

Document that formalised 'special relationship' with the US

A secret agreement brokered with the Americans that led to the sharing of all secret intelligence and cemented the Special Relationship, has been made public for the first time.



Harry Hinsley, Sir Edward Travis and Brig Tiltman, who helped negotiate the intelligence sharing agreement between Britain and the US, in Washington in November 1945 Photo: NATIONAL ARCHIVES



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The agreement, released to the National Archives by GCHQ, forms the bedrock of a unique relationship which has been the envy of foreign intelligence agencies.

Although rumours of the agreement have persisted for a number of years, the actual document has never been published before.

In fact the agreement states: "It will be contrary to this agreement to reveal its existence to any third party whatever" and that "each party will seek the agreement of the other to any action with third parties and will take no action until its advisability is agreed upon."

The partnership is founded on the joint abilities of GCHQ in Cheltenham and the National Security Agency (NSA) in Fort Meade, Maryland, to intercept intelligence.

Both agencies gather and decrypt signals intelligence, known as SigInt which involves internet, telephone, radio and satellite communications from across the world.

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Co-operation has now broadened beyond SigInt and led to recent tensions in the trans-Atlantic relationship after US intelligence related to the treatment of Binyam Mohamed, the former Guantanamo Bay detainee, was published following a ruling by the Court of Appeal.

Signed on March 5 1946 by Col Patrick Marr-Johnson of the British Army General Staff, and Lt Gen Hoyt S Vandenberg, chairman of the US intelligence gathering agency STANCIB, the original agreement prevented the US from sharing intelligence with any British dominions other than Canada.

But in 1956 Australia and New Zealand were added and a network of listening stations established covering most of the world.

In the 1960s an analysis system known as Echelon, was developed to collate and share the information.

Ed Hampshire, principal records specialist at the National Archives said: "The agreement represented a crucial moment in the development of the special relationship between the two wartime allies and captured the spirit and practice of the signals intelligence co-operation which had evolved on an ad-hoc basis during the Second World War."

A spokesman for GCHQ added: "The 1946 UK-USA Agreement formed the basis for co-operation between the two countries throughout the Cold War and continues to be essential in keeping the UK safe from today's threats."

The document is a "working arrangement" established between partner agencies which did not require government sanction.

Called the British-US Communication Intelligence Agreement and labeled "top secret," it was made between the forerunners of the NSA and GCHQ, the State-Army-Navy Communications Intelligence Board, known as STANCIB, and the London Signal Intelligence Board.

It says that the two sides agree to the exchange of the products of operations relating to foreign communications, specifically the collection of "traffic," the decryption, translation and analysis of such traffic, and the "acquisition of information regarding communication organisations, practices, procedures and equipment."

"Such exchange will be unrestricted on all work undertaken," the document adds, "Except when specifically excluded from the agreement at the request of either party and with the agreement of the other. It is the intention of each party to limit such exceptions to the absolute minimum and to exercise no restrictions other than those reported and mutually agreed upon."

If anything were to be withheld on the grounds of "special interests", the other side would "include a description of the information being withheld, sufficient in the opinion of the withholding party to convey its significance."

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