

Australian spying on Indonesian president provokes diplomatic storm

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Angry Indonesian officials threatened to retaliate after a leaked document yesterday revealed that the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) illegally tapped the phones of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, his wife and other members of his inner circle. Jakarta has already recalled its ambassador to Canberra for consultation and summoned the deputy head of mission to answer questions.

The exposure comes on top of the diplomatic furore provoked by earlier revelations that the US National Security Agency (NSA) tapped into the phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as well as those of Brazilian and Mexican leaders.

The latest top secret ASD document, leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, was dated November 2009. It deals with the introduction of 3G mobile phone networks in Indonesia and other South East Asian countries, including Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

One of the pages of a slide presentation, titled “IA Leadership Targets + Handsets,” listed the Indonesian president and his wife, as well as eight other top officials, together with their 3G phones. The list was a who’s who of Indonesian political figures, including Vice-President Boediono, former vice-president Jusuf Kalla, ex-finance minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati, presidential foreign affairs spokesman Dino Patti Djalal and former head of the Indonesian armed forces Widodo Adi Sucipto.

Two other slides demonstrate that the ASD specifically spied on Yudhoyono. The first was a graphic plotting the president’s call data records (CDR)—who he phoned and for how long—over a 15-day period in August 2009. The second showed an attempt to collect data about a call between Yudhoyono and a Thai phone number, and record its content. The

document also points to the ASD’s future ambitions, including to develop the ability, in collaboration with its US and British counterparts, to decode encrypted messages and phone calls.

The latest exposure has added fuel to a mounting diplomatic row between Jakarta and Canberra, following revelations last month that Australian spy agencies carried out extensive electronic surveillance from diplomatic missions in Asia, including in Indonesia. Another document confirmed that the ASD worked together with the NSA to carry out an intensive surveillance operation during a UN climate change conference in Bali in 2007.

The targeting of Yudhoyono provoked outrage in Indonesian ruling circles. Special presidential adviser for political affairs, Daniel Sparringa declared: “Until today, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has always paid special attention toward the deepening of the two countries’ relations. Therefore the news has devastated us.” He called on the Australian government to take immediate action, otherwise the issue “will continue to impede” ties.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa branded the ASD operations as “an unfriendly act, which is having already a very serious impact on our bilateral relations... It violates every single decent and legal instrument that I can think of.”

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday refused to comment directly on the revelations, but defended Australian spying, saying: “All governments gather information... and all governments know that every other government gathers information.” The information, he claimed disingenuously, was to “help our friends and our allies, not harm them.”

Natalegawa, however, bluntly warned that the refusal of Australian officials to acknowledge or explain what

had taken place was unacceptable. “We are not satisfied with this kind of dismissive answer provided, as if this is an activity that has [happened] as a matter of course in relations among countries,” he said. The foreign minister has ordered a review of intelligence, information and policing staff at the Australian embassy in Jakarta, suggesting that embassy staff and intelligence exchanges could be wound back.

The documents exposing Australian surveillance in Indonesia date from the previous Labor government, underscoring the bipartisan support for the close integration of Australian spy agencies with the vast NSA surveillance network around the world. The latest revelations have undermined the efforts of the new Abbott Coalition government to forge closer economic ties with Indonesia and secure its assistance in implementing Canberra’s reactionary policy of blocking refugees from arriving in Australia by boat.

Indonesia is also of central strategic importance, not only to Australia, but to the Obama administration as it intensifies its military build up throughout the Indo-Pacific as part of the “pivot to Asia” that is aimed against China. Indonesia has the largest population and economy in South East Asia, and key shipping lanes pass through the archipelago, including the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok straits. The Pentagon’s AirSea Battle strategy for war against China includes plans for an economic blockade that would cut off Chinese supplies of energy and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East by seizing control of these key “choke points.”

A recently published report by a US think tank, the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, highlights the importance of Australia as a base for future American air and naval operations against China. Referring to operations in the Sunda and Lombok straits, the report declared: “Whether Australia could deploy forces on Indonesian soil or within Indonesian waters in the event of a conflict with China remains an open question, which would largely depend on the state of Jakarta’s ties with Beijing at the time.”

Thus the Indonesian government and its internal discussions are of considerable importance to Washington and Canberra, particularly as US-China tensions sharpen and Indonesia prepares for elections next year. Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, has developed closer military ties both with the US and

Australia, but at the same time has maintained the country’s non-aligned foreign policy and boosted economic relations with China. Who will replace him will have consequences for the US and its allies in Asia. Three of the ten people listed by the ASD as “IA Leadership Targets” are potential presidential candidates.

Speaking on Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV yesterday, Kurt Campbell, former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, declared that the Australian government could expect “an uncomfortable few months” in its relations with Indonesia. He dismissed the diplomatic fallout in Jakarta as a “ritual” designed to pacify public anger that would eventually pass.

Campbell, who played a key role in implementing Obama’s “pivot” to undermine Chinese influence in Asia, urged Canberra to stay “on message” and ride out the diplomatic storm. “I think there is a substantial scope for increasing ties [with Indonesia] in defence, in intelligence and elsewhere. I know that’s where the Abbott government wants to go,” he said.

The latest revelation confirms that the massive global surveillance operations of the NSA and allied spy agencies are intimately bound up with rising geopolitical tensions and US preparations for war against its rivals.



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