

The Leaking Republic: The Pentagon's Take on Information Security

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For years, US intelligence officials could hold their allies, notably the British, in contempt for leaking like sinking vessels and harbouring such espionage luminaries as the Cambridge Five. The whirligig of time has returned the favour with the latest leak from the US Department of Defense. They pose a question pregnant with relevance: Do Washington's allies have any reason to trust their own secure channels of sharing defence information? The answer: probably not.

The spray of Pentagon documents began appearing on such platforms as Twitter, 4chan, Telegram and a Discord server that hosts video games. (How odd, [go the folks](#) at Bellingcat.) The very nature of this distribution has tickled pundits into assuming a sense of play at work here. A few have even asserted that the alleged perpetrator, Jack Texeira of the Massachusetts Air National Guard, was making a playful effort to make friends.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was [informed of the leak](#) during his April 6 morning briefing after five images surfaced on the platforms. The following day, Austin commenced daily crisis meetings to discuss the matter.

These briefings seem to have come some weeks late. Certain documents began circulating on the Discord messaging platform in March, featuring photographs of folded up printouts, only to then be smoothed out again.

The lion's share of the documents came in the form of slides developed by the Pentagon's Joint Staff, largely acting as briefing notes for senior leaders regarding Ukraine. A [pessimistic picture emerges](#) about the prospects of success for any Ukrainian spring counteroffensive. Shortages in ammunition were also becoming critical, and the capacity of Western states to replenish them had yet to be developed. The delivery of existing equipment to the frontline had also been slow, as was training Ukrainian forces. Soviet-era munitions and artillery continued to be the mainstay of Kyiv's military effort.

But then the picture became more cluttered – and clotted. Messily, there were suggestions that the United States had observed that old adage that friends need to be spied upon to be good. South Korea proved a case in point.

One leaked document [revealed the state of mind](#) of South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol's senior advisors on whether to yield to US pressure to send ammunition to Ukraine, or resist arming the state altogether. In 2022, Seoul had agreed to replenish US artillery stocks on the proviso that they keep the shells for themselves. But Foreign Affairs Secretary Yi Mun-hui, on March 1, told then National Security Advisor Kim Sung-han that the government was “mired in concerns that the US would not be the end user” of the ammunition. A mooted option was sending shells to Poland instead.

The revelation immediately [drew a stout defence](#), notably in the *Financial Times*. “Washington needs to know if Seoul is considering a move that could spark a nuclear arms race in north-east Asia, or fatally undermine international pressure on Pyongyang, or – in the most extreme circumstances – drag the US into a nuclear conflict.”

There was also disgruntlement in Washington regarding the UN Secretary General's supposedly favourable stance towards Russia. This was revealed in several documents describing private conversations between António Guterres and a number of African figures.

The Black Sea grain deal between Ukraine and Russia, which the secretary aided, along with Turkey, to broker last July, received a special, scathing mention. “Guterres emphasised his efforts to improve Russia's ability to export even if that involves sanctioned Russian entities or individuals,” [states](#) one document. His conduct in February, according to the assessment, had undermined “broader efforts to hold Moscow accountable for its actions in Ukraine”.

These documents have raised a few questions. Was such leaked information inaccurate, thereby revealing the state of confusion within the Pentagon itself? We [already know](#) how an entire swathe of US agencies and departments recently cocked-up their assessments of Afghanistan and the capabilities of the Taliban. Or had the information itself been tampered with on its release, thereby skewing the material favouring, to use the defence vernacular, the interests of a hostile adversary? Ultimately, all intelligence assessments must be subject to the withering eyes of History's muse, Clio, who may well, in time, reveal something quite different.

The overarching issue remains: Is it possible that a 21-year-old member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard could have access to such information? Again, in this information saturated age, where reports on security and defence stack shelves and surf as attachments on emails, smooth and ready access is easy to envisage.

Inevitable comparisons with Edward Snowden's disclosures from 2013 have been made. His disclosures threw the lid off the vast surveillance imperium created in freedom's name in the wake of the September 10, 2001 attacks, and executed in the service of paranoia and callousness. But in the land of intel-chat, these latest leaks are deemed more serious given their immediate relevance. The US-Ukraine show must be seen to be going according to plan, the aid from Washington noble, the fighting from Kyiv even nobler.

The old problems Snowden exposed, however, have not gone away. In redux format,

officials are now demanding a review of systems of access within the Pentagon. “We need to rethink how we store and hold classified information and who has access to that information,” [insists](#) Mick Mulroy, retired CIA officer and former Pentagon official. A tad late for that, isn't it?

The picture emerging from this, edited or otherwise, is ugly for the bureaucrats. For one, it shows that the conflict in Ukraine is very much a NATO affair, a brutal stoush with the Russian bear packed with old grievances and concerns. A bloody, lengthy conflict is on the cards.

As the DoD attempts to root out the sources and patch up the leaky vessel, Washington's allies will be pensive. The Empire, as was demonstrated in the Snowden spill, is prone to misbehaviour.

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