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Forum on:

Securing America's Elections: Understanding the Threat

September 28, 2017

Clearly, election security is a national security issue. Russia's 2016 election meddling – from targeting election infrastructure to launching a misinformation campaign – is one way Russia is trying to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. Russia's end-goal is to erode trust in democratic institutions in order to destabilize them and, thereby, democratic governments.

To respond, the U.S. government must better understand how Russian efforts to interfere in the 2016 Presidential Election fit into our adversary's larger global agenda and develop a strategy to protect these vital institutions. Although Russia is a sophisticated actor, other adversaries hostile to Western democracies could seek to replicate its election interference campaign.

That is why the Federal government needs to assess the full scope of threats to our Nation's election infrastructure and work aggressively to address them. Certainly, the Obama Administration, under Secretary Jeh Johnson's leadership, recognized that the integrity of U.S. elections is part and parcel to democracy itself.

As it became clear that Russia was actively working to interfere in the 2016 Presidential election, Secretary Johnson proactively sought to provide assistance to State and local governments to secure their networks and declared election infrastructure a critical infrastructure subsector. This is the kind of leadership necessary to combat the nefarious actions of our adversaries, such as Russia.

Unfortunately, the Trump Administration's commitment to election security is less clear. Questioning the Intelligence Community's conclusions regarding Russian efforts to meddle in the 2016 elections and considering repealing the critical infrastructure subsector designation does not inspire confidence that the current Administration is taking the threat to our elections seriously.

To respond to the threat at hand, the Administration should name a permanent Under Secretary for the Nation Protection and Programs Directorate and redouble efforts to build relationships across the Federal government and with State and local partners to address this threat.

Protecting our elections from foreign meddling should not be a partisan issue. Instead, it is the sacred obligation of Congress and the President, in cooperation with State and local governments and stakeholders, to secure our elections and, therefore, our American democracy. I look forward to a productive discussion about how we can work together to do just that.

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