Internet Governance And The Domain Name System: Issues For Congress

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Synopsis

The Internet is often described as a â œnetwork of networksâ • because it is not a single physical entity, but hundreds of thousands of interconnected networks linking hundreds of millions of computers around the world. As such, the Internet is international, decentralized, and comprised of networks and infrastructure largely owned and operated by private sector entities. As the Internet grows and becomes more pervasive in all aspects of modern society, the question of how it should be governed becomes more pressing.Currently, an important aspect of the Internet is governed by a private sector, international organization called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which manages and oversees some of the critical technical underpinnings of the Internet such as the domain name system and Internet Protocol (IP) addressing. ICANN makes its policy decisions using a multistakeholder model of governance, in which a â œbottom-upâ • collaborative process is open to all constituencies of Internet stakeholders.National governments have recognized an increasing stake in ICANN policy decisions, especially in cases where Internet policy intersects with national laws addressing such issues as intellectual property, privacy, law enforcement, and cybersecurity. Some governments around the world are advocating increased intergovernmental influence over the way the Internet is governed. For example, specific proposals have been advanced that would create an Internet governance entity within the United Nations (U.N.). Other governments (including the United States), as well as many other Internet stakeholders, oppose these proposals and argue that ICANNâ ™s multistakeholder model, while not perfect and needing improvement, is the most appropriate way to govern the Internet.Currently, the U.S. government, through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) at the Department of Commerce, enjoys a unique influence over ICANN, largely by virtue of its legacy relationship with the Internet and the domain name system. A key issue for the 113th Congress is whether and how the U.S. government should continue to maximize U.S. influence over ICANNâ ™s multistakeholder Internet governance process, while at the same time effectively resisting proposals for an increased role by international governmental institutions such as the U.N. An ongoing concern is to what extent will future intergovernmental telecommunications conferences (such as the December 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications or WCIT) constitute an opportunity for some nations to increase intergovernmental control over the Internet, and how effectively will NTIA and other government agencies (such as the State Department) work to counteract that threat? H.R. 1580, introduced on April 16, 2013, states that â œ[I]t is the policy of the United States to preserve and advance the successful multistakeholder model that governs the Internet.â •The ongoing debate over Internet governance will likely have a significant impact on how

other aspects of the Internet may be governed in the future, especially in such areas as intellectual property, privacy, law enforcement, Internet free speech, and cybersecurity. Looking forward, the institutional nature of Internet governance could have far-reaching implications on important policy decisions that will likely shape the future evolution of the Internet.

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