

DoD officials discuss WMDs, new threats

On March 23, senior defense officials spoke before the House Committee on Armed Services on the subject of traditional weapons of mass destruction and the use of new synthetic biological tools.

Dr. Arthur T. Hopkins, acting assistant secretary for nuclear, chemical and biological defense programs, testified on the Department of Defense's (DoD) expanding responsibilities in countering WMD. While the focus used to be nuclear deterrence, programs now include chemical and biological defense, chemical demilitarization, and reducing the threat of improvised explosive devices.

According to Hopkins, synthetic biology, defined as using sophisticated techniques and tools to sequence, synthesize and manipulate genetic material, can be used for both adversarial and peaceful purposes. "The same tools of synthetic biology that we're concerned about as being capable of being used against us, we are also using in the laboratories to help develop countermeasures," said Hopkins. He went on to say that the department has asked the National Academy of Sciences to produce an interagency study of potential impacts on national security, including when potential threats might arise and how the DoD can react should there be a threat.

Also speaking were Peter Verga, performing the duties of the assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense and global security, who spoke on threats posed by North Korea and ISIS, and Shari Durand, acting director of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, who testified on the need for an early-warning system for chemical and biological weapons.

- House Committee on Armed Services

Former DHS official calls for commission on new roles, missions

In a recent Homeland Security Today article, a former Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official stated that DHS is in need of reauthorizing legislation that will reaffirm and update the department's organizations and functions. Daniel M. Gerstein, who was the undersecretary (acting) and deputy undersecretary in DHS's Science and Technology Directorate from 2011 to 2014, also said that such legislation should begin with a roles and missions commission for DHS.

In his article, Gerstein notes that "Such a review is not without precedent," citing the National Defense Authorization Act of 1994, which included a requirement that the Department of Defense "review ... the appropriateness ... of the current allocations of roles, missions and functions among the armed forces..." This type of review, says Gerstein, "is needed today for DHS."

DHS has seen some changes since it was established through the Homeland Security Act of 2002, but the department has not received a top-down assessment that a roles and missions review would provide. Gerstein lists several key areas that would benefit from a roles and missions commission, including cybersecurity, weapons of mass destruction, and critical infrastructure, as well as human factors that impact homeland security, such as the relationships between DHS, state and local authorities, the private sector, and others.

"A DHS roles and missions commission would be an ideal undertaking to ask fundamental questions about the functioning of the Homeland Security Enterprise as the 15 year anniversary of the Homeland Security Act of 2002 approaches." concludes Gerstein.

- Homeland Security Today