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China to reap harvest of NSA scandals

By Brendan P O'Reilly

10/31/2013

The best warfare strategy is to attack the enemy's plans, next is to attack alliances. - Sun Tzu, The Art of War

A growing chorus of nations is decrying Washington's unrestrained cyber espionage. However, there is only one country with both the means and motivation for using mounting international resentment to challenge American hegemony. The NSA surveillance of America's allies has opened up two vital fronts in which China can erode American global dominance.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying has claimed the rhetorical high ground, calling cyber security "a matter of sovereignty". She said Beijing is eager to address the issue through the framework of the United Nations, and to do so "China and Russia have submitted a draft plan, in an effort to help the world jointly tackle the problem." [1]

This joint Sino-Russian proposal to combat the NSA's electronic surveillance coincides with a parallel initiative launched by two allies of the United States.

Germany and Brazil are working together to create a UN resolution aimed at curtailing electronic spying. Both nations have been openly angry with Washington in the wake of revelations that the NSA has for years spied on the personal communications of both Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and German Chancellor Merkel.

Brazilian and German diplomats expect to finish the draft within a week, and then send the resolution to the UN Human Rights Committee. According to political scientist Gunther Maihold, "Brazil's main interest is that this should result in international regulation by the UN." [2]

Such international regulation of electronic espionage would be anathema to large portions of the American political class, who believe unlimited NSA spying is justified by the perpetual threat of "terrorism", and are distrustful of the United Nations.

Beijing may be supporting anti-cyber espionage efforts at the United Nations precisely because China's leaders expect such efforts will fail in the face of American political intransigence. The fallout from Washington blocking anti-surveillance initiatives at the United Nations could disrupt American diplomacy for decades to come.

Chinese backing of UN efforts to curb the NSA's activities may undermine American hegemony by disrupting America's alliances. These alliances have cemented Washington's global dominance for the greater part of a century.

Nevertheless, Beijing's opposition to American cyber espionage is to a large degree a defensive tactic.

According to Der Spiegel, the NSA runs listening posts in Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, Hong Kong, and Taipei.

Furthermore, this week Japanese media reported that in 2011 the NSA sought Tokyo's help to wiretap fiber-optic cables running through Japan. [3] This move was almost certainly aimed primarily at gathering important political and economic data from China - terrorists of East Asian ancestry are not generally regarded as a major threat to the American homeland.

The Japanese government declined the proposal because intercepting communications on such a large scale would be illegal under Japanese law.

This story encapsulates some of the absurdities of the current situation. China, long accused by Washington of cooperation with lawless "rogue states", has been protected from American surveillance by the laws of Japan.

Morality matters

The second front in which Beijing can make advances against Washington is in the sphere of international public opinion. American leaders have long espoused an image of America as a uniquely ethical nation, a "city upon a hill", an ideal moral power which lesser, more barbaric and grossly self-interested countries should emulate.

The practice of secretly monitoring tens of millions of phone calls of one's allies - including the communications of some of America's closest friends - has severely tarnished this image. China's

official media is now capitalizing on this development. On Wednesday, the top story on the China Daily website was entitled "Spy scandal 'will weaken' US global credibility".

Chinese-language media was even more vociferous. State-run CCTV Four featured Zhang Zhaozhong, a well-known military commentator, as saying: "Now the United States, if they wish to return to democratic freedom and human rights, should apologize to the entire world, saying: I am sorry, we designed some software like this, we have this type of back door, in the future we will manage it seriously..." [4]

How times have changed. Only a few months ago, the US government was increasingly vocal in criticizing Chinese cyber espionage. Before President Barack Obama went to his first summit with President Xi Jinping, a White House official called on China to abide by international "rules of the road", and told reporters that "Governments are responsible for cyber attacks that take place from within their borders". [5]

China is eager to remind domestic and international audiences of official American hypocrisy, now that such hypocrisy has been exposed on a global scale.

Morality - or rather, the perception of morality - plays a significant role in America's foreign policy objectives. The United States, for all its flaws, has garnered admirers and supporters all around the world for the open, democratic ideals it disseminates.

In contrast, Chinese foreign policy has had little relation to ideology for the past several decades. Beijing cements its relationships with foreign countries around mutual self-interest, usually of the economic kind.

Beijing stands to benefit from emphasizing America's self-induced loss of moral standing. In the wake of Guantanamo Bay and the Iraq war, Washington cannot afford a further loss of integrity. If the United States is increasingly perceived to an amoral and hypocritical power, then Chinese policies of practical economic benefits and political non-interference may be increasingly attractive.

It is worth pointing out that China is Brazil's largest trading partner, and bilateral trade between China and Germany is more valuable than trade between Germany and the US.

As revelations of NSA electronic surveillance continue to mount, expect Beijing to continue highlighting Washington's moral duplicity. China will also support initiatives at the UN to curtail cyber espionage, potentially deepening divides between America and its allies. However, the damage is largely self-wrought. The rocks that were once thrown at China have come back to shatter the glass-house of American integrity.

Notes:

1. "Spy scandal 'will weaken' US global credibility", China Daily, October 30, 2013.
2. "Germany and Brazil want UN vote on NSA spying", Deutsche Welle, October 31, 2013.
3. "NSA asked Japan to tap nationwide fiber-optic cables in 2011", The Japan Times, October

27, 2013.

4. "Zhang Zhaozhong speaks of the Snowden affair's frightening secret", People's Daily, October 30, 2013 (Chinese).

5. . "Obama to press China's Xi to act against cyber spying", Reuters, June 4, 2013.