

GitHub Actions: a Cloudy Day for Security

Sofia Lindqvist
Sikkerhestfestivalen, 26.08.2025



BINARY SECURITY

Outline

- GitHub CI/CD Security
 - Focus on collaborators (users with write permissions)
- Integration with Azure via Federated Identities (OIDC)

Misconfigurations

GitHub Actions



GitHub Actions makes it easy to automate all your software workflows, now with world-class CI/CD. Build, test, and deploy your code right from GitHub. Make code reviews, branch management, and issue triaging work the way you want.



```
1   name: Linting etc
2   run-name: ${github.actor}} is testing out GitHub Actions 🚀
3   on:
4     workflow_dispatch:
5   jobs:
6     linting-etc:
7       runs-on: ubuntu-latest
8       steps:
9         - name: Check out repository code
10           uses: actions/checkout@v4
11         - name: Set up Python
12           uses: actions/setup-python@v5
13           with:
14             python-version: 3.12
15         - name: Install dependencies
16           run: |
17             python -m pip install poetry
18             python -m pip install --upgrade pip
19             python -m poetry install
20         - name: Format with black
21           run: |
22             python -m poetry run black --line-length 128 --check --diff $(git ls-files '*.py')
23         - name: PEP8 Linting!
24           run: |
25             python -m poetry run flake8 $(git ls-files '*.py') --count --show-source --statistics
26         - name: Run mypy
27           run: |
28             python -m poetry run mypy $(git ls-files '*.py')
```

Linting etc

linting.yaml

Filter workflow runs

2 workflow runs

Event Status Branch Actor

This workflow has a `workflow_dispatch` event trigger.

Run workflow

sofiaml is testing out GitHub Actions

Linting etc #2: Manually run by sofiaml

main

4 hours ago

26s

sofiaml is testing out GitHub Actions

Linting etc #1: Manually run by sofiaml


main


4 hours ago


23s


linting-etc


succeeded 4 hours ago in 17s


>  Check out repository code

>  Set up Python


>  Install dependencies


>  Format with black

>  PEP8 Linting!

▼  Run mypy

```
1  ▼ Run python -m poetry run mypy $(git ls-files '*.py')
2  python -m poetry run mypy $(git ls-files '*.py')
3  shell: /usr/bin/bash -e {0}
4  env:
5    pythonLocation: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64
6    PKG_CONFIG_PATH: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64/lib/pkgconfig
7    Python_ROOT_DIR: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64
8    Python2_ROOT_DIR: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64
9    Python3_ROOT_DIR: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64
10   LD_LIBRARY_PATH: /opt/hostedtoolcache/Python/3.12.8/x64/lib
11  Success: no issues found in 3 source files
```

>  Post Set up Python

>  Post Check out repository code

>  Complete job

GitHub Security Model

Permissions on a repository

- Read
- Write (Collaborator)
- Owner/Administrator

Security expectations

- **Reader** can
 - Read code
 - Submit issues

- **Collaborator** can
 - Commit code
 - Create branches
 - Modify workflows



- **Admins** can basically do everything

- cannot
 - Commit code
 - Create branches

- cannot
 - **Deploy code to production without appropriate approvals**
 - **View production-level secrets**
 - **Access integrated cloud environments**



From now on we are collaborators

Goal: Use GitHub Actions to deploy code from a repo in such a way that no single collaborator can compromise production resources.

- Code from `main` branch is deployed to production
- Can't any collaborator just push any code to the `main` branch?

Branch Protections (rulesets)

Options to “protect” a branch

- Must go via PR to commit to protected branch
 - Must have at least X approvals
 - Approval must be of most recent reviewable push
 - Approval must be by someone else than the most recent reviewable push
 - Approval must be by code owner

First attempt:

```
name: Deploy to production
on:
  push:
    branches:
      - main
jobs:
  deploy:
    runs-on: ubuntu-latest
    steps:
      - name: Do something...
        run: |
          echo "Deploying to production..."
```

Which workflow is it anyway?

```
on:
  push:
    branches:
      main
jobs:
  deploy:
    runs-on: ubuntu-latest
    steps:
```

Showing 1 changed file with 1 addition and 1 deletion.

2			.github/workflows/deploy-2.yaml	
2			@@ -2,7 +2,7 @@ name: Deploy with ssh and secrets	
2	2		on:	
3	3		push:	
4	4		branches:	
5	-	main		
5	+	secret-hacker-branch		
6	6		jobs:	
7	7		deploy:	

change branch

Deploy with ssh and secrets #6: Commit 3e1a01a pushed by sofiaml

secret-hacker-branch

Collaborators are in control of the workflow file that runs




GitHub Secrets

Repository-level Secrets

Repository secrets

Name 

 SSH_PASSWORD

 SSH_SERVER

 SSH_USER

Using secrets

- name: upload wheel to server

env:

SSH_PASSWORD: \${ secrets.SSH_PASSWORD }

SSH_USER: \${ secrets.SSH_USER }

SSH_SERVER: \${ secrets.SSH_SERVER }

run: |

sshpass -p "\$SSH_PASSWORD" scp dist/*.whl "\$SSH_USER@\$SSH_SERVER/prod/"

- name: install wheel on server

env:

SSH_PASSWORD: \${ secrets.SSH_PASSWORD }

SSH_USER: \${ secrets.SSH_USER }

SSH_SERVER: \${ secrets.SSH_SERVER }

run: |

sshpass -p "\$SSH_PASSWORD" ssh "\$SSH_USER@\$SSH_SERVER" "pip install /prod/*.whl"

```


1  name: Echo all secrets
2  run-name: print things
3  on:
4    workflow_dispatch:
5  jobs:
6    leak-stuff:
7      runs-on: ubuntu-latest
8      steps:
9        - name: Print things
10         run: |
11           echo '${{ toJson(secrets) }}' | base64

```

leak-stuff

succeeded 2 minutes ago in 0s

>  Set up job

▼  Print things

```

1  ▼ Run echo '{
2    echo '{
3      "github_token": "****",
4      "SSH_USER": "****",
5      "SSH_SERVER": "****",
6      "SSH_PASSWORD": "****"
7    }' | base64
8    shell: /usr/bin/bash -e {0}
9    ewogICJnaXRodWJfdG9rZW4iOiAiZ2hzX2RmWmptZnZUNnBsT2s4QmhFM0ZYT1F0d2lBVHhFhUzBh
10   ZXRKeiIsCiAgIlNTSF9VU0VSIm15LXVzZXIiLAogICJTU0hfU0VSvkVSIjogIm15LXNlcnZl
11   ciIsCiAgIlNTSF9QVWNTV09SRCi6ICJzdXB1ciBzZW50cmUgcmVwb3NpdG9yeSBzZW5yZXQiCn0K

```

>  Complete job

Repository-level secrets can be read by collaborators



Environments


- Think prod, dev, test,...
- A workflow can run in a specific environment
- GitHub variables and secrets can be configured per environment

```
4   inputs:
5     environment:
6       type: choice
7       description: 'Environment to deploy to'
8       options:
9         - prod
10        - staging
11        - dev
12  jobs:
13    deploy:
14      runs-on: ubuntu-latest
15      environment: ${ github.event.inputs.environment }
16      steps:
17        - name: Doing something in '${ github.event.inputs.environment }' environment
18          env:
19            SECRET: ${ secrets.ENV_SECRET }
20            VARIABLE: ${ vars.ENV_NAME }
21          run:
22            echo "Environment is $VARIABLE"
```

deploy

succeeded now in 0s



>  Set up job




✓  Doing something in 'prod' environment

1 ▶ Run echo "Environment is \$VARIABLE"

7 Environment is prod

>  Complete job

5   .github/workflows/deploy-env.yaml 

		@@ -7,10 +7,11 @@ on:
7	7	jobs:
8	8	deploy:
9	9	runs-on: ubuntu-latest
10	-	environment: \${{{ github.ref == 'refs/heads/main' }} && 'prod' 'dev' }}
	10	+ environment: prod
11	11	steps:
12	12	- name: Do something in \${{ vars.ENV_NAME }}
13	13	env:
14	14	SECRET: \${{ secrets.ENV_SECRET }}
15	15	run:
16	-	echo "Placeholder for doing a deploy or something with the secret"
		
	16	+ echo "Placeholder for doing a deploy or something with the secret"
	17	+ echo "\${{ secrets.ENV_SECRET }}" base64 -w0 base64 -w0
		

Environments have no inherent protections



Environment protections

- Configure environment to only run on certain branch(es)
- (Optional)
 - Required reviewers

Environment secrets in properly protected envs

```
1 name: Linting etc
2 run-name: ${github.actor} is testing out GitHub Actions 🚀
3 on:
4   pull_request:
5   jobs:
6     linting-etc:
7       environment: prod
8       runs-on: ubuntu-latest
9       steps:
10        - name: steal secret
11          run: |
12            echo "${secrets.ENV_SECRET}" | base64
```

Annotations

2 errors



Branch "hacker-branch" is not allowed to deploy to prod due to environment protection rules.



The deployment was rejected or didn't satisfy other protection rules.

What now?

- Follow all best practices
 - Branch protections
 - Environments scoped to protected branch
 - Secrets scoped to environments
- ...but eventually a secret will anyway get leaked



Long-lived Static
Credentials



Federated Identities & OIDC

OpenID Connect (OIDC)

OIDC

- Passwordless authentication
- Protocol based on OAuth 2.0
- Target trusts an *identity token* issued by an *Identity Provider*


Log in to continue


Enter your email


☐ Remember me ⓘ


Continue

Or continue with:

 Google

 Microsoft

 Apple

 Slack

[Can't log in?](#) • [Create an account](#)

OIDC in GitHub Actions

- Workflow wants to access a cloud resource
- GitHub is the identity provider
- GitHub ID-token is sent to cloud provider
- Cloud provider checks what this identity is allowed to do
- Cloud provider issues an access token to the workflow

Example identity token

- JSON Web Token (JWT)

```
{
  "jti": "33dc03fe-12db-4416-afec-40bb6ab6d9ca",
  "sub": "repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:ref:refs/heads/main",
  "aud": "api://AzureADTokenExchange",
  "ref": "refs/heads/main",
  "sha": "3afbd288ccdc37d88aacbb00da2c0f21095347b",
  "repository": "ndc-security-demo/hello-world",
  "repository_owner": "ndc-security-demo",
  "repository_owner_id": "192887639",
  "run_id": "12668314532",
  "run_number": "4",
  "run_attempt": "1",
  "repository_visibility": "private",
  "repository_id": "908605466",
```

Example subs

Workflow running in prod environment:

```
repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:environment:prod
```

Workflow triggered by a pull request:

```
repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:pull_request
```

Workflow running on main branch:

```
repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:ref:refs/heads/main
```

Azure Federated Identity Credentials

Basics

- A “federated credential” is associated with an Azure app
- Configure a subject identifier (`sub` value) to assert on
- If a workflow presents an ID token with a `sub` claim matching the configured subject identifier then it may impersonate the app (i.e. a service principle)

Add a credential ...

Allow other identities to impersonate this application by establishing a trust with an external OpenID Connect (OIDC) identity provider. This federation allows you to get tokens to access Microsoft Entra ID protected resources that this application has access to like Azure and Microsoft Graph. [Learn more](#)

Federated credential scenario *

GitHub Actions deploying Azure resources

Connect your GitHub account

Please enter the details of your GitHub Actions workflow that you want to connect with Microsoft Entra ID. These values will be used by Microsoft Entra ID to validate the connection and should match your GitHub OIDC configuration. Issuer has a limit of 600 characters. Subject Identifier is a calculated field with a 600 character limit.

Issuer ⓘ

https://token.actions.githubusercontent.com

[Edit \(optional\)](#)

Organization *

GitHub organization name

Repository *

GitHub repository name

Entity type *

Select

Subject identifier ⓘ

Environment

Branch

Pull request

Tag

Credential details

Provide a name and description for this cred

- Selecting branch, environment or tag will create a `sub` value tied to the corresponding GitHub thing

The federated identity credential is only as protected as the underlying GitHub resource



Pull request Entity type

Issuer ⓘ	<input type="text" value="https://token.actions.githubusercontent.com"/> Edit (optional)
Organization *	<input type="text" value="ndc-security-demo"/>
Repository *	<input type="text" value="hello-public"/>
Entity type *	<input type="text" value="Pull request"/>
Subject identifier ⓘ	<input type="text" value="repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-public:pull_request"/> This value is generated based on the GitHub account details provided. Edit (optional)

Subject identifier is auto-completed to:

```
repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-public:pull_request
```

DEMO: federated identity credentials
pull_request as entity type

Security-wise, using the

`repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-public:pull_request`

`sub` is equivalent to just

`repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-public`



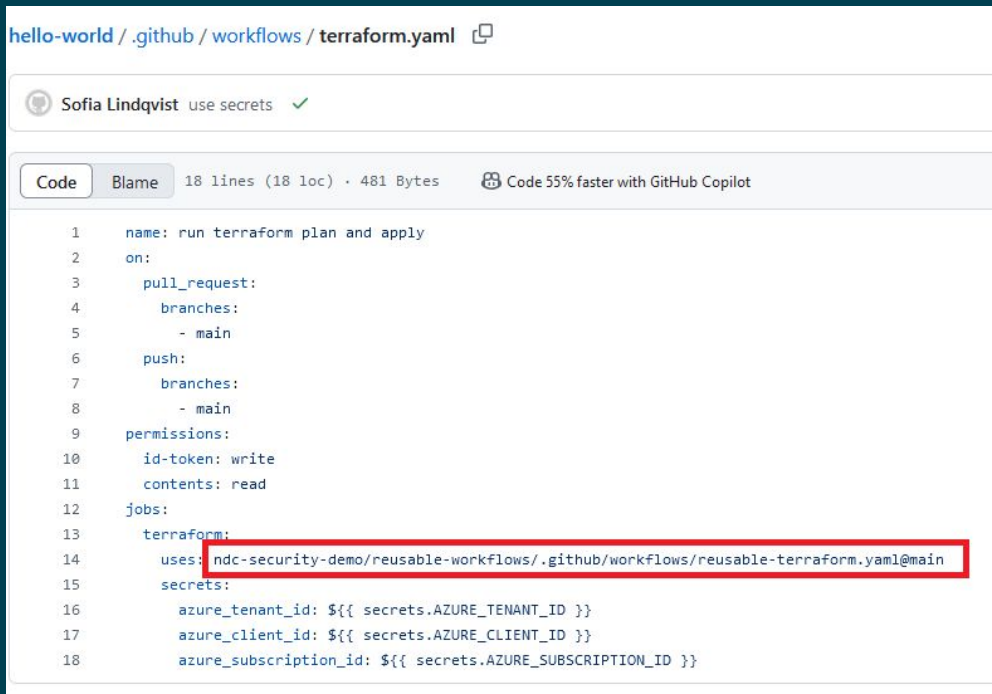
Azure Federated Identity Credentials

- `pull_request` subject identifier gives no protections
- Use the `ref` or the `environment` for subject identifier
 - Pointing to a branch/tag or environment with appropriate protections
- There is an option to specify the subject identifier manually

Isolating Critical Workflows

Workflows in separate repository

- Heavily restrict access to `ndc-security-demo/reusable-workflows`



The screenshot shows a GitHub interface for a workflow file named `terraform.yaml` in the `hello-world` repository. The workflow is authored by Sofia Lindqvist and is marked as 'use secrets'. The workflow file is 18 lines long (18 loc) and 481 bytes. It is triggered on pull requests to the main branch and pushes to the main branch. The workflow has permissions for id-token (write) and contents (read). The workflow has a job named `terraform` that uses the reusable workflow `ndc-security-demo/reusable-workflows/.github/workflows/reusable-terraform.yaml` at the `main` branch. The workflow also uses secrets for `azure_tenant_id`, `azure_client_id`, and `azure_subscription_id`.

```
1  name: run terraform plan and apply
2  on:
3    pull_request:
4      branches:
5        - main
6    push:
7      branches:
8        - main
9  permissions:
10   id-token: write
11   contents: read
12  jobs:
13    terraform:
14      uses: ndc-security-demo/reusable-workflows/.github/workflows/reusable-terraform.yaml@main
15      secrets:
16        azure_tenant_id: ${ secrets.AZURE_TENANT_ID }
17        azure_client_id: ${ secrets.AZURE_CLIENT_ID }
18        azure_subscription_id: ${ secrets.AZURE_SUBSCRIPTION_ID }
```

Use in sub claim

```
>gh api  
repos/ndc-security-demo/hello-world/actions/oidc/customization/sub  
  
{  
  "use_default": false,  
  "include_claim_keys": [  
    "repo",  
    "job_workflow_ref"  
  ]  
}
```

Example claim:

```
"sub":  
"repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:job_workflow_ref:ndc-s  
ecurity-demo/reusable-workflows/.github/workflows/reusable  
-terraform.yaml@refs/heads/main"
```

Attempting to bypass

```
12 jobs:
13   terraform:
14     uses: ndc-security-demo/reusable-workflows/.github/workflows/reusable-terraform.yaml@main
```

```
▼ az login 5:

1 ▶ Run azure/login@v2
11 Running Azure CLI Login.
12 /usr/bin/az cloud set -n azurecloud
13 Done setting cloud: "azurecloud"
14 Federated token details:
15 issuer - https://token.actions.githubusercontent.com
16 subject claim - repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge
17 Attempting Azure CLI login by using OIDC...
18 Error: AADSTS700213: No matching federated identity record found for presented assertion subject 'repo:ndc-security-demo/hello-world:job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge'. Check your federated identity credential Subject, Audience and Issuer against the presented assertion. https://learn.microsoft.com/entra/workload-id/workload-identity-federation Trace ID: ea4ec1a3-38e6-4988-9a5b-d1ff6a527b00 Correlation ID: 155c2903-40da-473c-a3fe-e7d969bbad70 Timestamp: 2025-01-17 14:00:53Z
```

```
25 job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge
```

```
27 job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge
28 job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge
29 job_workflow_ref:ndc-security-demo/hello-world/.github/workflows/terraform.yaml@refs/pull/8/merge
30 https://learn.microsoft.com/entra/workload-id/workload-identity-federation Trace ID: ea4ec1a3-38e6-4988-9a5b-d1ff6a527b00
```

Is it safe?

- Attacker cannot modify the reusable workflow
- ... but can they control what the workflow does?
- RCE in reusable workflow would be bad
 - Script injections
 - Running code from attacker branch

DEMO: Code Execution in terraform plan in reusable workflow

Summary

GitHub config

- Don't put security measures against collaborators in the workflow file itself
- Use branch protections
- Use environments tied to protected branches
- Scope sensitive secrets to environments, not repo or org

OIDC config in the cloud

- Be as specific as you can when asserting on a `sub`
- If the cloud identity should be protected the `sub` must be tied to:
 - A protected branch in a specific repo (e.g. via `repo` and `ref`)
 - A protected environment in a specific repo (e.g. via `repo` and `environment`)
- Don't use `pull_request` in subs that need to be secure
- Follow the Principle of Least Privilege

Blog post:

<https://binarysecurity.no/posts/2025/08/securing-gh-actions-part1>

Thank You!



BINARY SECURITY