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China aims to top U.S. in cyberspace: U.S. general

By Jim Wolf
Reuters
Wednesday, June 13, 2007; 2:11 PM

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - China is seeking to unseat the United States as the dominant power in cyberspace, a U.S. Air Force general leading a new push in this area said Wednesday.

"They're the only nation that has been quite that blatant about saying, 'We're looking to do that,'" 8th Air Force Commander Lt. Gen. Robert Elder told reporters.

Elder is to head a new three-star cyber command being set up at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, already home to about 25,000 military personnel involved in everything from electronic warfare to network defense.

The command's focus is to control the cyber domain, critical to everything from communications to surveillance to infrastructure security.

"We have peer competitors right now in terms of doing computer network attack ... and I believe we're going to be able to ratchet up our capability," Elder said. "We're going to go way ahead."

The Defense Department said in its annual report on China's military power last month that China regarded computer network operations -- attacks, defense and exploitation -- as critical to achieving "electromagnetic dominance" early in a conflict.

China's People's Liberation Army has established information warfare units to develop viruses to attack enemy computer systems and networks, the Pentagon said.

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China also was investing in electronic countermeasures and defenses against electronic attack, including infrared decoys, angle reflectors and false-target generators, it said.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry rejected the U.S. report as "brutal interference" in China's internal affairs and insisted Beijing's military preparations were purely defensive.

Elder described the bulk of current alleged Chinese cyber-operations as industrial espionage aimed at stealing trade secrets to save years of high-tech development.

He attributed the espionage to a mix of criminals, hackers and "nation-state" forces. Virtually all potential U.S. foes also were scanning U.S. networks for trade and defense secrets, he added.

"Everyone but North Korea," he said. "We've concluded that there must be only one laptop in all of North Korea -- and that guy's not allowed to scan" overseas networks, Elder said.

In October, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff defined cyberspace as "characterized by the use of electronics and the electromagnetic spectrum to store, modify, and exchange data via networked systems and associated physical infrastructures."

The definition is broad enough to cover far more than merely defending or attacking computer networks. Other concerns include remotely detonated roadside bombs in Iraq, interference with Global Positioning Satellites and satellite communications, Internet financial transactions by adversaries, and radar and navigational jamming.

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