

New documents expose New Zealand surveillance of Solomon Islands

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24 March 2015

Documents leaked by US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden show that New Zealand's intelligence agency, the Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB), used the NSA search tool XKeyscore to spy on high-ranking officials in the Solomon Islands government.

Previous leaks showed that the GCSB intercepts almost all Internet and telephone communications in several Pacific countries, including the Solomons. It also spies on China and other countries in Asia. The GCSB shares information with New Zealand's partners in the Five Eyes alliance: the intelligence agencies of the US, Britain, Australia and Canada.

The latest revelations demonstrate yet again that the GCSB's activities have nothing to do with preventing terrorist attacks or criminal activity, as the government repeatedly claims. Rather, the agency spies on governments, including those with which New Zealand officially has friendly relations, in order to safeguard the country's imperialist interests in the Pacific.

According to a 2013 document, published on March 15 by the *Herald on Sunday* in collaboration with the web site the *Intercept*, the GCSB was monitoring the communications of all Solomon Islands cabinet ministers, as well as six senior public servants. These included the prime minister's chief of staff Robert Iroga, special secretary to the prime minister Dr Philip Tagini, and cabinet secretary James Remobatu.

The agency also spied on Benjamin Afuga, a well-known anti-corruption campaigner, who has published documents leaked by whistleblowers within the Solomon Islands government.

The GCSB uses XKeyscore to sift through communications gathered by its Waihopai spy base. It also operated a secret "listening post" inside the New Zealand High Commission in Honiara, the Solomon

Islands capital, between 2006 and 2013. This eavesdropping was a joint project with the Australian agency, the Defence Signals Directorate (now the Australian Signals Directorate).

A source told the *Herald* that "the monitoring was in response to the civil crisis in the Solomons at that time, and also the intelligence agencies were very interested in a 'battle for hearts and minds' occurring between China and Taiwan." The Solomons is one of a handful of countries that has diplomatic relations with Taiwan rather than mainland China.

The impoverished country of just over half a million people in the southwest Pacific Ocean was a British colony until 1975. Since then, Australia and New Zealand, with the support of the United States, have maintained colonial-style control over the country.

Australia and New Zealand led a military-police intervention in Solomon Islands in 2003, known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). While promoted as a "humanitarian" mission, RAMSI took control of key parts of the country's governing apparatus, such as the country's central bank, judicial system and police force. Foreign troops left the Solomons in 2013 but hundreds of Australian and New Zealand police officers remain.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully brushed aside the latest spying revelations, declaring that "politicians in the Solomon Islands, as elsewhere in the Pacific, are smart enough not to believe what they read in New Zealand newspapers." According to the *Intercept*, "A spokesman for Manasseh Sogavare, the recently elected prime minister of Solomon Islands, said the issue would be addressed through 'diplomatic channels.'" This muted response reflects the local ruling elite's subservience to Canberra and Wellington.

In recent years, the Pacific has become the focus

major geo-strategic rivalry, fuelled by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a strategy to militarily encircle and prepare for war against China. New Zealand, Australia and the United States are all seeking to maintain their hegemony over the Pacific against China's growing economic and diplomatic influence.

Those New Zealand opposition figures and media commentators who have criticised the GCSB's actions have obscured the agency's role in furthering New Zealand's own imperialist interests. John Minto, a member of the Maori nationalist Mana Party, presented the spying purely as a US-dominated operation. He wrote on the *Daily Blog* that "the GCSB's role is to conduct mass surveillance of our close neighbours in the Pacific for the US National Security Agency. It is a US operation in all but name."

Pro-Labour Party columnist Chris Trotter wrote that the Snowden revelations demonstrated "New Zealand's loss of diplomatic independence." He denounced "Spanish, Dutch, British, French, German and American colonial projects" in the Pacific, and blamed New Zealand governments for "keeping the Pacific safe for imperialism." But he said nothing about New Zealand colonialism—including the conquest of Samoa and Nauru in World War I and New Zealand's role in the 2003 intervention in Solomon Islands.

New Zealand is a minor imperialist power, whose ruling elite has sought to exploit and politically dominate smaller countries in the Pacific for more than a century. To support its own predatory interests it has relied on an alliance with the major imperialist power of the day—first Britain and, after World War II, the US.

Trotter hailed the 1984-1990 Labour Party government of Prime Minister David Lange, for having "the courage to stand apart from the American-led Anglo-Saxon Empire" when he banned visits by nuclear-capable US warships. In fact, notwithstanding the anti-nuclear policy, the Lange government never left the Five Eyes alliance and oversaw the expansion of the GCSB, opening its Waihopai spy base in 1989.

The 1999-2008 Labour government further cemented ties with the US by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, to assist in Washington's drive to establish unchallenged domination over the resource-rich Middle East.

Following the latest spying revelations, Green Party spokesman Kennedy Graham presented the surveillance

as a mistaken aberration. He declared: "Pacific countries are our friends and neighbours. Spying on friends is not the Kiwi way." Former Green MP Keith Locke has launched what he calls an online "petition in the form of an apology to several Asian and Pacific Island nations for the GCSB spying on their government communications."

Such statements are totally hypocritical. The Greens, like their Australian counterparts, supported Labour's decision to send police and troops to the Solomons in 2003, on the grounds that it was necessary to restore "the rule of law." Locke gave a speech in parliament backing the deployment. The party also supported New Zealand's decade-long contribution to the war in Afghanistan, falsely depicted by Locke as a "peacekeeping" and "reconstruction" mission.



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