utilised" international network of Japanese businesses. "Japan, with its economic and diplomatic presence in countries like Iran, could draw on insights that would be of great interest to the United States," he commented.

At the time, the Bush administration was desperate for intelligence on events inside Iran as Washington sought to intensify pressure on Tehran, including by making threats of military attack on its nuclear facilities. As Fort pointed out, Japan had a "unique opportunity" to collect information inside Iran, where

the US had no embassy.

A November 2008 cable reflected the shift in foreign policy orientation that was beginning under Bush and intensified under Obama—away from the war in Iraq, and toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. It was associated with a more aggressive policy aimed at countering the rising power of China.

The cable documents a meeting between Fort and senior Australian officials about intelligence cooperation with Japan.

The director of the Australian Defence Intelligence Organisation, Major-General Maurie McNarn, and his deputy, Michael Shoebridge, "agreed that there were signs of progress within senior ranks of the Japanese regarding trilateral US-AUS-JPN efforts against countries of mutual concern—particularly within the defence intelligence establishment against such themes as North Korean [weapons of mass destruction] and China's naval capabilities".

The crisis-ridden North Korean regime is routinely invoked as a bogeyman to justify Washington's machinations in the Asia-Pacific. The real concern in the American political and military establishment is the expansion of Chinese influence and its development of a blue water navy that potentially poses a challenge to longstanding US strategic dominance in the Asia-Pacific region.

Over the past decade, the US has cultivated closer relations with the Japanese military and urged Japan to rearm and play a greater strategic role in Asia. The desire of the Japanese ruling elite to pursue a more

assertive foreign policy has been hampered by the so-called pacifist clause in the country's post-war constitution.

The constraints on the Japanese military were demonstrated during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War. As the US and its allies seized on the war against Iraq to pursue their strategic interests in the Middle East, Japan was left on the sidelines. To add insult to injury, Washington pressured Tokyo to foot a large part of the bill.

Over the past decade, Japanese governments have increasingly sought to free the military from the constitutional constraints. Despite widespread public opposition, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi exploited the Bush administration's "war on terror" to send Japanese naval refuelling vessels to support the invasion of Afghanistan and troops as part of the US-led occupation of Iraq.

The WikiLeaks cables point to a push from Washington for closer intelligence sharing. At the same time, the American intelligence establishment was concerned over the security of shared information after previous Japanese spy scandals involving China and Russia. In 2006, Fort called on Japan to take "additional steps to improve internal controls over classified information".

Fort urged Tokyo to follow the example of "the Australians", who had done "an outstanding job of protecting classified information". The comment underscores just how closely Canberra was tied into Washington's intelligence network following its full support for the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The leaked cables cover the period in which Japan, fully backed by the US, was seeking to develop a strategic "Quadrilateral Dialogue" involving the two countries, with Australia and India. The Quad held its first meeting in May 2007 and carried out joint naval exercises, along with Singapore, in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007.

The purpose of the Quad, like the moves toward greater intelligence cooperation, was to counteract the

growing influence of China in the Asian region. Beijing reacted angrily denouncing the Quad as an "Asian NATO"—that is, an embryonic military alliance directed against China.

The fate of the Quad, however, underscores the dilemmas facing the ruling elites in Asia. While it is heavily dependent on its post-World War II military alliance with the US, Australia is economically reliant on exports of minerals to China. Not wanting to offend China, the newly elected Labor government headed by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd pulled out of the Quad. Foreign Minister Stephen Smith pointedly made the announcement in early 2008 while standing alongside his Chinese counterpart.

The collapse of the Quad was one of the issues that incensed Washington. Other WikiLeaks cables have documented the growing animosity in Washington toward Rudd's foreign policy "blunders" that were a major factor in his ousting last year (see: "WikiLeaks cables cast fresh light on coup against former Australian PM Rudd").

A similar dilemma faces the Japanese establishment, which forged a military alliance with the US after World War II, but relies on China as its top export market. While Japanese and US intelligence officials were discussing closer arrangements in 2006, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had just been in China to try to mend relations that had been frayed under Koizumi.

The recent WikiLeaks cables throw further light on Washington's increasingly blatant efforts to shore up alliances in an attempt to isolate and undermine China in the region. Inevitably, these machinations will fuel greater tensions not only between countries in Asia, but within their ruling elites.



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