

More Snowden documents expose US-Australian spying on Indonesia

Mike Head
17 February 2014

Another batch of documents leaked by US National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden has provided further insights into the central role that Australian intelligence agencies play in the massive US spying operations in the Asia-Pacific region.

Previous leaks have revealed that Australian telecommunications giant Telstra, along with the NSA's Australian counterpart, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD), have helped plug into the undersea cables that carry much of the Internet and other international electronic traffic throughout the region.

The ASD, in collaboration with the NSA, also operated electronic listening posts in diplomatic missions in Asian capitals. One particularly revealing document highlighted the fact that the ASD had monitored the mobile phones of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his closest political associates, provoking protests from Jakarta and souring relations between the two countries.

The latest documents reported in the *New York Times* focused on NSA/ASD electronic surveillance on Indonesia. As part of the US-led "Five Eyes" network, which also includes the UK, Canada and New Zealand, the two agencies are illegally spying on the phone and online communications of millions of ordinary Indonesians, as well as government leaders and officials.

* A 2012 document revealed that the NSA supplied its partner, the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) with access to bulk metadata collected from Indosat, one of Indonesia's largest telecommunications networks.

* According to another NSA document, from last year, the ASD also obtained 1.8 million encrypted master keys from the Telkomsel mobile telephone

network in Indonesia and developed a way to decrypt almost all of them.

* A further leak confirmed that the NSA and ASD run an intelligence facility in Alice Springs, in central Australia, where half the personnel are from the NSA, with particular focus on monitoring Indonesia and China. It has long been known that Australia hosts a US electronic spy base at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, which is nominally referred to as a joint defence facility.

* This operation is critical to US military operations around the globe, including its interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as the Indo-Pacific sphere. A February 2013 bulletin from Canberra, for example, showed that the ASD was spying on a target in Afghanistan who was an American citizen, but who turned out to be working for the US government.

* Another document showed that the NSA sought to "mentor" the ASD to break the encryption codes used by the armed forces in Papua New Guinea.

The bulk of the *New York Times* article dealt with a document revealing that Australia spied, on behalf of Washington, on a US law firm representing Indonesia during trade disputes between the US and Indonesia last year. The *New York Times* said it was unclear what the discussions were about, but two trade disputes around that time were about the importation of clove cigarettes and shrimp.

A monthly bulletin from the NSA's liaison office in Canberra last year said the ASD was monitoring the talks and had offered to share any material with the US, including "information covered by attorney-client privilege." Liaison officials asked for guidance from the NSA general counsel's office. The bulletin did not specify what the guidance was, but said Australia was

“able to continue to cover the talks, providing highly useful intelligence for interested US customers.”

The ASD was contracted to spy on an American law firm, in violation of the basic principle of lawyer-client confidentiality, the US Constitution—which prohibits warrantless searches and seizures—and token legal restrictions barring the NSA from monitoring US citizens.

This was clearly a reciprocal arrangement, with the NSA just as ready to supply the Australian intelligence apparatus with access to data from surveillance, such as that covering the Indonesian telecommunications system, that would be barred by Australian legislation.

Such mass spying, and bugging of trade negotiations, demonstrates that the activities of the intelligence apparatuses have nothing to do with the most commonly used pretexts of fighting terrorism and cyber-attacks. It involves the naked prosecution of the predatory interests of US imperialism and its junior partner.

Outright economic espionage is clearly involved in the spying on the law firm, reportedly Chicago-based Mayer Brown, representing Indonesia. According to the *New York Times*, the Indonesian trade disputes were “relatively modest” for the US—affecting about \$1 billion in annual trade in the shrimp dispute and \$40 million annually for clove cigarettes. But the modesty of the interests involved simply underscores the very extensive scope of the spying operations.

The NSA trade document—headlined “SUSLOC (Special US Liaison Office Canberra) Facilitates Sensitive DSD Reporting on Trade Talks”—reportedly did not specify which “interested US customers” would receive its intelligence. NSA denials aside, any useful information would certainly have been used to further US business interests in the disputes.

Because of the widespread outrage in Indonesia, particularly over the Yudhoyono revelations, Jakarta suspended joint military exercises, intelligence-gathering and anti-refugee operations with Australia last November.

Presidential spokesman Teuku Faizasyah told the *Guardian* the latest exposures were “another perplexing revelation.” He commented: “I wonder what more Snowden has in store? Therefore, it is the responsibility of countries (US & Australia) engaged in this complicity to clean up the mess, to salvage their

bilateral relations with Indonesia.”

With more Snowden documents still to be released, relations between the Indonesian, US and Australian governments may come under greater strain.

In Australia, the political establishment closed ranks in defence of the spying operations in the wake of the latest revelations.

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, while standing by the standard refusal of the Western powers to comment on “operational intelligence matters,” blatantly lied about the purpose of the ASD’s spying. “We use it for the benefit of our friends. We use it to uphold our values. We use it to protect our citizens and the citizens of other countries and we certainly don’t use it for commercial purposes,” he said.

Opposition Labor Party leader Bill Shorten solidarised with Abbott, saying, “I want to take a bipartisan tone here,” while urging the government to rebuild relations with Jakarta. Greens senator Scott Ludlam objected to surveillance powers being used for “economic and corporate espionage” but only on the grounds this would interfere with “the ability to find people who are legitimate intelligence targets.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact