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Revamp the broken security-clearance process [Commentary]

By: Mike Rogers , David Shedd , and Chuck Alsop 1 day ago

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The national security of the United States relies on a critical foundation that is usually taken for granted – until it fails. There is no more basic utility in national security than the process by which we vet prospective government employees and their supporting contractors to determine who can be trusted with our nation’s secrets. But this foundation is crumbling: some who shouldn’t have clearances do, and some who need them are not approved swiftly enough. Why is this, and how do we fix it?

For nearly a decade, numerous cases of top-secret information being stolen and revealed publicly by trusted (read: cleared) insiders fill the news. All security breaches erode the public and allied trust, but those carried out by trusted individuals are particularly insidious. America’s enemies gain from these breaches. Terrorists and other adversaries wish to do us harm gain by learning our secrets. Cleared personnel were behind the recent leaks online of many tools used by the National Security Agency and the CIA to do their jobs in cyberspace. These cyber leaks in particular raise the frightening prospect that our enemies could use our own tools against us.

Not only are a few bad apples getting and keeping security clearances, but hundreds of thousands of people who merit security clearances cannot get them – at least not in time to do the job for which they are being hired. The backlog of investigations exceeds 650,000 cases and is growing at a rate of 10,000 to 20,000 per month, according to recent congressional reporting. As a consequence, some of the most talented and needed recruits, in fields such as cybersecurity, choose not to wait for a security clearance and accept other work. And who can blame them? Compounding this, we as a nation are paying an estimated \$1 billion a year for this dysfunction, with costs expected to further increase annually with our current system.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, in its fiscal 2018 defense authorization bill (unanimously approved 27-0), sums things up bluntly: “The background investigation process is broken.”

Not only are personnel not receiving their clearances in a timely fashion, but those that do are often prevented from moving within government as requirements change and opportunities appear. The absence of reciprocity among agencies prevents cleared personnel from moving between agencies, despite having identical clearances. It can take weeks or even months to move, even if they are to do similar work at the new agency. In a few cases, it can take just as long to move within the same agency from one office to another. This is like requiring a physician to renew the medical license each time the doctor practices at a different hospital! More than simply an annoyance and undermining the use of diverse talent against hard problems, it is discouraging for government employees who want new opportunities or seek progress in their careers.

So how do we fix this broken process?

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The good news is that various experts who studied the problem are in general agreement about the reforms. Several congressional committees, the nonpartisan Intelligence and National Security Alliance, and CEOs from 11 leading defense services companies offered solutions that largely echo one another.

The bad news is that the executive branch (at least to date) lacks the will, unity and cultural adaptability to act, despite some attempts at reform. Consequently, strong and uniform congressional policy direction is needed to compel the executive branch to act. Indications are that Congress, led by the Armed Services and Intelligence committees, are prepared to act.

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The clearance system must be revamped, not just reformed. This will take time.

But there are immediate reforms that the government should adopt to begin to remedy the broken system. Here are three:

- We must discontinue the outdated reliance on lengthy, infrequent (five-year-plus), gumshoe investigations in favor of “continuous evaluation.” Here the government would apply risk-based, credit score-like analytics to volumes of legally available information from law enforcement, personnel files, and travel, financial and social media holdings. This would also allow investigators to consider the “whole person” much more effectively, and it is much more suitable for today’s environment. This will enable the government to allocate its costly investigative resources where they are most needed.
- Remove the artificial barriers to personnel movement within and among agencies by implementing unimpeded reciprocity. Personnel requirements change, and just because a clearance is approved by one agency and not another should not stand in the way of employee transitions.
- Integrate the work of security-clearance investigators with those looking for hunting for threats from the inside. Hindsight shows that in many cases there is abundant evidence suggesting an employee may be a leaker. We need to get ahead of the curve and, combined with “continuous evaluation,” prevent the breaches from happening in the first place. To do this, it will be necessary for government and industry to share information, but the benefits of doing so far outweigh the initial costs and potential bureaucratic difficulties.

These necessary measures are not nearly as complex or difficult as the national security tasks performed daily by our dedicated military, intelligence and contract personnel. They, and their departments and agencies, deserve better. And the American people deserve to know that the most trustworthy people protect our most trusted secrets – be they nuclear codes, battle plans, intelligence sources, methods and operations.

Mike Rogers is the chairman of the Mike Rogers Center for Intelligence and Global Affairs. David Shedd has served more than 30 years in numerous national security and intelligence positions. Chuck Alsop is the president of the Intelligence and National Security Alliance.




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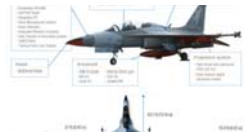
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