

A Conversation on Cybersecurity

With William J. Lynn III, US Deputy Secretary of Defense

September 15, 2010
Hotel Renaissance, Brussels



A *Security & Defence Agenda* Report

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Date of publication: October 2010

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CONTENTS

<u>Speaker and moderator</u>	<u>p.2</u>
<u>Introduction</u>	<u>p.3</u>
<u>Considering cybersecurity</u>	<u>p.3</u>
<u>A new model for cybersecurity</u>	<u>p.4</u>
<u>NATO and the european perspective</u>	<u>p.5</u>
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>p.6</u>
<u>List of participants</u>	<u>p.7</u>
<u>About the SDA</u>	<u>p.16</u>



Speaker and Moderator



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William J. Lynn, III
US Deputy Secretary of
Defense



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Giles Merritt

Director

Security & Defence Agenda

A conversation on cybersecurity



Introduction

On 15 September 2010, the Security and Defence Agenda hosted **William J. Lynn, III**, US Deputy Secretary of Defense, to present the US perspective on cybersecurity and discuss NATO's outlook for improving cyber defence networks.

In 2008, the US's classified military network was infiltrated by a piece of malware which replicated itself through the use of USB flash drives, Lynn began. In response to this attack the Pentagon has established a new cyber command – an organisation suited to addressing the needs of the US military's information defence systems.

“Extremely robust capabilities can be developed at a considerably low cost.”

The starting point for this reorganisation, he continued, was to acknowledge the dependence that the US military has on information technology (IT). While in the area of conventional warfare, US defence systems are secure, this dependence on IT allows the possibility of a 'back door' through which enemy agents, posing a threat to both military and non-military infrastructures, may infiltrate.

Considering cybersecurity

Following the 2008 cyber attack, the US military examined several unique aspects of cybersecurity, beginning with the asymmetric nature of IT. “Advances in technology have created a situation in which extremely robust capabilities can be developed at a considerably low cost,” Lynn explained, adding that, with the large number of foreign agencies that are constantly trying to hack into its systems, the conventional strength of the US military could quickly become a vulnerability.

Secondly, he continued, owing to the difficulty of attribution of a cyber attack, the promise of assured retaliation which up to now has served as an effective deterrent against conventional attacks begins to break down.

“The bottom line is that we have to shift our cyber defence paradigm from assured retaliation to denial of benefit,” he stated. In other words, it has become necessary to create more effective cyber defence structures to deny infiltration.

This shift is made difficult by the third characteristic of cybersecurity, namely that the internet was not created with security in mind. “A fortress mentality will not work,” Lynn elaborated. “From a defence point of view it is difficult to protect every portal. What we need is a strategy to deny the benefit to attackers who only need a single point of entry to disrupt our systems.”

A conversation on cybersecurity



A fourth consideration from the US Department of Defense (DOD) point of view is that an attack may not be limited to the internet alone but may be transmitted, as in 2008, through any number of external avenues.

Defence experts must therefore consider how to protect non-military areas of IT infrastructure, for example transport and finance infrastructures, which are critical for the defence of US and NATO systems.

Finally, he concluded, “we must be modest about our ability to predict where an attack will come from and what it will target.” The flexible and adaptive nature of cyber attacks demands an equally flexible and adaptive cybersecurity strategy.

In response to these needs, the US DOD has put forth a five-pillar strategy for the ever-evolving field of cyber defence.

A new model for cyber defence

The first pillar of this strategy is a change in mindset, Lynn stated. NATO and the US need to treat cybersecurity as the fifth domain of warfare, integrating its defence with land, sea, air and space defence systems. In response to this growing battlespace, the US has created a unified national cyber command to replace the loose collection of committees and command and control structures that were previously in place.

“We must have a cybersecurity strategy that embraces collective defence. Just as our air and missile defences are linked, so too do our cyber defence networks need to be.”

Secondly, the US cyber command has recognised the need to develop defences that go beyond the passive ‘Maginot line’ mentality. Passive defence systems – hygiene, perimeter defence networks and monitoring – are sufficient to meet 80% of attacks, he explained. For the remaining 20%, active defence systems are needed; for example, sensors that operate at network speed to detect and block intrusions, thereby halting attacks at the first levels of the defence system.

The third strategic pillar is the recognition that military networks are dependent on other networks and that protecting critical infrastructure – such as power grids and financial networks – is essential to an effective cybersecurity strategy.

The relationship between NATO member states figures importantly in the fourth pillar. “We must have a cybersecurity strategy that embraces collective defence,” Lynn stated. “Just as our air and missile defences are linked, so too do our cyber defence networks need to be.”

A conversation on cybersecurity



In principle, he elaborated, the more integrated a cyber defence network is, the more likely it becomes to detect a larger number of attack signatures earlier, thus increasing the overall effectiveness of the system.

Finally, Lynn told participants, the US needs to leverage its existing technological advantage qualitatively, as opposed to quantitatively, through improvements in technological developments such as artificial intelligence and creating a model of the internet for training and testing purposes. “We have a lead in the area of technology,” he stated, “and it is critical to our economies that we maintain this dominance.”

“I think that we will see a high level of support emerging in Lisbon on the question of cybersecurity. The measure of our success will be how we follow up this support.”

While the US DOD has outlined a plan to create a stronger defence against cyber attacks in its own networks, it is necessary that its allies in NATO work quickly to do the same, Lynn concluded.

NATO and the European perspective

One of the greatest problems to overcome in the field of cyber security is the fact that technological progress, in the hands of the private sector, far outpaces legal and policy frameworks. For example, the US DOD, faced with a 79 month acquisition model for new technology, has worked to reduce the wait time to 13-26 months for IT acquisition.

This issue, however, is more present in the European Union than in the US, the assembly agreed, where decision making is spread thin on the national level as opposed to being centralised. Estonia suffered a cyber attack in 2007 and, three years later, there has still been no movement on increasing European cybersecurity, moderator Giles Merritt, Director of the SDA, told the participants.

Accordingly, cybersecurity will be a critical element in the 21st century perspective on defence to be discussed at the NATO Summit in Lisbon in November 2010. “I think that we will see a high level of support emerging in Lisbon on the question of cybersecurity,” Merritt said. “The measure of our success will be how we follow up this support.”

Responding to a question from the audience as to the application of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the new field of cyber defence, Lynn told the participants that, as the treaty implies, the notion of collective defence applies to cyber attacks but, due to the unclear definition of what constitutes an attack, the focus should

A conversation on cybersecurity



be on Article 4, which calls for consultation between NATO member states. “On cybersecurity, consultations are likely to be the more productive approach,” he stated.

“I was impressed by the unity of purpose and shared vision in the North Atlantic Council concerning the need for increased cybersecurity.”

Another concern is the potential for authoritarianism that increased cybersecurity may have on cyberspace, which has become an important tool to promote freedom and democracy.

The answer to this concern is also increased cooperation and collective decision making in the framework of NATO and the EU, Lynn responded, adding that, since cybersecurity is mainly a military concern, there is no reason to believe that civil liberties or user privacy will be infringed upon.

To this end, Lynn encouraged cooperation between NATO and the EU institutions to define important areas and collaborate to protect both military and civilian information networks. “I was impressed by the unity of purpose and shared vision in the North Atlantic Council concerning the need for increased cybersecurity,” he stated. “There will need to be debates about how and how much but, for now, the need for collective security is recognised.”

Conclusion

“Cyber has redefined the front lines of national security,” Lynn concluded. “NATO has a nuclear shield and a missile shield but needs a cyber shield. In raising this shield, NATO will renew its role as a vital guarantor of global security.”

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The Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) is the only specialist Brussels-based think-tank where EU institutions, NATO, national governments, industry, specialised and international media, think tanks, academia and NGOs gather to discuss the future of European and transatlantic security and defence policies in Europe and worldwide.

Building on the combined expertise and authority of those involved in our meetings, the SDA gives greater prominence to the complex questions of how EU and NATO policies can complement one another, and how transatlantic challenges such as terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction can be met.

By offering a high-level and neutral platform for debate, the SDA sets out to clarify policy positions, stimulate discussion and ensure a wider understanding of defence and security issues by the press and public opinion.

SDA Activities:

- Roundtables and Evening debates
- Press Dinners and Lunches
- International Conferences
- Discussion Papers and special events



Upcoming events

Redefining NATO and the transatlantic relationship

27 October – 12:00-16:00, Bibliothèque Solvay, Brussels

Roundtable

Afghanistan has demonstrated that there are major shortcomings in force surges as a solution to asymmetric conflict. With the deadline for the beginning of US troop withdrawals looming closer, what is the reality on the ground today? What strategy is needed, and how can competing withdrawal schedules among the Allies be avoided? How prepared are the Afghan forces to take over?

Security & Defence Day '10 - Going global: Europe's security policy challenge

30 November – 09:30-17:30, Palais d'Egmont, Brussels

International Conference

In post-Lisbon treaty Europe, does the European Union now have the tools to meet its global ambitions? What are the most pressing challenges to Europe's security, and how should the EU respond? Have adequate capabilities, in terms of manpower and equipment, been developed yet, and are the mechanisms to deploy them in place? Has civil-military cooperation developed well enough to serve the mix of humanitarian and military missions that the EU has stated as its ambitions? What financial instruments are available for CSDP?

Pandemics: lessons learnt and future threats

7 December – 19:00-21:30, Brussels

Policymakers' Dinner

What lessons has the EU drawn from the H1N1 experience? Did governments, international institutions and the media over-react? Independent reviews in the UK and France are due to report and the European Commission is working on a health threat and emergency preparedness package. The US's national flu vaccine is in production, but in the EU there remain some doubts as to whether members states are ready for a serious flu pandemic. How real is the threat of further mutation, and how should this and other low probability/high impact dangers be approached? Is the exchange of information and best practices between the EU and US good enough?

The EU and NATO in the face of emergent threats

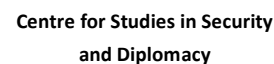
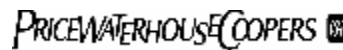
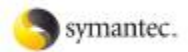
9 December (tbc) – 18:00-19:30, Bibliothèque Solvay, Brussels

Evening Debate

The past decade has seen a multiplication of non-traditional threats to EU citizens' security, from cyber-offensives to natural disasters. Have the strategies of the European Union and NATO adapted to this changing landscape? What responses have these institutions devised, and is there a duplication of tasks? How can the private sector contribute to prevention rather than reaction? What do analysts see as today's targets, and how real are those threats?



The Security & Defence Agenda (SDA) would like to thank its members and partners for their support.



The SDA gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the following governments:

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