China can track mobiles through satellite system

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China's Beidou Navigation Satellite System is pictured in an undated photograph.
Screengrab from the Internet

China's Beidou Satellite System (北斗系統) poses an information security risk to Taiwan in that the satellite is able to track smartphone users via embedded malware in devices with Chinese-manufactured chips directly tied into the system or phones manufactured in China, according to the latest mobile device security report that the Ministry of Science and Technology submitted to the Legislative Yuan.

The ministry reported that China's satellite system, despite claims of being commercial in nature, was primarily for military use, adding that over the past few years, many smartphone vehicle navigation products using Beidou Satellite System guidance chips have been imported to Taiwan.

"[Government employees] should avoid purchasing related products to avoid being the target of attacks," the report said.

China's Shanghai Beiga Satellite Technology Co Co (上海北伽導航科技) developed the first 40-nanometer satellite navigation chip in 2014 for use in tablets, smartphones and vehicle navigation systems specifically with the satellite system in mind.

The satellite system claimed to be primarily developed for vehicle navigation, but the second generation of the system reportedly offers two separate services, one aimed at the public sector being the navigation system, and a restricted offering for China's and Pakistan's military communication and location data.

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The ministry said that Taiwanese using Chinese-manufactured phones, or other smartphones using related software or chips, might be providing the Chinese military with information.

The ministry said it would be asking all distributors in Taiwan to identify their products that support the Beidou Satellite System, adding that it was mulling a ban on smartphones or other devices that are capable of being linked to the Beidou Satellite system.

A full list of applications using or related to the satellite system is being compiled and is to be run through a testing system, the ministry said, adding that it would announce the list of programs that might contain malware.

The ministry is also calling on civil servants to avoid purchasing or using products that carry guidance chips for the satellite system or related software to minimize the chance of targeted attacks.

The ministry also suggested that national defense units should monitor the Beidou Satellite System's transmitted signals and warn of any anomalies, adding that such monitoring would reduce the risk of hacking attacks from China via satellite-broadcast signals.

The National Security Bureau said it was aware of the issue and had already told the National Communication Council and the Ministry of Economic Affairs to develop countermeasures.

The issue was discussed at the legislature yesterday, and while a complete list of mobile devices that support the Beidou Satellite System has yet to be released, Democratic Progressive Party Legislator Rosalia Wu (□□□) said that several models of cellphones produced by Taiwan-based HTC Corp (□□□) use the Beidou Satellite System.

 Source: Taipei Times - 2016/05/05