

Congress Pushing DOD to Prioritize EMS Superiority

US military and government officials have been increasingly outspoken about the fact that the US has not just lost, but has given up, much of its advantage in the Electromagnetic Spectrum (EMS). While there has been a push to reinvest in EMS superiority across the Services, the progress that has been made is owed in a large part to congressional efforts to force change within the DOD, according to Rep. Don Bacon (NE 2), House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Tactical Air and Land Forces, who spoke on a panel hosted by the Hudson Institute in May, "The US Military and Electromagnetic Spectrum Superiority."

If progress is to continue, Bacon says Congress must maintain its pressure on the Joint Staff and the Services, focusing on three key objectives: identifying issues inherent to the way the DOD understands and prioritizes EW, implementing a clear chain of command within an EW-specific office, and creating a "hardwired" funding and acquisitions process specific to EW.

To his first point, Bacon said, "There is no doubt we had EW dominance in the '80s and '90s, totally dominating in [Operation] Desert Storm, for example." However, when there was no longer a perceived threat on the horizon, EW was defunded and received little attention.

In the meantime, according to Bacon, both the Chinese and Russian militaries took note of the US military's successes within the EMS. "They were building up their capabilities while we were walking away because we felt confident," Bacon said.

Rep. Jim Langevin (RI 2), House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee Chair on Cyber, Innovative Technologies, and

Information Systems (CITI), affirmed Bacon's remarks, saying, "We have to recognize that our enemies and adversaries have absolutely invested in these asymmetric technologies that undermine our advantage."

Perhaps the crux of the EW challenge, according to Bacon, lies in how the EMS is understood. "I was in favor of making the Electromagnetic Spectrum a separate domain," Bacon said. "I frankly think that is scientifically accurate. It is a physical domain. Without control of the EMS, you can have the best aircraft, the best ships, the best tanks...and if you can't talk, you can't get radar, you can't use GPS, these systems are easily defeated."

According to Bacon, the DOD may be hesitant to define the EMS as a warfighting domain out of budgetary concerns. Creating offices and funding pipelines specific to EMSO might require "more money to fix the problem" than is practicable within the DOD's budget. However, Bacon said choosing not to address the EMS as a domain because it's not in the budget – or out of fear of a separate EMS "Service" being proposed – could be what's hindering progress. "I think we're denying there's a problem if you don't acknowledge the EMS as a domain," he said.

Bacon's second objective is to ensure a team of people at the DOD is responsible for EMS strategy and implementation. "Somebody in the Pentagon needs to know they own EW," Bacon said.

This point was echoed by Langevin, who said that if a clear EW command structure isn't in place, "the current [EMS Superiority] Strategy is going to end up like the 2013 and the 2017 EMS Strategies."

"I'm bound and determined that that's not going to happen," he continued. "We're going to get it right this time."

The third objective, the "hardwired funding process for EW,"

is essential to maintaining an “enterprise view of EW,” according to Bacon. EMSO must be treated as a separate function in terms of acquisitions, rather than part of larger acquisition efforts, if it is to receive the funding it needs. “If it’s embedded in tons of other funding lines, you can’t really have an enterprise view.”

Expanding on this point, Langevin said the focus of EW funding must “move away from hardware-centric systems” and shift to more flexible, software-centric, networked systems that are adaptable and upgradeable when new threats are identified. Langevin said he would push the DOD toward a software-centric acquisitions approach, which could help mitigate the DOD’s budgetary inefficiencies where EW is concerned.

Overall, both Langevin and Bacon view pressure from Congress as an important forcing function in attaining EMS superiority, particularly through these three objectives. “If Congress is not pushing this area, the Pentagon will not deliver,” Bacon said. “There’s a lot of analysis and studies at the Pentagon; I want to start seeing action and start working diligently to close this gap with a plan,” he continued. “We’ve got to stop studying at some point and start acting – start executing.” – H. Swedeen