

2025

Western spy agencies' relations



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1. SUMMARY

Some weeks ago, the director of the French DGSE, Nicolas Lerner, gave an unusual interview in the LCI channel. It was about shedding some light and an illusion of transparency on the agency he runs.

No important data were shared with the general public. It might be highlighted that the DGSE is made up of over 7,500 members and that **Russia is an existential threat** for Europe in the medium and long term.

He also admitted that France – like most major intelligence powers – has **spied on allies** when **economic, technological, or strategic stakes were high**. The DGSE, while publicly emphasizing legal and ethical frameworks, **does not deny** gathering intelligence in allied countries when it serves “**les intérêts fondamentaux de la Nation**” (fundamental national interests), as codified in French intelligence law.

2. FRENCH INVOLVEMENT IN SPYING ALLIES

Chinese cyber actors have been involved in numerous high-profile cyber incidents targeting U.S. infrastructure, government agencies, and private organizations.

2.1 Espionage against the United States

In the **1990s**, U.S. authorities accused **France of conducting economic espionage** through its intelligence services (primarily the DGSE). The objective was allegedly to gain an advantage in **commercial aviation deals**, especially between **Airbus (then a European consortium including French interests)** and **Boeing**.

- A **1995 CIA report** identified France as one of the top countries engaging in economic espionage against the U.S.
- The **National Counterintelligence Center (NCC)** also warned that France was using intelligence to support French businesses in international contracts.

2.2 France and EU institutions

In the **early 2000s**, the EU security services discovered that **French agents had bugged European Commission offices** during trade negotiations. While

the DGSE never officially claimed responsibility, media reports and diplomatic sources implicated French operatives in the surveillance effort aimed at influencing EU positions, particularly regarding agricultural and trade policy.

2.3 Espionage against Germany

In 2015, Wikileaks revealed that the **NSA had wiretapped French Presidents** (Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande). However, what received less attention is that **France also spied on Germany. The DGSE tapped German diplomatic and economic institutions, including ministries and the chancellery, allegedly using France's technical surveillance installations.** This was partly confirmed through the investigations of German parliamentary committees post-Snowden.

3. BROAD SPECTRUM

In 2013, revelations from Edward Snowden and subsequent reporting showed that France, through its intelligence agency DGSE, was **involved in a secret metadata-sharing agreement with the NSA and GCHQ**, known as the “Lustre” treaty. Under this agreement, **France handed over more than 70 million metadata records** to the NSA between December 2012 and January 2013. These records likely **included communications from or passing through Spain**, either collected domestically or abroad.

At the same time, **Spain's intelligence agency, the CNI, was also implicated in similar activities.** Reports from *El Mundo* and *The Guardian* revealed that **Spain shared metadata from approximately 60.5 million phone calls with the NSA** during the same period. General Keith Alexander, then director of the NSA, clarified that this data was not collected by the NSA directly within Spain but was **provided by European partners** such as France and Spain themselves.

Further Snowden leaks revealed that **France, Spain, Germany, and Sweden** all engaged in technical and strategic cooperation with the NSA and the UK's GCHQ, enabling mass surveillance across fibre-optic cables and telecommunications networks.

Although the public outrage initially centred on claims that the NSA was spying on Spanish citizens, it later **became clear that much of the data had actually been collected and shared**

by European intelligence agencies themselves. France's DGSE played a significant role in this exchange, illustrating the extent of intra-European intelligence cooperation, **even when it involved surveillance of each other's populations.**

4. FINAL REMARKS

The latest case shows how European agencies operated in favour of the American NSA and against each other. Only when they accused the American of spying them, it was exposed the lack of coordination among European agencies.

It is very likely that after this period of time this has been changed, and coordination is better off.

This confirms that **mutual espionage and cooperation coexist.** Intelligence partnerships are transactional: nations share only what aligns with their interests, while often continuing to spy on their allies in parallel. The DGSE Director's reference to "everyone spying on everyone" reflects this **pragmatic realism** in intelligence culture.

One of the most striking insights from both the Lustre scandal and the DGSE interview is how **bulk metadata collection** and **AI-assisted analysis** have become central to intelligence work. Traditional human espionage remains **essential**, but digital methods now dominate early detection, influence operations, and mass behavioural analysis. However, this shift also brings risks of **data overload**, mission drift, and potential abuse—particularly **if oversight mechanisms fail to keep up.**

Yet history shows that **abuse and overreach remain possibilities**, especially when activities are shielded by national security secrecy. The existence of formal control does not automatically prevent misuse—especially in politically sensitive contexts like elections or international trade.

The intelligence world is a paradoxical domain: **legally constrained yet extra-legal, cooperative yet suspicious, and defensive yet offensive.** France, like its allies, operates in a space where **realpolitik often overrides idealism.** What emerges is a world in which trust is relative, transparency is tactical, and power is ultimately defined not by morality, but by capability and discretion.