

# Why do governments spy?

**The goal of espionage is to gather information and build actionable intelligence, i.e. establish the facts you need to direct your actions to get what you want. Governments want power and control, over what other governments do, what criminals do, and often times what their own people do.**



Governments spy on each other to ascertain threats. For instance, the United States keeps an eye on North Korea's nuclear activities, which pose a threat to South Korea. South Korea is a vital strategic partner for the United States in the Asia-Pacific Region.



A crucial function for intelligence services in every country is to anticipate and counteract threats to national security. There are many legitimate threats that call for the use of interception and tracking technologies. These include various types of criminal and terror activities. These include, among others,

- Threats to people's lives
- Threats to critical national infrastructure (such as the electricity supply, major ports of entry, and mobile network infrastructure)
- Organised crime, including smuggling, poaching, the drug, cigarette and weapons trade, and human trafficking
- Terror attacks by extremist groups



Military secrets and industrial patents also motivate governments to gather intelligence. Governments know that being at the forefront of technology strengthens their economic and political positions. For instance, in a 2009 report from South Africa's intelligence services decried the fact that government representatives from countries like China and Iran were invited to visit facilities such as Denel where South Africa was developing new technologies.



Governments also spy on one another to advance their own political and economic interests. For example: It is known that Russia interfered with the United States' presidential elections in 2016 and 2020. To do this, they used cyber intrusion and also manipulative social media campaigns. None of these plans could have been implemented without intelligence gathering. As geopolitical rivals, Russia and the United States have been meddling with each others' elections since the Cold War.



Today, a mammoth and hugely important task that often falls to intelligence services deserves a special mention: national cybersecurity. Because all major infrastructure (such as transport and shipping systems, communication networks, and the power grid) are dependent on computers and the internet, these major systems – and a country's ability to function normally – are dependent on sound cybersecurity. In South Africa, the State Security Agency is the lead department in ensuring the country's cyberspace remains secure.