Europeans Shared Spy Data With U.S.
Phone Records Collected Were Handed Over to Americans to Help Protect Allied Troops in War Zones

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Millions of phone records at the center of a firestorm in Europe over spying by the National Security Agency were secretly supplied to the U.S. by European intelligence services—not collected by the NSA, upending a furor that cast a pall over trans-Atlantic relations.

The revelations suggest a greater level of European involvement in global surveillance, in conjunction at times with the NSA. The disclosures also put European leaders who loudly protested reports of the NSA's spying in a difficult spot, showing how their spy agencies aided the Americans.

The phone records collected by the Europeans—in war zones and other areas outside their borders—were shared with the NSA as part of efforts to help protect American and allied troops and civilians, U.S. officials said.

European leaders remain chagrined over revelations that the U.S. was spying on dozens of world leaders, including close allies in Europe. The new disclosures were separate from those programs.

But they nevertheless underline the complexities of intelligence relationships, and how the U.S. and its allies cooperate in some ways and compete in others.

“That the evil NSA and the wicked U.S. were the only ones engaged in this gross violation of international norms—that was the fairy tale,” said James Lewis, a former State Department official, now a technology-policy specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “It was never true. The U.S's behavior wasn't outside the norm. It is the norm.”

Consecutive reports in French, Spanish and Italian newspapers over the past week sparked a frenzy of finger-pointing by European politicians. The reports were based on documents leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden and purportedly showed the extent to which the NSA sweeps up phone records in those countries.

France's Le Monde said the documents showed that more than 70 million French phone records between early December 2012 and early January 2013 were collected by the NSA, prompting Paris to lodge a protest with the U.S. In Spain, El Mundo reported that it had seen NSA documents that showed the U.S.
spy agency had intercepted 60.5 million Spanish phone calls during the same time period.

U.S. officials initially responded to the reports by branding them as inaccurate, without specifying how. On Tuesday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the data cited by the European news reports wasn't collected by the NSA, but by its European partners.

U.S. officials said the data was provided to the NSA under long-standing intelligence sharing arrangements.

In a congressional hearing Tuesday, the National Security Agency director, Gen. Keith Alexander, confirmed the broad outlines of the Journal report, saying that the specific documents released by Mr. Snowden didn't represent data collected by the NSA or any other U.S. agency and didn't include records from calls within those countries.

He said the data—displayed in computer-screen shots—were instead from a system that contained phone records collected by the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries “in defense of our countries and in support of military operations.”

He said the conclusion that the U.S. collected the data “is false. And it's false that it was collected on European citizens. It was neither.”

The U.S. until now had been silent about the role of European partners in these collection efforts so as to protect the relationships.

French officials declined to comment.

A Spanish official said that Spain's intelligence collaboration with the NSA has been limited to theaters of operations in Mali, Afghanistan and certain international operations against jihadist groups. The so-called metadata published in El Mundo was gathered during these operations, not in Spain.

The Italian Embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

The revelations that the phone data were collected by European intelligence services rather than NSA could spark a backlash against the same politicians who had been pointing their fingers at the U.S.—although that response could be tempered by assurances that the data were collected abroad and not domestically.

A U.S. analysis of the document published by Le Monde concluded the phone records the French had collected were actually from outside of France, then were shared with the U.S. The data don't show that the French spied on their own people inside France.

U.S. intelligence officials said they hadn't seen the documents cited by El Mundo, but that the data appear to come from similar information the NSA obtained from Spanish intelligence agencies documenting their collection efforts abroad.

At Tuesday's House Intelligence Committee hearing, lawmakers also pressed Gen. Alexander and the Director of National Intelligence James Clapper on the NSA's tapping of world leaders' phone conversations, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Asked whether U.S. allies spy on the U.S., Mr. Clapper said, "Absolutely."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.) asked why Congress hadn't been informed when U.S. spies tapped a world leader's telephone. Mr. Clapper said Congress isn't told about each and every "selector," the intelligence
term for a phone number or other information that would identify an espionage target.

"Not all selectors are equal," Mr. Schiff responded, especially "when the selector is the chancellor of an allied nation."

The Wall Street Journal reported Monday that President Barack Obama didn't know about NSA's tapping of Ms. Merkel's phone—which stretched back as far as 2002—until a review this summer turned it up.

Mr. Clapper said that intelligence agencies follow the priorities set by the president and key departments, but they don't necessarily provide top officials with details on how each requirement is being fulfilled.

The White House does, however, see the final product, he said.

Reporting to policy makers on the "plans and intentions" of world leaders is a standard request to intelligence agencies like the NSA, Mr. Clapper said. The best way to understand a foreign leader's intentions, he said, is to obtain that person's communications.

Privately, some intelligence officials disputed claims that the president and top White House officials were unaware of how such information is obtained.

"If there's an intelligence report that says the leader of this country is likely to say X or Y, where do you think that comes from?" the official said.

The House Intelligence Committee chairman, Rep. Mike Rogers (R., Mich.) remained a staunch defender of the NSA's operations.

"I am a little concerned about where we are—that we've decided that we're going to name our intelligence services at the earliest opportunity as the bad guys in the process of trying to collect information lawfully and legally, with the most oversight that I've ever seen," he said. "We're the only intelligence service in the world that is forced to go to a court before they even collect on foreign intelligence operations, which is shocking to me."

—Christopher Bjork in Madrid and Stacy Meichtry in Paris contributed to this article.

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