

NSA spying revelations exacerbate Australian-Indonesian tensions

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The Indonesian government is threatening to wind back intelligence sharing with Australia and the United States after revelations last week, based on leaked documents provided by Edward Snowden, that their embassies in Jakarta were used as electronic listening posts for the US National Security Agency (NSA).

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa directed his main fire against Canberra, declaring on Monday: “If Australia feels that there are ways of obtaining information other than the official one then one wonders where we are in terms of co-operation.” He warned of “a potentially damaging impact in terms of the trust and confidence between countries concerned.” He said Indonesia would join Brazil and Germany in sponsoring a UN General Assembly discussion on the issue.

The row erupted after Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made Indonesia the destination of his first official trip since taking office in September. Declaring that his foreign policy focus was Jakarta, not Geneva, Abbott sought to ally Indonesian concerns that his government’s use of the navy to turn back refugee boats would infringe on Indonesian sovereignty. (See: “Australian ‘border protection’ regime fuels dispute with Indonesia”)

Those diplomatic efforts are now in tatters. Natalegawa called into question intelligence sharing with Canberra on refugee boats heading to Australia, as well as on potential terrorist threats.

Last Thursday, the Fairfax media reported that the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) gathered electronic data as part of an NSA program codenamed STATEROOM from Australian diplomatic missions throughout Asia, specifically naming Jakarta, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Hanoi, Dili and Port Moresby.

The Indonesian foreign ministry called in Australian ambassador Greg Moriarty on Friday to demand an explanation. Natalegawa, who was in the West Australian city of Perth for a regional conference, sought a personal explanation from Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop. Natalegawa pointedly asked the media: “If Australia was itself subjected to such an activity [would] you consider it as a friendly act or not?”

Indonesian presidential adviser Teuku Faizasyah told the Fairfax media last week: “If news that Australia conducts clandestine surveillance activities through its embassy in Jakarta is true, such activities are highly unacceptable.” He warned that such activities could damage relations and needed “to be clarified by the Australian side.”

On Monday, back in Jakarta, Natalegawa expressed his dissatisfaction with the explanations provided by Australia. “The kind of response that we’ve been obtaining or receiving is the more generic response that neither the government of Australia nor the United States is able to confirm or deny the practices reported in the various media,” he said.

Publicly Abbott and Bishop flatly refused to comment on the media exposures, saying that refusal to confirm or deny was standard procedure for “intelligence matters.” Abbott claimed last week that “every Australian official, at home and abroad, operates in accordance with the law”—a flagrantly false statement that will add fuel to the fire.

Fresh revelations published in the *Guardian* on Monday that the NSA and the ASD carried out extensive electronic surveillance of the 2007 UN climate change conference in Bali will further exacerbate tensions. Details were contained in a report from the joint US-Australian spy base at Pine Gap in

central Australia, which cited the NSA's success in revealing "previously unknown Indonesian communications networks" that would enable "increased collection in the event of a crisis [in Indonesia]."

Australian Foreign Minister Bishop yesterday dismissed suggestions of a rift in relations with Indonesia, declaring that she was looking forward to discussions with her Indonesian counterpart today at the Bali Democracy Forum.

The Australian media has mostly played down the significance of the spying revelations and the potential for damage to relations with Indonesia and other countries in the region. In a comment today, Greg Sheridan, the foreign editor for the *Australian*, followed the line from Washington—what is all the fuss about?

"It is ridiculous to imagine the Indonesian government is surprised by the news Australian intelligence agencies, in co-operation with US counterparts, intercept some of their phone calls and digital communications," he wrote. "The truth is, every nation with the capability engages in signals intelligence collection."

Whether it knew of the spying or not, the political problem for the Indonesian government is that the news provoked public outrage over the flagrant manner in which the NSA, assisted by Australian agencies, has spied not only on Indonesian officials, but the population as a whole. Documents leaked by Snowden have exposed electronic espionage on an industrial scale—a vast global operation aimed at "harvesting" and storing the data of tens of millions of people in the US and around the world.

Public anger over the spying operations has resulted in a spate of hacking attacks on Australian web sites. A group calling itself Anonymous Indonesia reportedly broke into at least 178 sites and used their home pages to send messages to the Australian government. "Stop all forms of tapping into Indonesia or we will make your Internet network destroyed (sic)," one read.

The Indonesian government's protests to Canberra are clearly designed to contain the political repercussions, particularly in the lead-up to Indonesia's presidential and parliamentary elections next year.

Despite Canberra's attempts to downplay the issue, the *Australian Financial Review* reported that "diplomatic sources concede that the issue will damage

trust between Australia and its regional partners" and this would require "ongoing, behind-the-scenes efforts to repair." Intelligence sources told the newspaper they were "taking the issue extremely seriously and struggling to manage the fallout."

While Indonesia has been the most vocal in its opposition, other countries in the region have registered protests. Malaysia summoned the heads of the US and Australian diplomatic missions in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday to demand an explanation. Malaysia's foreign minister Anifah Aman met with his Australian counterpart in Perth to express "deep concern of such reports (of Australian spying activities), which have caused considerable anger amongst the Malaysian public."

The Chinese foreign ministry declared that it was "extremely concerned" about the Australian and US spying and called for an "urgent clarification." The statement called on foreign embassies to respect the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations and other international treaties.

China's response was relatively low-key but potentially the most damaging. China, which is Australia's largest trading partner, has already expressed concerns over Australian limitations on Chinese investment. Just last week, Prime Minister Abbott flatly ruled out any involvement by China's telecommunications giant, Huawei, in Australia's new broadband network—on security grounds. The close involvement of Australian intelligence agencies in NSA spying, as part of the broader US military build-up in Asia against China, will only further alienate Beijing.



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