

# Cyber warriors see politics muddying security efforts

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President Donald Trump has vowed to improve cyber attack defense, but security experts meeting this week say a fractious domestic and international political landscape could hamstring efforts to improve internet security.

As the White House mulls an executive order on cybersecurity to combat an epidemic of data breaches and hacks, participants at the annual RSA Conference voiced concern that dwindling political unity will challenge efforts to improve defense.

"The core of the problem hasn't changed; defenders have to win every time whereas attackers only have to win once," Forrester Research vice president and group director Laura Koetzle told AFP, while discussing the current state of online threats.

"What is different now is that the geopolitical situation is more unstable than it has been in quite a while."

Anti-globalization rhetoric that has been inflamed by Trump's rise and the United Kingdom's Brexit have shaken faith in the "globally interconnected world order"—seen as upholding rules and agreements to peacefully resolve online and real-world differences between nations.

If alliances for thwarting online assaults weaken, Koetzle said, "greater testing from Russia, North Korea, China" and others can be expected, as countries test how far limits can be pushed.

The issue of [cyber defense](#) was brought to the forefront after US intelligence officials concluded Russia had carried out a series of attacks aimed at disrupting the election, possibly helping Trump's campaign.

And an unprecedented series of breaches that have compromised data on millions of US government employees, internet giants such as Yahoo and large companies like Sony Pictures present additional challenges to the administration.

## 'Digital Geneva Convention'

Microsoft chief legal officer Brad Smith used the RSA stage to call for a "Digital Geneva Convention" that would set lines that should not be crossed in [cyber war](#), with an independent oversight body to identify offenders.

"Just as the Fourth Geneva Convention has long protected civilians in times of war, we now need a Digital Geneva Convention that will commit governments to protecting civilians from nation-state attacks in times of peace," Smith said during a keynote presentation.

While addressing RSA attendees, Representative Michael McCaul, a Texas Republican who heads the House Committee on Homeland Security, was among those warning of looming cyber threats.

"There is no doubt in my mind that the Russian government tried to undermine our elections," McCaul said.

"Cyber intrusion has the potential to change the very fabric of our democracy."

Sameer Bhalotra, co-chair of a [task force](#) formed to advise Trump at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the country needs an

agency that investigates [cyber attacks](#).

He said the administration's stance on reducing regulation could speed the adoption of national computer security standards, because there would be less worry about being tethered by rules.

## **Technology and trust**

Cyber policy task force co-chair Karen Evans had advised the administration to consider data as belonging to the user—an approach that could bolster arguments against weakening encryption or building in back doors to access people's data.

The task force also strongly advocated bulking cyber defenses and ramping up the cost of attacks to discouraging levels, while urging the government to rely on the private sector.

Trump had been expected to release an executive order focused on [cyber security](#) early this week, but it was unclear Wednesday when it might land.

Recommendations from the task force included a few radical ideas, such as befriending hackers and promoting "bug bounties" to reward those who discover system vulnerabilities, said Nico Sell, co-founder of encrypted messaging service Wickr.

"If the administration expects an improvement in how we deal with cyber incidents, they will have to figure out how to foster trust—especially in this charged environment," Koetzle said.

"The poisoning of politics fosters a tendency of not collaborating with institutions, and that is when things break down; especially in cyber security."

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