

U.S. Diplomats May Be Out in the Cold for a While

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WASHINGTON — If you are a U.S. diplomat accustomed to coaxing, cajoling or strong-arming governments behind closed doors, you will be out in the cold, at least for a while, because of WikiLeaks.

Current and former diplomats say the flood of U.S. Embassy cables obtained by the web site and the steady drip, drip, drip of embarrassing disclosures in the media have had a chilling effect on U.S. diplomacy.

"In the short run, we're almost out of business," said a senior U.S. diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity. "It is really, really bad. I cannot exaggerate it.

"In all honesty, nobody wants to talk to us," he added, saying it could take two to five years to rebuild trust. "Some people still have to talk to us, particularly [in] government but ... they are already asking us things like, 'Are you going to write about this?'"

"People outside the government don't want to talk at all."

The 251,287 U.S. Embassy cables have exposed everything from U.S. views of President Dmitry Medvedev as playing Robin to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's Batman to an American official calling Cuba and Venezuela an "Axis of Mischief."

A handful of news organizations obtained the cables and began publishing stories about them, as well as some of the underlying documents, on Nov. 28.

Just several thousand cables had been posted online by news organizations and WikiLeaks by Thursday, leaving another 250,000 or so that could surface to embarrass foreign governments, and Washington, for months to come.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sharply criticized the leaks and said they will not harm important U.S. alliances. Undersecretary of State William Burns gave a harsher assessment in testimony before a congressional committee last month.

"The reality is that the despicable breach of trust that we've seen through WikiLeaks' disclosures has done substantial damage to our ability to carry out diplomatic efforts," said Burns, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia.

However, a U.S. diplomat in the Middle East said the foreign officials he deals with had not suddenly clammed up and he suggested the long-term consequences were likely to be more pronounced for foreign countries than for U.S. diplomacy.

"That's a temporary problem and in two or three years, maybe less, we'll be back to doing business the way we used to do it," said the U.S. diplomat. "Time heals all wounds."

The official said in the Middle East there is often a disconnect between what leaders say in public and in private and, with the cables, people in closed societies may for the first time see that "in all its glaring inconsistency."

"I think it will have a much deeper and longer-lasting impact on the societies here than it will on our ability to conduct diplomacy," the diplomat said.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said he thought most foreign officials were likely to overcome any reticence with the United States within six months to a year, though he stressed this was a tentative conclusion.

"We're still big enough and important enough that people are not going to be able to avoid talking to us," he said.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates made the same point last week. "The fact is governments deal with the United States because it's in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets," he said. "Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for U.S. foreign policy? I think fairly modest."

Among the most awkward revelations reported so far:

- Saudi King Abdullah repeatedly urged the United States to attack Iran to end its nuclear program, and was quoted as saying: "cut off the head of the snake."
- The State Department asked U.S. envoys at UN headquarters and elsewhere to procure

credit card and frequent flyer numbers, mobile phone numbers, email addresses, passwords and other data from foreign diplomats and top UN officials, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

- China's Politburo directed the intrusion into Google's computer systems in that country in a computer sabotage campaign that targeted U.S. and Western allies' government computers, the Dalai Lama and American businesses since 2002.

Asked which countries were particularly angry, a senior U.S. official replied: "The easier question is, who's not?"

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