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## COLD WAR-STYLE 'CYBER ARMS RACE' BETWEEN US AND RUSSIA: REALITY OR RHETORIC?

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The '2016 Democratic National Committee (DNC) email leak' - a collection of emails of DNC, the governing body of the United States' Democratic Party and their subsequent publication by WikiLeaks - shook the very foundation of US representative democracy. The leaked collection includes emails from key staff members of DNC from January 2015 to May 2016, to chalk out a strategy to contain Bernie Sanders' popularity and to secure Hillary Clinton candidacy as Democratic presidential nominee. The leaks established beyond reasonable doubt that DNC staff acted in violation of the provisions of its own charter by favouring Hillary Clinton, long before any votes were cast.<sup>1</sup>

WikiLeaks did not reveal the source of information; however a hacker using the moniker "Guccifer 2.0" claimed responsibility for the attack. According to leading US cyber security firms, the self-styled hacker Guccifer 2.0 is not a

single operator but a loose group of Russian cybercriminals designated "Fancy Bear" and "Cozy Bear". Security firm Threat Connect, after comprehensive investigation, reported that Guccifer 2.0 was using the Russia-based Elite VPN service to communicate and leak documents directly with the media.<sup>2</sup> The hacked DNC material was timed to be leaked to WikiLeaks on the eve of the Democratic National Convention on July 22, 2016. This has led to scepticism that the whole episode was orchestrated by Kremlin, as part of its grand plan to facilitate Mr. Donald Trump accession to the White House.<sup>3</sup> It has been reported that Mr. Trump has business ties to Russia and Russian financial interests are linked with successful presidential run of Mr. Trump.<sup>4</sup> It has also been reported that "the Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation" was breached by hackers suspected to have strong Russian connections.<sup>5</sup> Besides, it is widely being speculated that the Russians may also be in



possession of the emails that Hillary Clinton sent as secretary of State and Kremlin might be waiting for an opportune time to release these, which could ensure a Trump victory.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian intrusions into American political system by leveraging cyberspace and its malafide manipulations to influence the outcome of presidential election have started a new debate on rules of engagement in the context of cyber warfare. Some have gone so far as to say that the US is being paid back in the same coin that it used against foreign governments.

It is no open secret that state supported, enabled, sponsored, and aided cyber operations are perpetuated across national borders and lack of consciously agreed-upon behavioural guidelines in cyber space has led to consequences – intentional and unintended – for individuals, civil societies and nations. Besides, the allegation against Russia meddling in American internal affairs and democracy is reminiscent of cold war rhetoric. An interesting twist was added to the story when Mr. Trump called upon Russians to find emails, which were supposedly deleted by Hillary Clinton from her family's private e-mail server during her tenure as United States Secretary of State, and said *“Russia, if you're listening, I hope you'll be able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.”* Within the US, the outrage was palpable as the call was construed as an open invitation to meddle in US internal affairs. Later Trump said that he merely

wanted Russians to turn over the emails to the FBI if they had them.<sup>7</sup> The nostalgic sentiments that some Russian officials continue hold for the Cold War saw the US discomfiture over these developments as assertion of Russia's resurgent political might. However, in its official position, Russia described the accusations levelled against it as a Cold War-style effort to score some extra political points by one of the presidential hopeful.

The importance accorded by the US to this issue can be gauged by the remarks of President Barack Obama, on September 05, 2016 during a press conference after G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China. President Obama warned Russia of Cold War-style escalation over cyber arms race.<sup>8</sup> In reply to one of questions during the press conference, he said that US is beset with many problems in the cyber context including cyber intrusions from Russia and other countries in the past.<sup>9</sup> However, instead of duplicating a cycle of escalation as was witnessed during other arms race in the past, in the cyber arena there is a need to start instituting norms for responsible behaviour. President Obama further stated, *“What we cannot do is have a situation where this becomes the wild, wild West, where countries that have significant cyber capacity start engaging in unhealthy competition or conflict through those means.”* President Obama's statement made after G20 Summit echoes the concerns expressed by many nations in various forums.<sup>10</sup>

India too has an enormous stake in a safe and secure cyberspace, which has far greater strategic significance for its national security, political vitality, economic development and societal advancement. India's national security environment is shaped primarily by regional imperatives and peripherally by global developments. Territorial disputes continue to strain India's relations with Pakistan and China. Unsettled by Indian economic growth, vibrant democracy and its expanding global geopolitical footprint, Pakistan has responded by unleashing a sub-conventional proxy war against India with unremitting hostility. China views India as a military and economic competitor capable of restricting China's aspirational global and regional clout and its ascendance as a global hegemonic power. The Jammu & Kashmir dispute and boundary issues are being raised by Pakistan and China at various international forums and during bilateral/ multilateral meetings, not for reaching mutually agreeable settlements but to keep the issue latent and simmering. The complicated and tenuous relationship which India has with its not so friendly neighbours has made India the target of proxy cyber war, sometimes perpetuated by states themselves while at other times outsourced to cyber mercenaries and terrorists. Today, cyber security is not an adjunct or afterthought to national security strategy but rather an integral part of national security framework. India is putting in considerable

efforts to develop, refine and consolidate cyber-attack strategies and expand the repository of cyber weaponry for defensive purposes.

**(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])**

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Sainato, Wikileaks Proves Primary Was Rigged: DNC Undermined Democracy, *The Observer*, July 22, 2016, <http://observer.com/2016/07/wikileaks-proves-primary-was-rigged-dnc-undermined-democracy/>, accessed

<sup>2</sup> Threat connect Research Team, Guccifer 2.0: All Roads Lead to Russia, *Threat Connect*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.threatconnect.com/blog/guccifer-2-all-roads-lead-russia/>, accessed

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Nakashima, Is there a Russian master plan to install Trump in the White House? Some intelligence officials are skeptical, *The Washington Post*, July 27, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Nesbit, Donald Trump's Many, Many, Many, Many Ties to Russia, *Time*, Aug 02, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Riley and Jordan Robertson, Clinton Foundation Said to Be Breached by Russian Hackers, *Bloomberg*, June 23, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Nesbit, Donald Trump's Many, Many, Many, Many Ties to Russia, *Time*, Aug 02, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, Unleashing torrent of Cold War rhetoric, Russia denies hacking DNC, *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 106.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Press Secretary The White House, Press Conference by President Obama after G20 Summit, September 05, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/05/press-conference-president-obama-after-g20-summit>, accessed

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/05/press-conference-president-obama-after-g20-summit>

