

Commentary, October 31, 2013

RETHINKING OBAMA'S CYBER STRATEGY

MAURIZIO MOLINARI

Deep throat Edward Snowden's revelations about the e-spying carried out by the United States set off a political storm in Washington and the capitals of its allies and is spurring President Barack Obama to speed up the timing for reforming the National Security Agency, reforms that should create a new equilibrium between the nation's security and individual freedoms.

The White House had initially intended to do this by March but the rapid-fire pace of the most embarrassing leaks pushed the date up to December 15 by the latest. By that date the commission of five experts, headed by former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, will present Obama with an outline of operational corrections and legislative revisions devised to guarantee American citizens and leaders of ally countries that the NSA – the most secret of America's 16 intelligence agencies – won't spy on them anymore or at least work under stricter governmental control.

It remains to be seen how Obama will manage to make these political intentions coincide with the need to keep operative the most efficient weapon of the Pentagon's electronic arsenal, created beginning in 2005 with the

most futuristic technologies under the direction of General Keith Alexander, since 2010 also the chief of the new "Cyber Command".

Obama has to answer three questions. First, whether to keep the NSA under military direction, as it has been since its foundation in 1952, or have it led by a civilian. And this is no small difference because military guidance means running it under the Pentagon's rigid operating system, while a civilian would be a political appointment and therefore more sensitive to the government's orientations as a whole and, in the last analysis, to public opinion. The result would also be an approach different from the strictest-top-secret mentality governing the NSA to date. Second: whether to overhaul its whole internal structure, which up to now has been monolithic even though within it are two big directorates, charged respectively with protecting the nation from cyber attacks and hunting down security enemies everywhere. It's as if the CIA and FBI were under the same roof and an anomaly arising from the disorderly development of the Defense Department's cyber-world duties. Deciding to split up the NSA, Obama could redesign its structure, reinforcing its tasks of espionage



and counterespionage and at the same time keeping it from continuing to concentrate immense powers in the intelligence community. Third: if and how to change the rules of espionage that have guided the NSA until now, in order to respond to urgent demands by Congress – and ally leaders – to set precise limits to the e-surveillance that has been going on thanks to Big Data, the 007 community’s new darling.

In dealing with these questions Obama will have to try to find a point of encounter between the demands of the intelligence big-wigs (who want to change the current structure as little as possible) and those of Congress, which are going in the opposite direction to reassure voters in view of the midterm elections that in November 2014 will re-elect all members of the House of

Representatives and a third of the Senate. Further complicating the picture are relations with allies because while on the one hand the leaders of France, Germany, Brazil, Mexico and Spain are pushing for bridling the National Security Agency, on the other those same heads of state and government are well aware that it’s been their own secret services to cooperate with Washington in collecting Big Data at home and abroad

For a president like Obama, who has made the secret war on terrorism the keystone of his security policy, it means finding himself in the unusual situation of having to publically justify the overhaul of the Pentagon’s most effective cyber weapon. The fissures emerging between the White House and the “lords of the spies” are the first signs of the earthquake about to hit the Beltway.