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Channel Binding Signalling for the Generic Security Services Application
Programming Interface
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Abstract

Channel binding is a technique that allows applications to use a secure channel at a lower layer without having to use authentication at that lower layer. The concept of channel binding comes from the Generic Security Services Application Programming Interface (GSS-API). It turns out that the semantics commonly implemented are different than those specified in the base GSS-API RFC ([RFC2743](#)), and that that specification has a serious bug. This document addresses both the inconsistency as-implemented and the specification bug.

This Internet-Draft proposes the addition of a "channel bound" return flag for the `GSS_Init_sec_context()` and `GSS_Accept_sec_context()` functions. Two behaviors are specified: a default, safe behavior reflecting existing implementation deployments, and a behavior that is only safe when the application specifically tells the GSS-API that it (the application) supports the new behavior. Additional API elements related to this are also added, including a new security context establishment API.

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[1.](#) Introduction

The GSS-API [[RFC2743](#)] supports "channel binding" [[RFC5056](#)], a technique for detection of man-in-the-middle (MITM) attacks in secure channels at lower network layers. This facility is meant to be all-or-nothing: either both the initiator and acceptor use it and it succeeds, or both must not use it. This has created a negotiation problem when retrofitting the use of channel binding into existing application protocols.

However, GSS-APIv2u1 [[RFC2743](#)] does not specify channel binding behavior when only one party provides provides none. In practice, some mechanisms (such as Kerberos [[RFC4121](#)]) ignore channel bindings when the acceptor provides none, but not when the initiator provides none. Note that it would be useless to allow security context establishment to succeed when the initiator does not provide channel bindings but the acceptor does, at least as long as there's no outward indication of whether channel binding was used! Since the GSS-APIv2u1 does not provide any such indication, this document corrects that flaw.

Allowing the connection to succeed when an initiator provides bindings but an acceptor does not has helped deployment of channel binding in existing applications: first fix all the initiators, then fix all the acceptors. But even this technique is insufficient when there are many clients to fix, such that fixing them all will take a long time. Additionally, it limits the usefulness of channel bindings, while allowing the acceptor to provide but not enforce would protect against man in the middle attacks (for channel binding aware initiators).

This document proposes a new method for deployment of channel binding that allows the feature to be enabled on the acceptor side before fixing all initiators. If the GSS-API had always had a return flag by which to indicate channel binding state then we could have had a simpler method of deploying channel binding: applications check that return flag and act accordingly (e.g., fail when channel binding is required). We cannot safely introduce this behavior now without an indication of support by the application.

Additionally, there may be applications where it is important for initiators to know that acceptors did use channel binding, and even to know whether a mechanism is capable of indicating as much. We add a request flag and a mechanism attribute for such applications.

1.1. Design and Future directions

The design for signalling application flag support and empty contexts is based on the Java Bindings of the GSS-API [[RFC5653](#)]. This document begins introduction of additional context inquiry and mutation functions, which eventually will also allow for simplified stepping to replace the GSS_Init/Accept_sec_context() loop.

1.2. Conventions used in this document

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [[RFC2119](#)].

2. Channel Binding State Extension

We propose a new return flag for `GSS_Init_sec_context()` and `GSS_Accept_sec_context()`, as well as a pair of functions for a) creating "empty" security context handles, b) requesting flags and indicating which flags the application understands. We also add a new mechanism attribute for supporting channel binding confirmation.

C bindings of these extensions are provided along the lines of [\[RFC2744\]](#) and [\[RFC5587\]](#).

In the future we might move more of the many input (and output) arguments to `GSS_Init_sec_context()` and `GSS_Accept_sec_context()` into mutators on empty security context handles.

2.1. GSS_Create_sec_context()

Inputs:

- o <none>

Outputs:

- o `major_status` INTEGER
- o `minor_status` INTEGER -- note: mostly useless, but we should keep it
- o `context` SECURITY CONTEXT -- "empty" security context

Return major status codes:

- o `GSS_S_COMPLETE` indicates success.
- o `GSS_S_UNAVAILABLE` indicates that memory is not available, for example.
- o `GSS_S_FAILURE` indicates a general failure.

This function creates an "empty" security context handle that can be passed to `GSS_Init_sec_context()` or `GSS_Accept_sec_context()` where they expect `GSS_C_NO_CONTEXT`.

2.1.1. C-Bindings

```
OM_uint32
gss_create_sec_context(OM_uint32 *minor_status,
                      gss_ctx_id_t *context);
```


2.2. GSS_Set_context_flags()

Inputs:

context CONTEXT HANDLE

req_flags FLAGS Requested flags. Applicable to acceptors and initiators.

ret_flags_understood FLAGS The set of return flags understood by the caller.

Outputs:

o major_status INTEGER

o minor_status INTEGER

Return major status codes:

o GSS_S_COMPLETE indicates success.

o GSS_S_FAILURE indicates a general failure.

This function tells the mechanism (when one is eventually chosen and invoked) that the application requests the given req_flags and is prepared to check the flags in the given ret_flags_understood. Mechanisms SHOULD NOT limit flags returned to those in ret_flags_understood, but MAY alter behavior accordingly. Initiators can override the req_flags in their GSS_Init_sec_context() call, but if no flags are requested there then the req_flags set on the empty context will be used. GSS_Accept_sec_context() is not required to perform any action based on req_flags at this time.

NOTE: The abstract GSS-API [[RFC2743](#)] uses individual elements--one per-flag--instead of a "FLAGS" type. This is unwieldy, therefore we introduce an abstract type named "FLAGS" to act as a set of all the request/return flags defined for the abstract GSS-API.

2.2.1. C-Bindings

```
OM_uint32
gss_set_context_flags(OM_uint32 *minor_status,
                      gss_ctx_id_t context,
                      uint64_t req_flags,
                      uint64_t ret_flags_understood);
```


2.3. Return Flag for Channel Binding State Signalling

Whenever both the initiator and the acceptor provide matching channel bindings to `GSS_Init_sec_context()` and `GSS_Accept_sec_context()`, respectively, then the mechanism SHALL indicate that the context is channel bound via an output flag, `ret_channel_bound_flag`, for the established context. Note that some mechanisms have no way for the acceptor to signal CB success to the initiator, in which case `GSS_Init_sec_context()` MUST NOT output the `ret_channel_bound_flag`.

2.3.1. C-Bindings

```
#define GSS_C_CHANNEL_BOUND_FLAG 2048 /* 0x00000800 */
```

2.4. New Mechanism Attribute

- o We add a new mechanism attribute, `GSS_C_MA_CBINDING_CONFIRM`, to indicate that the initiator can and always does learn whether the acceptor application supplied channel bindings (assuming mutual auth has been requested). Mechanisms advertising this attribute MUST always indicate acceptor channel bound state to the initiator.

OID assignments TBD.

2.5. Request Flag for Acceptor Confirmation of Channel Binding

We add a new request flag for `GSS_Init_sec_context()`, `req_cb_confirmation_flag`, to be used by initiators that insist on acceptors providing channel bindings. If set, the mechanism MUST prefer establishment of contexts which provide channel binding confirmation. It SHOULD NOT fail to negotiate just because it cannot provide the `GSS_C_MA_CBINDING_CONFIRM` attribute.

2.5.1. C-Bindings

Because `GSS_C_CHANNEL_BOUND_FLAG` is a return flag only, and this flag is a request flag only, and to save on precious flag bits, we use the same flag bit assignment for both flags:

```
#define GSS_C_CB_CONFIRM_FLAG 2048 /* 0x00000800 */
```

2.6. Handling Empty Contexts in Other GSS-API Functions

`GSS_Init_sec_context()` and `GSS_Accept_sec_context()` operate on empty security contexts as specified above (i.e., examining flags).

All other GSS-API functions MUST treat empty contexts as they would GSS_C_NO_CONTEXT as well. For most functions, this will result in returning GSS status code GSS_S_NO_CONTEXT.

GSS_Delete_sec_context() MUST NOT output a context deletion token when applied to empty security contexts.

3. Modified Channel Binding Semantics

The channel binding semantics of the base GSS-API are modified as follows:

- o Whenever both the initiator and acceptor have provided input_channel_bindings to GSS_Init/Accept_sec_context() and the channel bindings do not match, then the mechanism MUST fail to establish a security context token. (This is a restatement of an existing requirement in the base specification.)
- o Whenever the acceptor application has a) provided channel bindings to GSS_Accept_sec_context(), and b) not indicated support for the ret_channel_bound_flag flag, then the mechanism MUST fail to establish a security context if the initiator did not provide channel bindings data. This requirement is critical for security purposes, to make applications predating this document secure, and this requirement reflects actual implementations as deployed.
- o Whenever the initiator application has a) provided channel bindings to GSS_Init_sec_context(), and b) not indicated support for the ret_channel_bound_flag flag, then the mechanism SHOULD NOT fail to establish a security context just because the acceptor failed to provide channel bindings data. This strong suggestion is for interoperability purposes, and reflects actual implementations that have been deployed.
- o Whenever the application has a) provided channel bindings to GSS_Init_sec_context() or GSS_Accept_sec_context(), and b) indicated support for the ret_channel_bound_flag flag, then the mechanism SHOULD NOT fail to establish a security context just because the peer did not provide channel bindings data. The mechanism MUST output the ret_channel_bound_flag if both peers provided the same input_channel_bindings to GSS_Init_sec_context() and GSS_Accept_sec_context(). The mechanism MUST NOT output the ret_channel_bound_flag if either (or both) peer did not provide input_channel_bindings to GSS_Init/Accept_sec_context(). This requirement restores the original base GSS-API specified behavior, with the addition of the ret_channel_bound_flag flag.

4. Security Considerations

This document deals with security. There are no security considerations that should be documented separately in this section. To recap, this document fixes a significant flaw in the base GSS-API [RFC2743] specification that fortunately has not been implemented, and it adds a feature (that should have been in the base specification) for improved negotiation of use of channel binding [RFC5056].

5. IANA Considerations

The GSS-API mechanism attribute is to be added to the "SMI Security for Mechanism gsscm Codes" registry established by RFC5587 [RFC5587]. See Section 2.4.

6. References

6.1. Normative References

- [RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", BCP 14, RFC 2119, DOI 10.17487/RFC2119, March 1997, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc2119>>.
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6.2. Informative References

[RFC4121] Zhu, L., Jaganathan, K., and S. Hartman, "The Kerberos Version 5 Generic Security Service Application Program Interface (GSS-API) Mechanism: Version 2", [RFC 4121](#), DOI 10.17487/RFC4121, July 2005, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc4121>>.

[RFC5653] Upadhyay, M. and S. Malkani, "Generic Security Service API Version 2: Java Bindings Update", [RFC 5653](#), DOI 10.17487/RFC5653, August 2009, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/info/rfc5653>>.

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