The impact of quantum computing on real-world security: A 5G case study

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the impact of quantum computing on the security of 5G mobile telecommunications. This involves considering how cryptography is used in 5G, and how the security of the system would be affected by the advent of quantum computing. This leads naturally to the specification of a series of simple, phased, recommended changes intended to ensure that the security of 5G (as well as 3G and 4G) is not badly damaged if and when large scale quantum computing becomes a practical reality. By exploiting backwards-compatibility features of the 5G security system design, we are able to describe a multi-phase approach to upgrading security that allows for a simple and smooth migration to a post-quantum-secure system.

1 Introduction

In the last few years that has been much discussion of the impact of quantum computing on cryptographic systems. Whilst there is no general agreement that large-scale, general purpose, quantum computers will ever be built — see, for example, Dyakonov [15] — a huge effort continues to be made to develop them. Also, as has been widely discussed, should such computers ever become available, the impact on the security of many of today's cryptographic systems is considerable.

This suggests that for every major application of cryptography a careful review of the impact of quantum computing needs to be performed without delay. This review should assess which parts of the system are vulnerable if a quantum computer should become available, and what the impact would

be if this part of the system is broken. Such a review should also consider how long it would take to replace the cryptography used in each part of the system; this assessment should include the time required to update the specifications, the time to produce replacement implementations, and the time to replace all the existing implementations 'in the field'. The total time could be very considerable, depending on the application domain. For example, credit and debit cards have a typical lifetime of three–five years, so that replacing all such cards with new technology could take a decade or more (and this doesn't even consider the time required to replace the infrastructure supporting their use).

The security of the mobile telecommunications infrastructure has relied on the use of cryptography since the advent of the GSM system, originally designed back in the 1980s and first deployed in 1991 (GSM is often referred to as *2G* for the *2nd generation* of mobile telecommunications). 5G is the latest generation of mobile telecommunications standards, produced by the 3GPP organisation[1], and 5G systems are now being deployed globally. Mobile telecommunications systems are very widely used worldwide, and 5G looks set to become even more closely integrated with society. This means that the security of 5G systems is a matter of huge importance.

These observations have motivated this paper, which addresses the impact of quantum computing on 5G mobile security. Such a review seems particularly timely, given that 5G technology is already being deployed and major investments are likely to occur in this technology in the next few years. As will become clear, key parts of the system as currently specified are vulnerable should a quantum computer become available. Performing this detailed analysis enabled a phased approach to upgrading the security of the current system to be proposed, which will allow a smooth and simplified migration path.

Apart from the lessons we can draw from this review of priorities in 5G security evolution, it is hoped that this study will also help in performing 'post-quantum' reviews for other widely deployed technologies reliant on cryptography for security.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. §2 provides an introduction to the impact of quantum computing on the security of modern cryptography. This is followed, in §3, by a (simplified) description of how cryptography is used in 5G. This provides the basis for the detailed analysis in §4 of the impact of quantum computing on 5G security. This in turn leads to §5 in which we provide a series of prioritised recommendations regarding how 5G security should be developed to ensure that it is not seriously affected by the advent of quantum computing. Finally, a summary and conclusions are given in §6.

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[1]https://www.3gpp.org/

2 The impact of quantum computing on modern cryptography

2.1 Cryptanalysis

If and when large-scale general-purpose quantum computers are constructed, the effect on currently used cryptography will be very significant — see, for example, Yanofsky and Mannucci [28]. In particular, two quantum algorithms (i.e. algorithms which will execute on a quantum computer) have been devised which affect both symmetric (secret key) and asymmetric (public key) cryptographic algorithms.

Shor's algorithm [27], published in 1994, has a very major impact on the security of all today's widely used asymmetric algorithms. Complementing this, Grover's 1997 algorithm [16] affects the security of any symmetric algorithm, albeit in a much less severe way. The impact of these algorithms, given a quantum computer on which to execute them, can be summarised as follows.

- All asymmetric cryptographic algorithms based on the difficulty of factoring large integers or computing discrete logarithms (include elliptic curve schemes) will be rendered insecure for currently used key lengths. As a result, all currently used asymmetric schemes could be broken using a large-scale general-purpose quantum computer. Moreover, the (large) increase in key length needed to make currently used schemes secure would be so great as to render use of the algorithms infeasible in most cases.

- All symmetric cryptographic algorithms will in effect have their key length significantly reduced (in principle it is halved, but in practice the reduction will be somewhat less than this). That is, with the aid of a quantum computer, a k-bit key for a symmetric algorithm could be discovered in of the order of $2^{k/2}$ computations, i.e. the square root of the order of 2^k computations required using a conventional computer. However, in the quantum case these 'computations' may be quite complex, which is why a simple square root argument is not quite correct — also quantum attacks are not parallelisable in the way that brute force searches using conventional computers are. However, given the degree of uncertainty involved in estimating the precise quantum attack complexity, we take a conservative approach; that is, in line with established practice, we follow the principle that, if and when a quantum computer is available, a 128-bit key will offer roughly the same level of security as a 64-bit key does today, i.e. it will not be secure. Following this principle, to achieve the same level of security

as provided today by a 128-bit key will require switching to 256-bit keys.

As a convenient shorthand, we refer to the putative point in time when any potential adversary gains access to large-scale general-purpose quantum computers as the *PQ era*.

2.2 Security impacts

It is interesting to consider what the future impact will be if cryptographic algorithms in current use are rendered insecure at some time in the future. For algorithms solely used for verifying the integrity of transmitted data, i.e. whose use has no long-term impact, there will no significant problems, as long as new 'secure' algorithms are introduced in time. However, the significance for encryption and key establishment algorithms is potentially catastrophic.

If ciphertext is intercepted and stored that was encrypted using an algorithm that becomes insecure at some future time, then it could be decrypted at the future point in time when the encryption algorithm is broken. That is, data whose secrecy has any kind of long-term significance is being made vulnerable right now through the use of algorithms which will become insecure if quantum computers are built.

Similarly, suppose a key establishment technique is employed which could be broken at some future time using data exchanged via an insecure link. If the key establishment exchanges are recorded, then any sensitive data encrypted generated using a key established using such a technique would be at risk of compromise as and when a quantum computer becomes available.

2.3 Replacement algorithms

Given the potentially devastating consequences for the security of today's cryptography, a number of agencies are working on developing new cryptography standards. Fortunately, the current state of the art in symmetric cryptography allows for use of 256-bit keys, so no major changes are needed in this domain, except for enforcing a move to longer keys (i.e. of 256 bits or more). However, the situation is not so simple for asymmetric cryptography, given that almost all current applications of asymmetric cryptography use algorithms which will become insecure. This has led to a number of standards organisations (including NIST, ETSI and ISO/IEC JTC 1/SC 27/WG 2) to start work on developing a suite of asymmetric cryptographic algorithms which will remain secure in a future 'post-quantum' world.

To date, the NIST work has been most influential, with the results of its

Post-Quantum Cryptography Standardization project being closely followed by other standards bodies such as SC 27/WG 2. The scope and status of this project are best summarised by quoting the project web page[2]. The following call was announced in November 2017.

> NIST has initiated a process to solicit, evaluate, and standardize one or more quantum-resistant public-key cryptographic algorithms. Currently, public-key cryptographic algorithms are specified in FIPS 186-4, Digital Signature Standard, as well as special publications SP 800-56A Revision 2, Recommendation for Pair-Wise Key Establishment Schemes Using Discrete Logarithm Cryptography and SP 800-56B Revision 1, Recommendation for Pair-Wise Key-Establishment Schemes Using Integer Factorization Cryptography. However, these algorithms are vulnerable to attacks from large-scale quantum computers (see NISTIR 8105, Report on Post Quantum Cryptography). It is intended that the new public-key cryptography standards will specify one or more additional unclassified, publicly disclosed digital signature, public-key encryption, and key-establishment algorithms that are available worldwide, and are capable of protecting sensitive government information well into the foreseeable future, including after the advent of quantum computers.

As a first step in this process, NIST solicited public comment on draft minimum acceptability requirements, submission requirements, and evaluation criteria for candidate algorithms. The comments received were posted, along with a summary of the changes made as a result of these comments. This call led to a large number of proposals for novel algorithms, which are in the process of being reduced to a standardisable set via a series of rounds involving public comment and cryptanalysis. The Round 2 candidates were announced in January 2019.

3   5G security — a quick summary

3.1   Overview

In our discussion we assume that a user has established a subscription with a network (the *home network*), and that the user's mobile phone is connecting to a *serving network*. Of course, the two networks could be the same, but in general they are distinct.

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[2] https://csrc.nist.gov/Projects/post-quantum-cryptography/Post-Quantum-Cryptography-Standardization

For the purposes of this discussion, 5G security is as defined in release 15 (R15) of the 3GPP 5G security specifications [9]. Note that R15 is now stable, and work has recently started on replacing it with R16; however, very little of the system we describe looks set to be modified in R16. 5G security as currently defined can be regarded as an evolution of 4G security, which was itself an evolution of the security provisions in 3G (UMTS) and 2G (GSM). However, three major differences from 4G are:

- *flexibility in authentication method*: the *user equipment (UE)*, e.g. a mobile phone, can be authenticated to the serving network (formally the *SEcurity Anchor Function (SEAF)* of this network, which cooperates with the network's *AUthentication Server Function (AUSF)* to handle security functions) using either the 5G AKA (Authentication and Key Agreement) protocol, itself an evolution of 4G AKA, or the Internet EAP-AKA′ protocol[3];

- *robust mobile identity confidentiality*: the use of public key encryption removes the need to ever send the permanent user identity across the network in cleartext; and

- *data integrity protection*: this covers the use of keys derived from the session key established during authentication to protect the integrity of data sent across the air interface (including digitised voice).

We focus here on the case where the 5G AKA protocol is used, but clearly a complete analysis would also need to consider the EAP-AKA′ case. As described below, the security provisions can be divided into four main parts:

- *AKA*: this involves an exchange between the UE and the serving network, as a result of which the two parties are mutually authenticated and a secret session key is established between the two entities (see §6.1 of [9]);

- *Key derivation*: involving the derivation of purpose-specific keys from the session key established during AKA (see §6.2 of [9]);

- *Mobile identity confidentiality*: this involves ensuring that the UE never sends the cleartext permanent user identity over the air interface, either by encrypting it or through the use of unlinkable temporary identifiers (see §6.12 of [9]); and

- *Session security*: in which individual secret keys, derived from the session key, are used to protect data sent across the air interface between the UE and the serving network (see §6.4, §6.5 and §6.6 of [9]).

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[3]EAP-AKA′ (defined in RFC5448 [13]) is an improved version of EAP-AKA (see RFC 4187, [12]), and differs from EAP-AKA in that the keys derived as a result of its operation are bound to the name of the access network.

Underlying all security services is the requirement for a subscriber to be in possession of a card-based *Universal Subscriber Identity Module (USIM)*, which can be either removable or hard-wired into the UE. This USIM stores a long-term 128-bit[4] secret key K for use in AKA, which is also stored by the home network's *Authentication credential Repository and Processing Function (ARPF)*. The USIM also stores the home network's public key used for identifier encryption (see §3.4 below).

Finally, note that the descriptions below are somewhat simplified, with the goal of giving enough information for the purposes of the subsequent analysis. In particular we have not addressed the extensive provisions in the specifications for security issues relating to handover and roaming. We also do not separate the functions of the SEAF from the associated *Access and Mobility Management Function (AMF)*[5], which in any case is required to be co-located with the SEAF (see §6.2.2.1 of TS 33.501 [9]).

3.2 Authentication and key agreement

The 5G AKA protocol can be thought of as the core of 5G security. It is very similar to the 4G AKA protocol; one minor change is to provide the home network with a 'proof of successful authentication' of the UE to the serving network.

3.2.1 Authentication vectors

As in all previous system generations (2G–4G), the home network's ARPF provides the serving network's AUSF with a 5G HE *Authentication Vector (AV)* on request. This 5G HE AV is generated in the following way (note it is called a 5H HE AV to distinguish it from the 5G AV which is calculated from the 5G HE AV by the AUSF of the serving network; the 5G AV is what is actually used in the protocol.

A 5-value vector (RAND, XRES, CK, IK, AUTN) is first computed in precisely the same way as AVs for 3G and 4G are generated (see 3GPP TS 33.102 [3]). The calculation of a 3G/4G AV is summarised in Figure 1. More precisely: RAND is a 128-bit random value; XRES, CK and IK are 128-bit values generated as a function of RAND and the subscriber secret key K; and AUTN is a 128-bit *authentication token*. AUTN includes a 48-bit

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[4]See §5.1.7.1 of TS 33.105 [4]. Slightly surprisingly, §6.2.2.1 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9] allows the key K to be 128 or 256 bits long — clearly, the intention is to permit the change to 256-bit keys proposed in this paper, but this modification has not been made in all the relevant specifications.

[5]Confusingly, AMF is also used as an abbreviation for *Authentication Management Field*, which is another reason for not discussing the Access and Mobility Management Function further here.

string SQN⊕AK, where SQN is a sequence number derived from a counter managed by the ARPF, and AK is a 48-bit encrypting string generated as a function of RAND and the subscriber secret key K. AUTN also includes two other fields: the 16-bit Authentication Management Field (AMF) and a 64-bit message authentication code (MAC). The MAC is computed as a function of RAND, AMF, SQN and the subscriber secret key K. Of the 16 bits of the AMF, eight are available for proprietary purposes, and could, for example, be used to indicate the suite of algorithms $f1$–$f5$ that are in use (see below); of the other eight, seven are reserved for future use. For further details of use of the AMF see Annexes F and H of 3GPP TS 33.102 [3].
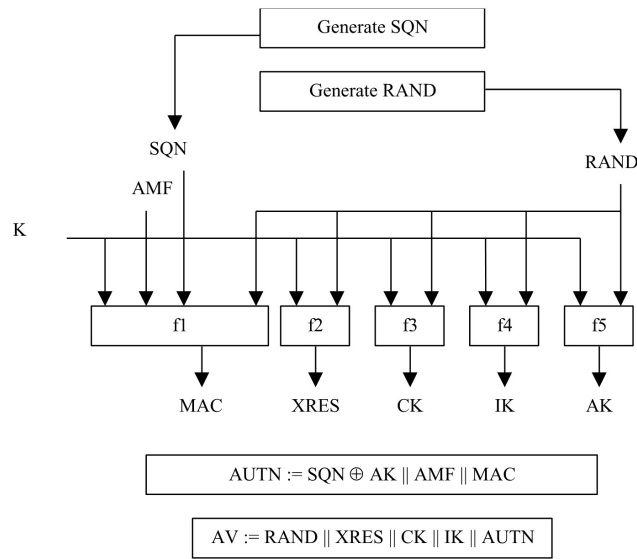

Figure 1: Generation of 3G/4G AVs (Figure 7 of TS 33.102 [3])

The functions used to derive MAC, XRES, CK, IK and AK are denoted by $f1$, $f2$, $f3$, $f4$ and $f5$, respectively, and are secret-key based MAC and key derivation mechanisms. The choice of these algorithms is left to the mobile operator, since they are only implemented in the USIM and the ARPF, both controlled by the operator. However, requirements for these algorithms are defined in 3GPP TS 33.105 [4] and a default set of algorithms is provided in 3GPP TS 35.205 [6] (and related documents).

Two additional computations are required to create a 5G HE AV from this vector.

- As described in Annex A.4 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9], a 128-bit value XRES* is generated from a combination of XRES, RAND, CK, IK and the serving network name, using a key derivation function KDF. The function KDF is specified in Annex B.2.0 of 3GPP TS 33.220 [5],

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and is based on HMAC-SHA-256, [21, 24].

- The values CK, IK, and the encrypted SQN from the AUTN are combined with an identifier for the serving network to generate a 256-bit key K_{AUSF}, using the same function KDF.

The 5G HE AV is the 4-tuple (RAND, AUTN, XRES*, K_{AUSF}). On receipt of this AV, it is used by the serving network AUSF to calculate the 5G AV in the following way.

- The 128-bit value HXRES* is computed as the (truncated) SHA-256 hash of the concatenation of RAND and XRES* (see Annex A.5 of [9]).

- The 256-bit key K_{SEAF} is set to the output of the function KDF when given as input the serving network name and K_{AUSF} (see Annex A.6 of [9]).

The 5G AV is the 4-tuple (RAND, AUTN, HXRES*, K_{SEAF}). A high-level overview of the generation of the 5G AV is provided by steps 1–4 of Figure 2.

3.2.2 The AKA protocol

The AKA protocol relies on the 5G AV. A summary of the 5G AV generation process and its use in AKA is given in Figure 2; the step numbers in the description below match those used in the figure.

5. The first three elements of the 5G AV are passed by the AUSF to the SEAF.

6. The SEAF sends RAND and AUTN to the UE in an *Authentication Request* message. The receiving *mobile equipment* (*ME*) submits the values to its resident USIM (where the ME and the USIM collectively make up the UE).

7a. The USIM computes AK from its secret key K and RAND, and uses this to recover the sequence number SQN from AUTN. SQN is checked for freshness using state information held by the USIM (see Annex C.2 of 3GPP TS 33.102 [3])). The MAC in AUTN is also checked using the secret key K.

7b. If the checks succeed, the USIM calculates a response RES, together with keys CK and IK, using exactly the same process as used in computing the 3G/4G AV (see §3.2.1); these values are passed back to the ME, along with an indication of success or failure.
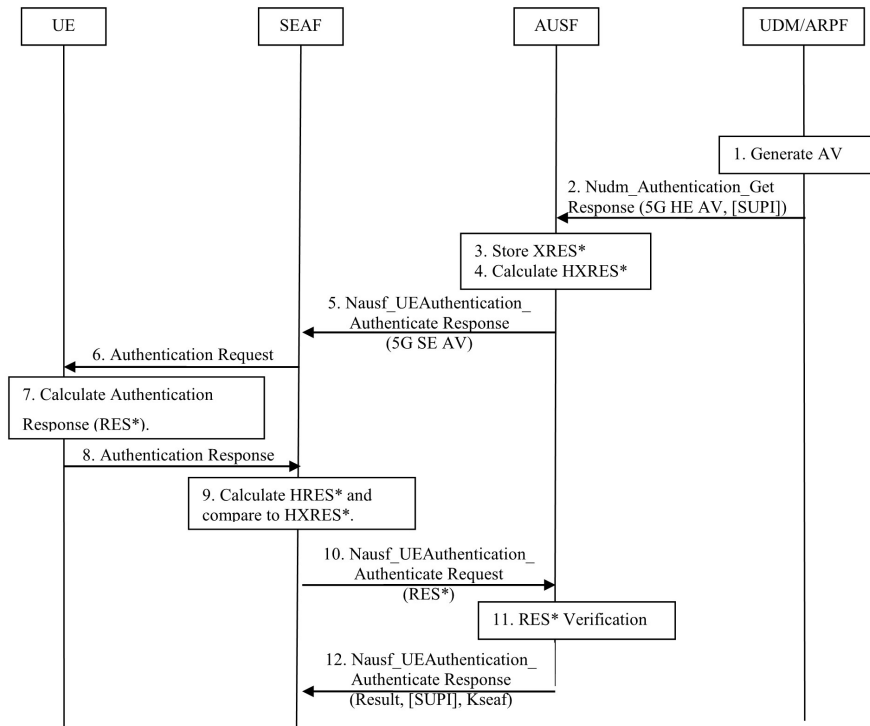
Figure 2: 5G AKA procedure (Figure 6.1.3.2-1 of TS 33.501 [9])

7c. The ME then computes RES* from RES, and K_{AUSF} from CK, IK and the AUTN, using the same processes as employed to compute the 5G HE AV (see §3.2.1). The ME also computes K_{SEAF} from K_{AUSF} (also as described in §3.2.1).

8. The ME then returns RES* to the SEAF in an *Authentication Response* message.

9. The SEAF computes HRES* from the received RES* (again as described in §3.2.1) and compares HRES* with HXRES*. If they agree the UE is deemed authenticated.

10–12. The SEAF passes the receives RES* to the AUSF for further checks (notably to verify whether the AV is still current), and the AUSF passes final confirmation of the success or failure of AKA back to the SEAF.

As a result of successful completion of the protocol, the SEAF and UE are mutually authenticated and possess the authenticated shared secret key K_{SEAF}. How this is used is described immediately below.

3.3 Key derivation

We next provide a simplified summary of how special-purpose keys are derived from the *anchor key* K_{SEAF}. We describe the SEAF (network side) key derivations; the computations performed by the UE are identical. The key generation hierarchy is summarised in Figure 3. Use of the generated keys is further described in §3.5.
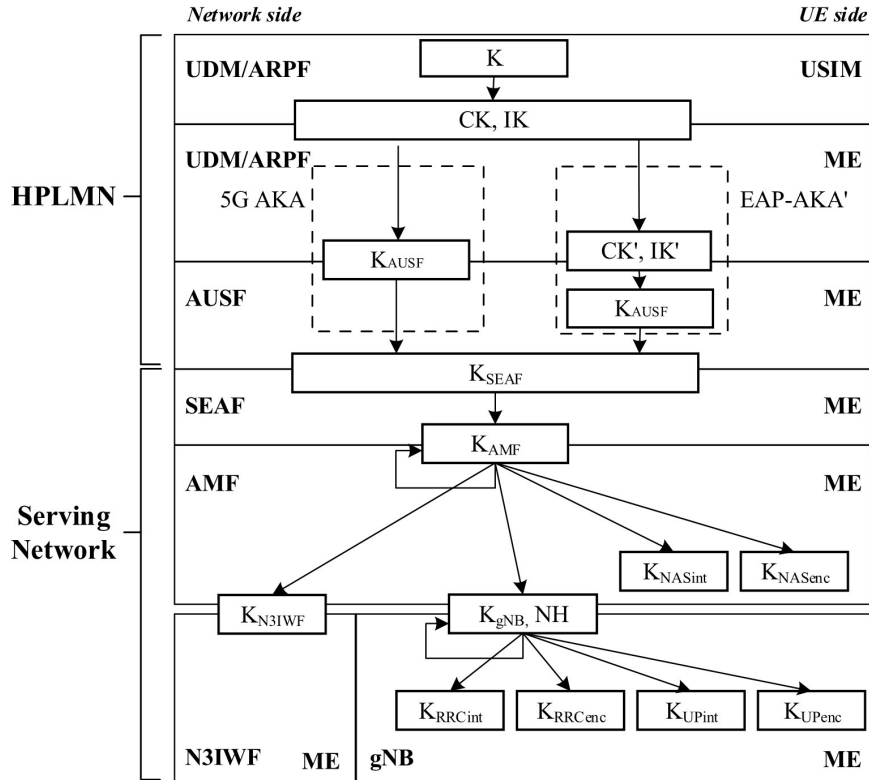

Figure 3: Key derivation hierarchy (Figure 6.2.1-1 of TS 33.501 [9])

Immediately following successful completion of AKA, the SEAF derives a 256-bit key K_{AMF} from the anchor key K_{SEAF}, and K_{SEAF} is then deleted. To support mobility, a new key K'_{AMF} can be derived from K_{AMF} for transfer to another SEAF.

The SEAF[6] then generates a number of operational keys, as follows.

- It generates a 256-bit key K_{gNB} from K_{AMF}. This key is then subsequently used to generate a pair of keys (K_{UPint}, K_{UPenc}) for protecting the integrity and confidentiality, respectively, of *User Plane (UP)*

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[6]Actually, the AMF — see §3.1.

traffic, i.e. data and voice traffic sent between the UE and the network. The key K_{gNB} is also used to generate a pair of keys (K_{RRCint}, K_{RRCenc}) for protecting the integrity and confidentiality, respectively, of *Radio Resource Controller (RRC)* signalling traffic.

- It generates a pair of keys (K_{NASint}, K_{NASenc}) from K_{AMF} for protecting the integrity and confidentiality, respectively, of *Non Access Stratum (NAS)* layer traffic, i.e. NAS layer signalling traffic sent between the UE and the network.

- Finally, as specified in §6.2.2.1 of TS 33.501 [9], other operational keys are derived by the SEAF for use in different contexts; however, these are outside the scope of our simplified description.

The algorithms used for the key derivations described above are specified in Annex A of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9]; just as in the generation of the 5G AV (see §3.2.1), these are all based on the key derivation function specified in Annex B.2.0 of 3GPP TS 33.220 [5], which is based on HMAC-SHA-256, [21, 24].

It is important to observe that all keys derived from CK and IK (from K_{AUSF} downwards in the hierarchy) are 256 bits long. However, the keys actually used operationally, although derived as 256-bit strings, are truncated to 128 bits before use, since the algorithms employed only take 128-bit inputs. The decision to use 256-bit keys within the key derivation hierarchy dates back to 2007, [1, 2], and is already built into 4G systems. The motivation for this feature was to enable a move to 256-bit keys at a later date.

3.4 Mobile identity confidentiality

In 5G, the permanent user identifier is called the Subscription Permanent Identifier (SUPI), and this is never sent in cleartext across the user interface. Instead, when initiating authentication, the UE identifies itself using either an encrypted version of the SUPI (the *Subscription Concealed Identifier (SUCI)*) or, if one is available, a previously established temporary identifier (the *5G-Globally Unique Temporary UE Identity (GUTI)*. Transmission of a SUCI may also be requested by the serving network, if it cannot resolve the 5G-GUTI.

The SUCI is created from the SUPI using a 'protection scheme' (typically an asymmetric encryption scheme) and the public key of the subscriber's home network, where the protection scheme is either ECIES (an elliptic curve encryption scheme (see Annex C.3 of [9])) or a scheme of the home network's choice. The specification of ECIES follows the SECG specifications[7], rather than those of a formal standard. The encryption is permitted to take place

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[7]SECG is a US private company - see `www.secginc.com`.

in either the USIM or the ME, at the choice of the USIM. Of course, if the encryption takes place in the ME, then a standardised scheme needs to be used. The public key of the home network is required to be available to the UE via a trusted source, e.g. by being provisioned in a USIM. When sending the SUCI to the serving network, the UE also sends the identifier of the home network. Note that the encryption is randomised, so that two SUCIs generated from the same SUPI will be distinct and unlinkable (except, of course, by the home network which can decrypt them).

The SUCI is then used by the serving network to request authentication information from the appropriate home network. The home network can recover the SUPI from the SUCI using its private decryption key. When a new 5G-GUTI is sent to the UE across the air interface, it is sent across an encrypted link (see §3.5 below).

3.5   Session security

We conclude this summary of 5G security mechanisms by considering how the various keys are used to protect data of various types sent to and from the UE. As previously, this is a somewhat simplified description, with certain special cases ignored.

We first describe the operation of NAS data encryption and integrity protection (see §6.4 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9]). Encryption and integrity protection are applied on a per message basis. Encryption operates using a stream cipher, and integrity protection involves the computation of a 32-bit MAC over the *unencrypted* message. Both encryption and MAC computation involve the use of COUNT, a 32-bit counter value. Both sender and receiver maintain two counters, for traffic in the two directions.

The stream cipher keystream is computed as a function of COUNT, the cipher key K_{NASenc}, a bearer identifier, and a bit indicating the direction of transmission (uplink or downlink). Similarly, the MAC is computed as a function of COUNT, the integrity key K_{NASint}, a bearer identifier, a bit indicating the direction of transmission, and the message.

The algorithms to be used are specified in Annex B of 3GPP TS 33.401 [8]. Three possibilities are specified for the stream cipher keystream generator, all of which take a 128-bit key: SNOW 3G (known as 128-EEA1), 128-bit AES [17] in counter mode [20] (128-EEA2), and ZUC (128-EEA3). Similarly, three possibilities are specified for the MAC function, all taking a 128-bit key, based on SNOW 3G, AES [17] in CMAC mode [20], and ZUC.

RRC integrity and confidentiality protection work in a very similar way (see §6.5 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9]), except that the keys used are K_{RRCint} and K_{RRCenc}.

Analogously, integrity and confidentiality protection of UP *protocol data units (PDUs)* (see §6.6 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9]), works in the same way (and using the same algorithms) except that they employ the keys K_{UPint} and K_{UPenc}.

3.6 Backwards compatibility

Before proceeding to our post-quantum analysis, we observe that the design of the scheme, as well as being evolutionary in nature, intrinsically allows backward compatibility in a variety of ways. In particular, the nature of the exchange between the ME and the embedded USIM is essentially the same in 3G, 4G and 5G. As described in step 7b of §3.2.2, the USIM passes the pair of 128-bit 3G keys CK and IK to the ME, and the ME is then responsible for processing them appropriately to derive the session keys used for (4G and) 5G. As we describe in §5.2, this feature allows a way of transitioning to a PQ-era-secure system without changing the USIM/ME interface — this could significantly simplify necessary future security system migrations.

4 Post-quantum analysis

4.1 Keys and key derivation

As should be clear from the above descriptions, for pragmatic backwards-compatibility reasons, the foundation of 5G security is exactly as it was in UMTS and LTE (3G and 4G) systems. A 128-bit key K, shared by the USIM and the issuing network, is used as the foundation of all 5G security functions (with the exception of mobile identity confidentiality, which relies on asymmetric cryptography). Clearly this means that if the USIM-resident key K is ever discovered, then the entire basis of 5G security is undermined, despite the fact that 256-bit keys are used in the key derivation hierarchy.

More specifically, to support the AKA protocol, K is used to help create a 5-value authentication vector, exactly as used in UMTS, including RAND, MAC and two 128-bit keys CK and IK. These values are then used to generate further values, as follows.

- The value XRES* is computed as a function of XRES, RAND, CK, IK and an identifier from the serving network. In turn HXRES* is then derived from XRES* and RAND. That is, HXRES* is a function solely of RAND, K and the serving network name.

- The keys CK and IK are then input to a further key derivation function (along with the encrypted SQN) to generate the 256-bit key K_{AUSF}. Next, the 256-bit key K_{SEAF} is derived from a combination of K_{AUSF}

and the serving network identifier, and the 256-bit key K_{AMF} is, in turn, derived from K_{SEAF}. Finally, the 128-bit keys actually used for encrypting and integrity-protecting traffic are derived from K_{AMF} (possibly as a multi-step process), initially as 256-bit keys which are then truncated before use. It should thus be clear that the operational keys are a function solely of RAND, K, the serving network name (and certain other public parameters).

It should immediately be apparent that there is a major security issue in the PQ era. That is, security is based on a 128-bit secret key, and thus Grover's algorithm (see §2.1) could reduce the effective level of security to that provided by a 64-bit key. Searches of size 2^{64}, whilst not trivial, are well within the bounds of what is possible today. Detailed implications for the AKA protocol and operational protection are discussed below.

It could be argued that parts of the functions used to generate the values XRES*, HXRES* and the operational keys are issuing-network-proprietary (namely $f1$–$f5$). However, this gives very little additional security for two reasons. Firstly 'default' values for these functions are standardised and are, presumably, in use in some networks. Secondly, all such functions are necessarily built into every USIM, and so a determined adversary could reverse engineer the USIM to learn these functions.

Finally, and perhaps rather ironically, all current implementations will immediately become non-compliant with the underlying standards. As noted above, the normative requirements for the functions $f1$–$f5$ are specified in §5.1.6 of 3GPP TS 33.105 [4] — these requirements are necessary since the functions can be chosen by the USIM issuer. For example, in §5.1.6.3 it is stated that '$f3$ should be a key derivation function. In particular, it shall be computationally infeasible to derive K from knowledge of RAND and CK'. However, since $f3$ takes two 128-bit inputs (RAND and K) and gives the 128-bit value CK as output, Grover's algorithm will mean that in the PQ era this requirement will be false *by definition* regardless of the choice of $f3$.

4.2 Authentication and key establishment

To consider in greater detail the degree of vulnerability of a 5G system in the PQ era, suppose a malicious party has intercepted a matching pair of AKA Authentication Request and Authentication Response messages. The first message will contain a 128-bit RAND value, and the second will contain the 128-bit response RES*. Now RES* is a function solely of RAND and K, and hence Grover's algorithm means that of the order of 2^{64} work will be required to deduce K.

That is, in the PQ era, interception of a single (successful) AKA challenge-response pair will provide sufficient information to determine the USIM key

K. Assuming that the corresponding fixed identifier, the SUPI, is also obtained, this would potentially enable a clone of the USIM to be manufactured that could successfully masquerade as the genuine USIM; this would, in turn, enable both receipt of calls intended for the user of the genuine USIM, and theft of service (call initiation and data transfer) at the expense of the genuine user. Whilst multiple such clones could be manufactured, this would very likely be rapidly detected by anti-fraud measures implemented in the home network, leading in turn to blocking of the USIM. There would, however, be no effect on other users since USIM keys are all distinct, and so other USIM keys could only be obtained by repeating the attack.

4.3   Symmetric encryption and integrity protection

Next suppose that a malicious party has intercepted encrypted and integrity-protected traffic sent over the network, together with the AKA challenge RAND. That is, the interceptor could obtain a set of encrypted PDUs and 32-bit MACs computed over the corresponding decrypted PDUs. As noted above, the keystream used for encryption is generated using a key derived from K_{SEAF}, and K_{SEAF} is itself a function of the long-term key K.

Using this information as the basis for an attack is somewhat more difficult than the case where a RAND and matching RES are known. The key K_{SEAF} is a function of RAND, and hence RAND would need to be intercepted by the attacker along with the ciphertext, although not the RES value. Known plaintext (for the encrypted PDUs) would also need to be available to derive keystream bits, and the counter value(s) in use would also be needed. That is, while an attack to derive K is possible in theory based on analysing encrypted data, such an attack would be far more difficult than using an intercepted AK challenge-response pair.

It is interesting to observe that, had the MAC been computed on the encrypted PDU as opposed to the plaintext version[8], the MACs for intercepted PDUs could be used to conduct an attack without any need for known plaintext bits.

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[8]The matter is not quite as simple as sketched here. Whilst the order of operations is 'MAC then encrypt' for user plane traffic, the NAS protocol performs 'encrypt then MAC'. Both approaches can be proven secure under certain assumptions, although 'encrypt then MAC' has certain practical and theoretical advantages making implementation weaknesses less likely, explaining why this approach, and not 'MAC then encrypt', is standardised in ISO/IEC 19772 [18]; for further details, see, for example, Namprempre et al.'s 2014 paper [25].

4.4 Asymmetric encryption

We finally briefly examine the use of asymmetric encryption for protection the secrecy of the UE permanent identity, i.e. the SUPI, when sent across the radio interface. In a typical case, the home network's public key will be stored in the USIM and can be extracted by any UE. That is, this public key is essentially public information. Assuming use of an asymmetric encryption technique vulnerable to the Shor algorithm (see §2.1), as would be the case if the 'default' ECIES scheme is employed, then discovering the private key from the public key will be possible in the PQ era. This immediately breaks the mobile identity confidentiality service for all USIMs equipped with this public key — potentially a very large number.

5 Future-proofing 5G security

The main goal of the analysis above was to understand the implications on the 5G security features of the advent of the PQ era. We now use this analysis to develop a series of recommendations for steps that should be taken to ensure that 5G systems will be capable of offering a sufficient level of security in the PQ era.

5.1 Implications of the PQ era

We start by summarising the implications of the analysis. We divide this analysis into two parts, namely implications for security features relying on the USIM-stored secret key K (used only with symmetric cryptography), and features relying on the asymmetric key pairs belonging to USIM issuers.

5.1.1 Attacks on the long-term USIM secret key

As noted above, interception of a single AKA challenge-response pair could be used as the basis of an attack to reveal the secret key K. The implications of this would include:

- all past (and future) intercepted encrypted voice and data traffic could be decrypted, as long as the RAND value sent during the immediately prior AKA protocol instance was also intercepted;

- an active 'man in the middle' interceptor could successfully manipulate data and signalling traffic by modifying the data and then modifying the MAC appropriately (this could, for example, lead to a long term denial of service if the UE configuration is modified to prevent use using manipulated signalling messages);

- as discussed in §4.2, one or more 'cloned' USIMs could be produced to enable mobile use at the expense of the legitimate account holder.

Whilst this would clearly be devastating for the security of a single subscriber, the attack would need to be repeated for each USIM. Given that each instance of the attack would involve of the order of 2^{64} quantum operations, recovering the key K for more than a very small number of USIMs might well be practically infeasible, at least in the medium term.

In addition, sensitive data sent across the network can be encrypted and integrity-protected at or immediately beneath the application layer, e.g. using a protocol such as SSL/TLS. For example, use of HTTPS [26] (essentially HTTP running over TLS) is becoming the norm for all web traffic. As a result, the likelihood of the compromise of sensitive data through such an attack is probably small (of course, in practice HTTPS security can be compromised through acceptance of fake certificates, but this is outside the scope of the discussion here). The possible future compromise of voice traffic is, of course, a possibly sensitive issue, but such a compromise has always been relatively easily achieved by interfering with the land-line network. This possibility does not seem to have caused major concern in the past.

Nonetheless, attacks on even a small number of 'high value' individuals could seriously damage the reputation of 5G, and there is also the possible threat arising from large scale fraud through cloning of individual USIMs. That is, whilst the issue is not likely to be catastrophic for 5G, it nevertheless would seem reasonable to see if there are simple steps that could be taken to reduce the threat.

Finally, as noted in §4.1, non-conformance issues may arise in the PQ era through the failure of operator-selectable cryptographic functions to meet standardised requirements. For example, potentially all network implementations might be deemed non-compliant with the standards because the USIM-implemented functions $f1$–$f5$ would no longer have the mandatory required properties. This is because, although the choice of $f1$–$f5$ is up to the USIM-issuer (see §3.2.1), security requirements for these algorithms are defined in 3GPP TS 33.105 [4], and if functions based on 128-bit keys are deemed insecure then these requirements cannot be met using a 128-bit USIM key. However, such conformance issues will be addressed by the change to 256-bit USIM keys proposed in §5.2.1 below.

5.1.2 Attacks on the USIM issuer key pair

By contrast, as described in §4.4 one instance of a PQ era attack to discover a USIM issuer private key potentially impacts the privacy of a large number of USIMs — perhaps even millions of subscriber accounts. Specifically, an 'active attacker' on the mobile radio link could induce a UE of its choice

to send its SUCI, which could immediately be decrypted using the compromised private key to reveal the terminal's SUPI. This is an example of an *IMSI catcher* attack (see, for example, [23]), where an active attacker can induce a UE to reveal the subscriber's long-term identifier by impersonating a network. Such attacks are well known in 2G–4G networks, and equipment to perform such attacks is commercially available at modest cost. As a result, the pay off in terms of effect is large for a single instance of an attack.

However, it could be argued that this is not so serious since compromise of such a private key would only move security back to the level that applies in 4G. That is, compromise of the USIM issuer private key is clearly a privacy threat, but one that subscribers have coped with since the advent of mobile networks.

It should also be noted that properties (arguably flaws) in the design of AKA error messages allow a level of compromise of the subscriber identity even if the mobile identity confidentiality feature is working. As first pointed out by Arapinis et al. [11], AKA protocol error messages can be used to discover whether a currently active UE is the same as a previously monitored UE. This attack works against 5G networks as well as previous generations of mobile network systems. Essentially, when the UE responds to an Authentication Request message, different error messages are returned if (a) the MAC in AUTN fails the verification step, or (b) the MAC is correct but the SQN value is not acceptable. This allows an active attacker who replays an 'old' intercepted Authentication Request message to learn whether or not the recipient of the replay is the same as the original intended recipient of the request.

As discussed by Khan and Mitchell [22], one solution to this problem would be to merge the two error messages, i.e. to make the two types of error indistinguishable to an interceptor. However, recently Borgaonkar et al. [14] have pointed out that even this fix does not prevent all attacks. If any error message contains the AUTS field, which is currently included in error messages for case (b) above, then repeated Authentication Request replays can be used to learn part of the SQN value for a target UE.

That is, without a careful redesign, there are issues with UE identity privacy even when the 5G identity protection feature is working securely. It could thus be argued that compromise of the USIM issuer private key, whilst clearly not desirable, would not be a catastrophic failure. However, there is clearly the possibility of reputational damage, not only to the networks, but also to all those responsible for writing and maintaining the standards.

5.2 Steps to be taken

Again we divide the discussion into separate cases, i.e. first addressing the issues with the secret key K — in a two-phase approach — and second proposing ways of dealing with the threat to the USIM issuer asymmetric key pairs.

5.2.1 Changes to symmetric cryptography — Phase 1

It should be clear from the descriptions in §3 that the entire security system is built on the use of 128-bit long-term secret keys. Also, the encryption and MAC functions used to protect transferred signalling and user plane data use 128-bit keys. In an ideal world all keys and functions would be replaced by 256-bit versions[9]. This would remove any threat of a quantum computer based attack. However, given that any changes to 5G (as well as 2G–4G) systems will need to be evolutionary, a staged approach to achieving this seems appropriate, aimed at reducing the threat whilst minimising the impact on currently deployed network infrastructures, handsets and USIMs.

The first phase, described immediately below, involves a relatively small set of changes restricted to the USIM and ARPF; these changes alone appear to significantly reduce the current threats. Note that these changes apply to 3G, 4G and 5G systems, a major advantage since it seems likely that it will be a long time before 5G completely replaces earlier generation systems. The second phase, specified in the next section, proposes evolving the use of keys in the remainder of the system to make it completely PQ-era-secure, and builds on the first phase changes.

1. At the heart of the proposed phase 1 change is to switch to 256-bit secret USIM keys K for newly issued USIMs. Currently the relevant standard (§5.1.7.1 of TS 33.105 [4]) requires K to contain 128 bits[10]. Changing this to allow it to contain either 128 or 256 bits would be a trivial change and would have no immediate impact on any other parts of the system. At a certain point this could be changed further to *recommend* use of 256-bit keys.

   Since the key K never leaves the USIM or the issuing network's ARPF (and all the functions that operate on K are proprietary to the issuing network), it would be perfectly possible for an issuing network to continue to maintain existing USIMs using 128-bit keys, whilst all newly

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[9]As described above, the initial steps towards achieving this have been in place since 4G, with the key derivation hierarchy using 256-bit keys throughout.

[10]However, as noted above, §6.2.2.1 of 3GPP TS 33.501 [9] already permits K to be 128 or 256 bits long.

issued USIMs would contain 256-bit keys. The only changes to existing functionality would be a small upgrade to the ARPF, and small changes to USIM operation and the USIM personalisation process. No changes to mobile handsets or the network infrastructure (other than the ARPF) would be needed.

2. To support such a change the requirements on the functions $f1$–$f5$, as specified in TS 33.105 [4] and TS 35.205 [6], would need to be updated to allow the use of a 256-bit input key. It might also be expeditious to change the wording currently used to avoid the possibility that all existing system implementations would by definition become non-standards-compliant in the PQ era (as discussed in §4.1).

3. To further support this change, examples of possible functions $f1$–$f5$ supporting a 256-bit input key could be specified in TS 35.205 [6]. Whilst such a design would need to be done with appropriate care, not only is the Tuak candidate set already specified in TS 35.231 [10], there is also no shortage of symmetric cryptographic algorithms which take sufficiently long parameters to be secure in the PQ era, as well as well-established 'generic' key derivation standards (see, for example, ISO/IEC 18033-3 [17] and ISO/IEC 11770-6 [19], respectively).

The above changes could all be implemented without changing any of the deployed infrastructure or handsets — all that would change would be the ARPFs and newly issued USIMs. Changing to use of 256-bit long-term USIM keys would also significantly reduce the threat. A PQ era attack could only learn an operational key associated with a single instance of the AKA protocol. Unless quantum computers become very powerful and very cheap, it is hard to imagine that performing of the order of 2^{64} quantum computations to learn one operational key — which might last for just a few hours — will be worth the effort at any time soon (if ever). That is, making these small changes would appear to head off the PQ era threat for many years to come, and not least the lifetime of currently issued USIMs.

It is also important to consider the practical implications of making such a change. The USIM key storage requirement will be increased from 16 to 32 bytes, although the requirement to store 16 extra bytes seems unlikely to be an issue given that the USIM must store much larger volumes of other data, including the public key used for asymmetric encryption of the SUPI. The USIM will also be required to implement replacement functions for $f1$–$f5$, although again this seems readily realisable since the Tuak functions [10] appear to be of similar complexity to those in the Milenage set [6]. Given the changes to complexity and storage requirements are very minor, the absence of changes to any external interfaces, and the fact that the functions to be implemented are already standardised, switching to a 'new generation' of

USIMs implementing the above changes would appear to be a matter of a USIM-issuer making the appropriate arrangements with its suppliers.

Corresponding changes will, of course, need to be made in the ARPF of the USIM-issuer. However, in general ARPFs are already capable of dealing with USIMs issued under a variety of standard regimes, and hence adding the ability to deal with a new type of USIM, which differs only in the key length and the choice of functions $f1$–$f5$, ought to be a relatively straightforward software change. Moreover, since ARPF software is provided by a relatively small number of suppliers, upgraded ARPFs can readily be rolled out to multiple network operators.

The only other point that appears worth mentioning here regards the method used to generate the secret USIM keys K. Whilst it may not be the case for any network, it is conceivable that some USIM issuers might have chosen to derive all the USIM keys K from a single master key. This would avoid the need to store (and protect) a large database of USIM keys, and instead the keys could be regenerated as required from the master key. Certainly such an approach has been employed in the past for generating secret keys for use in EMV-compliant credit/debit cards. If this is the case for any networks, and if the master key is only 128 bits long, then this could allow a PQ era attack to learn all the USIM keys by performing a single attack of complexity $O(2^{64})$. Any such networks (if they exist) should shift to use of a 256-bit master key as soon as is practicable.

5.2.2 Changes to symmetric cryptography — Phase 2

Changing the entire system to use 256-bit keys will require more far-reaching changes to the system (covering the network infrastructure and handsets). It will probably make most sense to leave this to future (6G) systems, which could be designed to be PQ-era-secure from the ground up. However, the timing of such a change will be a business and regulatory rather than a technical decision. The important issue is that, as described below, this can be done in a way that builds on the phase 1 changes proposed above, without requiring any further modifications to USIMs or the ARPF. That is, backward compatibility will not be lost, which could make migration much simpler.

At the heart of the approach is the observation that the USIM passes a pair of 128-bit keys CK and IK to the ME, both of which are derived from the long-term secret key K (using functions $f3$ and $f4$). If we assume that K has been upgraded to a 256-bit key (as per Phase 1), and $f3$ and $f4$ are designed appropriately, then the concatenation of CK and IK can be regarded as a 256-bit key, i.e. the backwards compatibility feature that builds 5G security on CK and IK actually allows the USIM to export a 256-bit key without any

changes to the interface specification (this has long been known — see, for example, §2.3 of [2]). We also observe that the 256-bit *anchor key* K_{SEAF} is derived from CK, IK and the SQN in a two-stage process (involving the 256-bit intermediate key K_{AUSF}). That is, the anchor key, and potentially all keys derived from it, should immediately be PQ-era-secure.

To complete the 'PQ-era upgrade', it is then a simple matter of ensuring that:

- all the operational keys derived from the anchor key are also 256 bits long (and not truncated to 128 bits); and

- the encryption and MAC functions used to protect transferred data employ 256-bit keys.

5.2.3 Changes to asymmetric cryptography

As discussed above, a compromise of a USIM issuer's private key would affect a large number of users, but the practical impact would be limited. Nevertheless, if only for reputational reasons, the following changes should be implemented in due course. Note that these changes affect 5G only.

1. Annex C.3 of TS 33.501 [9] currently permits the use of proprietary schemes for the protection of SUPIs. No guidance is provided on the choice of such schemes. Guidance could usefully be added in the short term recommending use of schemes which offer security in the PQ era.

2. Annex C.3 of TS 33.501 [9] currently specifies ECIES (an elliptic curve encryption scheme. This Annex should be updated to include the specification of a second PQ-era-secure asymmetric encryption scheme, once an appropriate candidate has been standardised. Such standardised schemes should become available within the next couple of years, once the NIST process described in §2.3 above has come to a conclusion.

6 Summary and conclusions

In this paper we have reviewed the operation of 5G security features and considered in detail the ramifications of the PQ era on the effectiveness of these features. This has led to a series of recommended changes to the operation of 5G security, designed to minimise both the practical impact of the PQ era attacks and the cost of implementing these changes.

In summary, and on the assumption that quantum computers do not become very cheap and ubiquitous, at least in the medium term, it would appear

that a small number of relatively minor changes will have the effect that the impact of the PQ era is minimal in terms of security risk.

The recommended changes (most important first) are given in three separate sets intended to be implemented in different timescales. Note that a more detailed description of these changes and their impact is given in §5.2 above. Note also that first set of changes apply to 3G and 4G networks, as well as 5G.

1. *Phase 1 changes to symmetric cryptography.* These changes should move forward as soon as is practicable, and can be achieved without impacting any deployed infrastructure or mobile terminals.

   (a) Modify the relevant standards to allow 256-bit (as well as 128-bit) long-term secret keys to be stored in the USIM. (At some stage, 256-bit keys should be recommended).

   (b) Modify the relevant standards to update the requirements for functions using the long-term secret USIM key as input to allow use of a 256-bit key.

   (c) Provide examples of recommended functions that take a 256-bit USIM key as input. It is important to note that a set of candidate functions of this type has already been specified, namely the Tuak functions — see 3GPP TS 35.231 [10].

   (d) Once the above three steps are in place, advise network operators to change to use of 256-bit long-term USIM keys.

2. *Asymmetric cryptography changes.* These changes should be accomplished as soon as viable alternative asymmetric encryption algorithms are standardised, perhaps in two-three years from the time of writing (late 2019).

   (a) Provide general guidance on the adoption of proprietary PQ-era-secure asymmetric encryption schemes for protecting permanent subscription identifiers.

   (b) As and when suitable PQ-era-secure asymmetric encryption schemes have been standardised, at least one such scheme should be included in the relevant 5G standard, and its adoption by operators should be encouraged.

3. *Phase 2 changes to symmetric cryptography.* These changes involve modifying the ways keys are used in handsets and in mobile networks. Implementing them will require changes to the operation of mobile terminals and mobile networks, but not to USIMs or the ARPF; it should be possible to specify the changes in such a way to allow parallel use of 128-bit and 256-bit keys and functions.

(a) New symmetric cryptographic functions will need to defined for encryption and MAC generation. These functions should all use a 256-bit key as input. In fact work is already under way within 3GPP to see what, if any, new functions need to be defined for such a move — see 3GPP TR 33.841 [7]. Indeed, the content of this technical report to some extent overlaps with this paper.

(b) The specifications need to be modified to allow use of 256-bit encryption and MAC functions using 'untruncated' 256-bit keys), once they have been adopted.

These changes are modest in scope and appear to be eminently realisable in a phased way. Moreover, much has already been achieved towards completing these changes (notably the use of 256-bit keys in the key derivation chain, the specification of the Tuak functions, and the work in 3GPP TR 33.841 [7]). Standards writers, network infrastructure and handset manufacturers, and network operators are encouraged to complete their adoption. The sooner moves are put in place to make the necessary changes, the smaller the number of vulnerabilities will be if and when the PQ era dawns.

Acknowledgements

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