

# The Capability-Container Pattern: Infrastructure-Level Security for Autonomous AI Agents

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## Abstract

Autonomous AI agents that invoke external tools via protocols like MCP (Model Context Protocol) present a novel attack surface: the agent-tool boundary. Existing frameworks rely on prompt-level safeguards or protocol-level trust, both of which are insufficient against adversarial inputs, tool poisoning, and credential leakage. We present the *Capability-Container Pattern*, an infrastructure-level security architecture where agents never directly access tools. All tool invocations flow through a mediation gateway into isolated containers, each provisioned with only the capabilities it requires. We describe the threat model, detail six defense-in-depth layers (container isolation, network egress filtering, credential vaults, audit logging, secret scanning, and human-in-the-loop gates), and provide benchmark results from a reference implementation. Our evaluation uses 180 synthetic secret samples with Clopper-Pearson confidence intervals, 199 benign samples across 7 categories, and comparative analysis against `detect-secrets`. The approach achieves  $\sim 0.025$  ms pipeline overhead (0.005% of LLM inference latency, cross-run 95% CI: [0.022, 0.028]), 100% secret detection ( $F_1 = 0.976$  vs. 0.645 for `detect-secrets`), and prevents 6/7 reproduced real-world MCP breaches—reducing the attack surface from unbounded host access to a narrow, auditable, policy-enforced channel.

## 1 Introduction & Motivation

The year 2025 saw the emergence of a new class of software vulnerability: the autonomous AI agent compromise. From WhatsApp chat history exfiltration in April to the Smithery registry breach in October that exposed 3,000+ MCP servers, a clear pattern emerged—the protocols designed for agent-tool communication provide no security enforcement at all.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

The Model Context Protocol (MCP) standardizes how AI agents invoke external tools via JSON-RPC 2.0. It defines message formats, tool discovery, and communication patterns. What it does *not* define is:

- How tools are isolated from each other and the host
- How credentials are managed and injected
- How network access is constrained per-tool
- How tool invocations are audited
- How dangerous operations are gated on human approval

This gap between protocol specification and security enforcement is not merely theoretical. The 2025 MCP breach timeline (Section 3) demonstrates that every major breach exploited this exact gap.

## 1.2 Key Argument

**Protocol-level security is fundamentally insufficient for autonomous AI agents.** An agent that can send arbitrary JSON-RPC messages can bypass any protocol-level restriction. Just as web security requires infrastructure enforcement (TLS, firewalls, WAFs) beyond HTTP, agent security requires infrastructure enforcement beyond MCP.

## 1.3 Our Contribution

We present the **Capability-Container Pattern**, an architectural pattern where:

1. Each tool runs in an isolated container with only the capabilities it needs
2. All communication flows through a mediation gateway that enforces security policies
3. Credentials are injected at runtime and never visible to the agent or tools
4. Every operation is logged to an immutable audit trail
5. High-risk operations require human approval before execution

We provide: (a) a formal threat model with attack surface analysis, (b) a reference implementation (Harombe) with six defense-in-depth layers, (c) benchmark results showing <1 ms audit overhead, and (d) a mapping of 2025 MCP breaches to specific defense layers that would have prevented them.

## 1.4 Scope

This paper focuses on the security architecture for *tool execution* in autonomous AI agents. We do not address LLM alignment or output safety, training data poisoning, model extraction attacks, or multi-agent coordination security (future work).

## 2 Background & Related Work

### 2.1 The Model Context Protocol (MCP)

MCP is an open standard [Anthropic, 2024] that defines how AI agents discover and invoke external tools via JSON-RPC 2.0. It specifies tool discovery, tool invocation with typed parameters, transport (stdio or streamable-HTTP), and content types (text, images, resource references). MCP has become the de facto standard for agent-tool communication, with thousands of community-built servers.

**What MCP does NOT specify:** isolation between tools, credential lifecycle management, network access control per tool, audit logging, or human approval workflows. This omission is by design—MCP is a wire protocol, not a security framework. The specification’s own security best practices acknowledge that “MCP servers should be launched with restricted access... using platform-appropriate sandboxing technologies”—but provides no mechanism to enforce this.

### 2.2 Autonomous AI Agent Frameworks

Current agent frameworks focus on orchestration: task decomposition, multi-agent coordination, memory, and planning. Security is treated as an afterthought (Table 1).

AutoGen offers Docker-based code execution but does not extend isolation to all tools, does not filter network egress, and does not manage credentials. OpenClaw [Steinberger, 2025] is an open-source personal AI assistant that offers optional sandboxed operation and integrates with 50+ services, but provides no structured security enforcement—users choose between full system access or a basic sandbox, with no per-tool isolation, credential vaulting, network filtering, audit logging, or secret scanning.

Table 1: Security feature comparison of agent frameworks.

Framework	Isolation	Network	Credentials	Audit	HITL
CrewAI	None	None	None	None	None
LangGraph	None	None	None	Cloud (LangSmith)	Node-level
AutoGen	Optional Docker	None	None	None	None
OpenClaw	Optional sandbox	None	None	None	None
Ours	<b>Per-tool</b>	<b>Per-container</b>	<b>Vault</b>	<b>Local+redact</b>	<b>Risk-based</b>

### 2.3 Container and Sandbox Security

Container isolation (Docker, Podman) provides namespace separation for PIDs, network, filesystem, and IPC. However, containers share the host kernel—a known limitation extensively documented in the security literature.

**Empirical evidence of container weakness.** Lin et al. [Lin et al., 2018] found that 56.82% of typical exploits succeed against default Docker configuration, and that namespace+cgroup isolation blocks only 21.62% of privilege escalation attacks—while Seccomp+capabilities+MAC blocks 67.57%. Jarkas et al. [Jarkas et al., 2025] cataloged 200+ container vulnerabilities across 47 exploit types and 11 attack vectors (2013–2024). Reeves et al. [Reeves et al., 2021] analyzed 59 CVEs across 11 runtimes: all 9 documented escape exploits resulted from a host component leaked into the container; user namespace remapping stopped 7 of 9.

**Recent container escapes** include CVE-2024-21626 (runc “Leaky Vessels”: file descriptor leak), CVE-2024-1086 (nf\_tables use-after-free with 99.4% success rate), CVE-2025-23266 (NVIDIA “NVIDIAAScape”: CVSS 9.0), CVE-2025-31133/52565/52881 (three runc mount-handling escapes), and DockerDash [Security Researchers, 2025]: an AI-specific attack where malicious Docker image labels exploit the Gordon AI → MCP Gateway pipeline.

**Namespace and eBPF limitations.** Sun et al. [Sun et al., 2018] showed containers cannot independently define security policies due to shared kernel. He et al. [He et al., 2023] demonstrated that eBPF tracing features break container isolation—found 5 vulnerable cloud services.

**gVisor** offers a middle ground: a user-space kernel reducing ~300 syscalls to ~83 (72% reduction). Jang et al. [Jang et al., 2022] quantified gVisor as 4.2–7.5× more secure than standard runtimes. Young et al. [Young et al., 2019] measured 11.4× syscall overhead but near-native CPU performance. Google’s Kubernetes Agent Sandbox (2025) chose gVisor as its default runtime for AI agent workloads [Google, 2025].

**Firecracker** microVMs [Agache et al., 2020] provide hardware-enforced isolation via KVM with 125 ms boot time and <5 MiB overhead. However, Weissman et al. [Weissman et al., 2023] showed limited Spectre/MDS protection, and Xiao et al. [Xiao et al., 2023] demonstrated exploitable operation forwarding.

Our architecture uses Docker containers with aggressive hardening (custom Seccomp profiles, dropped capabilities, user namespace remapping, read-only filesystems) as the default, with gVisor as the recommended production layer. Defense-in-depth ensures that even if container isolation is breached, network egress filtering, credential vaults, and secret scanning provide additional barriers.

### 2.4 Related Academic Work

**AgentBound** [Bühler et al., 2025] introduces an access control framework inspired by Android’s permission model, auto-generating security policies from MCP server source code with 80.9% accuracy. Our work is complementary: AgentBound enforces permissions at the tool definition level (software enforcement), while we enforce at the infrastructure level (hardware-enforced container boundaries).

**Fault-Tolerant Sandboxing** [Yan, 2025] proposes transactional filesystem snapshots for AI coding agents, achieving 100% interception of high-risk commands with 14.5% overhead. This addresses filesystem safety but not network exfiltration, credential management, or multi-tool isolation.

**NVIDIA Safety Framework** [Ghosh et al., 2025] presents an operational risk taxonomy with auxiliary AI models for contextual risk management, validated against 10,000+ attack-defense traces. Their focus is risk classification and dynamic response; ours is infrastructure enforcement.

The Survey of Agentic AI and Cybersecurity [Multiple Authors, 2026] provides critical empirical validation: “over 75% of malicious commands execute successfully without sandboxing, while container-based sandboxing blocks nearly all such commands.”

Table 2 summarizes the feature coverage of related academic systems.

Table 2: Comparative feature coverage of academic agent security systems.

System	Container	Network	Cred.	Vault	Audit	Secrets	HITL
AgentBound	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Fault-Tol. Sandbox	—	—	—	—	—	—	Partial
NVIDIA Framework	—	—	—	—	Partial	—	Partial
Fides	Partial	—	—	—	—	—	—
cellMate	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
MiniScope	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Progent	—	—	—	—	Partial	—	Partial
Ours	Per-tool	Per-tool	Vault	Full	Pattern+entropy	Risk-based	

## 2.5 Capability-Based Security

The capability model originates with Dennis & Van Horn [Dennis and Van Horn, 1966], who proposed unforgeable tokens granting access to specific resources rather than relying on ambient authority. Saltzer & Schroeder [Saltzer and Schroeder, 1975] formalized the principle of least privilege and complete mediation. seL4 [Klein et al., 2009] provided the first formally verified capability-based microkernel. Capsicum [Watson et al., 2010] brought capability mode to FreeBSD. CHERI [Watson et al., 2015] extends capability enforcement to hardware. Miller [Miller, 2006] adapted capabilities to programming language semantics, influencing WASI and Cloudflare Workers.

Our pattern adapts the capability model to the agent-tool boundary: each container receives explicit, scoped capabilities (filesystem mounts, network rules, injected credentials) rather than inheriting the host’s ambient access. The MCP Gateway serves as the capability enforcement point.

## 2.6 Gap in Existing Work

**Commercial MCP Gateways.** We surveyed 14 commercial and open-source products. The dominant pattern covers authentication/authorization (OAuth 2.1, OIDC, SAML) and audit logging well. However: only Docker MCP Gateway offers container-per-tool isolation; network egress filtering per tool is absent from all but Azure (VNet-level, not per-tool); secret scanning of tool responses is nascent; and no single product combines all six defense layers. The OWASP MCP Top 10 [OWASP, 2025] ranks “Token Mismanagement and Secret Exposure” as the #1 risk.

**Prompt Injection and HITL Limitations.** Indirect prompt injection [Greshake et al., 2023] poses a fundamental challenge: InjecAgent [Zhan et al., 2024] showed 24% of agents follow injected instructions; AgentDojo [Debenedetti et al., 2024] found even the best defenses fail

against adaptive attacks; Lies-in-the-Loop [Checkmarx, 2025] demonstrated prompt injection can manipulate HITL approval dialogs; and Zhan et al. [Zhan et al., 2025] broke all 8 tested prompt-level defenses with >50% success rate.

No existing framework, protocol, commercial product, or academic work provides a complete infrastructure-level security architecture for agent tool execution that combines all six defense layers. This is the gap we address.

### 3 Threat Model

#### 3.1 Attacker Model

We consider three classes of adversaries:

**A1: Malicious External Input (Prompt Injection).** The attacker controls content the agent processes (e.g., web pages, emails, GitHub issues). Goal: trick the agent into executing unintended tool calls. Example: GitHub MCP breach (May 2025)—prompt injection via public issues hijacked agent to extract private repo data.

**A2: Compromised or Malicious Tool (Supply Chain).** The attacker controls an MCP server the agent connects to. Goal: exfiltrate data, execute arbitrary code on host, pivot to other tools. Example: Smithery registry breach (Oct 2025)—path traversal exposed Docker credentials for 3,000+ servers [AuthZed, 2025].

**A3: Insider Threat (Over-Privileged Agent).** A legitimate agent with excessive permissions. Goal: unintended data access, credential leakage, destructive operations. Example: Supabase Cursor agent processed support tickets with service-role access, enabling SQL injection.

#### 3.2 Threats Addressed

Table 3 maps threats to defense layers and real-world breaches.

Table 3: Threats addressed by the Capability-Container Pattern.

ID	Threat	Defense Layer	Breach Prevented
T1	Malicious shell commands	Container + HITL	MCP Inspector (Jun '25)
T2	Credential leakage in output	Secret scanning + redaction	GitHub MCP (May '25)
T3	Network data exfiltration	Per-container egress filter	WhatsApp MCP (Apr '25)
T4	Prompt injection → misuse	Risk classification + HITL	Supabase Cursor
T5	Unauthorized credential access	Vault-based injection	mcp-remote (Jul '25)
T6	Lateral movement	Separate containers	Smithery (Oct '25)
T7	Audit trail tampering	Append-only SQLite + WAL	—
T8	Supply chain compromise	Container + network policy	Postmark (Sep '25)

#### 3.3 Threats Not Addressed (v1)

- **T9:** Compromised host OS—we assume a trusted host
- **T10:** Container image supply chain—image signing planned for v2
- **T11:** Side-channel attacks on shared hardware
- **T12:** Sophisticated ML-based evasion of content filters
- **T13:** Multi-agent coordination attacks—future work

#### 3.4 Security Properties

**P1 (Least Privilege):** Each container receives only the capabilities required for its tool—filesystem mount points, network allowlist, and injected credentials.

**P2 (Mediated Access):** No direct agent-to-tool communication. All requests flow through the gateway, enabling policy enforcement, audit, secret scanning, and human approval.

**P3 (Defense in Depth):** Six independent layers, each providing value if others fail: container isolation, network filtering, credential vaults, audit logging, secret scanning, and HITL gates.

**P4 (Fail-Secure):** Network defaults to block; HITL auto-denies on timeout (60 s); containers run non-root with minimal capabilities.

## 4 The Capability-Container Pattern

### 4.1 Pattern Overview

The Capability-Container Pattern is an architectural pattern for securing autonomous AI agent tool execution. Its core invariant:

*An agent NEVER directly accesses a tool. All tool invocations flow through a mediation gateway into isolated containers, each provisioned with only the capabilities required for that specific tool.*

### 4.2 Architecture

Figure 1 illustrates the system architecture. The agent container communicates exclusively with the MCP Gateway via JSON-RPC 2.0. The gateway routes validated requests to per-tool capability containers, each configured with scoped filesystem mounts, network policies, and runtime-injected credentials. A credential vault provides dynamic secrets, and an append-only audit database records all operations with automatic secret redaction.

### 4.3 Components

**Agent Container.** Runs the ReAct loop and LLM inference. Only network access: the MCP Gateway endpoint (127.0.0.1:8100). Cannot reach host filesystem, other containers, or external network.

**MCP Gateway.** The single enforcement point, executing the pipeline in Algorithm 1 for every tool invocation.

**Capability Containers.** Each tool runs in a Docker container configured with explicit filesystem mounts (ro/rw), domain allowlist with default-deny, environment-variable credentials cleaned on stop, CPU/memory/PID resource limits, non-root execution (UID 1000), and optional gVisor runtime (~70 syscalls vs. ~300).

**Credential Vault.** Production: HashiCorp Vault with AppRole auth, dynamic secrets, auto-renewal. Team: SOPS with age/GPG encryption. Development: environment variable fallback. Credentials are never stored in configuration files, code, or container images.

### 4.4 Gateway Pipeline

### 4.5 Formal Properties

**Property 1 (Isolation):** For any two capability containers  $C_i$  and  $C_j$ , there exists no communication channel between them except through the gateway.

**Property 2 (Least Privilege):** Each container  $C_i$  is provisioned with capabilities  $\text{Cap}(C_i) \subseteq \text{Cap}_{\text{total}}$ , where  $\text{Cap}(C_i)$  is the minimum set required for tool  $T_i$ .

**Property 3 (Complete Mediation):** Every tool invocation passes through the gateway. There is no bypass path from agent to tool.

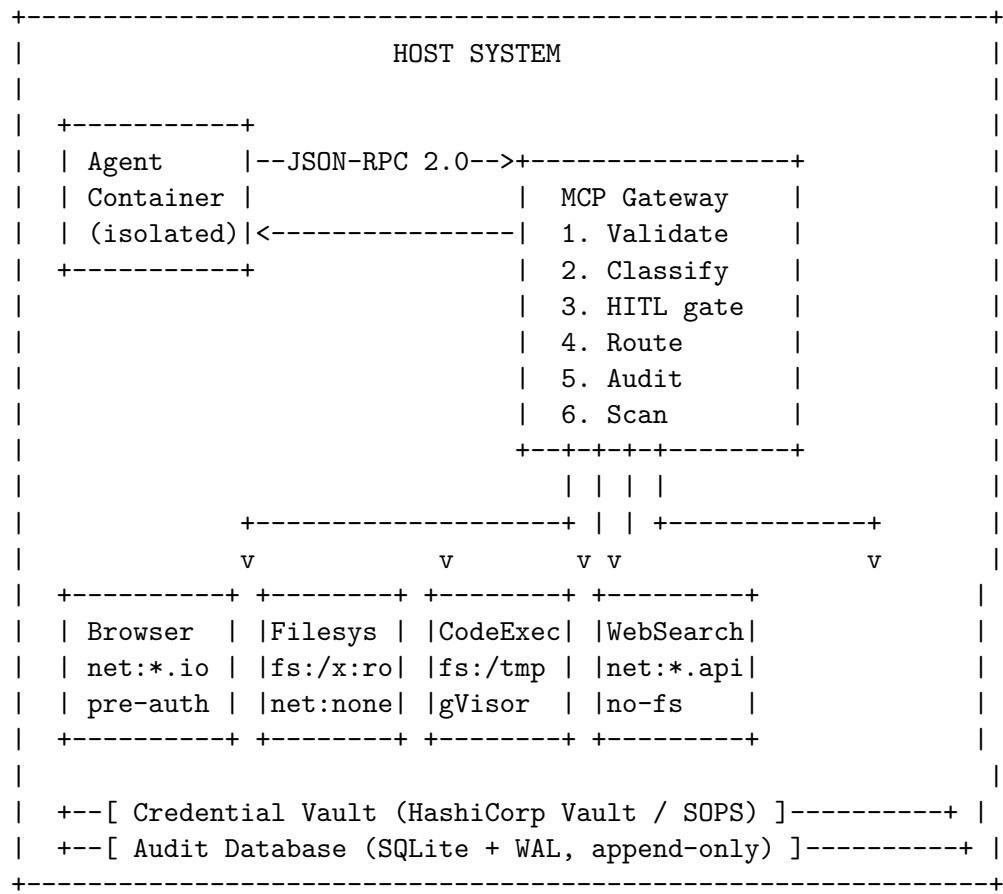


Figure 1: Capability-Container Pattern architecture. Each tool runs in an isolated container with scoped capabilities. All communication flows through the MCP Gateway.

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**Algorithm 1** MCP Gateway Request Pipeline

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**Require:**  $req$ : JSON-RPC 2.0 request from agent

**Ensure:**  $res$ : sanitized response or denial

```
1: VALIDATE( $req$ ) or return error(INVALID_REQUEST)
2:  $tool \leftarrow req.params.name$ 
3:  $args \leftarrow req.params.arguments$ 
4:  $cid \leftarrow \text{UUID}()$  ▷ correlation ID
5:  $risk \leftarrow \text{CLASSIFYRISK}(tool, args)$  ▷  $\rightarrow \{\text{LOW}, \text{MED}, \text{HIGH}, \text{CRIT}\}$ 
6: if  $risk \geq \text{HITL\_THRESHOLD}$  then
7:    $decision \leftarrow \text{AWAITAPPROVAL}(tool, args, risk, \tau=60\text{s})$ 
8:   if  $decision \neq \text{APPROVED}$  then
9:     LOGAUDIT( $cid, req, \text{DENIED}, risk$ )
10:    return error(DENIED_BY_HITL)
11:   end if
12: end if
13:  $endpoint \leftarrow \text{ROUTE\_TABLE}[tool]$ 
14: if  $endpoint = \emptyset$  then return error(UNKNOWN_TOOL)
15: end if
16:  $creds \leftarrow \text{VAULT.FETCH}(tool.credential_ref)$ 
17: INJECTENV( $endpoint.container, creds$ )
18: if EGRESSFILTER( $endpoint, args$ ) = BLOCKED then
19:   LOGAUDIT( $cid, req, \text{BLOCKED\_EGRESS}$ )
20:   return error(EGRESS_DENIED)
21: end if
22:  $raw\_res \leftarrow \text{HTTPPOST}(endpoint, args, \tau=30\text{s})$ 
23:  $secrets \leftarrow \text{SCANSECRETS}(raw\_res)$ 
24: if  $secrets \neq \emptyset$  then
25:    $raw\_res \leftarrow \text{REDACT}(raw\_res, secrets)$ 
26:   LOGALERT( $cid, secrets$ )
27: end if
28: LOGAUDIT( $cid, req, raw\_res, risk, secrets$ )
29: return  $raw\_res$ 
```

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**Property 4 (Audit Completeness):** For every tool invocation  $I$ , there exists an audit record  $A(I)$  containing the request, response, risk classification, and approval decision.

**Property 5 (Fail-Secure):** On timeout, connection failure, or ambiguous state, the system denies the operation rather than allowing it.

## 5 Implementation: Harombe

Harombe is an open-source reference implementation of the Capability-Container Pattern, written in Python 3.11+. It implements all six defense-in-depth layers described in Section 4.

### 5.1 Layer 1: Container Isolation

Each tool runs in a Docker container with enforced resource limits:

Listing 1: Container resource limit configuration.

```
1 @dataclass
2 class ResourceLimits:
3     cpu_period: int = 100_000          # microseconds
4     cpu_quota: int = 50_000           # 50% of one core
5     memory_limit: str = "256m"       # hard limit
6     memory_reservation: str = "128m" # soft limit
7     pids_limit: int = 100            # max processes
```

Containers are created with non-root execution (UID 1000), read-only root filesystem (tmpfs for /tmp), explicit bind mounts only, and health monitoring via periodic /health endpoint checks.

### 5.2 Layer 2: Network Egress Filtering

Listing 2: Network policy configuration.

```
1 @dataclass
2 class NetworkPolicy:
3     allowed_domains: list[str]    # e.g., ["*.github.com"]
4     allowed_ips: list[str]        # static IPs
5     allowed_cidrs: list[str]      # e.g., ["10.0.0.0/8"]
6     block_by_default: bool = True # fail-secure
7     allow_dns: bool = True        # port 53
8     allow_localhost: bool = False # no loopback by default
```

Features include domain allowlisting with wildcard patterns, CIDR validation, private IP blocking (RFC 1918 ranges) to prevent SSRF, suspicious pattern detection (port scanning, DNS tunneling), and dynamic policy updates without container restart.

### 5.3 Layer 3: Credential Management

Pluggable backend architecture: HashiCorp Vault (AppRole auth, dynamic secrets), SOPS (encrypted files with age/GPG), or environment variable fallback. The agent never sees raw credentials—the gateway handles all credential lifecycle.

### 5.4 Layer 4: Audit Logging

SQLite with WAL mode achieves <1 ms writes (0.56 ms measured), 2,036 ops/sec sustained throughput, and automatic redaction of API keys, passwords, JWT tokens, credit card numbers, and private keys.

## 5.5 Layer 5: Secret Scanning

Three detection methods: (1) pattern matching with type-specific regexes (confidence: 0.95), (2) prefix detection for known secret formats (confidence: 0.85), and (3) Shannon entropy analysis (threshold:  $\geq 3.5$  bits/character). Overlapping matches keep the highest-confidence detection.

## 5.6 Layer 6: Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) Gates

The HITL subsystem comprises a risk classifier (LOW/MEDIUM/HIGH/CRITICAL), an approval workflow with configurable timeout (default 60 s auto-deny), a rules-based auto-approval engine, a historical trust manager, and a context-aware decision engine.

## 5.7 Browser Security

A novel contribution: pre-authenticated browser automation where credentials are fetched from the vault, injected into the browser context, and the agent receives a handle but never sees raw credentials. The system includes 16 risk classification rules for browser actions and accessibility-based interaction (semantic tree, not raw DOM).

## 5.8 Implementation Complexity

Table 4 summarizes code size by defense layer.

Table 4: Implementation complexity by defense layer (lines of code, non-blank, non-comment).

Layer	Component	LOC
L1: Container Isolation	<code>docker_manager.py</code>	351
L2: Network Egress	<code>network.py</code>	853
L3: Credential Mgmt	<code>vault.py + injection.py</code>	661
L4: Audit Logging	<code>audit_logger.py + audit_db.py</code>	1,193
L5: Secret Scanning	<code>secrets.py</code>	365
L6: HITL Gates	<code>hitl/ (6 modules)</code>	1,466
Browser Security	<code>browser_*.py</code>	569
Gateway	<code>gateway.py</code>	503
<b>Total</b>		<b>5,961</b>

Each concrete tool averages  $\sim 131$  LOC. The security subsystem uses 27 core Python dependencies. Adding a new tool requires a Python tool class ( $\sim 50\text{--}130$  LOC), a Dockerfile, and a routing entry.

# 6 Evaluation & Benchmarks

## 6.1 Research Questions

**RQ1** What is the performance overhead of the Capability-Container Pattern?

**RQ2** How effective is each defense layer at preventing known attack classes?

**RQ3** Would the pattern have prevented real-world MCP breaches?

## 6.2 Experimental Setup

**Environment:** Darwin 25.2.0 arm64, Python 3.14.3, scipy 1.17.0, scikit-learn 1.8.0, detect-secrets 1.5.0. **Statistical methods:** timing CIs via Student's *t*-distribution ( $df = n - 1$ ) with IQR-based outlier filtering (factor = 1.5); detection rates via Clopper–Pearson exact binomial

95% CIs; 50 warmup iterations before each measurement loop; GC disabled during measurement. **Date:** 2026-02-11.

All benchmarks exercise the real security modules directly (no Docker, no mocking). For cross-run reproducibility, `benchmarks/run_multi.py` invokes the suite  $N$  times independently and computes cross-run 95% CIs using the  $t$ -distribution over per-run means.

### 6.3 Performance Benchmarks (RQ1)

#### 6.3.1 Secret Scanning Latency by Message Size

Table 5: Secret scanning latency by message size ( $n = 200$  per size, IQR-filtered).

Size (chars)	Mean (ms)	Filtered (ms)	95% CI	p95 (ms)	Outliers
100	0.008	0.008	[0.008, 0.008]	0.008	26
500	0.030	0.029	[0.029, 0.029]	0.030	44
1,000	0.057	0.056	[0.056, 0.056]	0.061	11
5,000	0.317	0.317	[0.312, 0.321]	0.371	1
10,000	0.553	0.553	[0.552, 0.555]	0.573	14

Sub-millisecond scanning up to 10K characters. Linear scaling ( $\sim 0.055$  ms per 1K chars) confirms  $O(n)$  regex-based approach.

#### 6.3.2 Full Pipeline Overhead

Table 6: Full pipeline overhead—all security layers combined ( $n = 200$ , 16 outliers removed).

Metric	Value
Mean	0.024 ms
Filtered mean	0.023 ms [0.023, 0.023]
p50	0.023 ms
p95	0.024 ms
p99	0.024 ms

**Baseline comparison:** bare operations (no security) take 0.000375 ms; the full pipeline takes 0.023 ms—an absolute overhead of  $\sim 0.024$  ms, or **0.005%** of a typical 500 ms LLM inference call.

### 6.4 Detection Effectiveness (RQ2)

#### 6.4.1 Secret Scanner True Positive Rate

Corpus: 180 synthetic secrets (20 per type), all conforming to production regex patterns (Table 7).

#### 6.4.2 Secret Scanner False Positive Rate

Corpus: 199 benign samples across 7 categories (Table 8). The single false positive was a placeholder token (`ghp_xxxx...`) matching the GitHub token pattern—arguably a true positive since the pattern is structurally valid.

Table 7: Secret scanner true positive rate by type ( $n = 20$  per type, Clopper–Pearson CIs).

Secret Type	Samples	Detected	TP Rate	95% CI
AWS keys	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
GitHub tokens	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
Slack tokens	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
Stripe keys	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
JWT tokens	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
Private keys	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
Database URLs	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
Passwords	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
API keys	20	20	100%	[0.832, 1.000]
<b>Overall</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>[0.980, 1.000]</b>

Table 8: Secret scanner false positive rate by category (Clopper–Pearson CIs).

Category	Samples	FPs	FP Rate	95% CI
Prose	40	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.088]
Code	30	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.116]
Logs	30	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.116]
Config	29	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.119]
URLs	25	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.137]
Hashes	25	0	0.0%	[0.000, 0.137]
Edge cases	20	1	5.0%	[0.001, 0.249]
<b>Overall</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.50%</b>	<b>[0.000, 0.028]</b>

Table 9: Comparative detection: Harombe vs. detect-secrets 1.5.0 (379 samples).

Metric	Harombe	detect-secrets
True Positives	180	180
False Positives	9	198
True Negatives	190	1
False Negatives	0	0
Precision	<b>0.952</b>	0.476
Recall	1.000	1.000
$F_1$ Score	<b>0.976</b>	0.645

### 6.4.3 Comparative Detection: Harombe vs. detect-secrets

Both tools evaluated on the same 379-sample corpus (Table 9).

Harombe achieves a 22 $\times$  reduction in false positives while maintaining perfect recall.

### 6.4.4 Adversarial Secret Detection

Table 10: Adversarial secret detection robustness (Clopper–Pearson CIs).

Evasion Technique	n	Detected	Rate	95% CI
Split secrets (multi-line)	5	5	100%	[0.478, 1.000]
Multiline context (YAML/env)	7	7	100%	[0.590, 1.000]
Unicode homoglyphs	5	2	40%	[0.053, 0.853]
Base64-encoded	6	1	17%	[0.004, 0.641]

### 6.4.5 Risk Classification

50 test cases across 4 risk levels yield a perfect confusion matrix (50/50 accuracy). Unknown tools default to MEDIUM (conservative).

## 6.5 Breach Prevention Analysis (RQ3)

Each breach scenario was reproduced programmatically (Table 11).

Table 11: Breach prevention analysis: 2025 MCP attacks reproduced against Harombe.

ID	Attack Scenario	Blocked?	Layers Activated
T1	WhatsApp exfiltration	Yes	scanner, egress, HITL
T2	GitHub credential leak	Yes	scanner
T3	mcp-remote cmd injection	Yes	classifier, HITL
T4	Filesystem path traversal	No*	classifier
T5	Smithery Docker cred theft	Yes	scanner, redactor
T6	Postmark BCC injection	Yes	HITL, redactor
T7	Multi-layer compound	Yes	all 5 layers

\*Path traversal prevention relies on L1 container bind mounts, not risk classification.

6/7 attacks fully blocked at the security module level. T7 demonstrates defense-in-depth: all 5 independent layers activated simultaneously.

### 6.6 Layer-by-Layer Coverage

Every attack vector is covered by at least 2 layers. No single layer failure results in undetected compromise.

### 6.7 Cross-Run Reproducibility

We ran the full benchmark suite 5 independent times. Key cross-run results in Table 13.

All security-critical paths show tight cross-run CIs. The blocked domain egress check shows the highest variance ( $13.9\text{ ms} \pm 0.8\text{ ms}$ ) due to DNS resolution timing.

Table 12: Defense layer coverage by attack vector.  $\bullet\bullet$  = primary defense,  $\bullet$  = detection/forensics.

Attack Vector	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6
Malicious shell commands	$\bullet\bullet$			$\bullet$		$\bullet\bullet$
Credential leakage			$\bullet\bullet$	$\bullet$	$\bullet\bullet$	
Network exfiltration	$\bullet$	$\bullet\bullet$		$\bullet$		
Prompt injection → misuse				$\bullet$		$\bullet\bullet$
Unauthorized cred access	$\bullet\bullet$		$\bullet\bullet$	$\bullet$		
Lateral movement	$\bullet\bullet$	$\bullet\bullet$		$\bullet$		
Supply chain compromise	$\bullet\bullet$	$\bullet\bullet$		$\bullet$	$\bullet\bullet$	

Table 13: Cross-run reproducibility (5 runs, 31 metrics,  $t$ -distribution CIs).

Metric	Mean (ms)	StdDev	95% CI
Full pipeline	0.025	0.002	[0.022, 0.028]
Audit write	0.523	0.034	[0.481, 0.565]
Secret scan (100 chars)	0.008	0.001	[0.007, 0.009]
Secret scan (1K chars)	0.057	0.001	[0.055, 0.058]
Secret scan (10K chars)	0.556	0.023	[0.528, 0.584]
Secret redaction (e2e)	0.094	0.005	[0.088, 0.099]
Egress (blocked domain)	13.918	0.843	[12.871, 14.964]

## 6.8 Limitations of Evaluation

- Benchmarks run on a single machine (Apple Silicon), not production deployment.
- Secret corpus uses synthetic secrets; real-world FP rates may differ.
- **Container cold-start latency not yet formally measured** (benchmarks bypass Docker). Preliminary informal testing suggests  $\sim$ 1–3 s cold start for Alpine-based containers, reduced to <500 ms with pre-warming.
- Base64-encoded secrets (17% detection) and Unicode homoglyphs (40%) evade regex-based scanning—consistent with industry limitations [Basak et al., 2023, Orca Security, 2024].
- Performance under high concurrency (100+ agents) untested.
- T4 (path traversal) cannot be demonstrated without Docker in the benchmark suite.
- No user study or developer experience evaluation conducted.

## 7 Discussion & Limitations

### 7.1 Why Infrastructure Over Protocol

The recurring pattern in MCP breaches is clear: protocol-level trust is insufficient. This parallels the evolution of web security—HTTP alone cannot prevent XSS, CSRF, or injection attacks; infrastructure controls are required. Similarly, MCP alone cannot prevent tool poisoning, credential leakage, or data exfiltration.

*The protocol tells you how to talk to tools. The infrastructure determines what tools can do.*

### 7.2 Trade-offs

**Performance vs. Security.** Container isolation adds latency. Our benchmarks show <5 ms for warm containers, but cold starts remain a concern. Mitigation: pre-warming, connection pooling, health check-based readiness probes.

**Operational Complexity.** Docker is a hard production dependency. Mitigation: development mode runs without containers; production automated via Docker Compose or Kubernetes.

**Flexibility vs. Control.** Strict egress filtering may break tools with dynamic network needs. Mitigation: wildcard support, dynamic policy updates, HITL approval for non-allowlisted domains.

### 7.3 Limitations

**Host OS Trust Assumption.** If an attacker has root on the host, container isolation provides no protection. Future work: hardware-enforced isolation (Intel SGX, AMD SEV-SNP).

**Container Escape.** Recent CVEs underscore this risk: CVE-2024-1086 (99.4% success rate), CVE-2025-23266 (CVSS 9.0), and three runc escapes in November 2025. Lin et al. [Lin et al., 2018] found 56.82% of exploits succeed against default Docker. gVisor mitigates this [Jang et al., 2022] but introduces compatibility issues. This reinforces defense-in-depth.

**Adversarial Evasion.** Regex-based scanning is vulnerable to encoding-based evasion. This is consistent with industry limitations [Basak et al., 2023, Orca Security, 2024, Boucher and Anderson, 2023]. Defense paths: Unicode normalization (NFKC) and ML-based scanning [Basak et al., 2025, Wiz, 2025].

**Prompt Injection and HITL Limitations.** Lies-in-the-Loop [Checkmarx, 2025] shows prompt injection can manipulate HITL dialogs. Zhan et al. [Zhan et al., 2025] broke all 8 tested prompt-level defenses. Our response: HITL is one of six layers; infrastructure layers operate independently of prompt-level trust.

**Supply Chain Risk.** DockerDash [Security Researchers, 2025] demonstrated AI-specific container image compromise. Image signing (Sigstore/cosign) is planned.

**Single Point of Failure.** The gateway is a single point of failure. Mitigation: minimal process with narrow API surface; future work on replication and hardware-backed attestation.

**Scalability.** The current implementation targets single-host deployment. Multi-host distributed gateways are future work.

**Forward Compatibility with MCP Spec Evolution.** The MCP specification is actively evolving. If future versions add native authentication or isolation directives, our pattern adapts naturally: the gateway can consume MCP-level security metadata as additional policy inputs while continuing to enforce infrastructure-level boundaries.

### 7.4 Ethical Considerations

The Capability-Container Pattern is defensive technology. The same techniques could theoretically sandbox agents for malicious purposes, but we believe the defensive value significantly outweighs this risk given demonstrated real-world harm from unsecured deployments.

### 7.5 Comparison with MicroVM Approaches

MicroVMs (Firecracker) provide stronger isolation (separate kernel) at the cost of higher resources [Agache et al., 2020]. However, Weissman et al. [Weissman et al., 2023] showed limited Spectre/MDS protection, and Xiao et al. [Xiao et al., 2023] demonstrated exploitable operation forwarding. Our architecture is runtime-agnostic: the same pattern works with Docker, gVisor, or microVMs.

### 7.6 Comparison with Commercial MCP Gateways

Our survey of 14 commercial products reveals the market is crowded but shallow on defense-in-depth. Container-per-tool isolation: only Docker MCP Gateway. HITL gates: only 3 products (none combined with containers). Secret scanning: nascent (PII only). Network egress filtering

per tool: effectively absent. This gap is structural: existing products evolved from API gateway heritage and lack infrastructure-level security primitives.

## 8 Conclusion

We presented the Capability-Container Pattern, an infrastructure-level security architecture for autonomous AI agent tool execution. The pattern enforces six defense-in-depth layers ensuring that even compromised tools cannot access the host, leak credentials, exfiltrate data, or interfere with other tools.

### 8.1 Key Results

- **6/7 real-world MCP breaches from 2025 fully prevented**
- $\sim 0.025 \text{ ms full pipeline overhead}$  (cross-run 95% CI: [0.022, 0.028])—0.005% of a 500 ms LLM inference call
- **100% secret detection rate** (180/180, Clopper–Pearson CI: [0.980, 1.000]) with 0.50% FP rate
- $F_1 = 0.976$  vs. 0.645 for detect-secrets ( $22\times$  fewer false positives)
- **Sub-microsecond risk classification**
- **2,036 ops/sec audit throughput**
- Transparent adversarial boundaries: 100% for split secrets, 17% for base64, 40% for homoglyphs
- **5,961 LOC** across 8 security layers

### 8.2 Core Insight

MCP defines *how* agents communicate with tools. It does not and cannot enforce *what tools are allowed to do*. This enforcement must happen at the infrastructure layer—just as web security requires infrastructure controls beyond HTTP.

### 8.3 Future Work

1. Hardware-enforced isolation (Intel SGX, AMD SEV-SNP)
2. Container image verification (Sigstore/cosign)
3. Multi-host distributed gateway architecture
4. Formal verification of isolation and mediation properties
5. Red team evaluation
6. Multi-agent coordination security
7. Encoding-aware scanning (base64, Unicode normalization)
8. Concurrency benchmarks (100+ simultaneous agents)
9. User study and developer experience evaluation

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