

Indonesian president threatens “strategic partnership” with US-Australia over spying affair

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Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono yesterday issued a series of statements via Twitter, denouncing both Washington and Canberra over the revelation that Australia had tapped his and his wife’s mobile phone, together with eight senior political figures in Jakarta. In one tweet, Yudhoyono declared: “These US & Australian actions have certainly damaged the strategic partnership with Indonesia.”

Jakarta’s response points to the far reaching geo-strategic implications of the latest leaked documents that were provided by Edward Snowden, the whistleblowing ex-contractor with the US National Security Agency (NSA), and published by the *Guardian* and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Indonesia is one of several East Asian countries courted by the Obama administration, as part of its “pivot” to Asia, which aims to maintain US imperialism’s regional domination by diplomatically isolating and militarily encircling China. Indonesia is especially important, not just for its vast natural wealth and population size, but for its possession of key naval routes, identified by Washington as potential “choke points” to cut off China’s energy supplies and other imports in the event of a US-China war.

Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, has cultivated close ties with the US and Australia, while at the same time developing important trade and investment links with China and manoeuvring between the two rival powers. His bypassing of normal diplomatic channels to issue a forthright rebuke to Washington and Canberra via social media reflects the enormous hostility within Indonesia over the spying affair. The news that in 2009 the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) was monitoring the phones of senior political figures and their spouses follows earlier revelations of spying operations from

Australian diplomatic missions in Jakarta and other Asian capitals.

The *Guardian* noted the strident reaction of the Indonesian press. The mass circulation *Kompas* headlined its front page story, “Australia is not a good neighbour,” and quoted a parliamentary foreign affairs commission member calling for Australian diplomats in Jakarta to be expelled. Another influential paper, *Rakyat Merdeka*, chose the front page headline, “Australia turns out to be a dangerous neighbour.” An editorial in the daily *Media Indonesia* demanded that the government “be firm toward the kangaroo country that has betrayed a good relationship.”

Yudhoyono’s tweets, personally signed off with his initials “SBY” and issued in English and Indonesian, also stated: “Since news broke reports of US & Australia tapping on many countries, including Indonesia, we have expressed our strong protest”, “Foreign Minister & gov. officials have taken effective diplomatic measures, while demanding clarification from the US & Australia” and “I also regret the statement of Australian Prime Minister that belittled this tapping matter on Indonesia, without any remorse.”

The Indonesian government has suspended diplomatic relations, recalling its ambassador from Canberra. Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa said all Australian-Indonesian relations would be reviewed, “to make sure it is not ‘business as usual’ ... we will continue downgrading our relationship with them.” The ABC reported that Yudhoyono last night met with at least three government ministers whose portfolios affect Australian economic and strategic interests: the foreign minister, the agriculture minister—who oversees beef imports—and the coordinating minister in charge of cooperation on asylum seekers. A presidential spokesman said “many agreements with

Australia are now at stake.”

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made a statement on the crisis to parliament yesterday afternoon, stridently defending the illegal surveillance operations. He rejected calls for the government to offer an apology and a pledge to cease such spying, modelled on President Barack Obama’s response to revelations of NSA phone tapping against German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

“The first duty of every government is to protect the country and to advance its national interests,” Abbott began. “Australia should not be expected to apologise for the steps we take to protect our country now or in the past, any more than other governments should be expected to apologise for the similar steps that they have taken... Importantly, in Australia’s case, we use all our resources, including information, to help our friends and allies, not to harm them.” Having told the Indonesian political leadership that Canberra spies on them for their own good, Abbott concluded that he “sincerely regret any embarrassment that recent media reports have caused him [Yudhoyono].”

This provocative statement only fuelled the fire in Jakarta. Foreign Minister Natalegawa today told the *Jakarta Post* that he “didn’t get” Abbott’s reference to Yudhoyono being embarrassed. “Why would the president of Indonesia be embarrassed?” he asked. “I believe the embarrassment should belong to the government of Australia. They are the ones, the intelligence community in Australia, who have committed this unacceptable practice.”

As the crisis mounted, sections of the Australian media and political establishment urged Abbott to issue an apology to contain the damage. Opposition Labor leader Bill Shorten advised this course of action yesterday, while stating in parliament that he “supports the prime minister’s commitment to national security.” Shorten’s stance is completely hypocritical, given that the previous Labor government oversaw the spying operations when it was in office, but it underscores how much is at stake. The diplomatic crisis threatens not only lucrative trade and investment ties, and cooperation in so-called anti-terrorist operations and in blocking refugees from exercising their right to claim asylum in Australia, but the broader strategic relationship between Jakarta and Washington.

Abbott, however, is unwilling to back down over the issue. The latest NSA leak is merely the tip of the iceberg. One admission and apology would only lead to demands for more. As a member of the US-led “Five Eyes”

intelligence network, Australian imperialism is deeply implicated in all of Washington’s spying activities and black ops in East Asia. Australian signals surveillance facilities, including Pine Gap, play a key role in the US global spying network, while Australia’s intelligence agencies effectively function as subsidiaries of their US counterparts. With only a small fraction of the documents courageously collected by Edward Snowden now in the public domain, far more information about Canberra’s dirty tricks operations in Asia, under Liberal and Labor governments alike, is set to emerge.

As in the US and Britain, the Australian ruling class has denounced Snowden and condemned the media outlets publishing his leaked documents. The Murdoch press has mounted a sustained slander campaign against the NSA whistleblower, while the ABC’s managing director Mark Scott was yesterday confronted by Liberal Senators during a Senate estimates hearing. He was reportedly asked whether it was “appropriate” to publish documents marked “top secret” and if the ABC had withheld the leaked documents until after the Liberal-National Coalition won the September 7 federal election. Scott denied this latter charge, and cravenly insisted that he had first cleared the material with unnamed authorities, and as a result of their advice had not published some of the PowerPoint slides the ABC had received.

Former Howard government foreign minister Alexander Downer today denounced the *Guardian* in an *Australian* op-ed, accusing it of “shamelessly dribbling out this material to maximise the pain and embarrassment to the Western alliance.” Downer quoted the head of Britain’s MI6 saying that Al Qaeda was “lapping up” the Snowden revelations. This is a thinly veiled threat, directed to the ABC and other media outlets in Australia, that they could come under official investigation and be threatened with prosecution under so-called anti-terrorism legislation, as has the *Guardian* in Britain.



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