

The Cost of “Friendly” Espionage Against the United States

Written by Andrew Brown

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ANDREW BROWN, AUG 7 2011

As the sole remaining superpower the United States is a natural target for espionage activity for a wide range of nations. Not all of those actively spying against the United States are competing powers as one might at first assume. The list of nations pursuing an active policy of intelligence gathering in the US includes strategic competitors such as Russia and China but also holds many of the closest allied states. Countries such as France, Israel and Japan all conduct covert intelligence gathering and direct actions against US military, governmental and industrial targets.

Many in the national security and foreign affairs spheres consider this as little more than an occasionally embarrassing nuisance of little consequence to overall US relations with these states or the general strategic balance. However, there are a number of hidden costs to allied espionage activity in the US which can have an impact on the greater affairs of state.

Allied states engage in covert intelligence gathering in the US for several reasons. First, many states consider the US to be overly stingy with the amount and quality of the intelligence and military technology it shares with its allies. This feeling of being cheated has led even the closest allies to institute their own intelligence program to remedy the situation. Israel is a prime example of this mind set at work. The Israelis consider it vital to their national security to obtain every possible secret that the US holds on regional competitors. They also require a massive military lead in technology over their neighbors to ensure state survival. In some cases the US has been less than total in its willingness to share secrets or highly classified military technology with Israel. So the Israeli intelligence apparatus has been tasked with developing alternative means of obtaining the data their leaders deem critical. Many in the US State Department, intelligence community and the DOD find it hard to be critical of such actions and Israeli agents are rarely hunted. There are many, however, and not just in the Pro-Arab lobby that find such tactless espionage activity from an allied state not just insulting but dangerous. The less than covert nature of many of Israel's intelligence actions in the past has had a certain polarizing effect within the US foreign affairs community and arguably has cost the Israelis more good will than military benefit from their stolen secrets.

The French tend to target their covert operations in the US on more diplomatic rather than military areas. For the French the goal is to remain relevant on the global stage. One of the pillars of this effort has been the theft of US diplomatic information and the application of subtle pressure to move US foreign policy more in line with French international goals. There is a much more amorphous effort which tends to scatter their purpose and diffuse their effectiveness. However, the ability to access and influence important US officials when necessary to further French foreign policy is highly prized in Paris. The cost of this effort is damaging to the image of French diplomacy and reduces the effectiveness of their overt personnel. The still widespread belief in US foreign policy circles in the duplicity and general un-sportsman like conduct of European diplomats is certainly not helped by covert influence peddling by French and other European powers.

Saudi Arabia is another state that goes to great lengths, both overtly and covertly to bring pressure to bear on US foreign policy elements to further their own agendas. The backlash against the Saudis has been much more public than has been the case with others. The shadowy nature of Saudi efforts to move the DC power elite has provided a great deal of ammunition to critics of positive US involvement with the Saudi Monarchy and in the Middle East region

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in general.

The Japanese focus their efforts almost exclusively on economic targets within the United States. The economic benefits that Japanese companies have reaped from concentrated corporate espionage against American rivals beggars belief. There is a great deal of purity of purpose to Japanese intelligence efforts in the US. Living as they do under US military protection and with very nearly the full range of advanced US weapons systems available to the Japanese Self Defense forces there has been little need for them to actively penetrate US intelligence, military or foreign policy circles. This was not always the case. During the US-Japan trade wars of the 1980's the Japanese invested significant resources in both covertly penetrating and overtly influencing US economic policy and political power groups. With the bursting of the bubble and the end of the trade wars those resources were once again move back to more mundane economic targets. The cost to the Japanese from these activities has been almost wholly economic. Companies that have been targeted, penetrated and striped by Japanese intelligence, assuming they even discover the fact, have reacted aggressively to try and bring sanction against their rivals in Japan through political and economic means. So far this has yielded little tangible result as the US considers Japan a vital partner in both monitoring/containing a rising China and hedging against an attention hungry and nuclear armed North Korea. Any number of eventualities could see this state of forbearance turn against the Japanese.

As the above examples help to illustrate covert intelligence programs run by America's allies within the United States are the rule not the exception and they do come with costs. Marginal though these costs may be today they are still a factor in foreign policy formulation. Allied intelligence programs are so pervasive in the US because the government has intentionally turned a blind eye to such activities. As a hyper power the US foreign policy establishment views these actions by the allies as little more than par for the course. And, of course, the US conducts its own intelligence operations against allied nations as well as her competitors so a certain degree of quid pro quo is expected. An interesting side note to this fact is that the United States is alone among the industrialized countries of the world as well as many developing nations in not possessing an economic espionage capability. Virtually every other nation in the world with the capacity to do so, and certainly many of their individual companies, have active economic espionage programs. What this says about the influence of morality over pragmatism in US intelligence and foreign policy is quite fascinating. Particularly given the overwhelming economic advantages that US companies would enjoy overseas if they were provided access to intelligence tools such as those possessed by the NSA, CIA and Department of Defense.

Intelligence by its very nature is virtually impossible to eliminate but the US could raise the cost to her allies of working to forward their own agendas here. The fact that the US makes virtually no attempt to even reduce these attacks is hubris. Covert espionage and pressure by allied nations weakens the relationships and undermines the ability of diplomats operating overtly to do business with the US. It costs American business, both military and civilian, tens of billions of dollars a year. And it lends unnecessary ammunition to domestic critics of US engagement with the rest of the world.

Andrew Brown is the author of the upcoming book *The Grey Line: Modern Corporate Espionage and Counterintelligence*.