



Latest Snowden Leak Shows NSA Wants More Scope and Flexibility

A top- secret National Security Agency document, leaked by whistleblower Edward Snowden, [reveals](#) that the government agency is intent on maintaining its dominance in intelligence collection and has pledged to expand upon those powers.

The *New York Times* [reports](#), “In a February 2012 paper laying out the four-year strategy for the N.S.A.’s signals intelligence [Sigint] operations, which include the agency’s eavesdropping and communications data collection around the world, agency officials set an objective to ‘aggressively pursue legal authorities and a policy framework mapped more fully to the information age.’”



The document also reveals the NSA’s apparent lack of regard for the Constitution and America’s laws, and states that the NSA feels current American laws are not sufficient to meet the needs of the agency to conduct broad surveillance in what the paper dubbed “the golden age of Sigint.”

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“The interpretation and guidelines for applying our authorities, and in some cases the authorities themselves, have not kept pace with the complexity of the technology and target environments, or the operational expectations levied on N.S.A.’s mission,” the document expresses.

The NSA’s powers have ultimately been outlined by Congress, executive orders, and the secret intelligence court, and though the NSA’s powers have reached unimaginable levels, agency officials argue that they require more flexibility, the document shows.

When asked about this particular item in the document, agency officials issued a statement offering further explanation. “N.S.A.’s Sigint strategy is designed to guide investments in future capabilities and close gaps in current capabilities,” the agency said. “In an ever-changing technology and telecommunications environment, N.S.A. tries to get in front of issues to better fulfill the foreign-intelligence requirements of the U.S. government.”

Critics of the NSA have argued that the agency’s violation of constitutional and civil liberties are not outweighed by claims of allegedly successful anti-terrorism efforts. Skeptics contend that the agency’s assertions regarding its effectiveness in thwarting terrorist attacks have been grossly exaggerated.

Following revelations released by whistleblower and former NSA contractor Edward Snowden regarding the extent of domestic surveillance operations, the agency defended its actions by declaring that its domestic surveillance programs have been responsible for thwarting 54 “terrorist-related activities.” However, skeptics including members of Congress have argued that the figure was drastically overstated.



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on November 26, 2013

But that has not stopped the agency from seeking a position as the leader in data collection, an agenda clearly articulated in the leaked strategy document. The document outlines methods by which the agency hopes to surpass the cybersecurity practices of its competitors so that the agency can acquire data from “anyone, anywhere, anytime.”

In order to do this, the document indicates that the NSA would work to decrypt or circumvent codes that would have otherwise kept communications secret by influencing “the global commercial encryption market through commercial relationships,” as well as through partners in other countries.

The document boasts that the agency has already had success in beating encryption, but lists as a primary objective the ability to counter “ubiquitous, strong, commercial network encryption.” To do that, the agency relies on espionage operations by fostering relationships with companies that can create encryption tools.

Outside of the United States, the NSA must “counter indigenous cryptographic programs by targeting their industrial bases with all available Sigint and Humint [human intelligence, a.k.a. spies].”

The paper indicates that, in addition to domestic networks, the NSA plans to acquire greater access to the world’s telecommunications networks. Information leaked by Snowden had revealed that the NSA has already infiltrated cable links to Google and Yahoo data centers across the globe.

But according to the leaked document, the NSA plans to achieve much more than that. The *New York Times* writes, “Yet the paper also shows how the agency believes it can influence and shape trends in high-tech industries in other ways to suit its needs.”

One of the goals outlined in the document is to “continue to invest in the industrial base and drive the state of the art for high performance computing to maintain pre-eminent cryptanalytic capability for the nation.”

It adds that the NSA must therefore strive to “identify new access, collection and exploitation methods by leveraging global business trends in data and communications services.”

Evidently, the agency recognizes the extent of its power and intends to use it. Language found in the document included efforts to “revolutionize” its data collection to “radically increase operational impact.”

The secret document reveals that the NSA was interested in expanding its surveillance powers even after a 2011 court ruling declared the NSA’s surveillance programs to be [unconstitutional](#).

The 2011 court opinion addresses a data-collection method referred to as an “upstream” program, which took data from fiber-optic networks that funneled a significant portion of Internet and phone data, and not the surveillance programs that have drawn recent attention, such as PRISM, which collect over 250 million Internet communications a year, according to the opinion.

The court opinion indicates that the National Security Agency acted in violation of civil rights when it collected thousands of e-mails and other digital messages between Americans.

Written by Judge John D. Bates of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the opinion asserts that the government misrepresented its surveillance efforts at least three times from 2008 to 2011. Bates explains that the government had first opened its surveillance program to the court in 2011, and had been collecting Internet data since at least 2008.

The release of the strategy document further implicates the already scandalized NSA as a power-hungry



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unconstitutional agency. The document was written at a time when the agency was at the peak of its powers and the scope of its surveillance operations was still secret, but since the date that the document was written, of course, much more is known about the NSA's tactics thanks to the information released by Snowden.

Snowden has [levied](#) a variety of accusations against the National Security Agency, including alleging that the NSA has specifically targeted journalists who wrote critically about the federal government following the September 11 attacks.

Snowden's revelations have prompted the public to call for the NSA's domestic operations to be reined in, not expanded upon.

That is apparently something that concerns the NSA, as shown by the strategy paper, which reveals that the agency is fearful that bureaucracy will infringe upon the agency's ability to maintain its scope. "To sustain current mission relevance," the document said, Signals Intelligence Directorate, the NSA's signals intelligence arm, "must undertake a profound and revolutionary shift from the mission approach which has served us so well in the decades preceding the onset of the information age."

Photo of NSA headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland



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