

US Espionage Within the UN Is a Story that Repeats Itself

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The United Nations Security Council room has been a scene of espionage.

The massive leak of a trove of highly classified US intelligence reports, described as one of the country's most remarkable disclosures of secrets in the past decade, has also revealed a more surprising angle to the story.

Washington not only collected information from two of its adversaries, Russia and China, but also from close allies, including Ukraine, South Korea, Egypt, Turkey and Israel.

The United Nations, long watched by multiple Western intelligence agencies, was also one of the victims of the spying scandal that broke out this month.

According to the British public channel BBC, one of the reports from the US intelligence services recounts a conversation between the Secretary General, António Guterres, and his deputy, Amina Mohammed.

Guterres expresses his "dismay" at a call by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, for Europe to produce more weapons and ammunition for the war in Ukraine.

The two senior UN officials also discussed a recent summit of African leaders, at which Amina Mohammed described Kenyan President William Ruto as "ruthless" and said: "I don't trust him."

In response to questions at the daily briefings, UN spokesman Stéphane Dujarric told reporters that "the secretary-general has been in this job for a long time, and in the public eye, and he is not surprised by the fact that there are people spying on him and listening to his private conversations..."

What does surprise him, he said, is “the malfeasance or incompetence that allows those private conversations to be distorted and made public.”

On a more global scale, virtually every major power is in the UN spy game, including the Americans, the Russians (and the Soviets during the Cold War era), the French, the British, and the Chinese.

During the height of the Cold War in the 1960s and 1970s, the UN was a veritable battleground for the United States and the now-defunct Soviet Union to spy on each other.

American and Soviet spies were known to hang out all over the building: in the committee rooms, in the press box, in the delegates’ lounge and, most importantly, in the UN library, which was a delivery point for sensitive political documents.

The extent of Cold War espionage at the United Nations was exposed in 1975 by a US Congressional Committee, named after Democratic Senator Frank Church, who chaired it while investigating abuses by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the National Security Agency (NSA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

Among the evidence presented to the Church Committee at the time was the revelation that the CIA had placed one of its Russian lip-reading experts in a press box overlooking the Security Council chamber, so that he could follow the movements of the lips of the Russian delegates, as they consulted each other in whispers.

Thomas G. Weiss, Distinguished Professor of Global Governance at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs who has written extensively on UN policy, told IPS that “it is not surprising that US intelligence services are spying on the 38th floor. It’s an old practice.”

“There’s almost nothing they don’t monitor,” he added, adding that it should be a relief that Washington “takes the UN seriously enough” to spy on it. “The rationale for surveillance would be more intriguing,” he said.

“Is the Secretary General pro-West (has criticized the Russian war), or pro-Russia (according to some rumors)?” could be one question the spies are trying to answer.

In his 1978 book, “A Dangerous Place,” Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former United States envoy to the United Nations, described the cat-and-mouse game of espionage taking place in the bowels of the world body, and in particular in the UN library.

In October 2013, when Clare Short, Britain’s former Minister for International Development, revealed that British intelligence agents had spied on former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (1997-2006), bugging his office just before the disastrous US invasion from Iraq in March 2003.

Upon learning this, the top UN leader was enraged that his talks with world leaders had been compromised.

As Short told the BBC, while talking to Annan on the 38th floor of the UN Secretariat building, he thought: “Oh my, there will be a transcript of this and people will know what he and I are saying.”

The United Nations, along with the 193 diplomatic missions of its member countries, housed in its glass-enclosed building in New York, have long been a veritable battleground for espionage, wiretapping and electronic surveillance.

As early as September 2013, then-Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, undoing diplomatic protocol, launched a withering attack on the United States for illegally infiltrating its communications network, surreptitiously intercepting phone calls, and breaking into the Brazilian Mission to the United Nations.

Justifying her public criticism, she told delegates that the problem of electronic surveillance goes beyond a bilateral relationship. It affects the international community itself, she remarked, and demands a response from it.

Rousseff launched her attack even as then-US President Barack Obama was waiting his turn to address the General Assembly on the opening day of the annual high-level debate. By tradition, Brazil is the first annual speaker, followed by the United States.

“We have made our disapproval known to the US government, and we demand explanations, apologies and guarantees that such procedures will never be repeated,” she said.

According to documents released by US whistleblower Edward Snowden, the illegal electronic surveillance of Brazil was carried out by the US National Security Agency (NSA).

The German magazine Der Spiegel reported that NSA technicians had managed to decrypt the UN’s internal videoconferencing system (VTC), as part of their surveillance of the world body.

The combination of this new ONU access and codebreak encryption led to a dramatic improvement in the quality of VTC data and the ability to decrypt VTC traffic, according to NSA agents.

In the article entitled “How the United States spies on Europe at the UN,” Der Spiegel claimed that, in a little less than three weeks, the number of decrypted communications increased from 12 to 458.

Subsequently, there were new espionage allegations, but this time the Americans were accused of using the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in Baghdad to intercept Iraqi security intelligence in an attempt to undermine, and perhaps overthrow, the Iraqi government of President Saddam Hussein.

The accusations, reported on the front pages of The Washington Post and The Boston Globe, only confirmed the longstanding Iraqi accusation that UNSCOM was “a den of spies”, mostly American and British.

Created by the Security Council immediately after the 1991 Gulf War, UNSCOM was mandated to eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and to destroy that country’s ability to produce nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

However, UNSCOM chief Richard Butler of Australia vehemently denied allegations that his inspection team in Iraq had spied on the United States. “We’ve never spied on anyone,” Butler told reporters.

Asked to respond to reports that UNSCOM may have helped Washington gather sensitive information on Iraq to destabilize Saddam Hussein's regime, Butler replied: "Don't believe everything you read in the press."

At the same time, The New York Times carried a front-page story quoting US officials as saying that "American spies had worked undercover on UN weapons inspectorate teams to uncover secret Iraqi weapons programs."

In an editorial, that newspaper stated that "using UN activities in Iraq as a cover for US espionage operations would be a sure way to undermine the international organization, embarrass the United States and strengthen Mr. Hussein."

"Washington crossed a line it should not have crossed if it placed US agents on the UN team with the intent of gathering information that could be used for military strikes against targets in Baghdad," the editorial said.

Samir Sanbar, a former UN Assistant Secretary General who headed its Department of Public Information, told IPS that tracking international officials has evolved with greater digital capability.

He added that what was mainly done by security officers expanded to become a public exercise.

At first, he said, some UN landmarks, such as the Delegates Lounge, were targeted by multiple countries, even with devices across the East River in Queens, or in the lounge adjacent to the UN garden and a short walk away. distance from permanent missions and residences of UN diplomats.

A senior UN official once said that the closer he got to the secretary-general's residence, in the Sutton Place neighborhood, the more obvious the radio surveillance became.

As a climax, a personal memory: When the UN Correspondents Association (UNCA) held its annual awards ceremony in December 2013, one of the most prominent videos was a hilarious parody about clumsy spying attempts taking place inside the lowest levels, high of the Secretariat and even the offices of the 38th floor of the then Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (2007-2016).

When I took the floor, as one of the UNCA winners for my reporting and analysis for IPS, I gave the secretary general, who was standing next to me, some unsolicited advice: if you want to know if your phone line has been tapped, I jokingly told him, you just have to sneeze hard.

A voice on the other end would instinctively and politely reply: "Bless you." "And you'll know that your phone is bugged," I said between laughs.

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