

Australian media bid to justify spying angers Indonesia

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A provocative attempt last weekend by the *Australian*, a Murdoch newspaper, to legitimise US-backed Australian spying on Indonesia's political elite has further inflamed tensions between Canberra and Jakarta.

Jakarta last month suspended cooperation with Canberra in three areas—military exercises, intelligence exchanges and interception of refugee boats—after documents leaked by former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden revealed that the NSA's partner, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), targeted the phones of Yudhoyono's inner circle in 2009.

In a front-page report on Saturday, the *Australian* asserted that the tapping of the mobile phones of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, his wife and senior political associates was “part of a deliberate and calculated strategy to learn more about the shifting balance of power inside Jakarta's ruling elite.”

The report, citing unnamed intelligence sources, was in all likelihood orchestrated by the Australian government, impatient to restore relations with Jakarta. The basic premise of the article was that Yudhoyono's wife was a political figure and therefore a legitimate target of intelligence gathering.

Citing a Wikileaks cable from the US Embassy in Jakarta, the *Australian* claimed the ASD (then called the Defence Signals Directorate) targeted Yudhoyono's wife's cell phone because “she had become the single most influential adviser to Yudhoyono and was thought to be hatching a presidential succession plan for her eldest son.”

Whether or not Yudhoyono's wife functioned as a presidential adviser does not justify the illegal surveillance operation on her, the president and eight other top politicians and officials. Not surprisingly, the

exposure, coming on top of other Snowden leaks showing there is an electronic listening post in the Australian embassy in Jakarta, provoked widespread public anger.

The *Australian's* other justification for the spying was even more inflammatory. According to the newspaper: “Canberra wanted to learn more about the relationship between the presidential palace and Islamic groups at a time when three Australians had been killed in the twin hotel bombings in Jakarta in July 2009 and notorious bomber Noordin Mohamad Top was still on the run.”

This insinuation of a possible link between Yudhoyono and terrorists—seeking to connect the surveillance to the so-called “war on terror”—is both politically incendiary and absurd. Yudhoyono, a willing partner in the “war on terror,” could hardly be criticised for having relations with “Islamic groups”—most Indonesians are Muslim.

On Monday, the *Jakarta Post* published comments by two of Yudhoyono's aides, who reacted angrily to the *Australian* report. Teuku Faizasyah, presidential spokesman for foreign affairs, said the article was an attempt to justify wiretapping. He commented: “The president has read the article but he did not take it seriously, because it does not have a grain of truth in it.”

Yudhoyono spokesman Julian Aldrin Pasha told the *Jakarta Post*: “The attempt to justify [the tapping] is stupid. Phone tapping is illegal. If your phone was being tapped, you would feel uncomfortable, wouldn't you? Haven't they ever read about the regulations on freedom, privacy and human rights?”

This response points to the political difficulties posed for the Yudhoyono administration by the popular hostility to the ongoing spying revelations. The *Jakarta*

Post reported that “many people” in Indonesia believed that the *Australian’s* revelations “could put the progress toward the normalisation of Jakarta-Canberra relationship in jeopardy.”

Last weekend, following the *Australian’s* story, Prime Minister Tony Abbott publicly stepped up the pressure on Jakarta, blaming the Indonesian government for increased arrivals of refugee boats. “There’s no doubt that the suspension of co-operation by the Indonesian authorities has been unhelpful,” the prime minister declared. “I think it’s high time that that co-operation was resumed.”

Significantly, the *Australian’s* coverage, which was accompanied by an editorial entitled, “Our spies acted responsibly,” went beyond the immediate dispute with Jakarta. Although it did not say so explicitly, it essentially asserted the right of the Australian intelligence apparatus, as part of the global US surveillance network, to monitor any government in the region.

The newspaper made it clear that the Indonesian spying was coordinated with the NSA, and approved at the highest levels in Canberra. According to the *Australian*, “the US National Security Agency is believed to have been aware of the surveillance and supportive of it” and the decision to tap the phones was “endorsed by relevant Australian cabinet ministers and fully reported to the then prime minister Kevin Rudd.”

Previous NSA documents, also leaked by Snowden, revealed that US and Australian diplomatic missions, not just in Jakarta, but throughout the Asia-Pacific, host ASD and NSA listening posts, monitoring the conversations of millions of people, as well as government leaders. (See: “NSA spying revelations exacerbate Australian-Indonesian tensions”)

This mass surveillance has nothing to do with protecting ordinary people from terrorism. As well as serving other US and Australian economic and political interests, the ongoing spying on Indonesia is particularly bound up with the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia to counter China’s rising influence. The Indonesian archipelago is critical to Washington, not just because of its immense natural resources and huge population. It contains key maritime “choke points,” such as the Malacca Strait, that would be blockaded in the event of a war with China.

Two weeks ago, Abbott bluntly declared that

Australia’s US-backed surveillance operations would continue in Indonesia. He directly contradicted statements by the Indonesian and Australian foreign ministers, Marty Natalegawa and Julie Bishop—following intensive talks to try to resolve the diplomatic rift—that Canberra had agreed not to spy on Indonesian leaders in the future.

The *Australian’s* latest offensive has heightened the quandary facing Yudhoyono. A former Suharto-era military general, he has long maintained close relations with the US and Australia. But, like other governments in the region, his administration has sought to balance between its military and security ties to the US and growing economic dependence on China. Yudhoyono has also had to cope with the widespread public anger over the spying exposure.

In his initial reaction to the spying revelations last month, Yudhoyono criticised both Washington and Canberra and declared that their actions had “certainly damaged the strategic partnership with Indonesia.” (See: “Indonesian president threatens “strategic partnership” with US-Australia over spying affair”)

That threat has not been repeated, and the US role was not mentioned in Yudhoyono’s spokesmen’s latest remarks. Nevertheless, Jakarta’s ongoing suspension of cooperation with Australia underscores the sharp tensions and potential conflicts generated by the Obama administration’s aggressive turn against China, and Australia’s key role in that confrontation.



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