Foundations of Computer Security

Lecture 8: MLS Example: Part III

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MLS Thought Experiment

Recall that we've assigned sensitivity labels to documents and clearances to individuals within our MLS environment. Now we're attempting to answer the following confidentiality question:

How are the permissions administered and checked? According to what rules?

Clearance	Sensitivity
(Secret: {Crypto})	**(Confidential: {Crypto})**
(Secret: {Crypto, Nuclear})	**(Top Secret: {Crypto})**

A Little Vocabulary

In the type of security policy we're constructing, the following terms are often used:

- **Objects:** the information containers protected by the system (documents, folders, files, directories, databases, etc.)
- **Subjects:** entities (users, processes, etc.) that execute activities and request access to objects.
- **Actions:** operations, primitive or complex, executed on behalf of subjects that may affect objects.

The *subjects* in our MLS example are the humans; the *objects* are the folders containing information.

The Dominates Relation

Given a set of security labels (L, S), comprising hierarchical levels and categories, we can define an ordering relation among labels.

Definition: (L_1, S_1) *dominates* (L_2, S_2) iff

1. $L_1 \geq L_2$ in the ordering on levels, and
2. $S_2 \subseteq S_1$.

We usually write $(L_1, S_1) \geq (L_2, S_2)$.

Note that this is a *partial order*, not a total order. I.e., there are security labels A and B, such that neither $A \geq B$ nor $B \geq A$.

Dominates Example

In the following table, for which pairs does **Label 1** dominate **Label 2**?

Label 1	Label 2	Dominates?
(Secret: {Crypto})	(Confidential: {Crypto})	Yes
(Secret: {Crypto, Nuclear})	(Top Secret: {Crypto})	No
(Secret: {Nuclear})	(Unclassified: {})	Yes

Does this suggest how you might decide whether to allow a subject to read an object?

Simple Security Property

The following rule appears to capture our intuition about when a subject can read an object.

The Simple Security Property: Subject S with clearance (L_S, C_S) may be granted *read* access to object O with classification (L_O, C_O) only if $(L_S, C_S) \geq (L_O, C_O)$.

Can you guess why it's "only if" instead of "if and only if"?

Operationally, an individual asking to see a document must show that his clearance level *dominates* the sensitivity level of the document.

Lessons

- The dominates relation formalizes a relationship between any two labels.
- The Simple Security Property shows how to use dominates to decide whether a read access should be allowed.

Next lecture: MLS Example: Part IV