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President Enrique Peña Nieto Criticized for Timid Response to US Spying Allegations

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President Enrique Peña Nieto has taken a cautious approach in his reaction to reports that the US National Security Agency (NSA) spied on him by intercepting his emails and cellular phone communications while he was still a candidate for president. The information on the NSA’s transgressions surfaced a few days before the Mexican president was scheduled to attend a meeting of the Group of 20 (G20) nations in St. Petersburg, Russia, in early September. The leaks about the NSA’s activities came from fugitive NSA contractor Edward Snowden. US journalist Glenn Greenwald, who lives in Rio de Janeiro, gained access to the documents from Snowden and reported on their content on the Brazilian news program Fantástico and in an article published by the British newspaper The Guardian on Sept. 1.

The Brazilian news program displayed what it said was an NSA document, dated June 2012, which displayed passages of written messages from then candidate Peña Nieto. This was a few weeks before the election, which Peña Nieto won by a few percentage points (SourceMex, July 11, 2012). In the messages, Peña Nieto discussed the names of people he was considering naming as his Cabinet ministers once elected.

A second document displayed communication patterns between Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and her top advisers, although Fantástico did not mention specific written passages included in the report.

Both documents were part of an NSA case study showing how data could be "intelligently" filtered, the Brazilian news program reported.

The NSA activities are threatening relations between the US and the two largest economies in the Americas. The Snowden situation, in which the ex-NSA contractor is rumored to have sought refuge in Latin America, has already caused some tensions with countries like Bolivia and Venezuela (NotiSur, July 19, 2013, and Aug. 30, 2013).

The Brazilian reports about the NSA spying were published a day before Peña Nieto was scheduled to make his State of the Nation speech. The president did not, however, mention the situation, which left him open to criticism at home. "Rather than take advantage of this opportunity [to make a statement] during his message from Los Pinos [presidential palace], the president opted for a weak statement from the foreign ministry," political commentator Carmen Aristegui said in a piece published in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.

The statement from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) was indeed very general and left out any mention of Peña Nieto. The SRE said Mexico "categorically rejects and condemns any kind of spying against Mexican citizens in breach of international law." The SRE added that Mexico had asked the US government for a thorough investigation of the matter and that, if necessary, Washington should explain who was responsible.
Aristegui acknowledged that Peña Nieto’s communications did not contain highly sensitive information and said the content was not as important as the violation of sovereignty committed by the US against Mexico.

**Contrast with strong Brazilian response**

In contrast to the mild initial comments from the Mexican president, the reaction from Brazil was swift and forceful. Foreign Minister Luiz Alberto Figueiredo immediately summoned US Ambassador Thomas Shannon and gave the envoy until the end of the week to provide a written explanation. "I expressed to [Shannon] the Brazilian government's indignation at the facts revealed in the documents," Figueiredo said at a news conference. "From our point of view, this is an inadmissible and unacceptable violation of Brazilian sovereignty."

Rousseff also called a Cabinet meeting that included the country's defense, justice, communications, and foreign ministers to discuss a response to the new espionage report. One of the Brazilian government’s responses later that week was to postpone a visit by an advance team to Washington ahead of a meeting between Rousseff and US President Barack Obama.

"Both leaders reacted differently to this violation," said Aristegui, who also hosts shows on radio and television and offers an online news site called Aristegui Noticias. "Brazilian President Rousseff called an emergency Cabinet meeting and demanded swift explanations in writing. The first reply [from the US] was deemed unsatisfactory, and the communications minister said openly that the US explanation appeared to be lacking," said the commentator.

The reports of NSA espionage were aired just days before the Group of 20 (G-20) meetings in St. Petersburg, Russia, which both Peña Nieto and Rousseff were scheduled to attend. Each of the chief executives made contact with Obama, but in entirely different ways. Rousseff demanded and received a face-to-face meeting with Obama.

Peña Nieto, in contrast, communicated with the US president via telephone, even though the two leaders were in St. Petersburg. "No one knows how long the call lasted or the tone of the conversation. All that was said was that Obama had promised to investigate," said Aristegui. "It is interesting to note that a telephone was selected as the means of communication. … The phone call was made in St. Petersburg, when the two leaders were in the same building."

Before his telephone call with Obama, Peña Nieto said he intended to tell his US counterpart that spying was a violation of international law. "Mexico clearly rejects this, condemns it, and demands a demarcation of responsibilities and an investigation into the matter," said the Mexican president.

In very general comments to reporters after the conversation, Peña Nieto said Obama reassured him that he had not issued the order for the NSA to conduct the espionage. "Our conversation with President Obama involved a personal pledge and a willingness to launch an investigation," said the Mexican president. "And in the case that there were any actions that were outside the law, [there was a promise] to determine responsibilities and impose sanctions on those who committed the transgressions."

Nevertheless, the strong reaction from Rousseff prompted the Mexican government to take some actions that made Peña Nieto appear to be taking a tough stance against the US. "The contrast with the Brazilian reaction was so strong that this forced Mexico to raise its tone," said Aristegui. "The US
ambassador was summoned and was asked to investigate the information disclosed by international media.

**Opposition parties seek more forceful reaction**

Peña Nieto’s seemingly timid reaction to the spying allegations drew strong criticisms from opposition politicians. "There must be a strong response," said Gustavo Madero, president of the conservative opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). "This is a violation that reduces confidence and weakens the climate of cooperation between two neighboring countries."

"Our government must repudiate this violation," added Madero. "We must demand not only an explanation but a promise that this will not happen again."

There was a similar reaction from the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which also demanded a vigorous response. PRD president Jesús Zambrano said Mexico requires a foreign policy that is "more energetic" and "active" in the face of the US transgressions. "[The US] feels entitled to push everyone around," said Zambrano, citing a decision by Obama and the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee to intervene militarily in Syria. "[Mexico] is viewed as vulnerable and as the backyard of the US."

Legislators from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) also condemned the US actions and promised to support a resolution in the joint permanent committee of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate condemning the US espionage. Still, PRI officials refrained from criticizing Peña Nieto and instead praised the SRE’s response. "I consider the protest from the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores appropriate," said PRI Sen. Emilio Gamboa.

While it is uncertain what further actions Mexico will take to address the concerns about the NSA espionage, Brazil is continuing direct discussions with the Obama administration. Foreign Minister Figuereido was expected to meet with Susan Rice, Obama’s national security advisor, on Sept. 11 or 12 to address the espionage concerns further.

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