

US Embassy Espionage Directed against Germany: The NSA's Secret Spy Hub in Berlin

By [Der Spiegel](#)

Global Research, October 29, 2013

[Spiegel Online](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

According to SPIEGEL research, United States intelligence agencies have not only targeted Chancellor Angela Merkel's cellphone, but they have also used the American Embassy in Berlin as a listening station. The revelations now pose a serious threat to German-American relations.

It's a prime site, a diplomat's dream. Is there any better location for an embassy than Berlin's Pariser Platz? It's just a few paces from here to the Reichstag. When the American ambassador steps out the door, he looks directly onto the Brandenburg Gate.

When the United States moved into the massive embassy building in 2008, it threw a huge party. Over 4,500 guests were invited. Former President George H. W. Bush cut the red-white-and-blue ribbon. Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) offered warm words for the occasion.

Since then, when the US ambassador receives high-ranking visitors, they often take a stroll out to the roof terrace, which offers a breathtaking view of the Reichstag and Tiergarten park. Even the Chancellery can be glimpsed. This is the political heart of the republic, where billion-euro budgets are negotiated, laws are formulated and soldiers are sent to war. It's an ideal location for diplomats — and for spies.

Research by SPIEGEL reporters in Berlin and Washington, talks with intelligence officials and the evaluation of internal documents of the US' National Security Agency and other information, most of which comes from the archive of former NSA contractor [Edward Snowden](#), lead to the conclusion that the US diplomatic mission in the German capital has not merely been promoting German-American friendship. On the contrary, it is a nest of espionage. From the roof of the embassy, a special unit of the CIA and NSA can apparently monitor a large part of cellphone communication in the government quarter. And there is evidence that agents based at Pariser Platz recently targeted the cellphone that Merkel uses the most.



The [NSA spying scandal](#) has thus reached a new level, becoming a serious threat to the trans-Atlantic partnership. The mere suspicion that one of Merkel's cellphones was being monitored by the NSA has led in the past week to [serious tensions between Berlin and Washington](#).

Hardly anything is as sensitive a subject to Merkel as the surveillance of her cellphone. It is her instrument of power. She uses it not only to lead her party, the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), but also to conduct a large portion of government business. Merkel

uses the device so frequently that there was even debate earlier this year over whether her text-messaging activity should be archived as part of executive action.

‘That’s Just Not Done’

Merkel has often said — half in earnest, half in jest — that she operates under the assumption that her phone calls are being monitored. But she apparently had in mind countries like China and Russia, where [data protection](#) is not taken very seriously, and not Germany’s friends in Washington.

Last Wednesday Merkel placed a strongly worded phone call to US President [Barack Obama](#). Sixty-two percent of Germans approve of her harsh reaction, according to a survey by polling institute YouGov. A quarter think it was too mild. In a gesture of displeasure usually reserved for rogue states, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle [summoned the new US ambassador](#), John Emerson, for a meeting at the Foreign Ministry.

The [NSA affair](#) has shaken the certainties of German politics. Even Merkel’s CDU, long a loyal friend of Washington, is now openly questioning [the trans-Atlantic free trade agreement](#). At the Chancellery it’s now being said that if the US government doesn’t take greater pains to clarify the situation, certain conclusions will be drawn and talks over the agreement could potentially be put on hold.

“Spying between friends, that’s just not done,” [said Merkel on Thursday](#) at a European Union summit in Brussels. “Now trust has to be rebuilt.” But until recently it sounded as if the government had faith in its ally’s intelligence agencies.

In mid-August Merkel’s chief of staff, Ronald Pofalla, offhandedly described the NSA scandal as over. German authorities offered none of their own findings — just a dry statement from the NSA leadership saying the agency adhered to all agreements between the countries.

Now it is not just Pofalla who stands disgraced, but Merkel as well. She looks like a head of government who only stands up to Obama when she herself is a target of the US intelligence services. The German website *Der Postillon* published a satirical version last Thursday of the statement given by Merkel’s spokesman, Steffen Seibert: “The chancellor considers it a slap in the face that she has most likely been monitored over the years just like some mangy resident of Germany.”

Merkel has nothing to fear domestically from the recent turn of affairs. The election is over, the conservatives and the center-left Social Democrats are already in [official negotiations](#) toward forming a new government. No one wants to poison the atmosphere with mutual accusation.

Nevertheless, Merkel must now answer the question of how much she is willing to tolerate from her American allies.

Posing as Diplomats

A “top secret” classified NSA document from the year 2010 shows that a unit known as the “Special Collection Service” (SCS) is operational in Berlin, among other locations. It is an elite corps run in concert by the US intelligence agencies NSA and CIA.

The secret list reveals that its agents are active worldwide in around 80 locations, 19 of which are in Europe — cities such as Paris, Madrid, Rome, Prague and Geneva. The SCS maintains two bases in Germany, one in Berlin and another in Frankfurt. That alone is unusual. But in addition, both German bases are equipped at the highest level and staffed with active personnel.

The SCS teams predominantly work undercover in shielded areas of the American Embassy and Consulate, where they are officially accredited as diplomats and as such enjoy special privileges. Under diplomatic protection, they are able to look and listen unhindered. They just can't get caught.

Wiretapping from an embassy is illegal in nearly every country. But that is precisely the task of the SCS, as is evidenced by another secret document. According to the document, the SCS operates its own sophisticated listening devices with which they can intercept virtually every popular method of communication: cellular signals, wireless networks and satellite communication.

The necessary equipment is usually installed on the upper floors of the embassy buildings or on rooftops where the technology is covered with screens or Potemkin-like structures that protect it from prying eyes.

That is apparently the case in Berlin, as well. SPIEGEL asked British investigative journalist Duncan Campbell to appraise the setup at the embassy. In 1976, Campbell uncovered the existence of the British intelligence service GCHQ. In his so-called "Echelon Report" in 1999, he described for the European Parliament the existence of the global surveillance network of the same name.

Campbell refers to window-like indentations on the roof of the US Embassy. They are not glazed but rather veneered with "dielectric" material and are painted to blend into the surrounding masonry. This material is permeable even by weak radio signals. The interception technology is located behind these radio-transparent screens, says Campbell. The offices of SCS agents would most likely be located in the same windowless attic.

No Comment from the NSA

This would correspond to internal NSA documents seen by SPIEGEL. They show, for example, an SCS office in another US embassy — a small windowless room full of cables with a work station of "signal processing racks" containing dozens of plug-in units for "signal analysis."

On Friday, author and NSA expert James Bamford also visited SPIEGEL's Berlin bureau, which is located on Pariser Platz diagonally opposite the US Embassy. "To me, it looks like NSA eavesdropping equipment is hidden behind there," he said. "The covering seems to be made of the same material that the agency uses to shield larger systems."

The Berlin-based security expert Andy Müller Maguhn was also consulted. "The location is ideal for intercepting mobile communications in Berlin's government district," he says, "be it technical surveillance of communication between cellphones and wireless cell towers or radio links that connect radio towers to the network."

Apparently, SCS agents use the same technology all over the world. They can intercept cellphone signals while simultaneously locating people of interest. One antenna system used by the SCS is known by the affable code name "Einstein."

When contacted by SPIEGEL, the NSA declined to comment on the matter.

The SCS are careful to hide their technology, especially the large antennas on the roofs of embassies and consulates. If the equipment is discovered, explains a “top secret” set of classified internal guidelines, it “would cause serious harm to relations between the United States and a foreign government.”

According to the documents, SCS units can also intercept microwave and millimeter-wave signals. Some programs, such as one entitled “Birdwatcher,” deal primarily with encrypted communications in foreign countries and the search for potential access points. Birdwatcher is controlled directly from SCS headquarters in Maryland.

With the growing importance of the Internet, the work of the SCS has changed. Some 80 branches offer “thousands of opportunities on the net” for web-based operations, according to an internal presentation. The organization is now able not only to intercept cellphone calls and satellite communication, but also to proceed against criminals or hackers. From some embassies, the Americans have planted sensors in communications equipment of the respective host countries that are triggered by selected terms.

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