Senators hone in on Russia's cyber capabilities

By Sean D. Carberry  Feb 09, 2017

The U.S. does not fully understand Russia's cyber capabilities and lacks a playbook to respond to future Kremlin-directed cyberattacks, said witnesses at a Senate hearing on U.S.-Russia challenges.

In a wide-ranging hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Feb. 9 that covered growing tensions and flashpoints between Russia and the U.S., senators and witnesses returned repeatedly to Russia’s cyber threats to the U.S. and its allies.

"Russia's ability to wage information warfare has been greatly aided by its heavy investments in cyberspace, where the United States remains ill-equipped to counter or deter its aggressive probing," wrote Julianne Smith, director of the Strategy and Statecraft Program at the Center for New American Security in her prepared statement.

Retired Air Force Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, agreed that Russia's hybrid warfare capabilities continue to grow and that it is increasingly using cyber, information operations and other means to influence politics and elections in the U.S. and Europe.

"What I haven't seen among the western nations who are under this attack is a strong, unified voice of indignation, outrage and to bring force to this," he said.

He said that nations must unify to send a message to Russia and to undermine its global propaganda efforts. He argued that to this point, the U.S. hasn’t stepped on the information warfare battlefield.
A number of senators repeated calls for an independent investigation into Russia’s campaign to disrupt the U.S. election. The witnesses agreed that policymakers and the public need a deeper understanding of exactly what Russia did and how.

Breedlove and Smith agreed it was essential to complete an investigation in order to better inform policy going forward.

The hearing touched on Russia’s ongoing military activities in Ukraine, its support for the Assad regime in Syria and its efforts to upend elections in France and Germany with an eye towards destabilizing Europe, NATO and the transatlantic partnership.

Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) compared the current situation to the Cuban missile crisis, where photos of a looming offshore threat demanded a U.S. response.

Isakson argued that the concreteness and ability to visualize the threat of Russian missiles allowed for a more clear discussion of policy options, unlike the situation with the Russian cyber threat.

"We understood a little better how to address the Cuban missile crisis because it was a decisively military feeling thing, and we had very decisive military responses," Breedlove said. "The cyber thing is even more scary to me because we haven’t really defined what is an attack, we haven’t really defined how we’re going to respond."

Smith said that the day before the hearing, she and Breedlove had participated in a tabletop military exercise that used playbooks of tactical options for dealing with conventional threats.

"The minute the team had to deal with a potential cyber hack that had been inserted into the game ... there’s no order of battle," she said. "We don’t know what the toolkit looks like, we don’t have a proper way to assess the threat, to figure out what tools we’ll use to deter it, to detect it."

"We’re getting better," she added. "The United States is certainly far ahead of many other countries around the world, but we still are far too clumsy in our response and our ability to respond to this challenge."

She said U.S. bureaucracy is simply too large and not agile enough to deal with cyber threats and Russia’s information warfare.

"If we’re going to win this information war and really come at Russia with a much more effective approach, we’re going to have to figure out ways in which we can lash up the skillsets that we have in the private sector, build better trust there to assess our vulnerabilities and then connect with our allies to do so," she said.

Smith and Breedlove both argued for making a greater effort to reassure NATO allies that the U.S. stands resolute with them in the face of Russia. Committee Chair Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) agreed that the U.S. needs to coordinate with NATO on how to counter attacks from Russia.

"NATO’s been wrestling with what an Article 5 attack is, so we don’t need to just understand for our own good what a weaponized cyber attack means," Corker said.
"But we need to help the world define it, because very soon it’s likely that in parts of the world adjacent to Russia it will be more weaponized, and we’re going to have to make a decision as to whether we’re coming to the aid of one of our allies."

About the Author

Sean Carberry is an FCW staff writer covering defense, cybersecurity and intelligence. Prior to joining FCW, he was Kabul Correspondent for NPR, and also served as an international producer for NPR covering the war in Libya and the Arab Spring. He has reported from more than two-dozen countries including Iraq, Yemen, DRC, and South Sudan. In addition to numerous public radio programs, he has reported for Reuters, PBS NewsHour, The Diplomat, and The Atlantic.

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