

New Delhi downplays evidence of extensive NSA spying targeting India

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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India's Congress Party-led government has failed to make any official protest to Washington over revelations that the US National Security Agency (NSA) has made India—including Indian government officials and diplomatic missions—a major target of its illegal spying operations.

The government's public show of indifference to the NSA snooping stands in marked contrast to the loud protests made by European and Latin American governments whose leaders and officials have been revealed to be NSA spying targets. Indeed, New Delhi's response has been so limp as to draw critical comment even from sections of the corporate media that otherwise argue for India to align its foreign policy even more closely with Washington.

In late September, the *Hindu*, a Chennai-based daily, published a fresh batch of revelations concerning NSA spying on India based on documents supplied to it by former NSA contractor and whistleblower Edward Snowden. While previous reports had exposed that India was a major focus of the NSA's massive illegal spying operations, the recent series of *Hindu* articles provided evidence that Indian officials and institutions are also extensively targeted.

The NSA, reported the *Hindu*, has spied on Indian diplomatic offices. A sophisticated bugging system was planted both at India's permanent mission at the United Nations and the Indian embassy in Washington DC. It is suspected that "entire computer hard disks might have been copied" by the NSA using this system.

An Indian diplomat admitted to the *Hindu* the NSA bugging would have inflicted "extensive damage" on the country's diplomacy. Having reviewed the material leaked by Snowden to the *Hindu* an Indian intelligence official said it showed that the NSA was preparing reports "on the basis of raw intelligence. It means, they are listening in real time to what our political leaders, bureaucrats and scientists are communicating with each other."

The NSA documents show that it collected intelligence about numerous issues and institutions deemed of strategic interests to Washington, including India's nuclear and space programs and its politics.

A senior official with the Home Affairs Ministry told the *Hindu* that the information the NSA had gotten through spying on Indian diplomatic missions and government leaders would have given Washington the upper-hand in bilateral relations and negotiations:

“Even before we go to the table, they know what we are going to put on it. It’s not just violation of our sovereignty, it’s a complete intrusion into our decision-making process.”

NSA uses “global heat maps” with countries given different colors and shading to indicate the level of surveillance to which they are subjected. Green denotes least attention, yellow mid-level surveillance and orange high-level surveillance. In a recent NSA map, India was marked in deep orange, making it among the NSA’s “hottest targets” worldwide.

The documents leaked by Snowden show the NSA’s spying on Indian communications uses at least two programs. One is Boundless Informant, “a data mining system which keeps track of how many calls and emails are collected by the security agency.” The other one is PRISM, a program which intercepts and collects actual content from the network—i.e. which intercepts actual telephone calls, e-mails, and text messages.

When asked by the *Hindu* “why so much surveillance is done on a friendly country like India,” a spokesman for the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence evaded the issue. He said that the US government would not comment on the allegations, adding the US was only gathering “foreign intelligence of the type gathered by all nations.”

That the NSA is carrying out extensive spying operations targeting India was revealed by Snowden last June as part of his initial exposures of the NSA’s spying on the citizenry of the US and the world. At that time, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid effectively defended the NSA. First he downplayed the significance of the NSA spying on the grounds it only targeted metadata. “[I]t is not actually snooping on the specific content of anybody’s message or conversation,” said Khurshid. Then he further justified the NSA’s spying, claiming, without citing any examples or providing any proof, that thanks to the US spy agency’s snooping Washington was able to obtain “some information to prevent serious terrorist attacks in several countries.”

Now following the new revelations about US surveillance on Indian officials and diplomatic missions, the Congress Party government is keeping almost totally silent.

In a further attempt to downplay the issue of the NSA spying, a representative of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told the *BBC* that “there are no concerns” about his being spied on like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, because “he [Singh] does not use a mobile phone or Gmail.” When asked why New Delhi had not made any public comment about US spying operations targeting Indian officials and diplomatic missions, the same Singh aide said, “We have no official information about it.”

There are two reasons India’s Congress Party-led government’s has been so silent about the NSA’s illegal spying on India, including on its own communications.

It fears that any public conflict with US over the issue will hamper New Delhi’s burgeoning “strategic partnership” with Washington. India’s elite views close relations with Washington as critical to realizing its great power ambitions. And the crisis now roiling the Indian economy—growth has fallen by more than half over the past two years—has made New Delhi even more desperate for increased US investment.

New Delhi’s other concern is that any official exposure and denunciation of US spying

operations against India could call attention to its own massive domestic surveillance program, the so-called Central Monitoring System (CMS). Created without parliamentary approval and developed over the past five years, the CMS gives India's security agencies unchecked access to the country's 900 million landline and mobile telephone users and 120 million internet users. They can listen or record any communication nationwide and track communications of targeted individuals.

In an October 30 editorial, the *New Indian Express*, a right-wing daily that is an enthusiastic proponent of closer strategic-military ties between New Delhi and Washington, nonetheless criticized the Indian government's failure to complain about the NSA's surveillance of its activities. This failure, it argued, only draws attention to India's weakness: "It is time the UPA government realised silence on an issue that affects our sovereignty is bad diplomacy as it undermines the country's prestige and can encourage both the US and other nations to treat us casually. It also sends a message of our weakness to our unfriendly neighbours, China and Pakistan."

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