

Trump on Cyber Warfare

by J. L. Billingsley

Preface: This article is not a political endorsement nor piece of partisan propaganda. I nor the nonprofit I founded have received any form of support from any political or Trump related entity. This is an independently conceived evidence-based analysis intended to illuminate a specific topic currently muddled in opinionated bickering and misunderstanding, the likes of which complicate thoughtful policy analysis and planning. It is incumbent upon fellow members of the American national security community to hasten progress from a mudslinging campaign mindset to more mature rational discussions that will better poise our nation for success in the coming years.^{i,ii,iii}

For a man who prides himself on being unpredictable, President-elect Donald J. Trump has been exceedingly clear that he will prioritize developing America's cyber warfare capabilities during his administration.^{iv} In various venues (including speeches, tweets, and publicized meetings), Trump has clearly indicated his intent to address our nation's ability to both throw a punch and take a hit in cyberspace. Below is a review of some such indications.

His First Address

It has not gone unnoticed within national security circles that Trump chose to highlight the cyber threat in his first official public address as President-elect...



“On national security, I will ask the Department of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to develop a comprehensive plan to protect America’s vital infrastructure from cyber-attacks, and all other form of attacks.”^v

As anybody familiar with the inner workings of government bureaucracy and resource allocation (sometimes referred to as *sausage-making*) will attest, words matter. Further, the order of words by national leadership matters and has a direct impact on which programs receive funding (the means that enable all operations) and which ones do not. With this insight in mind, the above statement is truly telling.

While only briefly discussing national security among a short list of immediate priorities in the address, *cyber* is not only included but is leading. That is in stark contrast to how we typically hear *cyber* included in lists, *after* more established forms of military power (such as air and maritime capabilities).^{vi} Including *cyber* in such lists has been sufficient to ensure a funding stream to steadily develop this capability. However, the prominence Trump bestows on *cyber* in this intentional and polished statement signals to us that *cyber* will be a true priority, both in funding and operationally.

National Security Speech

In October 2016, during a talk hosted by a veterans group, candidate Trump opened with a lengthy discussion about the importance of developing *cyber* capabilities. While I have included only a fraction of his relevant statements in this excerpt, they clearly support this article’s main conclusion and require no further elaboration.

“I’d like to address one of the most important aspects of America’s national security, and that’s cyber security. To truly make America safe, we must make cyber security a major priority... As president, improving cyber security will be an immediate and top priority for my administration... The scope of our cyber security problem is enormous. Our government, our businesses, our trade secrets and our citizens’ most sensitive information are all facing constant cyberattacks and reviews by the enemy... I will make certain that our military is the best in the world in both cyber offense and defense... I will also ask my secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs to present recommendations for strengthening and augmenting our Cyber Command. As a deterrent against attacks on our critical resources, the United States must possess — and has to — the unquestioned capacity to launch crippling cyber counter attacks. And I mean crippling, crippling. This is the warfare of the future. America’s dominance in this arena must be unquestioned... Cybersecurity is not only a question of developing defensive technologies but offensive technologies, as well... We should turn cyber warfare into one of our greatest weapons”^{vii}

Tweet History

Some of his statements to the veterans group go into detail about the role and cost of various notable hacks on American targets. Those 2016 statements appear consistent with his cyber related concerns expressed years ago, sometimes conveyed in tweets. See some of these comments below...

 **Donald J. Trump**  [@realDonaldTrump](#)  [Following](#)

The Chinese military is already hacking our satellites reut.rs/vFvKYW. The Chinese government is not an American ally.

 **China key suspect in U.S. satellite hacks: commission**
At least two U.S. environment-monitoring satellites were interfered with four or more times in 2007 and 2008 via a ground station in Norway, and China's military is a prime suspect, a draft report to... reuters.com

RETWEETS: 140 LIKES: 28

5:09 PM - 1 Nov 2011

 90  140  28 

 **Donald J. Trump**  [@realDonaldTrump](#)  [Following](#)

China has hacked another US government body. bit.ly/yBGHBP
When will we learn?

 **Suspicion grows China was behind hack of U.S. commission**
Suspicion is growing that operatives in China, rather than India, were behind the hacking of emails of an official commission that monitors relations between the United States and China, U.S.... reuters.com

RETWEETS: 109 LIKES: 17

3:59 PM - 20 Jan 2012

 70  109  17 

 **Donald J. Trump**  [@realDonaldTrump](#)  [Following](#)

China's top academics are working w/ PLA in cyber-espionage of our state secrets & R&D reut.rs/YsY59Y They are laughing at us!



Top China college in focus with ties to army's cyber-spying unit
Faculty members at a top Chinese university have collaborated for years on technical research papers with a People's Liberation Army (PLA) unit accused of being at t... reuters.com

RETWEETS: 56 LIKES: 18

5:30 PM - 25 Mar 2013

 55  56  18 

viii

Social Media

From being used to topple governments during the Arab Spring to enabling Trump to directly engage millions of followers, social media platforms like Twitter are powerful tools, and the President-elect clearly knows it.^{ix} Among numerous other statements on the topic, he shared his views succinctly in a recent 60 Minutes interview...

"I have such power in terms of numbers with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, et cetera, I think it helped me win all of these races where they're spending much more money than I spent... I think that social media has more power than the money they spent, and I think maybe to a certain extent, I proved that."^x

As Trump acknowledges, backed up by the statements of numerous commentators, his ability to wield the power of social media allowed him to effectively shape the information environment in support of his primary objective...being elected President. Other statements of his indicate he plans to retain this critical capability in support of achieving other goals.^{xi} Given the high value of these social media services to Trump, and since they are cyberspace based, both military planners and computer security experts can conclude that the in-coming administration will likely pursue expenditure of significant resources on cyberspace related efforts.

Relationship Building

Time is one resource he has already begun to invest into strengthening existing and building new relationships with leaders that will help inform and enable his cyberspace related efforts. For example, as he promised to do on the campaign trail, Trump recently met with Bill Gates, top Silicon Valley executives, and the leader of U.S. Cyber Command.^{xii,xiii} Trump's selection of General Mattis to lead the Defense Department is beneficial, as well, since the General understands the cyber threat. This was abundantly clear in my first interaction with the recently retired General as he was on the way to spend quality time at Stanford University (an essential Silicon Valley institution).^{xiv}



Trump meeting with Silicon Valley leaders in December 2016. From left to right: Eric Trump, Brad Smith of Microsoft, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Larry Page of Alphabet/Google, Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, Mike Pence, Donald Trump, and Peter Thiel (founder of PayPal).^{xv}

In addition to discussing immediate cybersecurity concerns with such leaders, the President-elect's emphasis on increasing technology related jobs in America is likely to bolster our nation's severely underperforming and unsustainable STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) talent development pipeline (which includes K-12 education).^{xvi} Given the natural forces of supply and demand, the more Americans with STEM talent that can qualify for government security clearances, the more capability our nation will have to triumph in cyber warfare and in the economic activity that enables such operations.

The Threat from China and Russia

Due to the current prominence and importance of the topic, no discussion of Trump and cyber warfare today would be complete without briefly addressing his views on China and Russia. While his attitude towards Chinese cyber activities (and generally) are clear and consistent (exemplified by the aforementioned tweets), his stance on Russia deserves some demystifying.

One underdiscussed but reasonable interpretation is that he intends to follow geopolitical common sense in a multipolar world by neutralizing threatening alliances that counter his nation's influence. He recognizes this situation, as indicated in comments such as...

"You can't have everybody hating you. The whole world hates us. And one of the things that I heard for years and years, never drive Russia and China together. And Obama has done that."^{xvii}

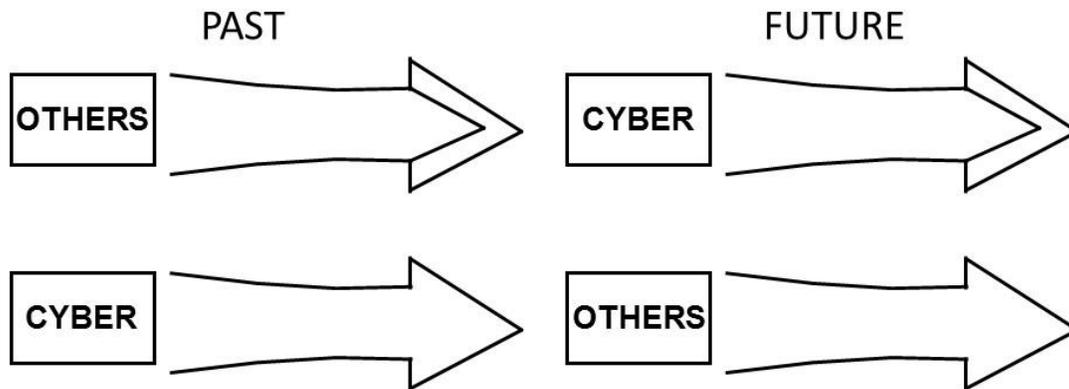
In this case, he may be seeking to divide the powerful China-Russia bloc by aggressively courting Russia. This can be accomplished, in part, by building on shared vital interests (like countering the threat of Islamic extremism) and resolving peripheral differences (such as approach towards ending the conflict in Syria and Iraq).^{xviii, xix}

As of the writing of this article in late December 2016, a current point of contention between America and Russia are the leaks of politically sensitive American data by (potentially Russian) hackers. Trump has already developed a consistent narrative that categorizes (what some may refer to as) foreign state-directed cyber-attacks as a direct result of disrespect towards President Obama.^{xx} Trump has repeatedly stated that Putin will respect him, which in this case includes a stop to such cyber related activity. Taking advantage of opportunities to affect foreign state decision-making through the power of personal diplomacy and negotiation, as opposed to the expenditure of more American blood and treasure, appears consistent with Trump's overall emphasis on the American economy (which includes more efficient use of American power).

Conclusion

Upon reviewing this discussion about our new national strategist, any reasonable person can conclude that his administration will prioritize developing our nation's cyber related capabilities. With such development, and their cost and ethical advantages over traditional military capabilities, we may even witness cyberpower becoming the tool of choice in upcoming conflicts.^{xxi,xxii}

In response to the predicted evolution of the operating environment, expect increased adoption of a *cyberist* paradigm with regards to the role of cyber warfare capabilities in concert with other forms of military power.



The top arrow represents "decisive operations" (the operation that directly accomplishes the purpose or task assigned by the higher headquarters. Decisive operations conclusively determine the outcome of major operations, battles, and engagements) while the bottom represents "shaping operations" (operations at any echelon that create and preserve conditions for the success of decisive operations). The above graphics should not be taken literally, but are intended to visually represent the evolving relationship between cyberpower and other forms of military power. Definitions from FM 1-02 / MCRP 5-12A (Operational Terms and Graphics). For more on the *cyberist* paradigm, see *An Innovation Framework Applied to a Military Cyber Professionals Association*, Billingsley, 2013. From *Trump on Cyber Warfare* by J. L. Billingsley.

Cyber: the Magazine of the Military Cyber Professionals Association, © 2016, All Rights Reserved. <http://magazine.milcyber.org>

This anticipated evolution to a cyber-first footing in the national security community will have many implications yet to be conceived. It is obviously beneficial to those in cyber related industries, as well as citizens frustrated with increasingly frequent, high-profile, and costly hacking incidents. Without prioritizing cyber and addressing the nation's current state of vulnerability, as the incoming administration is expected to do, the actions of potential adversaries risk antagonizing a nation fully capable of traveling "an alternate path."^{xxiii} With that in mind, this is a positive direction for all peoples.

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About the author



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