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How America Eavesdrops on Allies

By: Philip Giraldi

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The shock ^[1] being registered by various European foreign ministries over the revelation that the United States has been intercepting their communications, both public and governmental, is in reality a bit of a theatrical performance to soothe the nerves of their domestic audiences, which are demanding that something be done to preserve privacy. But it also reveals a growing estrangement between Washington and its closest allies over the U.S. tendency to exploit security concerns and ride roughshod over local interests. President Obama, referring to reports that the European Union headquarters and United Nations diplomatic mission, as well as ^[2] the French Embassy in Washington, have been subject to electronic intrusion, has shrugged off the controversy, noting ^[3] that “everyone does it.”

In reality, everyone knows about what is going on, but only the major nations can afford to do it. The developing story of National Security Agency (NSA) spying ^[4] on Americans has revealed that almost no one in the United States can any longer rely on the privacy of personal communications. But domestic spying is only part of a vast worldwide operation that has been growing since World War II. The NSA, bigger than the CIA and with a much larger budget, has overseas listening posts, just like CIA Stations, which are normally hidden in U.S. Embassies and consulates. They are often placed under the roof of the building because the antennas collecting information are normally located—in plain sight—just above.

Many local people looking at the array of dishes and masts assume that the equipment is for diplomatic communications, but their governments and security services certainly know better,

because every U.S. Embassy overseas employs numerous locals, often in sensitive positions. They are referred to as Foreign Service Nationals (FSN), and it is not unusual to find them spending their entire working lives employed by the Americans. Most carefully protect American interests, so much so that it is easy to forget that they are not U.S. citizens. But inevitably some of them can be assumed to be the recruited agents of their own governments, routinely reporting back to their security services on what the Yanks are up to. The FSNs, who frequently provide all the administrative services for the building, are fully aware of the size and location of the NSA presence in the building, meaning their government knows as well.

Because intercepting private communications is illegal almost everywhere in the world, the overseas NSA facilities are under deep cover and are never acknowledged to exist. Even within the U.S. government, the NSA is jokingly described ^[5] as “No such agency.” NSA employees are rarely diplomats but are instead usually given nominal job descriptions as technical or administrative officers of the Embassy. This gives them some legal protection if they should get in trouble and since they normally work deep within the Embassy building they rarely need anything more extensive. In a place like Rome, their office did not even exist on the floor plan or in the Embassy phone book. It did not even bother to have the usual Defense Department or commercial section euphemism as cover within the building since it did not want Italians calling it up and asking for information. It was generally referred to by the American staff in the Embassy as the extension of the internal telephone that it used—444.

One might well ask why the U.S. government would have NSA stations in the capitals of nations like Italy, Spain, Germany, and France, which are friends and even allies without any geographical propinquity to countries or targets considered to be hostile. The answer would very much depend on the operating directive (I am using the CIA term) of the listening post. The OD prioritizes targets and assigns available resources. In most places today the prime target would be under the broad rubric of terrorism. Other targets might include the local Russian, Chinese, and Iranian Embassies, whose diplomatic and commercial communications might be recorded and broken to be read by interested parties in Washington.

Illegality aside, an Italian or Spanish government would not object too strongly to narrowly focused terrorism-related information being obtained from the ethersphere. Nor would anyone be surprised if attempts were being made to intercept old enemies, including the Russians, just like during the Cold War. But the collection process is not that simple. The NSA vacuums in vast quantities of telephone, email, and other electronic information based on computer-generated linkages, which means that if someone makes a phone call, that number too becomes part of the search base and so on until millions of numbers eventually become linked. The guesstimate that hundreds of millions of German communications ^[6] are being collected and analyzed by the United States government each month is therefore probably far too low.

And then there is the rather more contentious issue, alluded to by Obama, of government-on-government spying. If you are breaking out telephone calls you can just as easily collect information from phones and internet systems that support the government infrastructure since they all eventually pass through the same communications hubs. Careless talk on open government lines can produce a windfall of information. With a little more effort provided by specialized computers, you can even crack into the secure phones and databases.

Obama's assertion ^[7] that when he wants to know what is happening in Germany he picks up the phone and calls Chancellor Angela Merkel is characteristically facile but ultimately irrelevant. U.S. policymakers have an interest in secret German negotiating positions on trade agreements as well as on internal debates relating to likely responses to Washington's initiatives in places like Afghanistan. Admittedly the need for such information is not critical, but the NSA often collects intelligence on an opportunity basis just because the mechanisms that exist enable it to do so without any particular degradation of its coverage of genuine priority targets. In short, much electronic intelligence collection takes place just because it is possible, not because there is any clear objective in mind.

Do the German BND, Turkey's MIT, and Italy's SISMI avail themselves of opportunities to listen in on U.S. Embassy phone calls in their respective countries? They certainly do, but no one does it like the Americans, and efforts to suggest that there is some kind reciprocity in bad behavior are misleading. The NSA has the ability and resources to enable it to listen to everyone all the time, friend or foe, and its willingness to engage in collection operations that have no particular focus is perhaps a measure of how the burgeoning national-security state is incessantly searching for new enemies to expand its role. No one should be surprised that Washington routinely spies on friendly foreign diplomatic missions, but it does run the danger that allies can gradually become enemies if a growing perception in Europe and elsewhere that the U.S. is engaging in unrestrained and pointless behavior continues apace.