

PROMISES, PROMISES: Battling cyber turf wars

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President Barack Obama delivers remarks on securing the nation's cyber infrastructure, Friday, May 29, 2009, in the East Room of the White House in Washington. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

(AP) -- The digital battlefield is proving to be difficult terrain for President Barack Obama.

As he unveiled his plan Friday to make the nation's computer networks more secure, he fulfilled a campaign pledge to make cybersecurity a top priority. But he fell short on another promise to create a cyber adviser "who will report directly to me."

Ten months ago, candidate Obama told a Purdue University audience that he "will make [cyber security](#) the top priority that it should be in the 21st century." He went on to pledge that he would coordinate efforts across government, implement a national policy, tighten standards to make information more secure, and bring together government, industry and academia "to determine the best ways to guard the infrastructure that supports our power."

On Friday, Obama took the first step toward making that far-reaching promise a reality. But it remains unclear whether the structure he is creating will be capable and powerful enough to take on an enduring and monumental task.

The key will be how much authority the so-called coordinator will wield.

Obama said Friday he will personally choose his new cyber coordinator, and that person will have "regular access" to the Oval Office.

But the White House has yet to apply a formal title to the post and specify the coordinator's line and level of authority within the complex government structure.

Access is everything in Washington. Those who have the president's ear have the power to make things happen. Without a title and clear lines of authority, it's hard to say how much power and access the new cyber czar will have.

Turf wars between powerful federal departments, including intelligence agencies, the Pentagon and Homeland Security , have also long mired efforts to better coordinate, control and fund the nation's cyber security. Agencies do not want to cede authority to make decisions about what software or hardware they use, how they protect their networks or what new technologies they will research or pursue.

In the six weeks since the White House cyber review was completed, officials in and out of the White House have wrangled over exactly how much power should be invested in the new coordinator position. The lack of detail in Obama's announcement suggests the debate - and uncertainty - continues.

The goals laid out in Obama's announcement largely mirror his Purdue promise, and they reflect a growing realization that the U.S. is not adequately prepared for a serious cyber attack.

Obama's description of the cyber job was broad, and spoke of "working closely" with federal budget decision-makers, and "coordinating" with other agencies in the event of an attack. He also said the cyber czar will be a staff member of both the National Security Council and the National Economic Council - adding what could be a complicated dual layer of responsibility.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said the new cyber coordinator would have a strong role. Asked directly about the extent of the cyber czar's authority, Gibbs said the president "isn't looking to hire somebody and dump them somewhere."

As experts have repeatedly noted in recent weeks, more than 80 percent of the nation's digital infrastructure is owned or controlled by the private sector.

"At the end of the day, you actually need a more senior-level person to work with the senior principals within the administration," said Tiffany Jones, director of government relations for Symantec. She added that the same is true in order to work with high-level industry executives.

One possible comparison is Obama's appointment of Carol Browner as director of the [White House](#) Office of Energy and Climate Change. The

selection of Browner, a former Environmental Protection Agency administrator, carried weight due to her status in the field. But it also set up competing leaders of complex energy issues.

If Obama snags a high-profile, well-respected cyber expert to take on this job, it will send a strong signal about the person's authority and expected changes ahead. If not, it may only further entangle the bureaucracy and make real change far more difficult.

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