Another Shipping Giant Falls Victim To Ransomware

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The infamous NotPetya ransomware ran rampant last summer. One of its most high-profile victims was A.P. Moller-Maersk. The Danish shipping giant was reportedly saddled with $200 million in costs related to the outbreak.

This week another major industry player was hit. Shanghai-based Cosco, the world’s fourth-largest maritime shipper, reported a ransomware outbreak of its own.

Cosco has yet to reveal many details about the incident publicly. In fact, in a company press release, there’s no mention of ransomware. Instead, the announcement refers to a “local network breakdown” affecting operations at its locations in the United States.

Internal emails sent to Cosco staff told a different story. According to a pair of maritime news sources that have seen the emails, staff were warned to be on the lookout for suspicious messages in their inboxes. Cosco locations outside the U.S. stepped up anti-malware defenses in hopes of preventing the infection from spreading overseas.

The situation at Cosco doesn’t appear to be as dire as the one faced by Maersk in 2017. The NotPetya infection was so devastating that some of the company’s vessels were stuck in port.

Cosco, on the other hand, seemed mostly to be having communications issues. Email and telephone services were impacted and the company’s American website remains offline for the time being. Cosco stressed that its entire fleet was still operating normally and that its “main business operation systems” were stable.

Assuming that’s an accurate assessment, it’s very good news for Cosco. The company could have easily been staring down a protracted fight to recover its systems and a multi-hundred million dollar expense sheet. The full extent of the incident may not be known for some time -- possibly when the company posts its results for the next fiscal quarter.

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Cargo ship "Cosco Shipping Aries" arrives in the harbour of Hamburg, Germany (Photo by Daniel Bockwoldt/picture alliance via Getty Images)