

Abusing Partners: Spying on Germany

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It is a rare thing when an ally tells another that one of their embassy individuals should be sent packing from their plumb surrounds. The French did it in 1995, when it expelled several US officials on the grounds of suspected espionage. ut French-US relations during the post-World War II period have been periodically icy, making such an act less of a surprise than something of a clarifying gesture.

The order of expulsion was executed on Thursday, when it was revealed in the German press that a CIA station chief was, for all intents and purposes, given his marching orders. While embassies are to spies what honey is to bees, the manner of its execution raised a few eyebrows.

Clemens Binninger, chair of the committee that oversees the intelligence services of Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats, said at a press conference in Berlin that the action was occasioned by Washington's 'failure to cooperate on resolving various allegations, starting with the NSA and up to the latest incidents'. The head of the SPD parliamentary group, Thomas Opperman, is beside himself. 'It is a degrading spectacle to watch US spies being exposed on a weekly basis.' Much of this rage, however, must be seen as the indignation of impotence.

Steffen Seibert confirmed the decision in an official statement. 'The government takes these activities very seriously. It is essential and in the interest of the security of its citizens and its forces abroad for Germany to collaborate closely and trustfully with its western partners, especially the US.' Seibert emphasised that openness was fundamental to the relationship. But that is where he is simply wrong. Washington has been selectively open with its German ally, as it has been from the start.

This follows revelations of espionage in Die Welt about a German soldier who was sniffed out by the German military counter-intelligence service. Some days prior, it was revealed that an employee of the German BND had been funneling files to the CIA, the sort of arrangement that went well and truly beyond the bounds of the alliance.

The BND employee in question was supposedly labouring under a physical disability and speech impediment, but received some 25,000 euros for 218 confidential documents. The psychological profile of the individual in question was less one of greed than egomania. Both characteristics often feature when those privy to information wish to do the dirty on their employees.

The US ambassador to Berlin, John Emerson, has been doing the rounds, placating officials even as his masters take a good long dump on the German-US relationship. In a speech on Tuesday, he conceded that 'that the German-American relationship is now undergoing a

difficult challenge'. The CIA chief, John Brennan, has also been doing his share of pacifying.

The Clintons, always masters at the power game, have bought into denouncing the NSA for its conduct regarding Germany. Hillary has taken to the press, arguing in Der Spiegel that such conduct, notably regarding the tapping of Merkel's phone, was unwarranted. Not, mind you, that Merkel deserved an apology from the Obama administration. That is just not the done thing. Wounding in a relationship should be taken in your stride. The not so hidden suggestion here is that the Germans are better than all that.

It was clear, according to Clinton, that the US had 'to do a much better job in working together between Germany and the United States to sort out what the appropriate lines of cooperation are on intelligence and security. I think the cooperation is necessary for our security, but we don't want to undermine it by raising doubts again and again.'

In truth, neither side intends a separation. There will be tiffs, a few tears perhaps, and a stony glance here and there. But the abused and abusive will still come together in the field of security cooperation, if it can be called that. Social workers tend to be avoided in the field of diplomatic consultancy, since abusive relationships are deemed workable. Even the decision on the part of the US government to refuse access to a request by the German chancellor to access her NSA file will, at the end of the day, be accepted.

Power, with its distorting tendencies, corrupts, sometimes in spectacular fashion. But usually it is a poison that operates over a considerable amount of time, taking hold of the body, paralyzing it in parts while allowing others aspects of it to function. Neither Merkel, nor her allies, wishes to find the true antidote to the situation. The spies will be replaced, and new recruits found. They are no doubt on their way. The important thing is to keep up the pretense of anger – and be very convincing.

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