

Spying on allied leaders carries big risks: Our view

The Editorial Board, USA TODAY 8:44 p.m. EDT October 24, 2013

As with domestic surveillance, just because U.S. can do something doesn't mean it should.



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Hardly a day seems to go by without some embarrassing new disclosure about the United States' electronic eavesdropping on friendly governments.

On Thursday, the British newspaper *The Guardian*, citing a classified document provided by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, [reported that the NSA monitored calls of 35 world leaders](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/24/nsa-surveillance-world-leaders-calls) (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/24/nsa-surveillance-world-leaders-calls>). The document didn't name the nations involved, but other reports have cited Germany, France, Mexico, Brazil and numerous

European Union offices.

WHITE HOUSE: [We're reviewing our policies](http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/24/nsa-foreign-leaders-president-obama-lisa-monaco-editorials-debates/3183331/) (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/10/24/nsa-foreign-leaders-president-obama-lisa-monaco-editorials-debates/3183331/>)

Unsurprisingly, the targets are not amused. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff [canceled a visit to Washington scheduled for this week](http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/17/world/la-fg-snowden-fallout-20130918) (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/17/world/la-fg-snowden-fallout-20130918>). French President Francois Hollande complained to the U.S. ambassador and then called President Obama for an explanation. And German Chancellor Angela Merkel contacted Obama on Wednesday after her intelligence services raised suspicions the NSA had hacked into her cellphone.

To be sure, some of these nations doth protest too much. They either spy on the U.S. themselves or would if they could. In today's world, it's naive in the extreme to think that some electronic eavesdropping is not necessary, or that the U.S. is the only country doing it. There's good reason Obama was told to give up his BlackBerry when he became president.

But some of the foreign outrage is undoubtedly genuine. Imagine the reaction in this country to revelations that supposed allies were tapping into Obama's conversations, or into millions of Americans' phone calls. The latest disclosures are harmful to America's standing in the world, and to its ability to form and lead coalitions on causes ranging from counterterrorism to fighting drug smuggling.

As with domestic surveillance, just because U.S. intelligence agencies have the ability to do something doesn't mean they should.

What's lacking is a good system for weighing the benefit of intelligence that might be gleaned from eavesdropping against the potential harm if it is exposed. Indeed, a former senior government official tells us that, in the past at least, this kind of cost-benefit analysis was not made within the intelligence agencies but only when top administration figures offered "policy guidance" ordering caution. Being caught didn't seem to enter into the equation.

In the case of spying on the leaders of friendly nations, it's hard to imagine how a cost-benefit analysis would produce a decision to go ahead in many cases.

The costs of exposure are already mounting, and they are economic as well as political.

European nations are discussing whether to put off a trans-Atlantic trade pact. Countries pushing to "de-Americanize" the Internet have had their arguments strengthened. Foreign makers of switches, routers and software have a new sales pitch: Don't buy these things from U.S. companies because they are probably in cahoots with the NSA.

As for the benefits, information gleaned from a friendly head of state, while potentially useful, would not include terror threats, which is the basis on which NSA eavesdropping has been sold to the American people. The memo obtained by *The Guardian*, dated October 2006, said the eavesdropping on foreign leaders had produced "little reportable intelligence."

The Obama administration says it is reviewing its policies. That's a start.

We suggest it formalize a system for considering when to go forward, one that makes spying on friendly leaders dependent on extraordinary circumstances. America has enough enemies in this world without creating new ones.