

Winnti is Coming - Evolution after Prosecution@HITCON2021

speakerdeck.com/aragorn/seng/winnti-is-coming-evolution-after-prosecution-at-hitcon2021



December 16, 2021

Winnti is Coming - Evolution after

Since APT41 was sued by the FBI last year, the group has not disappeared. Instead, they have used more innovative and less well noticed techniques to evade detection by security products, such as:

- Avoiding memory detection through dll hollowing technique
- Using DPAPI to encrypt the real payload to make forensics more difficult.
- Abusing the certificate to hide the payload in a signed PE file.
- Using domain fronting techniques to hide the real IP address.
- Using legitimate tools like InstallUtil to execute code and bypass application whitelisting.

In addition to malware that is known to be used by APT41 , we also found some newly developed malware. There are two new pieces of listening port malware. We also found a shellcode-based backdoor, Natwalk.

The group is also more careful in their usage of C2. They use DNS tunnelling extensively as well as Cloudflare Worker to hide their real C2 IP.

We have observed that APT41 targeted telecommunications companies, key medical institutions, governments, and major infrastructures in various countries in 2021.

The prosecution did not deter them, but instead prompted them to evolve their attack techniques, and make it harder for researchers to track and detect.

In this talk we will provide more details about the campaigns of APT41 , including its innovative TTPs, newly developed malware, lateral movement techniques, and the strategies they used for C2 after they were sued by the FBI.

We also research the relation of the subgroups under APT41, like fishmaster and GroupCC.

Transcript

1. Winnti is Coming - Evolution after Prosecution
TeamT5

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2. 2

Security Engineer

UCCU

Peter Syu

001

President of "Twice Promotion

Agency"

Security Engineer

Tom Lai

456

Malware Researcher

Aragorn Tseng

Chief Analyst

Charles Li

Who we are

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3. AGENDA

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02

03

04

05

Initial Access

Cobalt Strike Loader

APT41's Backdoor

C2 Hiding Technique

Relation to other operations

06 Takeaway

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4. Who is Winnti?

4

<https://twitter.com/jfslowik/status/1420924040047337474>

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5. Winnti? APT41?

5

Ministry of State Security of
the People's Republic of
China(MSS)

- Winnti = APT41 ?
- APT41 = Chengdu404 ?
- Under APT41, it can be divided into several groups via different techniques and targets
- The targets are very wide.

It is suspected that MSS has integrated the resources, attack techniques, and tools to make this group looks bigger.

APT41

APT10 APT17 APT...

Integration?

Fishmaster

/TAG-22

GroupCC

Amoeba Unknown

Group ...

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6. Target Country Talk in last section

6

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7. Target Industry

High-tech
Healthcare Airlines
Financial Research
Government
Media
Gaming
Telecom
Energy
Education
Manufacturing
7

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8. Compromise

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9. Initial Access



CVE-2021-34527(printnightmare)



CVE-2021-26855(proxylogon)



SQL vulnerabilities



phpmyadmin vulnerabilities



Web vulnerabilities



Flash installer



Fake Decoy Icon

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10. Webshell Access

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11. Probe plugin

11

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12. Webshell Upload

12

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13. Catalina Log

13

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14. [View Slide](#)

15. Scan by Shodan

Unused Probe

套件, 12, 67%

Using Probe

套件, 6, 33%

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16. Post-Compromise

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17. New TTPs



Certificate bypass



Dll hollowing technique



InstallUtil



Early bird code injection



CDN service and Cloudflare worker



Some new backdoor

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18. Timeline for disseminating the Cobalt Strike

2020.7

2020.11

2021.1

2021.3

2021.4

Chacha20

shellcode or

loader(Chatloader)

appeared to

extract Cobalt

strike Beacon

Use CDN service in

Cobalt Strike,

especially DNS

beacon

Use Cloudflare

worker to hide real

C2 IP

Use certificate

bypass and dll

hollowing

technique in

Chatloader

Use multiple .NET

loaders and

misuse InstallUtil

to load Cobalt

Strike 2021.6

Use funnyswitch to

load Cobalt Strike

and use early bird

code injection

technique

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19. Certificate bypass(MS13-098)

セワシ

Valid

certificate

Valid

certificate

セワシ

Shell

code

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20. Chatloader



Uses chacha20 algorithm to decrypt the payload



Most of the payload is Cobalt Strike, but we have also seen another backdoor



ETW bypass



Dll hollowing

offset length data

0x0:0xB 0xC config nonce

0xC:0xF 0x4 config crc32

0x10:0x13 0x4 config_enc_length

0x14:0x14+config_enc

_length

config_enc_length ciphertext

0x100:0x120 0x20 config key

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21. length data

0x4 Header

0x4 Check User is SYSTEM

0x4 Mutex trigger

0x4 Delete Loader trigger

0x4 Patch EtwEventWrite trigger

0x4 Process Hollowing trigger

0x4 Injected Process Name Length(x2)

InjectedProcess

Name

Length(x2)

InjectedProcess Name

0x4 Payload in Loader

0x4 Payload Name Length(x2)

Payload Name

Length(x2)

Payload Name

0x4 Payload Size

0x4 Payload FilePointor

0x4 Payload crc32

0xC Payload Nonce

length data

0x4 Header

0x4 Check User is SYSTEM

0x4 Mutex trigger

0x4 Delete Loader trigger

0x4 Patch EtwEventWrite trigger

0x4 Payload in Loader

0x4 Payload Name Length(x2)

Payload Name

Length(x2)

Payload Name

0x4 Payload Size

0x4 Payload FilePointor

0x4 Payload crc32

0xC Payload Nonce

Header:CB2F29AD

Header:8BD6488B

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22. Chatloader config example

=====
Decrypted Config
=====

Config Nonce (12 bytes) = 0xb5 0x5e 0x14 0x8d 0x46 0xe1 0x2e 0x97 0x5d 0x3d 0x75 0xf1

Config Nonce (base64) = tv4UjUbhLpddPXXx

Config CRC32 = 0xe 0xdc 0xac 0xad

Config CRC32 (base64) = DtysrQ==

Ciphertext length = 48

Config Key = 0xa2 0x42 0x99 0x5 0x5f 0x1f 0xc 0x14 0xcb 0xdd 0xb 0x1 0xdf 0xa6 0x4c 0x34 0xf5 0xfd 0x3 0x3c 0xa7 0xf1 0xaf 0x30 0xa0 0xc7 0x5c 0x57 0x35 0x9d 0x41 0xe0

Config Key (base64) = okKZBV8fDBTL3QsB36ZMNPX9Azyn8a8woMdcVzWdQeA=

=====
Config
=====

Head = 0xad 0x29 0x2f 0xcb

Check User is SYSTEM = 0

Mutex trigger = 0

Delete Loader trigger = 0

Patch EtwEventWrite trigger = 1

Payload in Loader = 0

Payload Name Length = 14

Payload Name = Despxs.dll

Payload Size = 3f800

Payload FilePointer = 0

Payload CRC32 = 0x40 0xf6 0x8f 0xa7

Payload Nonce (12 bytes) = 0x93 0x49 0x68 0x79 0x6a 0xda 0xb5 0xcf 0xf0 0xf1 0xb3 0x4f

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23. Dll Hollowing

Signed file

Dll hijack

libEGL.dll

wlbsctrl.dll

Find target dll in

System32

Kernel32.dll

User32.dll

aaclient.dll

DLL Hollowing: Inject

malware payload in

aaclient.dll's .text section

Synchost.exe

Create

Process

Synchost.exe's

Module

Read File

Load module

launcher

payload

Choose

aaclient.dll

dll hollowing

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24. Dll Hollowing (cont.)

<https://github.com/forrest-orr/phantom-dll-hollower-poc> 24

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25. .NET loader

InstallUtil.exe KBDHE475.dll

kstvmutil.ax

payload

1.

System.Configuration.Installer

3.Inject

payload via

Process

Hollowing

2.Read File

and decrypt

with AES

sdiagnhost.exe

Payload:

cobalt strike or

other backdoor:

ex: Natwalk

Use InstallUtil to bypass application

allowlist restrictions.

.NET

loader(obfuscation by

ConfuserEx)

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26. .NET loader structure

offset data

offset 38(h) –

47

md5 hash of offset 48 until end

offset 48-53 Sha256 as AES key

offset 54-67 MD5 as AES IV

offset 68 - end Encrypted payload with AES(ECB)

offset data

offset 0-3 must be 1F A4 3A AC

offset 4-7 the length of the payload

offset 8 - end malware payload

Version 2.63

offset Data

offset 84(h) -93 md5 hash of offset 48 until end

offset 94-9f Sha256 as AES key

offset a0-ab MD5 as AES IV

offset ac - end Encrypted payload with AES(ECB)

offset data

offset 0-3 must be 0C C0 73 95

offset 4-7 the length of the payload

offset 8 - end malware payload

Version 17.102

After decryption

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27. Funnyswitch loader



Name from ptsecurity*, which will inject .NET backdoor funny.dll in memory



We found new version loader(mcvsofcg.dll) which may target McAfee user



E:\VS2019_Project\while_dll_ms\while\x64\Release\macoffe.pdb



Another :

E:\VS2019_Project\prewhiltedll\x64\Release\prewhiltedll.pdb



We found the new loader inject Cobalt Strike and funny.dll

*[https://www.ptsecurity.com/ww-en/analytics/pt-esc-threat-intelligence/higaisa-or-winnti-apt-41-](https://www.ptsecurity.com/ww-en/analytics/pt-esc-threat-intelligence/higaisa-or-winnti-apt-41-backdoors-old-and-new/)

backdoors-old-and-new/

Cobaltstrike funnydll 27

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28. Charlotte loader

Simple

.Net loader

Charlotte

loader

load inject

Cobaltstrike

check.dll

(MD5:8c5a174bbcd93e988bcb8681b542708f)

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29. Early bird code injection Loader



Using open source Alaris loader* to use syscalls to run cobalt strike



Load PNG resource as payload and decrypt with RC4



Using Detour to hook the Freelibary API of the launcher



Using early bird code injection technique



NtTestAlert



KiUserApcDispatcher

*<https://github.com/cribdragg3r/Alaris>

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30. New version loader 30

msdtc.exe oci.dll

Get

Computername

(sha1) as rc4 key to

decrypt payload

cobalt strike

(bind TCP)

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31. Fishmaster loader



PDB : C:\Users\test\Desktop\fishmaster\x64\Release\fishmaster.pdb



Some have “Bidenhappyhappyhappy” in strings



Two ways to decrypt payload



Xor with hardcoded key, ex:” Bsiq_gsus” or “miat_mg”



Use UUIDShellcode and callback function

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Fishmaster operation – TAG-22

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32. loader used by GroupCC 32

Signed file

Temp.tmp

winprint.exe

rundll32.exe

2.Create

rundll32.exe

Process

1.Read File binary

Stage_1.shellcode

4.Read File

5.decode

cobaltstrike

3.Inject

shellcode in

rundll32

- winprint.exe first reads a piece of shellcode from the payload file and then opens rundll32.exe, calls RtlCreateUserThread to run the first stage shellcode in rundll32.exe

- The first stage shellcode will read the payload file again, use VirtualAlloc to allocate memory in rundll32.exe, and inject the payload and decrypt it, finally, it will call EtwCreateEtwThread to move the thread to the starting point of the cobalt strike.

GroupCC

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33. Backdoor
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34. APT41's Backdoor during 2020-2021

Natwalk
APT41
HIGHNOON
Funnydll
Shadowpad
Cobalt strike
PlugX
Spyder
Winnti
Linux RAT
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35. Funnydll*

config
Password="test" StartTime="0" EndTime="24"
WeekDays="0,1,2,3,4,5,6"> address="4iiiessb.wikimedia.vip" port="443" interval="30-60"/>

mcvsocfg.dll Stage_1.shellcode Funny.dll
Base64+AES
decrypt
Js module
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*<https://www.ptsecurity.com/ww-en/analytics/pt-esc-threat-intelligence/higaisa-or-winnti-apt-41-backdoors-old-and-new/>

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36. Funnydll



In 2020, the config of funnydll is plaintext, in 2021, the config will decrypt by funny.core.run which using AES and base64



Command, protocol, and js module are same as 2020*

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37. Shadowpad



APT41 used the new builder of shadowpad in 2021, which was mentioned in Ptsecurity's report* which used new obfuscation method and decryption method for configuration



We think this builder was a shared Tool, because we have also seen Naikon Team use this builder



Md5 of the loader:3520e591065d3174999cc254e6f3dbf5

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```
def decrypt_string(src):
```

```
key = struct.unpack("data_len = struct.unpack("data = src[4:4+data_len]
```

```
result = ""
```

```
i=0
```

```
while(i < data_len):
```

```
tmp = key
```

```
tmp += tmp
```

```
key = key + (( tmp * 8 ) & 0xFFFFFFFF) + 0x107E666D
```

```
result += chr(((HIBYTE(key) + BYTE2(key) + BYTE1(key) + LOBYTE(key)) ^  
ord(data[i])) & 0xFF)
```

```
i+=1
```

```
return result
```

*[https://www.ptsecurity.com/ww-en/analytics/pt-esc-threat-intelligence/higaisa-or-winnti-apt-41-](https://www.ptsecurity.com/ww-en/analytics/pt-esc-threat-intelligence/higaisa-or-winnti-apt-41-backdoors-old-and-new/)

[backdoors-old-and-new/](#)

The method to decrypt the string of the configuration

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38. Shadowpad config example

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id = 6/18/2021 11:26:19 AM

Messenger = TEST

Binary Path = %ALLUSERSPROFILE%\Microsoft\WinLSAM\

Binary Name = LSAM.exe

Loader Name = log.dll

Payload Name = log.dll.dat

Service Name = SystemAssociationManager

Service Display Name = System Association Manager

Service Description = This service provides support for the device association software. If this service is disabled, devices may be configured with outdated software, and may not work correctly.

Registry Key Install = SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run

Registry Value Name = LocalSystemAssociationManager

Inject Target 1 = %windir%\system32\svchost.exe

Inject Target 2 = %windir%\system32\wininit.exe

Inject Target 3 =

Inject Target 4 =

Supposed to have 4 server

Server1 = TCP://1dfpi2d8kx.wikimedia.vip:443

Server2 =

Server3 =

Server4 =

Socket 1 = SOCKS4

Socket 2 = SOCKS4

Socket 3 = SOCKS5

Socket 4 = SOCKS5

DNS 1 = 8.8.8.8

DNS 2 = 8.8.8.8

DNS 3 = 8.8.8.8

DNS 4 = 8.8.8.8

config offset:0x96

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39. Shadowpad Decryption Routine

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Old Version

[View Slide](#)

40. Shadowpad Decryption Routine

New Version

40

Shadowpad

Decrypt_A

Module

Shadowpad

Decrypt_B

TCP Packet

Quicklz

Decompress

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41. Natwalk



Dropped by chatloader



First seen in the wild in 2021/3, and first seen on VT in 2020/9



Shellcode based backdoor



It uses register + offset to call the Windows api (also used by crosswalk)



The name is from the unique file path it will look up :

“%AllUserProfile%\UTXP\nat”

rbx = 7FEF1431534

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42. Natwalk(cont.)



Transport protocol



Raw TCP socket



HTTPS:Post requests to C2 server



gtsid : generated by CryptGenRandom



gtuvid : generated by CryptGenRandom and md5 operation



Uses chacha20 md5 to encrypt/decrypt the message to/from C2 server

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the post request of Natwalk

raw TCP

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43. Natwalk(cont.)



Crosswalk also uses register + offset to call the Windows api in shellcode



First command code are both 0x64



But commands are different

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44. Natwalk(cont.)

command description

0x64 Close sessions

0x5C Update the ChaCha20 key for
C2 communication

0x66 Change the current status

0x74 Terminate all threads

0x78 kill process

0x7c Run plug-in

0x82 Enumerate user info

0x8c Send config to C2

0x8E Load additional config

44

Software\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Intern
et Settings

ProxyServer

explorer.exe

%AllUsersProfile%\UTXP\nat\

%02X

POST

Mozilla/5.0 Chrome/72.0.3626.109 Safari/537.36

gtsid:

gtuvid:

https://msdn.microsoft.com

https://www.google.com

https://www.twitter.com

https://www.facebook.com

Unique string in the bottom of Natwalk

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45. HIGHNOON(BotDll64)
wbemcomn.dll sdhasjk.dll
WmiApSrv.exe
Dll hijack IAT modify
Decrypt
payload with
DPAPI/AES
BotDll64.dll
Packed with
UPX in
memory
HIGHNOON
Windivert.dll
Windivert.sys
User mode
Kernel
mode
Reflective
injection
(1) packet
(2a)
Matching
packet
(2b) non-matching packet
(3) re-
injected
packet
45

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46. HIGHNOON Loader
DPAPI version
AES version
choose the driver determined by the dwMinorVersion 46
"F:\2019\RedEye\Door\Bin\Middle64.pdb"

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47. HIGHNOON command



Command is same as the HIGHNOON mentioned by Macnica* in 2018
command description

0 Bind Network Socket

1 Check IP address change and
Receive Packet, Console Output

3 Console Output

4 Read //DEV//NULL and Console
Output

5 Check IP address change and
Receive Packet, Console Output

*<https://hitcon.org/2018/pacific/downloads/1214-R2/1330-1400.pdf>

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48. C2 Hiding (Domain Fronting)

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49. CDN service



Https beacon : direct use CDN service to hide real C2 IP



Ex: microgoogle[.]ml



DNS beacon

Real C2 IP

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ns1.hkserch.com

No resolution

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50. parks their DNS

beacon C2 domain on

some specific IP, ex:

8.8.8.251, 4.2.2.2

Some C2 domain in this slide are used by other group

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51. Cloudflare Worker



use Cloudflare Workers as redirector to hide the real C2 domain and IP

Real C2

proxy

Victim

Cloudflare worker

cdn.cdnfree.workers.dev

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52. Fastly (GroupCC)

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BeaconType - HTTPS

Port - 443

SleepTime - 1000

MaxGetSize - 1398119

Jitter - 10

MaxDNS - Not Found

PublicKey_MD5 - 9ee3e0425ade426af0cb07094aa29ebc

C2Server - pypi.python.org/latest/pip-check

UserAgent - Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 6.1; Win64; x64) AppleWebKit/537.36

(KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/84.0.4147.125 Safari/537.36

HttpPostUri - /latest/check

...

PipeName - Not Found

DNS_Idle - Not Found

DNS_Sleep - Not Found

SSH_Host - Not Found

SSH_Port - Not Found

SSH_Username - Not Found

SSH_Password_Plaintext - Not Found

SSH_Password_Pubkey - Not Found

SSH_Banner - Host: pypi2-python.org

...

Watermark - 426352781

...

ProInject_AllocationMethod - VirtualAllocEx

bUsesCookies - True

HostHeader - Host: pypi2-python.org

...

pypi2-python.org.global.prod.fastly.net

pypi2-python.org

Real C2 IP

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53. Relation to other operations

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54. Cobalt strike
payload
Same Xor key:
0x3A
Funnyswitch
dropper which
injected
cobalt strike
ITW Url
Fishmaster operation – TAG-22*
Funnyswitch
dropper which
injected funnydll
Connection of
APT41 and
fishmaster operation
New builder
of Shadowpad
IR case
Same PDB string
* <https://www.recordedfuture.com/chinese-group-tag-22-targets-nepal-philippines-taiwan/>

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55. Fishmaster v.s GroupCC

Fishmaster operation – BIOPASS RAT*

Online.txt

c1222.txt

Silverlight_ins.exe

Htop6K4c.txt

BrowserPlugin.exe

[Emergency] Work-
over Well 105CTC-

01 - PVD 03 Rig on

28 July 2021.com

GroupCC

BIOPASS RAT Python Script (local online server)

*https://www.trendmicro.com/en_us/research/21/g/biopass-rat-new-malware-sniffs-victims-via-live-streaming.html

(C1222 module)

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56. GroupCC

Fishmaster

BIOPASS RAT Python Script (local online server)

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57. GroupCC

Fishmaster

BIOPASS RAT Python Script (C1222 module)

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58. Fishmaster Used(stolen) certificate



Happytuk Co.,Ltd.



Serial Number : 0E D4 DF 10 33 39 3F F2 AF 41 C5 71 A6 AA 19 D7



Rhaon Entertainment Inc



Serial Number : 06 80 8C 59 34 DA 03 6A 12 97 A9 36 D7 2E 93 D4
58

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59. GroupCC Used(stolen) certificate



Quickteck.com



Serial Number : 70 D8 96 11 7E 15 30 2C 7E EF EC B2 89 B3 BF E0



주식회사 엘리시온랩(ElySION Lab Co., Ltd.)



Serial Number : 03 D4 33 FD C2 46 9E 9F D8 78 C8 0B C0 54 51 47



ARGOS LABS



Serial Number : 00 F7 B7 5C 60 5B 00 83 95 73 8A AC 06 AB E3 B4 70



1.A Connect GmbH



Serial Number : 00 A7 E4 DE D4 BF 94 9D 15 AA 42 01 84 3F 1A B6 4D
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60. Fishmaster v.s GroupCC 60



Shared Tool – Biopass RAT



Similar TTPs



Uses some stolen or revoked certificate



Uses Legitimate installer (like Flash, Silverlight, BrowserPlugin)



Use aliyun as payload sites

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61. Amoeba v.s Fishmaster v.s GroupCC 61



Amoeba v.s. Fishmaster



Two possibilities



Shared C2



163.138.137.235



93.180.156.77



Shared customized CoboltStrike



Xor key : 0x3A



Fishmaster v.s. GroupCC



Shared Tool : Biopass RAT



Similar TTPs



Uses some stolen or revoked certificate



Uses Legitimate installer



Use aliyun as payload sites

Amoeba Fishmaster GroupCC

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62. Other operation

cobaltstrike

cobaltstrike

IR case

IR case

#Goblin

panda

*RedFoxtrot

Drop PCshare

<https://community.riskiq.com/article/56fa1b2f>

* <https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2021-0616.pdf>

security_audit_template_final.doc

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63. # <https://community.riskiq.com/article/56fa1b2f>

* <https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2021-0616.pdf>

security_audit_template_final.doc

#Goblin panda

*RedFoxtrot

Drop PCshare

Connection to

Gobling Panda or

Other Chinese APT

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64. HW operation(護網行動)



To detect the security issues of key national infrastructure, and to test their event monitoring and ability to quickly coordinate with emergency incident



The target involves many industries, including government, finance, electricity, and business key enterprises in China.



From OSINT, the operation started from 4/8 in 2021

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65. 南京木百文化传媒有限公司.exe

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66. Maybe link to HW operation

66

Cobalt strike loader in IR case

which use alaris loader with

resource png payload

Same loader

南京木百文化传媒有限公司.exe

Funnyswitch

Same unique

shellcode in

calculating

api hash

调整中移在线服务有限公司

职工五险一金缴纳比例的通知

.exe

Cobalt strike loader in IR case

which used early bird code injection

VPN统一身份证认证

ID.exe

运维安全管理与审计系统

单点登录插件.exe

Same Cobalt

strike payload

header

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67. Takeaway



Various kind of cobalt strike loader and some new attack techniques



New backdoor ex: Natwalk



C2 hiding techniques



Relation to other operations

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68. IOC

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Chatloader

7ee9b79f4b5e19547707cbd960d4292f
F5158addf976243ffc19449e74c4bbad
1015fa861318acbbfd405e54620aa5e3
a1d972a6aa398d0230e577227b28e499



.NET loader

bd2d24f0ffa3d38cb5415b0de2f58bb3



Funnyswitch loader

e0a9d82b959222d9665c0b4e57594a75
07a61e3985b22ec859e09fa16fd28b85
d720ac7a6d054f87dbafb03e83bcb97c
F85d1c2189e261d8d3f0199bbdda3849
5b2a9a12d0c5d44537637cf04d93bec5



Early bird code injection loader

4598c75007b3cd766216086415cc4335
Fd6ae1b8713746e3620386a5e6454a8d
b028b4f8421361f2485948ca7018a2b0



Natwalk

1d36404f85d94bea6c976044cb342f24
7c6e75e70d29e77f78ea708e01e19c36



HIGHNOON loader

407b5200c061123c9bd32e7eea21a57b
5b99fa01c72cebc53a76cc72e9581189



Funnydll

e0a9d82b959222d9665c0b4e57594a75



Spyder

fba77006e8f8f3db6aac86211fa047fb



Shadowpad

af7cef9e0e6601cae068b73787e3ae81

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69. IOC

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ns1.dns-dropbox.com
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wustat.windows.365filtering.com
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