



Protecting Critical National Infrastructure

EACH NATION HAS CRITICAL RESOURCES. As well as basics such as energy and food reserves, these include the infrastructure on which a society depends – ranging from power lines to water supplies and transport links. Among these resources are communication systems. And with the increasing reliance on Internet protocol (IP)-based networks in all sections of an economy, there has been discussion that a new term, “Critical Information Infrastructure,” should be introduced.

ITU’s Constitution and Convention acknowledge the right of a member country to protect its telecommunications and related infrastructure, while taking into consideration the implications of the country’s actions upon the global system.

The current International Telecommunication Regulations (ITRs) do not explicitly refer to protection of critical resources or information infrastructure, but they do cover the concept. In particular, Article 9 states that “technical harm” should be avoided to the operation of the telecommunication facilities of other countries.

Various proposals have been made to modify or increase the scope of such provisions in the ITRs — for example to include avoidance of “financial harm” — when the treaty is reviewed at the World Conference on International Telecommunications 2012. And proposed provisions on preventing the misuse of numbering resources could also be considered part of protecting critical information infrastructure.¹

Questions surround intangible assets such as numbers, as well as addresses and even commercial agreements. In many jurisdictions, for example, it is not clear who “owns” a telephone number, and what rights users have. Can they sell a number or rent it? Can they insist that it is portable to another service provider? Similar issues may arise concerning Internet names and addresses.

Nations often consider that safeguarding their critical infrastructure is closely linked to national sovereignty. But there is general agreement that, in today’s interconnected world, international cooperation is the only way to ensure the protection of critical information infrastructure in any one nation.

¹ See also the WCIT Background Brief on Telecommunication Origin Identification

