Is China Behind Recent Hacking and Data Breaches at Some of the US's Largest Companies?

February 5, 2013 - Three recent online attacks are raising concerns that China is systematically targeting US companies. Both the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times have recently identified China as the source of cyber-attacks that broke into their corporate email systems. And although Twitter has not said anything about the source, many are speculating that the China caused a data breach that compromised more than 250,000 Twitter accounts last week. These are just the most recent cases in which Chinese government involvement is suspected.

Tweet

(function() {
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s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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})();

In the attack against the New York Times, the company has stated that the user names and passwords for every employee at the company were stolen. The company has said that the attack was sophisticated and that it went on for four months before it was discovered. The stolen logon information was then used to infiltrate more than 50 company computers; all while the paper was investigating massive Chinese corruption involving the relatives of Chinese Premier Wen Jaibo.

After the revelations by the Journal and the Times, the Washington Post also announced that it had been similarly targeted in 2011 by Chinese hackers. But to what end?

The most obvious reason for China to be hacking major media outlets would be to make it difficult for those outlets to use confidential sources. If the Chinese government is able to hack into the individual computers used by reporters, it stands to reason that they may be able to gather information about who those reporters have been talking to. That alone could be enough to stop people in China from talking to reporters from the west.

For its part, the Chinese government is denying any participation in these hack-attacks. But China prides itself on state-control of the internet. It recently announced a variety of crack-downs on the use of anonymous email and setting up anonymous accounts with other online services similar to twitter. Most China watchers believe that the Chinese government actively monitors online activities of its citizens. This makes the government's claims that independent hackers, and not the government, are behind these recent attacks improbable at best.

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