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Wrong for Abbott to follow Obama and add lying to spying

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEMBER 25, 2013 12:00AM

ACCORDING to the ABC, Australian taxpayers aren't entitled to know how much it pays its executives. But while shrouding itself in secrecy the national broadcaster did not hesitate to divulge highly classified information about Australia's intelligence programs, worsening the crisis unleashed by the US traitor Edward Snowden.

Unfortunately, that crisis still has a way to run. And its long-term implications may prove even more challenging than the immediate pain. By highlighting the fault lines in our region, the hysterical reaction to Snowden's revelations shows we need more intelligence about our closest neighbours, not less; yet the crisis also risks compromising that goal.

In themselves, Snowden's revelations are not surprising. Apes in the forest spy on each other; it would be remarkable if humans did not. That states do is hardly news. Nor should it be news that the world is a better place for it.

No one understood the case for spying more clearly than the legendary diplomat Talleyrand. "Speech," he observed, "was given to man to hide his thoughts." And in a world in which "ruling and lying are synonyms" the facts never speak for themselves.

But what cannot be verified, cannot be trusted. Hence the importance of penetrating beyond surface appearances: for the greater states' ability to peek behind the veil, the fewer the costly precautions they need to take against each other and the more they could rely on fences rather than force. In Machiavelli's words, the deceitful tactics of the fox thus helped avoid the violent ones of the lion.

Nothing better illustrates that proposition than the 19th century's Pax Britannica. That long peace was built on a solid technological foundation: Britain's control of global telegraphy. As late as 1890, 80 per cent of the world's submarine cables were British; Britain ruled the wires even more decisively than she ruled the waves.

And with British companies being required to employ British telegram clerks, Her Majesty's agents at ports from Dakar to Hong Kong read the cables while the Imperial Defence Committee monitored traffic at London's imposing Central Telegraph Office. It was therefore understandable that the French diplomat Maxime de Margerie complained "electricity was the ally of English diplomacy". But the unravelling of British control as France and Germany built systems of their own contributed to the distrust that pushed the world towards war.

The sophistication of today's communications networks is obviously many orders of magnitude that of Britain's global telegraph system. In 2012, daily internet traffic was in the order of 1.1 exabytes, one billion times more every day than the 19th century system could carry in a year. And the growth rates remain breathtaking: wireless traffic alone is now eight times larger than the entire internet in 2000.

Never has such a field of observation been available to states; but the internet is also the infrastructure of choice for terrorism, fraud and crime. Policing the electronic commons is therefore as vital as exploiting

the intelligence opportunity it provides. And our location, combined with our dependence on communications, means few countries have a greater stake in those goals.

But the challenges they involve are difficult to overstate. Detecting and deterring cyber attacks requires continuous surveillance of many million active nodes. Equally, while traffic within terrorist groups displays distinctive patterns, those patterns need to be identified against a constant maze of "false positives".

As for intercepting the mobile communications of a foreign leader, it is dauntingly complex in technical and operational terms; to believe such intercepts can be turned on and off as circumstances change is dangerously naive.

Ensuring our national security therefore entails a constant commitment of costly resources, including to inevitably risky activities such as putting in place the means to eavesdrop on presidents and prime ministers. But even with our security-related spending growing at nearly 10 per cent annually since 2001, the scale economies inherent in electronic intelligence make close co-operation with allies indispensable. Particularly crucial is our ability to rely on the US, which spends \$110 on intelligence for each \$1 spent by Australia.

Yet, as the Snowden debacle demonstrates, vast scale brings the vulnerabilities economists term the "rotten apple theorem": the larger an organisation, the higher the probability it will eventually recruit a rotten apple, and the lower the probability it will detect him or her in time to prevent serious harm.

Now we must cope with the fallout. And, with further revelations likely, the pressures could become ever more intense. There are no magic bullets; but what is clear is that Barack Obama's strategy of publicly apologising to Angela Merkel while also promising not to "monitor" her communications in future was absurd.

Obama's promise is scarcely credible. After all, other documents Snowden released show the US intelligence agencies employ more than 500 fluent German speakers; with continuing tensions between the US and Germany, it seems implausible those agents will now devote themselves to reading Goethe and watching re-runs of Inspector Rex.

Obama's apology, therefore, merely added lying to spying while setting a poor precedent along the way. And so it would be for our relationship with Indonesia. Julia Gillard's call for Tony Abbott to follow Obama's lead consequently only reconfirms her lack of judgment. Instead, Abbott must stick by the policy of not commenting on security matters while strengthening our signals intelligence capabilities and our ability to project and protect them. And he should demand, and properly expect, that Labor back him unconditionally.

That won't, of course, stop the ABC. But, then again, stupidity has its heavyweights, like everything else. The pity is that you and I have to pick up their tab. No wonder they don't want us to know how much it is.