



January 8, 2010

Melding U.S. and foreign intelligence a challenge

Former President Reagan used the signature phrase "trust but verify" throughout his presidency.

That sentiment still holds true, one expert, Ken Ballen, said, especially as the United States looks to fix flaws in its intelligence system in the wake of the attempted Christmas Day airliner bombing.

"If it's hard to share information among our own counterterrorism agencies, imagine what happens when we try and share intelligence with other countries," said Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonprofit research institute.

On Thursday, the White House released its report on the plane terror plot by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- which has taken responsibility -- and the suspect, Umar Farouk AbdulMutallab.

President Obama, in speaking about the report, said the U.S. intelligence community had the information about a possible attack by the group -- and information about the suspect -- but failed to "connect the dots."

At a press conference later in the day, [Homeland Security](#) Secretary Janet Napolitano said she would soon head to Spain to meet with her European counterparts to discuss security issues.

"Working with the Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton], we need to strengthen international security measures and standards for aviation security," Napolitano said. "Security measures abroad affect our security here at home."

One challenge for the United States is not only cutting through the bureaucratic red tape within U.S. counterterrorism agencies, but also connecting better with foreign intelligence.

Ballen, a former federal prosecutor with more than 20 years in law enforcement and international relations, argues that mixing U.S. intelligence with information from foreign governments could get messy.

"The problems are magnified when you involve other intelligence agencies," he said. "In our own government we have bureaucratic issues between agencies."

“As for sharing classified information with other countries? It's going to be tough, Ballen said.

"There are limits to what we can share. And intelligence agencies from other countries have the same issues. They have issues of having highly sensitive information that they may be wary of sharing with us."

Administration officials, though, have pointed out that the United States has worked successfully with foreign governments in stopping [terrorist](#) attacks and rooting out terror cells.

But there are also big trust issues.

"You're dealing with some intelligence agencies where the United States has a mixed record of cooperation. I think of the Pakistani ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] as an example of that," Ballen said. "We've cooperated with them over the years, but there are certainly issues of trust between us and the Pakistanis."