

Gates Creates Cyber-Defense [offence] Command

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Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates issued an order yesterday establishing a command that will defend military networks against computer attacks and develop offensive cyber-weapons, but he also directed that the structure be ready to help safeguard civilian systems.

In a memo to senior military leaders, Gates said he will recommend that President Obama designate that the new command be led by the director of the National Security Agency, the world's largest electronic intelligence-gathering agency. The current NSA director, Lt. Gen. Keith B. Alexander, is expected to be awarded a fourth star and to lead the cyber-command.

Gates or his deputy had been expected to announce the command in a speech a week ago. Analysts said making the announcement by memo is in keeping with the Pentagon's effort to tamp down concerns that the Defense Department and the NSA will dominate efforts to protect the nation's computer networks.

"Is it going to be the dominant player by default because the Department of Homeland Security is weak and this new unit will be strong?" said James A. Lewis, a cybersecurity expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "That's a legitimate question, and I think DoD will resist having that happen. But there are issues of authorities that haven't been cleared up. What authorities does DoD have to do things outside the dot-mil space?"

The command will be set up as part of the U.S. Strategic Command, which is responsible for commanding operations in nuclear and computer warfare. Gates directed that the command be launched by this October and be fully operational by October 2010.

In a speech last week, Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn stressed that the command's mission would be to defend military networks. However, he said, "it would be inefficient -- indeed, irresponsible -- to not somehow leverage the unrivaled technical expertise and talent that resides at the National Security Agency" to protect the federal civilian networks, as long as it is done in a way that protects civil liberties.

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