



JULY 9, 2014

OBAMA'S CHOICE

by Annette Heuser

A new wave of spy allegations is further damaging German-American relations and now threatens to radically alter the mainstay of the entire trans-Atlantic partnership. Last week's allegations of the CIA's paying a German informant for documents related to a Bundestag committee's investigations into the festering NSA scandal unleashed another bout of anger and disbelief in Berlin. This week an investigation of another US mole, this one in the German defense establishment, has been launched. As Berlin's political leadership sees it, Germany was — in the aftermath of Edward Snowden's revelations, which first lifted the veil on widespread American intelligence activities — shoring up the foundation of the trans-Atlantic relationship while the US continued to jackhammer it. Washington may want to focus on upcoming mid-term elections and other foreign-policy crises, but US policymakers are being grossly negligent by continuing to ignore German frustration and anger arising from American spying. The potential damage keeps growing, especially in three areas:

1. In The US We Don't Trust

Any hope that the fallout from the NSA scandal, now a year old, would fade away was always a delusion. Washington, unwilling or unable to understand German outrage and disappointment, seemed to see the issue as little more than an annoyance. The Obama administration eventually and halfheartedly agreed to a so-called "cyber dialogue" with Germany, which met for the first time only last month. (A US-EU cyber dialogue has also taken place, though there have been no concrete results.) This is a scant substitute for Germany's original push for membership in the "five eyes" community or a no-spy agreement with the US. It also appears now as if such talks were little more than a ruse. Berlin's hope that the cyber dialogue was a serious American effort to discuss the objectives and scope of US surveillance activities in Germany has been obliterated. The latest allegations threaten to end the dialogue as soon as it started. German trust in the US has hit a new nadir.

2. A More Uncertain Future For TTIP

A recent trend away from massive German criticism of the Transatlantic Trade and

Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations towards more neutral and occasionally even positive commentary and analysis of a potential trans-Atlantic free-trade deal is likely to come to an abrupt end, stymied by another wave of anti-Americanism. The mutual effort, announced last summer, to conclude a “comprehensive” and “ambitious” agreement may be unachievable under current circumstances. The best outcome now in a climate of mistrust and frustration may be a modest deal that will not unleash the trans-Atlantic market’s full potential or set new global benchmarks for trade. That is a far call from initial hopes that TTIP would be a “go-big-or-go-home” agreement.

3. A Boon For Russia

The latest spying scandals further weaken the trans-Atlantic relationship and consequently complicate a united Western front in the Ukraine crisis. Though Washington was skeptical of Berlin’s support for a hard line and sanctions against Moscow, and repeatedly lamented that “Germany has to do more”, the White House should acknowledge that the one player that delivered swiftly while maintaining all communications channels with the Kremlin was the Merkel government. With the Ukraine crisis far from over, gambling with German-American relations by failing to confront and overcome the dispute over NSA, and now CIA, activities serves only Russian interests.

Berlin has strongly questioned Washington’s seriousness and willingness to deal with the mess that has become German-American relations. Deeds, not words, seem to support a growing belief that the US no longer sees the trans-Atlantic relationship as “special” and “vital”. The repercussions of that go far beyond Germany and extend to the entire European Union. Discord with the EU’s most powerful political and economic member state means discord with Europe as a whole.

The German-US relationship is at a crossroads, and the next move is Washington’s. If the White House believes at all in the trans-Atlantic partnership, President Obama must meet Berlin’s expectations of reining in his intelligence services. The choice is his.

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