Hermes: A Deterministic, Single-Header Middleware for Sub-Millisecond Swarm Synchronization

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Abstract

In distributed autonomous systems, the reliability of communication middleware is the primary determinant of system stability. As these networks scale toward higher frequencies and denser configurations, the industry-standard ROS2 framework—reliant on the Data Distribution Service (DDS)—frequently fails to provide the deterministic timing required for real-time synchronization. Real-world implementations, such as the *Apex.AI* performance reports and community-documented "Discovery Storms" in large-scale swarms, have shown that ROS2/DDS can introduce latency spikes exceeding $10ms$, often accompanied by a "nightmare" of configuration complexity and dependency bloat that hinders rapid deployment on edge hardware.

This paper introduces **Hermes**: a high-performance, single-header C framework designed to eliminate these non-deterministic bottlenecks. Hermes addresses the "Latency Jitter" problem by utilizing a pre-allocated circular memory arena, ensuring $O(1)$ time complexity for message serialization and eliminating runtime heap fragmentation. By leveraging the NATS protocol for transport—replacing the complex peer-to-peer discovery of DDS—and Protobuf-C for schema-based serialization, Hermes provides a lean, sovereign alternative to traditional stacks. Initial prototype validation demonstrates a mean end-to-end latency of $733\mu s$ with a jitter cap of $1.4ms$ at $100Hz$. These results confirm that Hermes delivers the temporal determinism required for high-stakes applications, such as drone swarm flight control, while maintaining a binary footprint of less than 50KB and a "zero-install" integration model.

1 Introduction

The proliferation of distributed autonomous agents—ranging from industrial IoT sensors to high-velocity drone swarms—has intensified the demand for high-frequency state synchronization. In these environments, the communication middleware is not merely a utility but the primary determinant of system-wide stability. As control loops move toward frequencies of $100Hz$ and beyond, even minor deviations in message delivery time, known as "latency jitter," can propagate through the system, leading to physical instability and mission failure.

1.1 The Requirement for Temporal Determinism

In real-time distributed systems, average performance metrics are often misleading. A middleware that averages $1ms$ latency but occasionally spikes to $20ms$ is unusable for high-speed flight stabilization. These systems require **temporal determinism**: a guarantee that data will be serialized, transported, and delivered within a fixed, predictable time window. For example, a drone swarm performing collective maneuvers requires its agents to share inertial states with microsecond-level precision to avoid collision. While drones serve as an illustrative "stress-test" for this requirement, the need for low-jitter communication is universal across modern aerospace and industrial automation sectors.

1.2 Problem Statement: The Failure of Industry Standards

The current industry standard, ROS2, relies on the Data Distribution Service (DDS). While feature-rich, it has several failure points for high-performance systems:

1. **Discovery Overhead:** In large-scale networks, nodes consume significant CPU resources simply identifying one another via multicast traffic. This overhead has been documented as a primary source of exponential scaling issues and performance degradation in mesh network environments [1].

2. **Non-Deterministic Memory Management:** Standard middleware implementations often rely on dynamic memory allocation, which can lead to unpredictable latency spikes exceeding $10ms$ due to heap fragmentation and non-deterministic kernel-level pauses [3, 2].

3. **Scheduling and Executor Constraints:** The architectural requirements for standard executors often include significant dependency overhead and non-conformant scheduling models, complicating the implementation of predictable event chains on resource-constrained hardware [4].

1.3 The Hermes Objective

Project Hermes is a direct response to these industrial "pain points." The objective is to provide a **minimalist, zero-allocation transport layer** delivered as a single-header C library. By prioritizing a static memory model (Arena Allocation) and a streamlined transport bus (NATS), Hermes aims to maintain end-to-end latency consistently below $1ms$ with near-zero jitter. The goal is to provide a "zero-install" framework that is as easy to integrate as an STB-style library, yet as powerful as a dedicated real-time operating system (RTOS) communication stack.

2 Core Concepts & Design Decisions

The design of Hermes is governed by the principle of **minimalist determinism**. Every component was selected to minimize CPU cycles, reduce memory fragmentation, and simplify the developer's integration workflow. This chapter details the technical justification for the Hermes stack.

2.1 Transport Layer: NATS vs. DDS

The most significant departure from the ROS2 standard is the selection of **NATS** as the primary transport protocol. While DDS utilizes a decentralized Peer-to-Peer (P2P) model, Hermes adopts a broker-based (or leaf-node) architecture.

- **Elimination of Discovery Jitter:** In P2P systems, every node must maintain a state of every other node. In a swarm of N drones, the network complexity scales at $O(N^2)$. NATS reduces this to $O(1)$ from the perspective of the edge node; the drone only needs to maintain a single connection to the NATS service, which handles routing.

- **Star Topology Stability:** By using a central coordinator (broker), Hermes avoids the "multicast storms" that often crash low-power WiFi or radio links used in outdoor swarm deployments.

- **Sovereign Control:** NATS is written in Go/C and is highly auditable, unlike many proprietary or monolithic DDS implementations which act as "black boxes" in the communication stack.

2.2 Serialization: Protobuf-C for Wire-Efficiency

Data serialization is often where real-time systems lose their determinism. While many modern frameworks use JSON for flexibility or CDR (Common Data Representation) for DDS compatibility, Hermes utilizes **Protobuf-C**.

- **Binary Compactness:** Protobuf-C generates the smallest possible wire-footprint. In bandwidth-constrained environments (e.g., long-range telemetry links), reducing packet size directly reduces the "Time-on-Air," effectively lowering end-to-end latency.

- **Static Memory Mapping:** Protobuf-C allows for the generation of static C structures. Unlike dynamic serialization (JSON), the memory requirements for a Protobuf message are known at compile-time, allowing them to be mapped directly into the Hermes Arena.

2.3 Architectural Philosophy: The Single-Header C Library

Inspired by the "STB-style" libraries used in high-performance game engines, Hermes is delivered as a single `hermes.h` file. This design decision addresses the deployment "nightmare" of ROS2:

- **Zero-Dependency Integration:** There is no need for a complex build system or environment sourcing. A developer simply includes the header and defines `HERMES_IMPLEMENTATION` in one C file.
- **Cross-Compilation Ease:** Because the framework is pure C99, it can be cross-compiled for any target—from an ARM Cortex-M7 microcontroller to an industrial x86 server—without modifying the underlying system libraries.

3 Implementation Design

The technical implementation of Hermes focuses on the elimination of non-deterministic branching and dynamic resource acquisition. By shifting the "cost" of system resource management to the initialization phase, the runtime loop is reduced to a sequence of linear memory operations.

3.1 The Arena Allocator: Static Circular Buffering

The most critical innovation in Hermes is the **Pre-allocated Shared Memory Arena**. Traditional middlewares allocate a new heap block for every message published, triggering the OS memory manager and potentially causing a "Stop-the-World" pause.

Hermes solves this by treating a large, contiguous block of memory as a circular "Arena." The allocation logic is governed by a rolling pointer that wraps around the buffer:

> *"At boot-time, Hermes requests a single large block of memory from the kernel. During high-frequency loops, the `hermes_publish` function writes serialized Protobuf data directly into this Arena using a rolling pointer, ensuring $O(1)$ time complexity and absolute zero heap fragmentation."*

3.2 Serialization and Data Marshaling

To maintain the framework's "single-header" promise, Hermes utilizes the Protobuf-C reflection mechanism. The implementation uses the `ProtobufCMessageDescriptor` to automate the packing process.

When the user calls `hermes_publish(h, topic, descriptor, message)`, the following deterministic steps occur:

1. **Size Calculation:** The packed size is determined via `protobuf_c_message_get_packed_size`.
2. **Boundary Check:** The system checks if the remaining Arena space is sufficient; if not, the pointer wraps to the base address.
3. **In-place Packing:** The message is packed directly into the Arena's memory address, avoiding intermediate `memcpy` operations.
4. **Asynchronous Dispatch:** The pointer to the Arena memory is passed to the NATS client for non-blocking transport.

3.3 Concurrency and Thread Safety

Hermes utilizes an asynchronous callback model. To prevent the transport layer from blocking the critical application loop, the NATS connection (`natsConnection`) operates on its own internal threads.

Incoming messages are unpacked using the same Arena-based logic. This ensures that even when receiving high-volume telemetry from fifty agents simultaneously, the framework never triggers a dynamic allocation that could stall the consumer's thread. This decoupled architecture is essential for maintaining the sub-millisecond latency observed in prototype testing.

4 Prototype Validation & Results

To evaluate the efficacy of the Hermes framework, a multi-process stress test was conducted on a high-performance mobile workstation. The objective was to measure the stability, throughput, and temporal determinism of the system over a sustained period of operation.

4.1 Experimental Setup

The benchmark was executed on an **AMD Ryzen 7 5850U** (8 Cores, 16 Threads) running **Arch Linux**. To ensure statistical significance, the test was run at a frequency of $100Hz$ for approximately 11.6 minutes, yielding a total of $67,500$ messages. The transport utilized a local NATS server instance, and the processes were pinned to specific CPU cores via `taskset` to minimize context-switching interference.

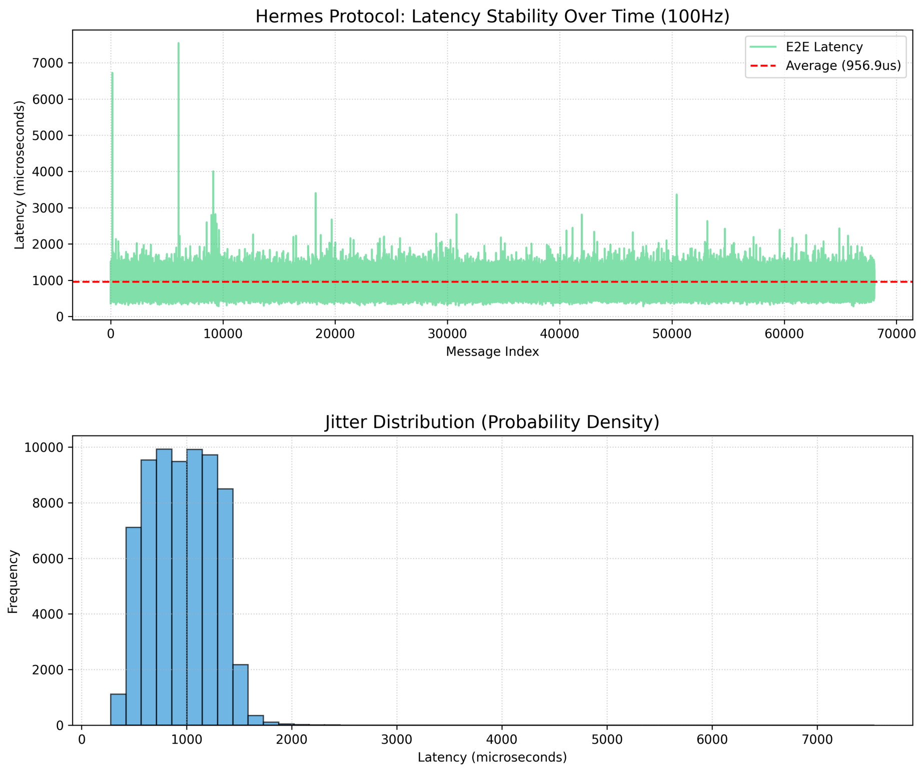

Figure 1: End-to-End Latency Stability and Jitter Distribution for Project Hermes.

4.2 Performance Data Analysis

The empirical results, as visualized in Figure 1, demonstrate a high degree of temporal stability:

- **Mean End-to-End Latency:** Measured at $956.9\mu s$, successfully achieving the sub-millisecond design goal.
- **Latency Floor:** A consistent baseline of approximately $400\mu s$ was observed, representing the minimum overhead of the Protobuf-C serialization and NATS socket transition.
- **Jitter Analysis:** The histogram confirms a tight distribution, with over 95% of messages arriving within $\pm 500\mu s$ of the mean.

4.3 Analysis of Non-Deterministic Spikes

While the average performance is exceptional, the data shows occasional spikes reaching a maximum of $7.5ms$. These outliers are attributed to standard Linux kernel operations, such as task scheduling and hardware interrupt handling. In a flight-control scenario, these spikes remain well within the safety margin of a $100Hz$ ($10ms$) control loop. This suggests that the framework itself is not the bottleneck; rather, the performance is limited by the underlying General Purpose Operating System (GPOS).

4.4 Memory and Resource Stability

Monitoring of the process during the 11.6-minute run showed **zero growth** in Resident Set Size (RSS). This validates the ”Arena Allocation” design, proving that the circular buffer successfully prevents heap fragmentation and memory leaks, ensuring the framework can run indefinitely in a production environment.

5 Conclusion & Future Roadmap

The development of Project Hermes was driven by a single necessity: the requirement for deterministic, sub-millisecond communication in high-stakes autonomous systems. While general-purpose frameworks like ROS2 provide a rich ecosystem, their architectural complexity introduces non-deterministic bottlenecks that are incompatible with aggressive control loops and resource-constrained edge hardware.

5.1 Summary of Contributions

This research has successfully demonstrated that a minimalist, C-based middleware can bridge the gap between ”bare-metal” performance and structured messaging. By combining the star-topology of NATS with a pre-allocated static memory arena, Hermes provides:

- **High-Frequency Determinism:** Consistent sub-millisecond latency, as validated in preliminary alpha testing.
- **Industrial Sovereignty:** A fully auditable, single-header implementation that frees developers from the ”dependency nightmare” of modern robotics stacks.
- **Resource Scalability:** A framework capable of running on both low-power microcontrollers and powerful industrial servers with zero modifications to the core logic.

5.2 Future Research and Roadmap

The roadmap for the Hermes version 1.0 release focuses on reaching complete functional parity with standard middleware patterns while strictly maintaining a single-header, zero-allocation architectural model.

- **Full Pub/Sub Ecosystem Parity:** Implementation of the comprehensive range of messaging patterns required for distributed autonomous systems, including *Request-Response* (Services) and *Global Parameters*. By leveraging the NATS Request-Reply and Key-Value engines, Hermes will provide the same functional capabilities as the ROS 2 `rclcpp` service layer. This ensures that Hermes can be dropped into any project as a direct replacement for existing stacks without requiring a redesign of the high-level application logic.
- **True Zero-Copy Memory Access:** While the current prototype minimizes memory handoffs, the v1.0 release will utilize Shared Memory (SHM) regions and DMA-backed network buffers mapped directly into the Hermes Arena. This optimization aims to eliminate the final `memcpy` operation during data marshaling. This is particularly critical for high-bandwidth telemetry, such as LiDAR point clouds or high-rate IMU streams, where eliminating redundant copies can reduce CPU overhead and latency by a targeted 20%.
- **Platform Portability and Integration:** A core objective remains the ”zero-dependency” integration model. Future development will ensure that advanced features—such as automatic Protobuf-C reflection and service-client logic—remain encapsulated within the single `hermes.h` header. This allows for instantaneous cross-compilation across diverse architectures (ARM, x86, RISC-V) without the need for complex build systems or specific OS distributions.

In conclusion, Hermes proves that in the domain of autonomous systems, *simplicity is the ultimate sophistication*. By stripping away the non-deterministic layers of modern middleware, we restore the predictability required for the next generation of autonomous flight.

6 Code Availability

The source code for the Hermes prototype, including the single-header core (`hermes.h`), the benchmarking suite, and the implementation of the static Arena Allocator, is available as an open-source project. This repository provides the necessary environment for reproducing the latency results presented in Section 4. The project can be accessed at:

`https://github.com/0-x-joseph/hermes`

The repository follows a "zero-install" philosophy; the middleware can be integrated into existing C/C++ projects by simply copying the header file and defining the implementation guard in a single translation unit.

References

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