

Amid new revelations of NSA spying on Europe

# German press, politicians warn of rupture in US-German relations

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New revelations on the National Security Agency's activities and the consequences of its bugging of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's cell phone dominated German media at the start of the week.

Under the headline "The Sinister Friend," the German weekly *Der Spiegel* warned Monday of the threat of an "ice age" in German-American relations. It reported that a likely centre of the US spying operation was the massive, recently built US embassy at Brandenburg Gate, just a stone's throw from the Chancellery and the main German government buildings. *Der Spiegel* suggested that a listening post had been established in the embassy, which has a forest of antennae on its roof.

Infrared images indicate that enormous amounts of energy are being consumed inside the building, indicating surveillance activities.

Systematic monitoring of leading German politicians and officials began in 2002, when the Social Democratic (SPD)-Green Party government headed by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) spoke out against German participation in the impending Iraq war. Over the ensuing years, the monitoring of the German government was systematically extended. In addition to the German chancellor, the NSA has monitored at least 34 other international leaders.

The NSA surveillance operations are not limited to politicians, but target masses of people throughout Europe. It was reported at the weekend that the US secret services had monitored 60 million phone calls in Spain in December alone. According to Spanish news reports, the NSA had gathered information on phone numbers, the origin and duration of calls, and their content.

On Monday, the Spanish Foreign Ministry officially summoned the US ambassador to inform him of the displeasure of the Spanish government and demand an explanation.

Commenting on the *Der Spiegel* report, columnist Jakob Augstein wrote: "The bitter truth is that digital omnipotence has turned the heads of the Americans. Is the country in its current condition even capable of maintaining an alliance?"

Augstein went on to say that the United States "regards its right to security to be absolute and all-embracing—and has thereby become somewhat self-destructive." There was no conceivable benefit that could outweigh the damage already done by the recently exposed espionage, he concluded.

The conservative newspaper *Die Welt* declared that the Obama administration was enmeshed "in its most dangerous crisis," while the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* reported that German anger over US spying was intense. The "Obama-mania" that prevailed in layers of the European population before his 2008 election had disappeared.

High-ranking representatives of the German government and parliament from all parties declared their indignation in press releases and statements. At the end of last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel scolded the US administration. "Spying on friends is unacceptable," she declared prior to the EU summit in Brussels, adding, "We need trust between allies and partners, and such trust must now be restored."

Despite the criticisms and demands for an explanation or apology directed at Washington, the German government is trying to limit the damage.

On Monday afternoon, it was announced that the federal parliament (Bundestag) would hold a special session to discuss the bugging activities of the NSA. The meeting is planned, however, for three weeks' time—on November 18. A speaker for the conservative “union” parties (Christian Democratic Union—CDU and Christian Social Union—CSU) confirmed that “union” fraction leader Volker Kauder (CDU) and his counterpart from the SPD, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, had agreed on the meeting.

The Green Party and Left Party both welcomed the decision, renewing their call for a parliamentary investigation into the espionage allegations. This proposal could be put to a vote at the November meeting.

On Sunday evening, Kauder told the ZDF television channel that the CDU-CSU would not oppose such a parliamentary investigation. “If the two small opposition parties (i.e., the Greens and the Left Party) want the committee, we will allow it,” he said. The previous day he had categorically rejected the demand for such an investigation.

The CDU/CSU and the SPD, which are currently involved in negotiations for a new coalition government, have apparently concluded that the political crisis is so deep and has such far-reaching consequences that cooperation between all parties is vital.

The three weeks until the planned parliamentary session are to be used to defuse the crisis as much as possible. The chancellor has taken every opportunity to signal to the Obama administration that she is very concerned about the “jolt to the transatlantic relationship” and is committed to the continuation and strengthening of that relationship.

While repeatedly expressing anger over the NSA wiretap, Merkel has rejected calls for concrete measures against the US, most notably a halt to current negotiations for a free trade pact between Europe and the US.

Government spokesman Steffen Seibert declared that German interest in a free trade agreement remained intact. He was responding to demands by sections of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party, and also some voices within the CSU, to suspend negotiations until the allegations against US intelligence are answered.

Nevertheless, Merkel's attempts at conciliation

cannot hide the fact that a profound rupture in international relations has taken place, with far-reaching consequences that are only gradually coming to the surface.

For decades, the German intelligence services have worked closely with their American counterparts. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic are intent on building up their police state apparatuses in order to suppress their respective populations. This is behind the hostility of both Washington and Berlin to the revelations made by Edward Snowden.

The exposure of the criminal nature of the activities of the US secret services comes as an embarrassment to US intelligence agencies' German partners. A discussion has already commenced in the press and political circles regarding the need to beef up the German intelligence services to permit them to carry out spying operations domestically and internationally with greater independence from the US.

Writing at the end of last week in the *Financial Times*, the editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, a fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and a close ally of the US, called upon governments in Berlin and throughout Europe to “stop whining.” It is better, Joffe wrote, “to remember the rules: good counter-intelligence is more effective than sulky pouting; the best defence is offence—if you, my good friend, spy on me, I spy on you; and most important—do not get caught.”

Joffe complained about the backwardness of the German government's communications systems and went so far as to evoke the notorious secret services of the Nazis as a model. “Berlin has a long way to go in emulating its fabled Second World War Abwehr,” he concluded.



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