White House unveils global cyberspace strategy

May 16 2011, by Chris Lefkow

Analyists work at the National Cybersecurity & Communications Integration Center in Arlington, Virginia in 2010. The White House unveiled a set of policy proposals Monday for international cooperation in ensuring an open and secure Internet.

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"Together, we can work together to build a future for cyberspace that is open, interoperable, secure, and reliable," US President Barack Obama wrote in an introduction to the 25-page "International Strategy for Cyberspace."

Obama, who has made cybersecurity a top priority along with diplomatic engagement, wrote that the document "outlines not only a vision for the future of cyberspace but an agenda for realizing it.

"It provides the context for our partners at home and abroad to understand our priorities and how we can come together to preserve the character of cyberspace and reduce the threats we face," he wrote.

The policy document is short on specifics but provides goals and a framework for international cooperation in promoting the US vision for cyberspace in what it called seven priority areas.

Obama did not personally attend the unveiling of the document but the event drew top members of his cabinet including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, Attorney General Eric Holder and Commerce Secretary Gary Locke.

White House cybersecurity coordinator Howard Schmidt, Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn and Obama's counter-terrorism chief, John Brennan, also addressed the gathering, attended by diplomats and leaders of private industry.

Schmidt said the document explains "what the US stands for internationally in cyberspace, and how we plan to build prosperity, enhance security, and safeguard openness in our increasingly networked world."

Clinton said the strategy hinges on seven key policy priorities including promoting Internet freedom and economic engagement to encourage innovation and trade while safeguarding intellectual property.

"We want to do more together to protect privacy and secure fundamental freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, online as we do offline," she said.

Other priorities include enhancing the ability of law enforcement to respond to cybercrime and military cooperation to "help our alliances do

more together to confront cyber threats," Clinton said.

"It is not a series of prescriptions," she said. "There is no one-size-fits-all, straightforward route to that goal.

James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the policy paper was not a "particularly bold document" but was a good first step.

"It's a continuation of the Obama national security strategy that says the US will engage with people and try to work with them," he said. "So saying the United States wants to engage and here's what we'd like to achieve -- an Internet that's open and stable and secure -- that's a good thing."

The White House document also calls for a robust response to cyber threats.

Lynn, the deputy defense secretary, said Pentagon networks "are probed millions of times a day and more than 100 foreign intelligence agencies have tried to penetrate our networks or those of our industrial partners."

"When warranted, the United States will respond to hostile acts in cyberspace as we would to any other threat to our country," the White House said in a fact-sheet.

"We reserve the right to use all necessary means -- diplomatic, informational, military, and economic -- as appropriate and consistent with applicable international law, in order to defend our nation, our allies, our partners, and our interests," it said.

Dean Garfield, president and chief executive of the Information Technology Industry Council, welcomed the White House initiative.

"A growing number of governments worldwide are enacting cybersecurity-related laws, regulations, and other requirements that are inconsistent with generally accepted norms and standards," Garfield said.

"This growing policy patchwork not only results in decreased security for nations, but also disrupts global commerce and ignores the borderless nature of the Internet.

"To date, the international community has lacked the collective willingness to engage in a meaningful conversation on the need for a global approach," he said. "US leadership is critical to reaching a consensus solution."

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Citation: White House unveils global cyberspace strategy (2011, May 16) retrieved 28 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2011-05-white-house-unveils-global-cyberspace.html