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## Dahl: Time ripe for DHS net assessment

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# Dahl: Time ripe for DHS net assessment

JANUARY 4, 2016

Center for Homeland Defense and Security instructor Erik Dahl urges the Department of Homeland Security to follow a practice of its military counterparts and establish

- [Out of the Classroom; into the World](#)
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an Office of Net Assessment that would gauge future threats and the nation's ability to mitigate them.



*NPS Associate Professor and CHDS instructor Erik Dahl published a paper in the winter 2015 edition of Security Studies Quarterly*

Writing in the winter 2015 edition of the academic journal [Strategic Studies Quarterly](#), Dahl sets forth the merits of a DHS operation similar to that of the Pentagon's highly regarded Office of Net Assessment.

“One of the problems I have seen and that we talk about in our classes at CHDS is that we don't

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seem to have a good process in this country for determining just what threats we need to worry about and why,” said Dahl, Associate Professor in the Naval Postgraduate School’s National Security Affairs department. “I got the idea for a new net assessment process while thinking about the threats and issues we discuss in the CHDS classroom.”

Such a concept has been suggested by others, but Dahl goes a step further in his paper, detailing how he envisions this kind of office functioning and what major areas it would address – a sort of threat balance ledger.

He suggested three threat areas to focus on – terrorism, cyber security and natural hazards – and for each of those areas a net assessment office would analyze three factors: the extent of the threats, what the nation’s capabilities are to combat them, and finally, what the impact those efforts may have on the lives of Americans in terms of civil liberties and constitutional

 [Homeland Security Affairs \[pdf\]](#)

## INQUIRIES

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protections.

A homeland security net assessment in this context could look at an issue such as terrorism, and do more than just attempt to measure the extent of the threat from groups such as ISIS and from home-grown extremists within the United States. It would also examine whether the counterterrorism tools the U.S. uses, such as drone strikes or intelligence data collection, are working, and what impacts those efforts are having on American citizens, allies and audiences around the world.

“A homeland security net assessment might argue that in evaluating domestic intelligence programs, we should follow the same standard as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in determining whether drugs can be marketed: they need to be both safe and effective,” Dahl noted.

This would mean, he writes, that in order for a domestic counter-

terrorism program to be judged legitimate and worthwhile, it must be both effective in preventing terrorist attacks, and sufficiently safe for civil liberties and personal freedoms.

As for cyber, Dahl points out that “estimates of the threat from cyber-terrorism range from the extremely dire to the moderately sanguine,” making it difficult for most Americans to know how concerned they should be about the threat of a “cyber Pearl Harbor.” But recent reports suggest that predictions of some sort of “Cyber Armageddon” are exaggerated, and a cyber net assessment could produce a more nuanced and thoughtful approach to the problem than is often found in daily news reports and statements by pundits.

Hurricane Katrina and Super Storm Sandy, and even strategic health threats such as Ebola, showed that natural hazards threaten the nation’s security. Increasingly, policy makers are concerned about a “black swan” natural event in

which a series of natural catastrophes converge into what some call a complex catastrophe. A Homeland Security Net Assessment could gauge the tools and plans that have been prepared to deal with such events against the risk posed by complex future threats.

In the politically polarized society that is modern America the public needs to support what the government is doing to keep them safe, Dahl says. He argues this is especially important when it comes to domestic intelligence and security efforts, because these programs affect American citizens more directly than do most traditional national security efforts, which are typically focused overseas.

A key test, Dahl argues, is captured by the concept of legitimacy: “Are the capabilities that our government has developed to keep us safe seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people they are designed to serve?”

A major challenge, as Dahl sees it, is that 14 years after 9/11 the nation's security structure remains constrained by "silo thinking," with intelligence agencies, government departments, and experts in and out of government each focused on different types of threats. Few agencies and officials are charged with the task of looking broadly across the entire spectrum of threats and challenges.

"We all know we worry about terrorism, especially after Paris and San Bernardino," Dahl said. "But I've learned through my affiliation with CHDS that there are many other areas of concern to the homeland security community."

A former U.S. Navy intelligence officer, Dahl based much of his concept around the military Office of Net Assessment that was headed for decades by the renowned Andrew Marshall, who retired earlier this year. Marshall's Office of Net Assessment was noted for its big-picture thinking on future, and at times futuristic, threats, and Dahl

would like to see a new office established at DHS to do the same type of forward-looking thinking about homeland security concerns.

“In recent years we have seen a few, mostly tentative calls for the use of net assessment tools in determining and weighing the threats to America’s homeland security,” Dahl wrote. “However, as we continue to face an increasing variety of challenges in an era of decreasing budgets and government retrenchment, these tools may be more useful than ever.”

Views: 204



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