

Why Australians are cool with spying

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The security leaks by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden – now nestling safely in the bosom of the KGB in Moscow – have damaged America's national security and irritated some of its partners. But the effect of these revelations has been felt even more heavily in the foreign relations of US allies such as Australia.

German chancellor Angela Merkel was offended that the NSA tapped her mobile phone. But Berlin was never going to exact a high price from Washington. The United States is just too important.

For Australia, it's a different story. Last November, the newly-elected government in Canberra was rocked by Snowden's [allegations](#) that Australia's signals intelligence service had monitored the cell phones of Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his wife. This did great violence to the bilateral relationship between Canberra and Jakarta – one of Australia's most important connections. Indonesia's ambassador to Australia was recalled the same day. Indonesia suspended vital intelligence and military cooperation with Australia which is critical to fighting drug syndicates and people-smugglers. Relations have not yet fully returned to normal.

Yet, despite all this, Australians remain remarkably sanguine about their government's espionage activities. In the [2014 Lowy Institute Poll](#), which was released last week, seven out of ten Australians say that it is acceptable for the Australian Government to spy on governments with which Australia does not have good relations. And five out of ten Australians say that spying is acceptable even against countries with which Australia has good relations.

A majority believes it is fine for Australia to spy on China (65%), Indonesia (62%), East Timor (60%), Japan (58%), France (53%) and even our close neighbour New Zealand (51%). More than half of Australians think it's okay for the Government to spy on our great ally the United States! (Don't take it personally.)

Australians are much more partial to spying, it seems, than are Americans or Europeans.

Surveys by the Pew Research Organisation in late 2013 [found](#) that 56% of Americans say it is unacceptable 'for the US to monitor the phone calls of the leaders of allied nations'. The German Marshall Fund [found](#) in September 2013 that only one-third or less of the British, French, German, Swedish and US populations think governments 'are justified in collecting the telephone and internet data of citizens in other allied countries as part of the effort to protect national security'. In Germany, a full 72% said that such intelligence activities are not justified.

Why are Australians so laid-back when it comes to spying? The answer flows partly from our national character: having built a successful society on an unforgiving continent, Australians are laconic in humour and pragmatic by disposition.

This tendency is reinforced by our geopolitical circumstances.

For most of our history, the world was run by countries like our own. When the world map was painted pink, we were a member in good standing of the British Empire. Throughout the Pax Americana, Australia has been a highly reliable treaty ally of the United States. But now, our great and powerful friends are becoming less great and powerful. And wealth and power are moving eastward, toward us.

The economic outlook in Asia is strong, but the security outlook is unclear. A number of regional powers, including Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia and Vietnam, are vying for advantage. There are troubling tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the East and South China Seas.

The international behaviour of China is increasingly unpredictable and aggressive. And there are worrying signs about America's readiness to face the China challenge. Australians noticed that in his big [foreign-policy speech](#) at West Point, President Barack Obama did not even mention his much-ballyhooped 'rebalance' towards Asia. How seriously can we take a doctrine that the president has never explained at home?

Australia would hate to see a new cold war between the United States and China. But even more alarming, what if America retreats while China advances? What if we face the worst possible combination: a feckless America and a reckless China?

Australia also faces non-state threats, including the persistent problem of Islamist terrorism. Australians have been the targets and victims of terrorism on a number of occasions since 9/11, including in several major bombings in Indonesia. According to the 2014 Lowy Institute Poll, 'international terrorism' is one of the foremost threats in the minds of the Australian public. Sixty-five per cent of Australians see it as a critical threat to the nation's vital interests.

Australians live in a sketchy neighbourhood. Asia is gentrifying, but the increased wealth is magnifying threats and tensions rather than ameliorating them. We are closer to the world's booming crisis, and closer to the world's developing crises – less isolated, but also less insulated.

Is it any wonder, then, that Australians are comfortable with their government using all possible means to understand what is happening in the world around us?

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