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## Spy Game: India readies cyber army to hack into hostile nations' computer systems

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Harsimran Singh &amp; Joji Thomas Philip, ET Bureau Aug 6, 2010, 03:15am IST

NEW DELHI: Borrowing a page from China's art of cyber war, the government is giving shape to an IT infrastructure setup manned by a small army of software professionals to spy on the classified data of hostile nations by hacking into their computer systems.

IT workers and ethical hackers who sign up for the ambitious project will be protected by law, says the proposal being discussed by senior government administrators. The expertise of these professionals will be used to go on the offensive or preempt strikes by breaching the security walls of enemy systems.

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The strategy of taking the fight to hackers was drafted at a high-level security meet on July 29 chaired by National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon. The meeting was attended by the director of Intelligence Bureau as well as senior officials of the telecom department, IT ministry and security agencies, documents seen by ET show. Departments whose officials were present at the meeting did not respond to ET emails.

The government is worried about spying and sabotage from neighbouring countries, particularly [China](#) and [Pakistan](#), after a spate of assaults on its computer systems in recent times. The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto said in April that a clique of hackers based in China had conducted extensive spying operations in India, pilfering confidential documents from the defence ministry.

Though Beijing strongly denied any role in the attacks, the investigation pointed to the Chinese government's tacit approval of the spying operations. The technical reconnaissance bureau of the People's Liberation Army that is responsible for signals intelligence collection is headquartered in Chengdu, where the hackers had set up base.

According to the government proposal, the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) along with [Defence Intelligence Agency](#) (DIA) will be responsible for creating cyber-offensive capabilities. NTRO is a key government agency that gathers technical intelligence while DIA is tasked with collating inputs from the Navy, Army and Air Force.

The NTRO will also suggest measures to ensure legal protection to recruits, a move that is expected to coax software professionals into joining the government group because under the Indian IT Act, hacking is punishable with imprisonment up to three years, or carries a fine up to `2 lakh, or both.

"Even if the offense is done on a computer on foreign soil, it is punishable under Indian laws," says cyber lawyer Pavan Duggal, adding that the IT Act will have to be changed for "patriotic stealth operations".

Mr Duggal welcomed the efforts to establish a hacker group, pointing to the explosive growth in assaults on Indian systems recently. Last year, 600 computers belonging to the external affairs ministry were hacked, allegedly by Chinese groups. The hackers also managed to steal crucial documents from the computers of the defence establishment then.

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Vikas Desai, lead technical lead of network security firm RSA, said the government's efforts can be classified as ethical hacking. "Many countries and organisations in the world already have this kind of infrastructure," he said.

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**RR** (Udaipur)

06 Aug, 2010 11:09 AM

Is this a joke....i mean how officals can disclose this and our media is ridiculous who is publishing this....

**sanjay** (Singapore)

06 Aug, 2010 07:11 AM

Notice the difference, China just does it and we make big announcement and do nothing ...

**Mohan** (Chennai)

05 Aug, 2010 02:46 PM

Believe TOI should restrain from publishing these kind of sensitive and confidential issues in public forum. Its a good job in identifying these kind of data. But it shouldn't be published. Thumbs down to TOI !! For playing around with national security.

**H.R. Sreepada Bhagi** (Erbil)

05 Aug, 2010 02:20 PM

The decision is good and to be put in place on priority. How come such a confidential issues are leaked to the media and become a news item. Is the government not bothered about the nature of work the IT professionals do? Why not such issues treated, matters of national interest and such information is limited to the inner ring of the country's managers? Should the whole world know that India is building a team and allow them to build counter strategy?

**banudas** (Bangalore)

05 Aug, 2010 01:03 PM

Why is this coming in News? Is that not Classified.

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