



Risk Mitigation Consulting Inc.

Intelligence and Analysis Division

OPEN SOURCE UPDATE

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INTENT

This open source periodical is designed to provide an overview of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events and analysis of potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all threat and hazard news and inclusion in this product does not constitute a confirmation of credibility nor precedence by RMC.



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Threats

U.S. Accuses Russia of Testing Space Weapon – *Foreign Nation-State Military*

Summary: The U.S. Space Command has caught a Russian satellite in what appears to be an anti-satellite weapon test. The same satellite, Cosmos 2543, was seen in 2019 approaching a classified U.S. reconnaissance satellite and releasing some sort of projectile into orbit. In February, a pair of Russian satellites, Cosmos 2542 and 2543, were found shadowing a US spy satellite called USA 245, also known as KH-11.

Space Command, a combatant command of the U.S. Department of Defense, believes the separate, but linked events add up to the test of a space-based weapon designed to kill or disable enemy satellites in orbit.

The Russian anti-satellite test is considered a “non-destructive” test: No satellites were harmed during the course of the tests.

It isn't clear how the Russian anti-satellite weapon actually destroys an enemy satellite. One way is to simply crash into the enemy sat. Another method is to explode what amounts to an orbital shotgun, a warhead packed with high explosives designed to pepper enemy satellites with disabling metallic pellets.

Analyst Comment: The U.S. has accused Russia of conducting a test of an anti-satellite weapon in space with the intent to deploy weapons that threaten U.S. and allied satellites. Space Command described the incident as this: the Russian satellite “operated in abnormally close proximity to a U.S. government satellite in low-earth orbit before it maneuvered away and over to another Russian satellite, where it released another object in proximity to the Russia target satellite. This test is inconsistent with the intended purpose of the satellite as an inspector system, as described by Russia.”

Russia has disputed these accusations. The Defense Ministry said the 15 July event involved “a small space vehicle” that “inspected one of the national satellites from a close distance using special equipment.” It added that the inspection “provided valuable information about the object that was inspected, which was transmitted to the ground-based control facilities.”

Orbital debris created by satellite destruction can have multiple negative effects. In addition to destroying or disabling the satellite itself, the satellite and its components then become space debris. The debris then endangers other satellites. For example, a destructive Indian anti-satellite weapon test, Mission Shakti, created 60 pieces of orbital debris in 2019. The loss of the targeted satellite could reduce defense, research, or communication abilities of the targeted nation. Finally, the act itself can raise tension between nations, potentially provoking negative repercussions on earth or in space. This test by Russia is likely to push the newly formed Space Command to develop more aggressive and defensive satellite capabilities.



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U.S. Takes Action Against Chinese-Owned Social Media App TikTok

– Foreign Intelligence Entities

Summary: On 31 July, U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters that he intended to ban TikTok, a popular video-sharing social media app owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company. TikTok's Chinese ownership has led to various concerns regarding the app's security, as the Chinese government has the ability to compel Chinese-owned firms to access user data and other information.

While TikTok's ultimate fate in the U.S. remains unclear, President Trump has issued an executive order that bars any transactions between U.S. entities and ByteDance. The ban on these "transactions" is an apparent move to prevent the app from being present in the app stores of mobile phones (such as Apple's App Store or Google's Play Store). ByteDance is expected to respond to this move with legal action to appeal the decision.

Conversely, President Trump appears to have given his blessing to a deal in which U.S.-based firm Microsoft could purchase TikTok's operations in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand from ByteDance. This deal would have to be finalized by 15 September, a deadline set by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), an interagency U.S. government entity which screens foreign investment in the U.S. for national security concerns. Such a deal would ensure that TikTok user data is stored in the U.S., by a U.S.-based firm, in order to mitigate concerns associated with the current status quo of user data that could be accessed by the Chinese government upon request.

Analyst Comment: TikTok collects vast amounts of user data, although it should be noted that this practice is consistent with other social media apps such as Facebook or Instagram (which collect user data for targeted advertising, among other purposes). TikTok's privacy policy and terms of service state that the app "tracks the websites you're browsing and how you type, down to keystroke rhythms and patterns." Additionally, the app "warns users it has full access to photos, videos and contact information of friends stored in the device's address book, unless you revoke those permissions." Furthermore, TikTok utilizes location tracking of users, even running in the background when the app is not in use.

This level of access to user data, coupled with the Chinese government's ability to compel ByteDance/TikTok to share the data of U.S. users with state agencies has raised red flags among cybersecurity researchers and policymakers alike. U.S. military branches have banned TikTok on



official devices and have cautioned personnel against downloading the app on their personal devices, as has the Department of Homeland Security. Military and security personnel who use TikTok are likely appealing targets for Chinese government actors. Moreover, the private, personal data collected by TikTok (such as internet browsing history, photos/videos, and geolocation) could be utilized by China's intelligence services for espionage purposes to include targeting for recruitment or blackmail.

To highlight the potential for blackmail, consider the following hypothetical scenario involving a U.S. military servicemember with access to sensitive information. The servicemember, who has TikTok installed on a personal device, is involved in an extramarital affair. TikTok has gathered various pieces of information on the servicemember over the duration of the affair (in accordance with the aforementioned privacy policy/terms of service), and the Chinese government has requested this U.S. servicemember's user data for malicious purposes. TikTok must comply with the Chinese government's request, and the servicemember's data is handed over. The Chinese government takes possession of photos of the servicemember out on a date with their new lover, as well as location data showing the servicemember at the new lover's home on a number of occasions. This information is then passed to a Chinese intelligence officer who is preparing to make a recruitment approach with the threat of blackmail. Such a scenario is entirely within the capabilities of TikTok's data collection and the Chinese government's ability to access said information.

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High-Profile Twitter Accounts Compromised, Utilized in Bitcoin Scam – Cyber

Summary: On 15 July, a number of high-profile Twitter accounts belonging to prominent individuals (to include former President Barack Obama/Vice President Joe Biden, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Kanye West) were hacked. The accounts were exploited in order to provide credibility for a fraudulent link, which purported to double the Bitcoin of any individual who sent the cryptocurrency via the link. The link reportedly collected approximately \$100,000 in Bitcoin from hundreds of users who fell for the scam.



Twitter stated that the accounts were compromised due to a “coordinated social engineering attack” against employees who had access to internal systems and tools. These systems and tools appear to have granted the perpetrators of the scam access to the high-profile accounts in order to post Tweets with the fraudulent link.

As a precaution, Twitter temporarily locked all “verified” accounts (typically the accounts of public figures, identified with a blue checkmark) from posting Tweets while the company investigated the extent of the breach. It was later determined that the perpetrators included a 17-year old from Florida, along with a 19-year old from the United Kingdom and a 22-year old, also from Florida.

The primary perpetrator’s court hearing was held virtually via the videoconferencing service Zoom. The hearing was affected by “Zoombombing,” a form of cyber-based harassment in which malicious actors join a Zoom meeting with the intent of disrupting the meeting with disruptive, lewd, or offensive content.

Analyst Comment: The “coordinated social engineering attack” that Twitter stated was the cause of the breach is a technique known as “spearphishing.” Per Microsoft, spearphishing attacks “are targeted at specific individuals, whereas general phishing attacks are usually sent to masses of emails simultaneously in the hopes that someone takes the bait.” Spearphishing allows malicious actors to strategically target individuals who have access to particular tools, systems, or information. In the case of the recent Twitter hack, Twitter employees with access to unique aspects of the social media platform were likely specifically targeted.

Additionally, it is unclear what kind of cybersecurity awareness training is mandated for Twitter employees. If employees received proper training yet fell victim to a preventable social engineering approach, it could be indicative of a non-malicious insider threat emanating from careless employees. Conversely, if there was an inadequate cybersecurity awareness training program, it could be indicative of a non-malicious insider threat emanating from leadership.

Observers have also noted concerns regarding the influence wielded by certain Twitter verified accounts. Many of these accounts have millions of followers, and verified users include a number of world leaders and prominent politicians, along with business leaders. The publication of false or misleading information could have potentially damaging effects on the economy and/or political relations. U.S. President Donald Trump is known for his prominent Twitter presence (and has announced major policy measures on the platform), although the White House refused to comment on whether his account was affected in the recent breach.

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Right-Wing Escalation at Recent Protests – *Civil Disturbance*

Summary: Since the death of George Floyd on 25 May in Minneapolis, officials and media have suggested that violence at protests may be the work of outside agitators who are affiliated with right-wing, white supremacist, or accelerationist groups. On 27 May, at the protests in Minneapolis following Floyd’s death, a man in black with an umbrella, wearing a gas mask, broke windows at an AutoZone. He also defaced it with graffiti before rioters set it ablaze. The media has dubbed him “Umbrella Man.” The suspect has been identified and is, purportedly, affiliated with the Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club and the Aryan Cowboy Brotherhood prison gang. Authorities have suggested that the suspect’s actions incited the increase in violence and looting at the demonstrations. As of August 2020, the suspect is still at large, and there has otherwise been difficulty identifying which groups have participated in rioting.

Media pundits, law enforcement, and local lawmakers have speculated about “infiltrators” and right-wing or white supremacist groups attending protests. While militia groups and other right-wing elements have openly staged counter-protests, the concern is that individuals are infiltrating protests a la “Umbrella Man,” pretending to be adherents of ANTIFA or Black Lives Matter (BLM) while committing crimes. Officials have expressed particular concern about the Boogaloo Boys, a libertarian accelerationist group that believes a civil war is imminent. Adherents have appeared at protests wearing Hawaiian shirts and carrying high-powered rifles. The Boogaloo Boys have a white supremacist contingent, but some adherents have marched with Black Lives Matter out of a mutual concern about law enforcement practices. Other right-wing militias have openly appeared at protests as a show of force, without participating in riots.

Over the weekend of 25-26 July, there were nearly two dozen arrests at riots in Richmond, Virginia. Charged ranged from unlawful assembly to trespassing, assaulting an officer, and drug and weapons charges. Mayor Levar Stoney blamed white supremacist agitators for violence, without offering specific details. Police Chief Gerald Smith clarified that Boogaloo Boys were present. This may have been the result of Boogaloo supporter Mike Dunn and other adherents marching with Black Lives Matter 757 of the Hampton Roads area. Dunn and his cohorts make common cause with BLM and eschews the white supremacist elements. Dunn and BLM757 representatives claimed to have left by the time the violence began. City officials have yet to clarify or identify any arrested individuals or relevant groups with ties to white supremacy. However, fliers encouraging rioting were seen online and at the protest produced outside of Richmond. Other jurisdictions, including Philadelphia, have faced the same challenge.

Analyst Comment: Blaming “outside agitators” has traditionally been used to discredit protests. However, following the death of George Floyd, local officials have largely supported peaceful protestors, while attempting to quell riots. The recent events have been unique in that the presence of violent, radical elements is undeniable. Right-wing groups, militias, and white supremacist elements have also been present at counter-protests. Open source reporting shows a spate of recent



arrests of white supremacists and Boogaloo Boys for a range of charges, from assault and trespassing to the murder of a Federal Protective Service Contract Officer at a protest in Oakland, and a conspiracy to bomb a BLM protest in Las Vegas.

The challenge faced by local officials and law enforcement is not identifying militia members holding a banner at a counter-protest, but identifying rioters wearing masks and similar paramilitary garb. The Air Force Staff Sergeant who killed the federal officer did so at an Oakland protest and was arrested days later. But almost all of the white supremacist and Boogaloo members who have been arrested were not arrested during protests, but before, after, and/or for tangential mischief, such as unfurling an offensive banner on an Arizona bridge. However, open source reporting has suggested that white supremacists have used the messaging platform Telegram to encourage rioting and violence. The identification of “Umbrella Man” demonstrates that there are at least individuals on the far right with these intentions. Local officials have tried to support peaceful protestors and the BLM movement without grouping them in with rioters, much less with outside agitators. This is an even greater challenge when rioters cannot be easily identified. It does little to assist law enforcement to dismiss all rioting as the work of white supremacists. LEOs are tasked with arresting individuals who commit criminal acts at peaceful protests, regardless of the perpetrator’s affiliation.

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Hazards

Rare Magnitude 5.1 Earthquake Strikes North Carolina – *Geological Hazards*

Summary: Since the 1700's, inland North and South Carolina, and adjacent parts of Georgia and Tennessee, have felt small earthquakes and suffered damage from infrequent larger ones. Historically, the largest earthquake in the immediate region occurred in 1916 (magnitude 5.1). Moderately damaging earthquakes strike the inland Carolinas every few decades, and smaller earthquakes are felt about once each year or two.

On 9 August a record magnitude 5.1 earthquake was reported near Sparta, North Carolina, at 8:07 a.m., according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS). Based on reporting, tremors were felt across North Carolina and as far out as Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. It is considered to be the strongest earthquake to hit the region since 1916. As of 1 p.m. on 9 August there were 80,000 "Did You Feel It?" reports submitted to the USGS. Per the USGS, those closest to the epicenter reported strong to very strong shaking, while those further away reported weak to light shaking.

As of 18 August, the city of Sparta has reported 525 reports indicating property damage and 19 individuals relocated to Red Cross housing due to impacts from the earthquake. Multiple aftershocks have been reported in the days since.

Analyst Comment: Earthquakes that occur in central and eastern U.S., while less common than in the west, usually occur over a much broader region. East of the Rocky Mountains, an earthquake can be felt over up to ten times larger an area than a similar magnitude earthquake on the west coast. This is because the eastern half of the U.S. is formed of rocks that are millions of years older and thus harder and denser, which allows seismic waves to pass through them more efficiently. A magnitude 4.0 east coast earthquake can potentially be felt up to 100 km (60 mi) from ground zero, while a magnitude 5.5 east coast earthquake can usually be felt up to 500 km (300 mi) away.

Based on the magnitude of the quake and population density of the epicenter region, there are currently no casualties reported in the Sparta earthquake and estimated economic losses are expected to account for less than 1% of the national GDP. The USGS assesses that through the week of 24 August there is a less than 1% chance of one or more aftershocks that are larger than magnitude 5.1, but it is likely that there will be smaller earthquakes with up to two magnitude 3 or higher aftershocks.

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Tropical Storm Isaias Strikes East Coast – *Meteorological Hazards*

Summary: On 2-3 August Tropical Storm Isaias passed the coast of Florida and Georgia, causing heavy rain and gusty winds. Late on August 3 the storm strengthened into a hurricane and made landfall at 11:00 p.m. EDT near Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina as a category 1 hurricane with maximum sustained winds of 85mph. Isaias was downgraded to a tropical storm as it moved Northeast, but many states in the region experienced wind gusts over 60mph and significant rainfall.

Hurricane Isaias damage included fallen trees from Virginia to New England, over 3 million business and homes without power between North Carolina and New England, and flooding across the Northeast that required water rescues in some areas. The storm surge sent the Cape Fear River at Wilmington, North Carolina, to a record high water level. The storm caused fallen trees from Virginia to New England. The storm also spurred around 20 tornados between North Carolina and Maryland. Five deaths are attributed to Isaias.

Isaias is the earliest named ninth Atlantic tropical cyclone on record; the previous record holder was Irene on 7 August 2005. Typically, the ninth named tropical storm occurs in the Atlantic basin in early October. This puts the 2020 pace two months ahead of average.

Analyst Comment: Isaias caused significant damage along the East Coast that will require both time and money to recover, but it is just a precursor to a predicted “extremely active” hurricane season. An average season produces 12 named storms, including six hurricanes of which three become major hurricanes (Category 3, 4, or 5). Isaias already broke records indicating that this could be uniquely destructive hurricane season.

NOAA currently predicts 19-25 named storms (winds of 39 mph or greater), of which 7-11 will become hurricanes (winds of 74 mph or greater), including 3-6 major hurricanes (winds of 111 mph or greater). This update covers the entire six-month hurricane season, which ends 30 November, and includes the nine named storms to date.



A storm season's level of activity or past trends is not always indicative of damage. Hurricane Andrew was the first named storm of the 1992 hurricane season and is one of the most deadly and destructive hurricanes to strike the U.S. Hurricane Sandy on the other had struck in the season in late October as a category 2 hurricane yet was the second costliest hurricane in U.S. history.

Based on current predictions for an active season, it is expected that organizations will need to focus on hurricane preparedness and funding. It is also expected the U.S. will receive another storm this season that will warrant concern and organizations should prepare for damage and casualties that result from a storm of large magnitude. Typically, after a significant storm, such as hurricane Isaias, the government and business increase hurricane preparedness and this trend is expected to continue.

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Apple Wildfire in Southern CA Brings COVID-19 Complications – *Meteorological Hazards*

Summary: Since starting on July 31, the Apple Fire has charred 33,424 acres in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. The wildfire began as two adjacent blazes in Cherry Valley, an area near the city of Beaumont. The fire has been fueled by high temperatures, low humidity and dry vegetation in the area. Because parts of the fire were located on steep, rugged hillsides, firefighters were unable to safely reach the blaze. An estimated 2,600 residences and 7,800 people were evacuated at the height of the blaze. As of 12 August, the fire is 60% contained and all evacuation orders have been lifted. The apple fire appears to have destroyed a total of four homes and resulted in injuries to three firefighters. Full containment of the fire is expected by 17 August. However, hot, dry, and windy conditions will stay in the area.

Analyst Comment: The increasing heat brought by climate change has made wildfires in the United States more frequent and severe. The higher temperatures dry out vegetation, providing more fuel for blazes. Given the dry fuels, lightning may cause increased fire activity and above normal significant large fire potential. Additionally, there is less moisture present in the atmosphere, promoting fires and drying fuel. Less snow in the winters leads to drier soil in the summer. The dry season is also becoming longer throughout the Western United States. The Apple Fire was aided by high temperature and below average levels of rainfall in the region. Generally, August is the peak of fire season for the West. In Southern California, normal large fire potential is expected for August and September across the region. As precipitation and cooler temperatures arrive in fall, areas of concern will shift southward to portions of California as offshore wind events become more likely.



The smoke generated by wildfires can travel hundreds of miles. The National Weather Service reported smoke from the Apple Fire had blown east to Phoenix, Arizona - nearly 300 miles (482km) away. The poor air quality caused by the smoke can result in the exacerbation of some medical issues, especially lung problems. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is likely many individuals who contract the illness will be exposed to smoke from fires in the region, potentially worsening the impact of the virus on the region. Furthermore, the use of communal shelters for those evacuating from wildfires could cause an increase in COVID-19 transmission.

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Explosion at Port of Beirut – *Accidental Events*

Summary: On Tuesday, 4 August 2020, a stockpile of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate caused an explosion near the Port of Beirut in its namesake city, the capital of Lebanon, with a blast radius of 6 miles. It left a crater 405 feet in diameter. As of Monday, 10 August, the death toll stood at 220, with anywhere from 21-100 missing, and thousands injured. Many of the missing are workers from other countries. The explosion left 300,000 homeless and may cost anywhere from \$3-15 billion. Ammonium nitrate is used for fertilizer, but it is extremely volatile. It has been used to make bombs, including the one that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995. Open source reporting immediately speculated that the explosion in Beirut was intentional. However, the presence of the ammonium nitrate and its origins were uncovered by mid-week. In November 2013, a Russian shipping vessel called the Rhosus made an unscheduled stop in Beirut to take on freight en route to Mozambique. Port inspectors found enough issues to detain the vessel. Its crew abandoned the ship, and no one attempted to retrieve it. Its freight, including the ammonium nitrate, was unloaded into a warehouse at the port. In 2015, officials had the ship moved 1,000 feet up to the pier. In mid-February 2018, the ship sank to the bottom of the harbor, where it has remained.

Early signs point to negligence in storing the ammonium nitrate. Open source reporting has suggested that 30-40 nylon bags of fireworks confiscated by customs were stored in the same warehouse. President Michel Aoun indicated that, even prior to his own election in 2016, Lebanese officials were aware of the stockpile of ammonium nitrate and had discussed removing it. Internal investigations are unfolding, but by Friday, 7 August, Lebanese authorities took 16 people associated with the port into custody. This included the chief of the customs department, his predecessor, and the general manager of the port. Over the weekend of 8-9 August, protests and riots occurred in Beirut over the government's slow response. On the evening of Monday, 10 August, Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced his resignation and that of the entire Lebanese government. This includes cabinet ministers, who will likely remain on an interim basis during a



transition. If a third of the country's parliament ministers also resign, it will trigger another parliamentary election. The situation in Beirut is still developing.

Analyst Comment: By Friday, 7 August, Lebanese President Michel Aoun was suggesting that "external intervention" by a missile or a bomb may have ignited the stockpile. No evidence has emerged to support this claim. The explosion at the Port of Beirut was likely the result of extreme negligence and bureaucratic shifting of responsibility for the stockpile's removal. Ammonium nitrate has very specific storage requirements, including fireproofing and inspecting for pipes or drains that might allow gas to accumulate. By volume of ammonium nitrate and number of deaths, the explosion in Beirut was one of the largest of the 20th Century, comparable to one in Texas City, TX in April 1947 (581 deaths). The volume of ammonium nitrate that exploded in the latter instance varies by source.

As an ingredient in fertilizer, ammonium nitrate is safe to handle and store. However, it requires adequate ventilation and cannot be near fuel. In the United States, OSHA requires a store of more than 1,000 pounds to be kept in a one-story building with ventilation and a fire-suppression system. Because it is a common ingredient in IEDs, the Department of Homeland Security also regulates the sale and transfer of ammonium nitrate, among other federal agencies.

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*Open Source Update
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On the Radar

- **Peak Hurricane Season**

- Per NOAA, the peak hurricane season for the Atlantic Basin (the Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, and the Gulf of Mexico) is from mid-August to late October, meaning the peak season has just begun. Additionally, a mid-season NOAA update from 06 August states that the 2020 season has the potential to be one of the busiest on record, with atmospheric and oceanic conditions primed to fuel storm development in the Atlantic.
- Two tropical storm systems are potentially headed towards the Gulf and will likely become named storms by the weekend of the 22nd-23rd. A case of multiple storms in the Gulf concurrently, while not unprecedented, is rare.

- **Election Interference**

- The U.S. Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe recently stated that China poses an increasing threat to the upcoming presidential election due to an increase in observed propaganda efforts online. Moreover, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien stated that China has engaged in cyberattacks and phishing attempts directed toward election infrastructure. However, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi has rejected equivocating China's recent increase in meddling efforts with the "24/7" efforts emanating from Russia.