

Snowden documents reveal New Zealand's spying in Pacific

Tom Peters
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US National Security Agency documents released on March 5 by whistleblower Edward Snowden reveal that New Zealand's intelligence agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), spies intensively on "nearly two dozen countries" in the Asia-Pacific region.

The documents were revealed by Ryan Gallagher from the *Intercept* website, in collaboration with investigative journalist Nicky Hager, and published in the *New Zealand Herald* and *Sunday Star-Times*. They show that the GCSB spies on all communications in Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, the Solomon Islands and Fiji, the French colonies New Caledonia and French Polynesia, and New Zealand's colonies Niue and the Cook Islands.

Hager indicated that future reports will reveal other countries that New Zealand spies on. Asked by Fairfax Media if China is on the list, he said "wait and see." The *Dominion Post* pointed out that a leak in 2006 revealed that under the Labour government in the 1980s the GCSB "was spying not just on the South Pacific, but also on Egypt, Japan, North Korea, the Philippines, South Africa and on United Nations diplomatic communications."

The indiscriminate spying on millions of Pacific Islanders and New Zealanders is a violation of democratic rights on an immense scale. The revelations are an indictment of the government and opposition parties, which all support the existence of the GCSB.

The latest documents illustrate the staggering extent of surveillance by the NSA-led Five Eyes alliance, which includes Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Even in tiny, remote countries like Tuvalu and Nauru (each with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants) every phone call, text message and email, along with other internet data, is recorded by the GCSB and

shared with other members of the Five Eyes alliance.

The GCSB's Waihopai spy base moved to "full take" surveillance in 2009, meaning it captures the contents of private communications and the metadata (details of who people communicate with and how) by tapping satellites and undersea cables. This information can be searched by the GCSB and its Five Eyes partners using the XKeyscore tool, which is described as Google for spies.

Predictably, Prime Minister John Key attempted to dismiss the revelations, asserting that the GCSB had not broken the law, and that some of Snowden's claims were "just plain wrong"—although he refused to give any details. He told the *Herald* it was "bizarre" to release the documents given that the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was "reaching out to cause harm to New Zealanders."

The government has repeatedly made unsubstantiated claims of terrorist threats to justify expanding the GCSB's powers, including a deeply unpopular law change in 2013 which legalised spying on New Zealand citizens. In reality, as Hager and Gallagher noted, "the Snowden papers show that counter-terrorism is at most a minor part of the GCSB's operations. Most projects are assisting the US and allies to gather political and economic intelligence country-by-country around the world."

Claims that the GCSB operates within the law are untrue. People born in Niue and the Cook Islands have New Zealand citizenship, meaning that prior to the 2013 amendment the agency was spying on them illegally. Hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders visit the Pacific on holiday or have family in the region. Last year Snowden revealed that from his desk in Hawaii, where he worked as a NSA contractor until mid-2013, "I routinely came across the

communications of New Zealanders.”

According to Hager and Gallagher, the fact that the GCSB shares data with the NSA “suggest[s] an astonishing lack of independence in New Zealand intelligence operations.” Hager told Fairfax Media that the GCSB’s activities were “the price of being in the [Five Eyes] club... Otherwise, would New Zealand be bothering to spy on the Prime Minister of Samoa? I don’t think so.”

The implication that the GCSB is simply the puppet of Washington is false. New Zealand’s ruling class has maintained an alliance with the US since World War II—and before that with Britain—to pursue its own neo-colonial interests in the Pacific. Samoa was invaded by New Zealand in 1914 and remained a colony until 1962. New Zealand and Australia also seized Nauru to exploit its valuable phosphate deposits.

Over the past two decades, Australia and New Zealand have sent troops to East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Tonga in order to defend their interests in those countries. *Dominion Post* columnist Tracey Watkins defended spying on “the region of most strategic importance to us,” noting that the Pacific “is rife with poverty, corruption and a rising tide of dispossessed, jobless and angry youth, all of which is a breeding ground for instability.”

The newspaper’s editorial today asserted that “China’s great-power machinations in the area are well-known and a source of natural anxiety to Western countries.” Beijing has recently given generous loans to impoverished countries, including Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, which previously depended on aid from US allies New Zealand and Australia.

Wellington, Canberra and Washington share the strategic goal of rolling back China’s economic and diplomatic influence. The GCSB’s blanket surveillance of the Pacific undoubtedly plays a significant role in the Obama administration’s aggressive “pivot” to Asia, a strategy to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China.

According to Fairfax, Tongan Prime Minister ‘Akilisi Pōhiva described the GCSB’s spying as a “breach of trust,” adding that his country was powerless to stand up to New Zealand and that “China is on the radar... so what can we do?”

New Zealand’s opposition Labour Party leader Andrew Little criticised the “mass intrusion of privacy

of innocent citizens.” However, Little defended the country’s membership in the Five Eyes and its right to spy on the Pacific, telling Radio NZ that “China is showing a greater interest in the Pacific, so it wouldn’t surprise me that we would monitor what was going on there.”

Little told Fairfax that Labour wanted to “ensure our security agencies stick to the mandate we’ve given them, which is counter-espionage, counter-terrorism, and protecting our commercial interests.” In other words, the GCSB is needed to defend the predatory interests of New Zealand capitalism from any opposition abroad and at home.

Labour fully supports the military-intelligence alliance with the US. Little recently suggested that GCSB agents be deployed to help plan air strikes in Obama’s renewed war in Iraq, as they have previously done in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The 1999–2008 Labour government, which was supported by the Green Party and the “left-wing” Alliance Party, sent troops to join the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Greens accused the GCSB of breaking the law and lodged a complaint with the government’s Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. However, they are no less committed to defending the interests of New Zealand imperialism. According to Newstalk ZB, Greens co-leader Russel Norman worried that the latest revelations would be “extremely corrosive for our influence in the South Pacific and could actually boost the influence of other nations, such as China.”

The Snowden revelations are a sharp warning to workers and youth throughout the Pacific and in New Zealand. Like its counterparts in the US and Europe, New Zealand’s ruling elite has put in place the framework of a police state, aimed at suppressing any opposition to social inequality, maintaining dominance over the Pacific, and helping the US to prepare for war with China.



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