ISSN 3049 - 3692 (Print)

A HYBRID AI-DRIVEN THREAT DETECTION FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING CYBERSECURITY IN CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

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Abstract

Critical infrastructure—ranging from transportation grids and healthcare services to energy and water systems—continues to face an expanding spectrum of cyber threats. Modern attacks such as ransomware, advanced persistent threats (APTs), and zero-day exploits are becoming more sophisticated and harder to detect through conventional security mechanisms. Traditional signature-oriented intrusion detection systems (IDS) struggle because they depend heavily on predefined attack patterns and therefore cannot keep pace with evolving threats. This study introduces a hybrid AI-based detection framework that blends machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL), and rule-driven logic for enhanced situational awareness in complex environments like SCADA, industrial control systems (ICS), IoT networks, and cloud platforms. The proposed architecture integrates feature-engineering techniques, LSTM-based temporal learning, and a weighted decision-fusion mechanism to improve detection precision while lowering false-positive rates. Experiments conducted on NSL-KDD, UNSW-NB15, and CICIDS2017 datasets show that the hybrid approach outperforms existing ML/DL IDS models, particularly in identifying zero-day threats. The paper also discusses implications for sectors such as energy, transportation, and healthcare, where cybersecurity reliability is mission-critical.

Keywords: Hybrid Intrusion Detection System (IDS); Cybersecurity; Critical Infrastructure Protection; Machine Learning (ML); Deep Learning (DL); LSTM Networks

1.Introduction

The growing reliance on digital technologies in water treatment facilities, transport systems, power grids, and healthcare infrastructures has led to increased exposure to cyberattacks [1]. These systems often utilize interconnected SCADA and ICS components that introduce operational vulnerabilities exploitable by advanced adversaries [2]. Past incidents—such as Stuxnet, the Colonial Pipeline ransomware breach, and the SolarWinds supply-chain compromise—demonstrate the destructive impact of such attacks on national and organizational sta bility [3, 4]

Traditional IDS mechanisms operate by comparing real-time traffic with known malicious signatures [5]. While effective against established threats, they cannot identify previously unseen or adaptive attacks such as zero-day exploits [6]. Anomaly-based detection strategies attempt to model normal system behavior and flag deviations, but they often produce excessive false alerts and cannot easily adjust to shifting network trends (concept drift) [7, 8].

Recent advancements in ML and DL have enabled more intelligent IDS architectures capable of capturing complex and multi-stage attack behaviors [9]. However, standalone AI models still encounter challenges such as high

computational demand, limited temporal awareness, and interpretability issues [10]. In high-security environments like SCADA networks, real-time responsiveness, trustworthiness, and auditability remain essential [11].

This study introduces a hybrid AI-driven IDS that integrates ML classifiers, LSTM-based sequence learning, and rule-based verification, addressing gaps in reliability and detection precision.

2. Related Work

Several ML models—including SVM, Decision Trees, Random Forest, and Gradient Boosting—have been investigated for intrusion detection and have demonstrated higher accuracy than classical IDS approaches [12]. DL architectures such as CNNs, RNNs, and LSTMs have also advanced IDS systems by learning spatial and temporal features from traffic datasets [13, 14].

Hybrid IDS frameworks emerged to combine the strengths of ML/DL with deterministic rule-based validation to improve detection accuracy and reduce false alarms [15]. Such rule mechanisms are particularly important in SCADA systems for enforcing protocol compliance and detecting suspicious commands [16]. However, many hybrid systems still lack optimized fusion mechanisms and often perform poorly in large-scale, high-load networks [17].

The proposed method introduces multi-table feature summarization, temporal modeling with LSTM networks, and an optimized fusion mechanism integrating threat intelligence sources [18].

3. System Architecture and Methodology

Table 1. System Architecture Summary

Layer	Description	Techniques Used
Layer 1: Data Acquisition	Collects traffic from SCADA, IoT, cloud, and network logs	PCAP, NetFlow, Syslogs
Layer 2: Feature Engineering	Reduces dimensionality and extracts useful attributes	Normalization, PCA, entropy features
Layer 3: Hybrid Detection	ML + DL + Rules detect anomalies	RF, XGBoost, LSTM, rule engine
Layer 4: Fusion Module	Final decision through weighted scoring	Weighted ensemble

Table 1 is referenced throughout the methodology for clarity.

3.1 Data Acquisition Layer

The system collects diverse data, including packet captures (PCAP), NetFlow statistics, authentication logs, and SCADA protocol messages such as Modbus/TCP and DNP3 [18]. Using multiple data sources provides better contextual understanding and improves classification reliability.

3.2 Feature Engineering Layer

Feature engineering involves normalization, Min–Max scaling, PCA-based dimensionality reduction, entropy-level computation, and extraction of timing and payload-based attributes [19]. These refined features significantly enhance model learning.

Table 2. Dataset Summary

Dataset	Samples	Features	Attack Types
NSL-KDD	125,973	41	DoS, Probe, U2R, R2L
UNSW-NB-15	2.5M	49	9 modern attacks
CICIDS20-17	3M	80+	DDoS, Botnet, Brute Force

The datasets presented in Table 2 were used for evaluation and training

3.3 Machine Learning Module

Random Forest and XGBoost were selected due to their strong performance on imbalanced and noisy datasets [19, 20]. They also offer faster inference and reasonable interpretability, which are essential for industrial environments.

3.4 Deep Learning Module

The LSTM unit is used for analyzing sequential traffic flows, effectively detecting slow-moving and stealthy threats that other models often miss [21].

3.5 Rule-Based Module

Rule-based validation incorporates:

♦ Industry protocol compliance checks

♦ known malware signatures

♦ Behavioral patterns tied to suspicious SCADA commands [16]

This enhances interpretability and ensures trustworthy detection outcomes.

3.6 Fusion Layer

A weighted scoring model combines ML, DL, and rule-layer outputs into a unified decision:

Score = w1(ML) + w2(DL) + w3(Rules)

Weights are determined through tuning to minimize false positives [22].

4. Experimental Setup

The experiments used Python, TensorFlow, Keras, and Scikit-learn. Each dataset (NSL-KDD, UNSW-NB15, CICIDS2017) was split into training–validation–testing segments following common IDS evaluation practices [23, 24]. Metrics included accuracy, recall, precision, F1-score, false-positive rate, and AUC.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Performance Comparison

The results demonstrate that the hybrid model significantly surpasses the performance of single-model ML or DL approaches [10], [12], [14].

The performance of the proposed system vs. baseline models is shown in Table 3

Table 3. Performance Comparison of Existing and Proposed Models

Model	Accuracy (%)	F1 Score (%)	FPR (%)
SVM [10]	88.2	86.5	6.2
CNN-IDS [12]	93.1	92.3	4.8
LSTM-IDS [14]	94.8	93.7	3.5
Random Forest [11]	95.3	94.2	3.2
Proposed Hybrid Model	98.7	97.9	1.8

5.2 Attack-Type Analysis

The framework excelled in identifying DDoS, malware, probe attacks, ransomware variants, and zero-day behaviors with strong precision and recall values [25].

Table 4. Attack-Type Detection Performance

Attack Type	Precision	Recall	F1 Score
DDoS	0.99	0.98	0.98
Malware	0.97	0.96	0.96
Ransomware	0.98	0.97	0.97
Probe/Scan	0.96	0.95	0.95
Zero-Day	0.94	0.92	0.93

Table 4 demonstrates the framework's strength in zero-day threat detection.

6. Discussion

6.1 Advantages

The main benefits include multi-layer detection robustness, improvements in false-positive reduction, strong temporal learning, compatibility with SCADA/IoT environments, and impressive zero-day detection capabilities [18], [21].

6.2 Limitations

Computational overhead during DL model training remains high, models require periodic updates due to concept drift, and high-quality labeled datasets are necessary for optimal performance [7].

6.3 Deployment Considerations

Real-world deployment requires edge–cloud coordination, real-time packet monitoring, model retraining infrastructure, and end-to-end SCADA protocol support [16], [18].

7. Conclusion

This research proposed a hybrid AI-driven IDS that integrates ML, DL, and rule-based detection techniques to address cybersecurity challenges in critical infrastructures. Tests conducted on three major datasets confirmed that the approach enhances detection accuracy while significantly reducing false-positive rates compared to existing models. Future work will explore adversarial robustness, federated learning integration, and deployment in industrial real-time settings [23], [24].

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