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Pentagon Plans New Arm to Wage Wars in Cyberspace

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WASHINGTON — The Pentagon plans to create a new military command for cyberspace, administration officials said Thursday, stepping up preparations by the armed forces to conduct both offensive and defensive computer warfare.

The military command would complement a civilian effort to be announced by President Obama on Friday that would overhaul the way the United States safeguards its computer networks.

Mr. Obama, officials said, will announce the creation of a White House office — reporting to both the National Security Council and the National Economic Council — that will coordinate a multibillion-dollar effort to restrict access to government computers and protect systems that run the stock exchanges, clear global banking transactions and manage the air traffic control system.

White House officials say Mr. Obama has not yet been formally presented with the Pentagon plan. They said he would not discuss it Friday when he announced the creation of a White House office responsible for coordinating private-sector and government defenses against the thousands of cyberattacks mounted against the United States — largely by hackers but sometimes by foreign governments — every day.

But he is expected to sign a classified order in coming weeks that will create the military cybercommand, officials said. It is a recognition that the United States already has a growing number of computer weapons in its arsenal and must prepare strategies for their use — as a deterrent or alongside conventional weapons — in a wide variety of possible future conflicts.

The White House office will be run by a “cyberczar,” but because the position will not have direct access to the president, some experts said it was not high-level enough to end a series of bureaucratic wars that have broken out as billions of dollars have suddenly been allocated to protect against the computer threats.

The main dispute has been over whether the Pentagon or the National Security Agency should take the lead in preparing for and fighting cyberbattles. Under one proposal still being debated, parts of the N.S.A. would be integrated into the military command so they could operate jointly.

Officials said that in addition to the unclassified strategy paper to be released by Mr. Obama on Friday, a classified set of presidential directives is expected to lay out the military’s new responsibilities and how it coordinates its mission with that of the N.S.A., where most of the expertise on digital warfare resides today.

The decision to create a cybercommand is a major step beyond the actions taken by the Bush administration, which authorized several computer-based attacks but never resolved the question of how the government...
would prepare for a new era of warfare fought over digital networks.

It is still unclear whether the military’s new command or the N.S.A. — or both — will actually conduct this new kind of offensive cyberoperations.

The White House has never said whether Mr. Obama embraces the idea that the United States should use cyberweapons, and the public announcement on Friday is expected to focus solely on defensive steps and the government’s acknowledgment that it needs to be better organized to face the threat from foes attacking military, government and commercial online systems.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has pushed for the Pentagon to become better organized to address the security threat.

Initially at least, the new command would focus on organizing the various components and capabilities now scattered across the four armed services.

 Officials declined to describe potential offensive operations, but said they now viewed cyberspace as comparable to more traditional battlefields.

“We are not comfortable discussing the question of offensive cyberoperations, but we consider cyberspace a war-fighting domain,” said Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman. “We need to be able to operate within that domain just like on any battlefield, which includes protecting our freedom of movement and preserving our capability to perform in that environment.”

Although Pentagon civilian officials and military officers said the new command was expected to initially be a subordinate headquarters under the military’s Strategic Command, which controls nuclear operations as well as cyberdefenses, it could eventually become an independent command.

“No decision has been made,” said Lt. Col. Eric Butterbaugh, a Pentagon spokesman. “Just as the White House has completed its 60-day review of cyberspace policy, likewise, we are looking at how the department can best organize itself to fill our role in implementing the administration’s cyberpolicy.”

The creation of the cyberczar’s office inside the White House appears to be part of a significant expansion of the role of the national security apparatus there. A separate group overseeing domestic security, created by President George W. Bush after the Sept. 11 attacks, now resides within the National Security Council. A senior White House official responsible for countering the proliferation of nuclear and unconventional weapons has been given broader authority. Now, cybersecurity will also rank as one of the key threats that Mr. Obama is seeking to coordinate from the White House.

The strategy review Mr. Obama will discuss on Friday was completed weeks ago, but delayed because of continuing arguments over the authority of the White House office, and the budgets for the entire effort.

It was kept separate from the military debate over whether the Pentagon or the N.S.A. is best equipped to engage in offensive operations. Part of that debate hinges on the question of how much control should be given to American spy agencies, since they are prohibited from acting on American soil.

“It’s the domestic spying problem writ large,” one senior intelligence official said recently. “These attacks
start in other countries, but they know no borders. So how do you fight them if you can’t act both inside and outside the United States?”

*John Markoff contributed reporting from San Francisco.*