

NSA affair strains German-US relations

Peter Schwarz
1 November 2013

Top German and European politicians are flocking to Washington in an attempt to limit the escalating effects of the NSA bugging scandal.

On Wednesday, advisors of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Barack Obama met at the White House. The German delegation included the chancellor's foreign policy advisor, Christoph Heusgen, and intelligence coordinator Günter Heiß, who met with National Security Advisor Susan Rice, the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, deputy head of the NSA John Inglis and Obama's anti-terrorism adviser, Lisa Monaco. Heusgen met with Deputy State Secretary William Burns later on.

Parallel to the German visit, three separate delegations from the EU Parliament travelled to Washington. Next week, the heads of the German domestic intelligence service, Hans-Georg Maaßen, and the foreign intelligence service, Gerhard Schindler, are also due in the US capital.

The German and other European governments were notably restrained in their reactions when former NSA employee Edward Snowden first revealed details in June of the extent of the monitoring programs of American and British intelligence agencies. Behind the reticence was the fact that European intelligence agencies conduct similar sorts of surveillance operations, and work closely with their American and British counterparts.

The situation changed only when it emerged that the US was also spying on allied governments. The bugging of the cell phone of the German Chancellor was only the tip of the iceberg. US intelligence services monitor thousands of government and opposition politicians in allied countries, as US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper candidly admitted to a congressional committee on Tuesday.

“We’re talking about a huge enterprise here with thousands and thousands of individual requirements,”

he said. The United States was spying on foreign leaders and other officials to see “if what they’re saying gels with what’s actually going on,” and how the policies of other countries “impact us across a whole range of issues,” he added.

Citing former officials with knowledge of the system, the *New York Times* reported that “the NSA tries to gather cellular and landline phone numbers - often obtained from American diplomats - for as many foreign officials as possible. The contents of the phone calls are stored in computer databases that can regularly be searched using keywords.”

Analysts at the NSA’s headquarters at Fort Meade then “pore over the transcripts of the phone calls and write reports, stamped ‘top secret’ that are distributed to officials across the government.”

According to former officials, “the most intense interest in the reports is at the State Department, the Treasury, the other intelligence agencies and the National Security Council.”

There are very good reasons to doubt the exclamations of surprise by European governments regarding these revelations. The French secret service DGSE is notorious for its wiretaps and provocations, and the German intelligence service, which drew upon the services of leading Nazis, is no laggard in this regard.

Nevertheless, the fact that the leading nation of the so-called “free world” operates in the manner of a crime syndicate, spying unrestrainedly on its closest allies, has had an impact on public opinion. It has not only discredited the US government but also its allies and the capitalist system as a whole.

This is why the chairman of the German Social Democratic Party, Sigmar Gabriel, whose party is intimately informed about the machinations of the secret services after years in government, lamented: “The Americans are destroying the basic values of the

transatlantic community.”

At the same time, the extent of the American spying activities has exacerbated tensions between the great powers, which are already extremely fraught due to the international economic crisis and differences on foreign policy.

In response, the German and European emissaries in Washington demonstrably sought to play down differences. They wanted to demonstrate that they continue to “talk to one other”, and campaigned for a written agreement intended to limit mutual espionage operations. According to the DPA, the German government is working towards a bilateral agreement requiring the United States to refrain from spying on the government and diplomatic missions.

Germany and Brazil are also planning to put forward a resolution to the United Nations aimed at securing private communications over the Internet from surveillance. Such a resolution would not be legally binding, and nobody in German government circles seriously believes that the US government would abide to a non-spy-agreement.

The extent of US espionage operations has soured relations to an extent that is difficult to repair. This will make it increasingly hard to resolve differences through diplomatic channels or personal meetings and give the German-American relationship and international relations as a whole an increasingly ruthless and unpredictable character.

In Germany, there is a growing lobby arguing that the German intelligence services should strive to obtain similar capabilities as their American cousins. Already in mid-August the culture editor of *Die Zeit*, Jens Jessen, pleaded “for a controlled cooling of German - US relations....The talk of friendship must end and give way to a sober understanding of mutual benefits and common interests,” he wrote. Germany must also learn “to act on its own with regard to security policy and counterterrorism.”

The editor of *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, wrote recently in the *Financial Times*: “Good counter -intelligence is more effective than sulky pouting; the best defense is offense - if you, my good friend, spy on me, I spy on you.” Berlin, Joffe noted with regret “has a long way to go in emulating its fabled Second World War *Abwehr* .”

The US and Germany are still closely linked

economically - Germany is the fifth largest trading partner of the US and the US the fourth largest partner of Germany - but there are also deep differences, especially on monetary policy.

The semi-annual currency report from the US Treasury, published on Thursday, attacked Germany in unusually strong terms. It accused the country of transferring the euro crisis to the European periphery based on high export surpluses, instead of stimulating domestic demand.

“Germany’s anemic pace of domestic demand growth and dependence on exports have hampered rebalancing at a time when many other euro-area countries have been under severe pressure to curb demand and compress imports in order to promote adjustment,” the report stated.

For their part German sources accuse the United States of encouraging a new speculative bubble with its policy of the unlimited printing of money.

The two countries also have differences over foreign policy, but these are dealt with less openly. Berlin is increasingly critical of US policy in the Middle East, which has destabilized the entire region.

Berlin also has reservations about the policy of the US and its allies in the Far East, which has stirred up tensions with China. This emerged at the 22nd German-Japanese forum in Tokyo at the start of this week. At the forum, high-ranking German government officials criticized the US-backed Japanese foreign policy which they declared encourages “mistrust and misunderstanding” in China - remarks which led to violent protests from the Japanese side.

Germany maintains close relations with China, which is its most important trading partner outside Europe and the leading market and investment destination for German cars, machinery and chemical industries. Germany is the only country with which China holds joint cabinet sittings - so-called government consultations.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact