

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE STUDIES VANCOUVER

TRANSNET CYBER ATTACK

5TA

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CASIS West

Executive Summary: This 5TA explores the recent cyber-attack on South Africa's leading freight transport company, Transnet, and examines the potential motivations and security implications of the incident. This attack comes following weeks of rioting and violence, which disrupted major transportation routes of the country's freight industry, so it could be argued that the current cyber-attack may be the latest attempt to destabilize the current government.

1. On July 22, 2021, one of Transnet's critical systems was hit by a cyberattack, effectively disrupting container operations at the South African Port of Cape Town (Diphoko, 2021; Shabalala & Heilberg, 2021). Transnet is a state-owned freight transport company which operates several major South African ports and rail lines, therefore, an attack of this magnitude can arguably have substantial economic, political and security implications on South Africa and its global partners.

2. The details, perpetrator(s), and motivation of the attack remain unknown; however, this attack comes following several weeks of civil unrest and violence after former president Zuma's arrest and imprisonment (Diphoko, 2021; Shabalala & Heilberg, 2021). Rioters are reported to have destroyed transport trucks and blocked key transport routes, thus halting operations in several major ports in the weeks prior (Diphoko, 2021; Ericsson, 2021; Shabalala & Heilberg, 2021; Singh & Wells, 2021). It is possible that this cyber-attack is related to the civil unrest of recent weeks and the latest attempt to destabilize the current government and show support for Zuma (Stäcker, 2021). It is also possible that foreign state actors are behind the attack and exploiting unstable environments to sabotage critical infrastructure (Luckhoff, 2021).

3. It is unclear whether this was a financially-motivated or politically-motivated attack, so the security implications could be expansive and far-reaching. Critical operations were shut down for the majority of the day and were forced to transition to manual operations, which resulted in significant delays in the export of cargo and potentially millions of dollars lost (Diphoko, 2021; Shabalala & Heidelberg, 2021). Although reports suggest only the container terminal was impacted by the disruption, hackers may be capable of accessing other terminals or entirely different systems, including freight rail, pipelines, engineering and property divisions, which could affect the transport of agriculture and critical supplies to the rest of the country (Shabalala & Heilberg, 2021). If the issue is not dealt with swiftly, civil unrest may intensify, which may put the government at further risk for insurgency.

4. South Africa is particularly vulnerable to cyber-attacks, partly due to their arguably weak cyber-crime laws, as well as poor public knowledge of cyber threats which makes cybersecurity a lower priority for many companies (Winjit, 2021). There also appears to be a lack of coordination between federal and municipal governments and insufficient adequate risk assessment with regards to cybersecurity (Pygma, n.d.). In order to protect South Africa's critical infrastructure, steps should be taken by the government to promote public awareness and develop more robust policies to strengthen and enforce cybersecurity practices.

5. Considering Canada is a significant investor in South Africa's transportation sector, as well as the mineral and mining sector, the Transnet attack could have a negative impact on Canadian interests in the region (Government of Canada, n.d.). Moreover, Canada is ranked as the 35th largest export destination for South Africa, with its Export Development Canada (EDC) office in Johannesburg, and imported nearly $2 billion of goods in 2020 (Government of Canada, n.d.; South African High Commission, n.d.). Therefore, it is in Canada's interest to assist South African transportation industries with developing more robust cyber security frameworks and provide aid where needed.

CASIS Vancouver specializes in examining Violent Transnational Social Movements and the different ideologies that overlap an array of ideological segments. VTSM theory suggests that violent extremists are socially radicalized self-actualized individuals who arguably are radicalized through a societal normalization of extremist language and sentiments (Kelshall, 2021). Whereby self-actualised actors want to impose legitimacy, dominance, authority, and supremacy over other identity groups using soft and kinetic violence as their main tools (Kelshall, 2021).

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