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The End of Hypocrisy: American Foreign Policy in the Age of Leaks

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The U.S. government seems outraged that people are leaking classified materials about its less attractive behavior. It certainly acts that way: three years ago, after Chelsea Manning, an army private then known as Bradley Manning, turned over hundreds of thousands of classified cables to the anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks, U.S. authorities imprisoned the soldier under conditions that the UN special rapporteur on torture deemed cruel and inhumane. The Senate's top Republican, Mitch McConnell, appearing on *Meet the Press* shortly thereafter, called WikiLeaks' founder, Julian Assange, "a high-tech terrorist."

More recently, following the disclosures about U.S. spying programs by Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency analyst, U.S. officials spent a great deal of diplomatic capital trying to convince other countries to deny Snowden refuge. And U.S. President Barack Obama canceled a long-anticipated summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin when he refused to comply.

Despite such efforts, however, the U.S. establishment has often struggled to explain exactly why these leakers pose such an enormous threat. Indeed, nothing in the Manning and Snowden leaks should have shocked those who were paying attention. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who dissented from the WikiLeaks panic, suggested as much when he told reporters in 2010 that the leaked information had had only a "fairly modest" impact and had not compromised intelligence sources or methods. Snowden has most certainly compromised sources and methods, but he has revealed nothing that was really unexpected. Before his disclosures, most experts

already assumed that the United States conducted cyberattacks against China, bugged European institutions, and monitored global Internet communications. Even his most explosive revelation - that the United States and the United Kingdom have compromised key communications software and encryption systems designed to protect online privacy and security -- merely confirmed what knowledgeable observers have long suspected.

The deeper threat that leakers such as Manning and Snowden pose is more subtle than a direct assault on U.S. national security: they undermine Washington's ability to act hypocritically and get away with it. Their danger lies not in the new information that they reveal but in the documented confirmation they provide of what the United States is actually doing and why. When these deeds turn out to clash with the government's public rhetoric, as they so often do, it becomes harder for U.S. allies to overlook Washington's covert behavior and easier for U.S. adversaries to justify their own.

Few U.S. officials think of their ability to act hypocritically as a key strategic resource. Indeed, one of the reasons American hypocrisy is so effective is that it stems from sincerity: most U.S. politicians do not recognize just how two-faced their country is. Yet as the United States finds itself less able to deny the gaps between its actions and its words, it will face increasingly difficult choices -- and may ultimately be compelled to start practicing what it preaches.

(Ib Ohhlson)

A HYPOCRITICAL HEGEMON

Hypocrisy is central to Washington's soft power -- its ability to get other countries to accept the legitimacy of its actions -- yet few Americans appreciate its role. Liberals tend to believe that other countries cooperate with the United States because American ideals are attractive and the U.S.-led international system is fair. Realists may be more cynical, yet if they think about Washington's hypocrisy at all, they consider it irrelevant. For them, it is Washington's cold, hard power, not its ideals, that encourages other countries to partner with the United States.

Of course, the United States is far from the only hypocrite in international politics. But the United States' hypocrisy matters more than that of other countries. That's because most of the world today lives within an order that the United States built, one that is both underwritten by U.S. power and legitimated by liberal ideas. American commitments to the rule of law, democracy, and free trade are embedded in the multilateral institutions that the country helped establish after World War II, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, and later the World Trade Organization. Despite recent challenges to U.S. preeminence, from the Iraq war to the financial crisis, the international order remains an American one.

This system needs the lubricating oil of hypocrisy to keep its gears turning. To ensure that the world order continues to be seen as legitimate, U.S. officials must regularly promote and claim fealty to its core liberal principles; the United States cannot impose its hegemony through force alone. But as the recent leaks have shown, Washington is also unable to consistently abide by the values that it trumpets. This disconnect creates the risk that other states might decide that the U.S.-led order is fundamentally illegitimate.

Of course, the United States has gotten away with hypocrisy for some time now. It has long preached the virtues of nuclear nonproliferation, for example, and has coerced some states into abandoning their atomic ambitions. At the same time, it tacitly accepted Israel's nuclearization

and, in 2004, signed a formal deal affirming India's right to civilian nuclear energy despite its having flouted the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty by acquiring nuclear weapons. In a similar vein, Washington talks a good game on democracy, yet it stood by as the Egyptian military overthrew an elected government in July, refusing to call a coup a coup. Then there's the "war on terror": Washington pushes foreign governments hard on human rights but claims sweeping exceptions for its own behavior when it feels its safety is threatened.

The reason the United States has until now suffered few consequences for such hypocrisy is that other states have a strong interest in turning a blind eye. Given how much they benefit from the global public goods Washington provides, they have little interest in calling the hegemon on its bad behavior. Public criticism risks pushing the U.S. government toward self-interested positions that would undermine the larger world order. Moreover, the United States can punish those who point out the inconsistency in its actions by downgrading trade relations or through other forms of direct retaliation. Allies thus usually air their concerns in private. Adversaries may point fingers, but few can convincingly occupy the moral high ground. Complaints by China and Russia hardly inspire admiration for their purer policies.

The ease with which the United States has been able to act inconsistently has bred complacency among its leaders. Since few countries ever point out the nakedness of U.S. hypocrisy, and since those that do can usually be ignored, American politicians have become desensitized to their country's double standards. But thanks to Manning and Snowden, such double standards are getting harder and harder to ignore.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

To see how this dynamic will play out, consider the implications of Snowden's revelations for U.S. cybersecurity policy. Until very recently, U.S. officials did not talk about their country's offensive capabilities in cyberspace, instead emphasizing their strategies to defend against foreign attacks. At the same time, they have made increasingly direct warnings about Chinese hacking, detailing the threat to U.S. computer networks and the potential damage to U.S.-Chinese relations.

But the United States has been surreptitiously waging its own major offensive against China's computers -- and those of other adversaries -- for some time now. The U.S. government has quietly poured billions of dollars into developing offensive, as well as defensive, capacities in cyberspace. (Indeed, the two are often interchangeable -- programmers who are good at crafting defenses for their own systems know how to penetrate other people's computers, too.) And Snowden confirmed that the U.S. military has hacked not only the Chinese military's computers but also those belonging to Chinese cell-phone companies and the country's most prestigious university.

Although prior to Snowden's disclosures, many experts were aware -- or at least reasonably certain -- that the U.S. government was involved in hacking against China, Washington was able to maintain official deniability. Protected from major criticism, U.S. officials were planning a major public relations campaign to pressure China into tamping down its illicit activities in cyberspace, starting with threats and perhaps culminating in legal indictments of Chinese hackers. Chinese officials, although well aware that the Americans were acting hypocritically, avoided calling them out directly in order to prevent further damage to the relationship.

But Beijing's logic changed after Snowden's leaks. China suddenly had every reason to push back publicly against U.S. hypocrisy. After all, Washington could hardly take umbrage with Beijing for calling out U.S. behavior confirmed by official U.S. documents. Indeed, the disclosures left China with little choice but to respond publicly. If it did not point out U.S.

hypocrisy, its reticence would be interpreted as weakness. At a news conference after the revelations, a spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of National Defense insisted that the scandal “reveal[ed] the true face and hypocritical conduct regarding Internet security” of the United States.

The United States has found itself flatfooted. It may attempt, as the former head of U.S. counterintelligence Joel Brenner has urged, to draw distinctions between China’s allegedly unacceptable hacking, aimed at stealing commercial secrets, and its own perfectly legitimate hacking of military or other security-related targets. But those distinctions will likely fall on deaf ears. Washington has been forced to abandon its naming-and-shaming campaign against Chinese hacking.

Manning’s and Snowden’s leaks mark the beginning of a new era in which the U.S. government can no longer count on keeping its secret behavior secret. Hundreds of thousands of Americans today have access to classified documents that would embarrass the country if they were publicly circulated. As the recent revelations show, in the age of the cell-phone camera and the flash drive, even the most draconian laws and reprisals will not prevent this information from leaking out. As a result, Washington faces what can be described as an accelerating hypocrisy collapse -- a dramatic narrowing of the country’s room to maneuver between its stated aspirations and its sometimes sordid pursuit of self-interest. The U.S. government, its friends, and its foes can no longer plausibly deny the dark side of U.S. foreign policy and will have to address it head-on.

SUIT THE ACTION TO THE WORD, THE WORD TO THE ACTION

The collapse of hypocrisy presents the United States with uncomfortable choices. One way or another, its policy and its rhetoric will have to move closer to each other.

The easiest course for the U.S. government to take would be to forgo hypocritical rhetoric altogether and acknowledge the narrowly self-interested goals of many of its actions. Leaks would be much less embarrassing -- and less damaging -- if they only confirmed what Washington had already stated its policies to be. Indeed, the United States could take a page out of China’s and Russia’s playbooks: instead of framing their behavior in terms of the common good, those countries decry anything that they see as infringing on their national sovereignty and assert their prerogative to pursue their interests at will. Washington could do the same, while continuing to punish leakers with harsh prison sentences and threatening countries that might give them refuge.

The problem with this course, however, is that U.S. national interests are inextricably bound up with a global system of multilateral ties and relative openness. Washington has already undermined its commitment to liberalism by suggesting that it will retaliate economically against countries that offer safe haven to leakers. If the United States abandoned the rhetoric of mutual good, it would signal to the world that it was no longer committed to the order it leads. As other countries followed its example and retreated to the defense of naked self-interest, the bonds of trade and cooperation that Washington has spent decades building could unravel. The United States would not prosper in a world where everyone thought about international cooperation in the way that Putin does.

A better alternative would be for Washington to pivot in the opposite direction, acting in ways more compatible with its rhetoric. This approach would also be costly and imperfect, for in international politics, ideals and interests will often clash. But the U.S. government can certainly afford to roll back some of its hypocritical behavior without compromising national security. A double standard on torture, a near indifference to casualties among non-American civilians, the gross expansion of the surveillance state -- none of these is crucial to the country’s well-being,

and in some cases, they undermine it. Although the current administration has curtailed some of the abuses of its predecessors, it still has a long way to go.

Secrecy can be defended as a policy in a democracy. Blatant hypocrisy is a tougher sell. Voters accept that they cannot know everything that their government does, but they do not like being lied to. If the United States is to reduce its dangerous dependence on doublespeak, it will have to submit to real oversight and an open democratic debate about its policies. The era of easy hypocrisy is over.