

Spy agency gains support for key cyber role

Robert Lemos 2009-03-02

The United States' top intelligence official argued last week that the National Security Agency should become the nation's cyber defender, adding his voice to the growing murmur of support for the agency's future role in cyberspace.

In comments before the U.S. House of Representatives' intelligence committee on Wednesday, the Obama administration's Director of National Intelligence, Dennis Blair, stated that the current lead agency on cybersecurity, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, has not stepped up to the plate, while the NSA "has the greatest repository of cyber talent." Blair acknowledged that the NSA has to gain the trust of the American people and show that they can be held accountable, but that the capabilities of the agency make them best suited to the role of protecting U.S. networks against cyber attacks.

"I think that (the NSA's) capability should be harnessed and built on as we're trying to protect more than just our intelligence networks or our military networks as we expand to our federal networks and to our critical infrastructure networks," Blair said, according to transcript ([pdf](#)) of the remarks. "And, the reason is that, because of the offensive mission that they have, they're the ones who know best about what's coming back at us and it's defenses against those sorts of things that we need to be able to build into wider and wider circles."

Blair's comments are not the first time that the National Security Agency has been suggested as a logical lead for the nation's cybersecurity defense efforts. Paul Kurtz, a consultant and advisor to the Obama administration's transition team, [also recommended](#) that the NSA take on a greater role in securing cyberspace in comments at a recent security conference. However, the NSA [has suffered](#) a public black eye for allegedly collecting data on and tapping the communications of U.S. citizens in the name of fighting terrorism.

In his comments, Blair — the nation's third Director of National Intelligence — argued that the agency and Congress have to work to improve the NSA's reputation and underscored the increasing importance of cybersecurity.

"Our information infrastructure is becoming both indispensable to the functioning of our society and vulnerable to catastrophic disruption in a way that they previous, analog, decentralized systems were not," he said. "Cyber-systems are being targeted for exploitation, and potentially for disruption or destruction, by a growing array of both non-state and state adversaries."

The lion's share of Blair's comments focused on the intelligence communities role in the fight against terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation and unrest caused by current economic conditions.

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