

Former Russian spy leads Moscow campaign to co-opt Indian technology

BY CATHERINE BELTON

Russia is working to co-opt part of India's booming tech sector to forge a technological alliance to counter the West and boost its standing with China, in a campaign led by a former U.S.-based deep-cover spy, documents show.

As Russian President Vladimir Putin makes his first visit to India since the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has offered technology transfers to allow India to produce its Su-57 stealth fighter jet. In the background, a cohort of top former Russian foreign intelligence operatives have also mounted an effort to expand Russia's influence into India's cybersecurity and information technology sectors, according to documents obtained by a European intelligence service and reviewed by The Washington Post.

The efforts are led by Andrei Bezrukov, the Russian spy whose double life in Boston as business consultant Donald Heathfield became the inspiration for the TV show "The Americans." Bezrukov now serves as the head of the Russian Association for the Export of Technological Sovereignty and, according to European security officials, still works closely with Russian foreign intelligence.

"India and Russia should embark into a privileged strategic partnership and collaborate to build advanced technologies which are sustainable and independent of the West," one of the documents written by Bezrukov's team states. The "effort would be to build technologies which can also be taken to countries in Global South and create a common technology base for BRICS nations going forward, thus tracing a path to technological sovereignty," the document stated.

The BRICS group of major emerging economies, which originally consisted of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, is seen by Moscow as a way of expanding its global influence and counteracting the West.

"We have to create our own technological economic space in order to ensure our security. We have to do this, otherwise we will be crushed," Bezrukov said in a recent public lecture in Russia. "We can't do this on our own. We

need allies, and it is easier for us to unite with those who are close: with Iran, with India and with Southeast Asia."

In text messages with The Post, Bezrukov denied that he still worked with Russian intelligence or that the initiative could pose any security risk for cooperating countries. "IT promotion is normal business for any country or business association," he said. "The West is dominating IT space for decades, it is natural we want technology sovereignty."

Bezrukov was returned to Russia in 2010 when the FBI arrested him and nine other intelligence operatives. The group were sent back to Moscow as part of a spy swap, their covers blown after intensive FBI surveillance that compromised their communications back to "the Center," Russia's foreign intelligence headquarters.

In the years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Bezrukov has become a pivotal player in Kremlin efforts to export Russian cybersecurity and other IT systems across the expanding BRICS alliance. But the documents also show that Bezrukov's efforts are aimed at opening the way for Russia to infiltrate these countries' systems.

As part of the attempt to export Russia's own cyber products, Bezrukov has teamed up with another senior former foreign intelligence officer, Valentin Makarov, who previously served in Moscow's delegation to UNESCO and now heads the Russoft association of software developers, which is at the forefront of Russia's efforts to offer an alternative to Western software.

The two men view India, which has a long-standing tradition of defense cooperation with Russia dating back to Soviet times, as central to their efforts because of the countries' historical partnership, the documents show.

But even as Makarov and Bezrukov have sought to promote the cooperation as boosting India's independence from the West, in private exchanges with Russian associates Makarov has indicated that the joint development of projects is a way for Russia to gain control over part of India's tech sector, as well as to boost Russia's position in relation to



MAKSIM KONSTANTINOV/SOPA IMAGES/REUTERS

Andrei Bezrukov during a panel session at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June.

China.

"What's important is that the transfer of technology from Russia will mean dependence on development, production and the training of personnel ... and the potential to cut off these systems if these friendly countries violate agreements," Makarov told one of Bezrukov's associates, the documents show. "The achievement of India working together with Russia is reaching parity with China."

Makarov did not respond to requests for comment.

The collaboration has focused on joint development of cybersecurity projects and quantum cryptography, as well as Russian proposals for the use of its Elbrus processor, a computer system developed by Russia for use by its military, to create an "independent" and "secure" Indian national processor or supercomputer.

Makarov and Bezrukov have also forwarded proposals for India to deploy Russia's BasAlt operating system for the joint production of laptops together with India's OptimusLogic Systems Ltd., to be used by government agencies, including the Indian Defense Ministry.

Some of the projects have gar-

nered support from the Indian government, including the signing of preliminary agreements to construct the plants to build those laptops. At the end of last year, a Russo-Indian technological hub was established involving Makarov's Russoft as well as Russia's Innopraktika, a Russian tech company headed by Putin's daughter, Katerina Tikhonova.

Makarov has discussed the plans for deepening cooperation with India, including in the field of quantum cryptography, with a top Chinese science and technology official, Guan Shaonan, the documents show, further highlighting the security risks for India.

Spokespeople for the Indian prime minister and the Defense Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

India and Russia announced a slew of agreements on Friday to cap Putin's two-day visit to New Delhi, including ones to facilitate labor activity between the two countries and combat irregular migration. The nations also expressed interest in jointly manufacturing in India, through a transfer of technology and joint ventures, the spare parts and

components of Russian-origin defense equipment.

They also agreed to emphasize "the importance of joint research in science, technology and innovation" and "further developing cooperation" in digital technologies for information protection, the security of critical infrastructure and law enforcement.

Analysts said that while Russia's advanced technologies in some fields such as cybersecurity could present India with an opportunity to boost its independence from the West, many of the projects represented potential security risks.

"Russia does provide certain technological expertise and capabilities, particularly in cybersecurity and secure communications such as cryptography," said Pia Hüsch, a research fellow in cyber, technology and national security at the Royal United Services Institute in London. "But for India it does hold certain risks," she said, including the project for joint laptop production, which could open the way for "potential back doors and security weaknesses."

The U.S. Treasury has imposed sanctions on several Russian cybersecurity firms for collabora-

ting with Russian military and intelligence agencies.

Dmitri Alperovitch, chairman of the Silverado Policy Accelerator, a U.S. national security think tank, said India's recent standoff with the Trump administration over tariffs could encourage it to deepen its relationship with Russia.

For Bezrukov, the battle to forge an alliance of countries capable of countering Western technological dominance could provide a degree of revenge after the U.S. authorities so extensively monitored his own communications when he operated out of Boston for nearly a decade. The FBI installed in his family's Cambridge, Massachusetts, home a plethora of cameras, bugs and other devices to intercept communications.

"I would think there would be some degree of professional anger and embarrassment," said one former U.S. official familiar with Bezrukov's case, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Western officials have downplayed any operational successes Bezrukov may have notched up undercover out of Boston. The charges filed against him noted that he had "established contact" with a former high-ranking U.S. government national security official, as well as with an official working at a government research facility on the U.S. nuclear bunker-buster program.

"I don't think anyone thought they were on the verge of ... sharing confidences, or providing information which might be used to influence them or let alone compromise them," the former official said.

Ever since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Bezrukov's role back in Moscow has become more important, particularly through his promotion of "technological sovereignty" across the Global South, said Andrei Soldatov, an expert on the Russian security services.

"Now maybe it's the best part of his life. He is actually doing something," he said.

Pranshu Verma contributed to this report.