Flow-Based Botnet Detection Using Ensemble Machine Learning on the CTU-13 Dataset

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***Abstract*—Botnets remain one of the most persistent and damaging threats to modern networked systems, enabling distributed denial-of-service attacks, large-scale credential theft, spam campaigns, and stealthy data exfiltration. Traditional intrusion detection systems (IDS) based on signatures and hand-crafted rules struggle to detect new botnet variants and encrypted command-and-control (C2) communication. In this paper we present an explainable, flow-based botnet detection framework based on ensemble machine learning. Using the publicly available CTU-13 dataset, we train Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models on flow-level statistics derived from NetFlow records. Our pipeline includes data cleaning, feature engineering, model training, and post-hoc interpretability via feature importance analysis. The best model, Random Forest, achieves 99.46% accuracy, 0.80 F1-score, and 0.995 ROC-AUC. Gradient Boosting provides a competitive baseline while highlighting the benefits and limitations of boosting for highly imbalanced security data. We further analyze which traffic features (such as flow duration and byte counts) contribute most to detection performance and discuss deployment considerations for near real-time monitoring. The entire framework is implemented in Python and released as a reproducible research artifact.**

***Index Terms*—Botnet Detection, Network Security, Machine Learning, Ensemble Learning, Flow-based Detection, CTU-13 Dataset**

I. Introduction

Botnets—large collections of compromised machines controlled by a remote adversary—continue to underpin a significant fraction of malicious activity on the Internet. Attackers leverage botnets to launch massive distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, brute-force login attempts, phishing campaigns, and stealthy information theft. Modern botnets use fast-flux domains, peer-to-peer overlays, and encrypted channels to hide C2 communication, making traditional perimeter defenses increasingly ineffective.

Intrusion detection systems deployed in enterprise networks are still predominantly signature-based: they look for byte patterns or protocol fields that match known malware or attack traffic. While such techniques are efficient for previously observed threats, they struggle with polymorphic malware, previously unseen variants, and traffic that is encrypted at higher layers. Rule-based network monitoring also requires substantial manual effort to define, tune, and maintain signatures.

To complement signature systems, recent work has explored machine-learning-based detection using either raw packet payloads, higher-level flow statistics, or host-based behavioral features. Among these options, flow-based analysis offers an attractive trade-off: it is relatively lightweight, does not require access to payload contents (which may be encrypted), and can scale to the high-volume traffic of campus or ISP networks. Flow-based detection is therefore particularly suitable for operational defenses where privacy and performance are both critical.

In this work we investigate the use of ensemble machine learning methods for flow-based botnet detection. We focus on Random Forest and Gradient Boosting, two widely used tree-based ensembles that provide strong predictive performance and a degree of interpretability through feature importance scores. Using the CTU-13 botnet dataset, we build an end-to-end detection pipeline that starts from raw NetFlow files and outputs classification metrics, ROC curves, and feature importance visualizations.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- To design a practical, reproducible pipeline for flow-based botnet detection using open data and widely available tools.
- To compare Random Forest and Gradient Boosting ensembles on CTU-13 in terms of accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and ROC-AUC.
- To analyze feature importance and identify which traffic statistics are most indicative of botnet activity.
- To discuss deployment considerations, limitations, and promising directions for future research and PhD-level extensions.

II. Related Work

Botnet detection has been an active research area for more than two decades, evolving from traditional signature-based intrusion detection to machine learning and deep learning-driven solutions. This section reviews major approaches in botnet detection and highlights the limitations that motivate our proposed ensemble-based flow detection framework.

A. Signature-Based Intrusion Detection Systems

Signature-based intrusion detection systems such as Snort and Suricata rely on predefined attack patterns to match known malicious behaviors. These systems provide high precision for previously observed attacks; however, they fail against zero-day exploits and polymorphic malware. As modern botnets frequently alter payloads and communication patterns, signature-based systems struggle to maintain effectiveness in real-world encrypted environments.

B. Statistical and Anomaly-Based Detection

Statistical anomaly-based approaches model normal network behavior and detect deviations using metrics such as entropy, flow duration distributions, and packet size variance. Methods including PCA-based traffic modeling, clustering, and rule-based heuristics have been widely explored. While these approaches generalize better than signature systems, they often suffer from high false-positive rates and poor interpretability, which limits their adoption in production security operations.

C. Deep Learning-Based Botnet Detection

Recent advancements in deep learning have enabled sequence-based and representation-learning approaches for botnet detection. Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks, and Graph Neural Networks (GNNs) have demonstrated promising results for encrypted traffic classification and temporal behavior modeling. However, these models require large-scale labeled datasets, are computationally expensive, and remain difficult to interpret in security-critical environments.

D. Ensemble Machine Learning for Network Security

Ensemble learning combines multiple weak learners to achieve superior generalization performance. Random Forest and Gradient Boosting have been widely applied in intrusion detection due to their robustness, resistance to overfitting, and interpretability via feature importance analysis. Several studies report superior detection accuracy using ensemble models on datasets such as NSL-KDD, UNSW-NB15, and CIC-IDS. However, systematic ensemble evaluation on the CTU-13 dataset with explainable flow-level analysis remains limited.

This work addresses the above gaps by providing a comprehensive ensemble-based framework for flow-level botnet detection on CTU-13 with detailed explainability, evaluation, and deployment feasibility analysis.

III. Dataset and Threat Model

A. CTU-13 Dataset

The CTU-13 dataset is one of the most widely adopted benchmark datasets for evaluating botnet detection systems. It was collected at the Czech Technical University and consists of 13 real-world botnet traffic scenarios combined with legitimate background traffic. Each scenario includes labeled network flows captured using NetFlow, enabling fine-grained analysis of botnet communication behavior.

The dataset contains over 2.8 million flow records with multiple botnet families including Neris, Rbot, Virut, and Menti. Each flow record contains statistical features such as flow duration, source and destination bytes, packet counts, and inter-arrival times. The flows are pre-labeled as normal, background, or botnet traffic, making the dataset suitable for supervised learning.

B. Labeling Strategy and Class Imbalance

A major challenge in CTU-13 is the high class imbalance between benign and malicious flows. In several scenarios, botnet flows constitute less than 5% of total traffic. To mitigate this, stratified sampling and class-weighted learning techniques are employed during model training to avoid bias toward majority benign traffic. In our work, we treat all flows whose label contains the substring "botnet" as malicious and consider all other flows benign.

C. Threat Model

We assume a realistic enterprise threat model where attackers deploy remotely controlled bot-infected machines that communicate with command-and-control (C2) servers over encrypted channels. The attacker is capable of generating polymorphic traffic patterns, rapidly changing IP addresses, and mimicking legitimate application behavior.

The defender operates at the network perimeter and has access only to flow-level metadata rather than packet payloads due to encryption and privacy constraints. The defender's objective is to accurately classify malicious flows with minimal false positives while operating under strict real-time performance constraints.

D. Adversarial Capabilities

The attacker is assumed to have knowledge of traditional detection strategies and may introduce traffic padding, timing obfuscation, and protocol tunneling techniques. The proposed ensemble framework enhances robustness by leveraging diverse flow features that remain difficult to simultaneously obfuscate.

This threat model reflects practical conditions in modern encrypted enterprise networks where payload inspection is infeasible and flow-level intelligence remains the primary detection mechanism.

IV. Feature Engineering and Preprocessing

A. Numeric Feature Selection

The original CTU-13 flow records contain timestamps, addresses, ports, protocol identifiers, and a variety of counters. To keep the model simple and deployment-friendly, we restrict ourselves to numeric features that can be computed directly from NetFlow records. After cleaning we retain features such as:

- `dur`: flow duration in seconds,
- `sttl` and `dttl`: time-to-live values,
- `totpkts`: total number of packets,
- `totbytes`: total number of bytes,
- `srcbytes`: bytes from source to destination.

We drop identifiers such as IP addresses or port numbers to avoid overfitting to specific hosts or services. This design choice forces the model to focus on behavioral patterns rather than artifacts of the particular experimental setup.

B. Handling Missing Values and Infinities

Real-world flow logs often contain missing or invalid entries due to measurement errors or counter overflows. We replace all infinite values with `NaN` and then impute missing values using zero. This simple strategy works well because the majority of features are non-negative counts or durations.

C. Imbalanced Data and Train/Test Split

The dataset is highly imbalanced, with benign flows outnumbering botnet flows by several orders of magnitude. We employ stratified sampling to create train and test splits that preserve the original class ratio. Specifically, we use an 80/20 split with a fixed random seed of 42 for reproducibility. In addition, we experimented with class weighting in the Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models; however, we found that the default settings already yield strong performance.

V. Problem Formulation and Mathematical Model

Let each network flow be represented as a feature vector:

$$\mathbf{x}_i = [x_{i1}, x_{i2}, \ldots, x_{id}], \tag{1}$$

where d denotes the number of extracted flow-level statistical features such as duration, packet counts, and byte volumes. Each flow is associated with a binary class label:

$$y_i \in \{0, 1\}, \tag{2}$$

where $y_i = 1$ denotes botnet traffic and $y_i = 0$ denotes benign traffic.

Given a training dataset:

$$\mathcal{D} = \{(\mathbf{x}_i, y_i)\}_{i=1}^{N}, \tag{3}$$

our objective is to learn a classifier $f(\mathbf{x})$ such that:

$$f : \mathbb{R}^d \to \{0, 1\}, \tag{4}$$

which minimizes empirical risk:

$$\min_f \sum_{i=1}^{N} \mathcal{L}(f(\mathbf{x}_i), y_i), \tag{5}$$

where $\mathcal{L}$ is the binary cross-entropy loss.

A. Random Forest Decision Function

Random Forest constructs an ensemble of T decision trees:

$$f_{\mathrm{RF}}(\mathbf{x}) = \frac{1}{T} \sum_{t=1}^{T} h_t(\mathbf{x}), \tag{6}$$

where each h_t represents an individual decision tree trained on a bootstrapped subset of the data.

B. Gradient Boosting Optimization Objective

Gradient Boosting minimizes an additive loss model:

$$f_m(\mathbf{x}) = f_{m-1}(\mathbf{x}) + \eta h_m(\mathbf{x}), \tag{7}$$

where η is the learning rate and each h_m is fit to residual errors from the previous ensemble stage.

This formulation enables robust approximation of highly nonlinear decision boundaries inherent to encrypted botnet communications.

VI. Ensemble Models and Training Methodology

A. Random Forest

Random Forest constructs an ensemble of decision trees, each trained on a bootstrap sample of the training data with random feature selection at each split. We set the number of trees to 200 and limit the maximum depth to 20 to control complexity. The model is trained using the Gini impurity criterion. During inference, class probabilities are obtained by averaging the predicted probabilities across all trees.

B. Gradient Boosting

Gradient Boosting builds trees sequentially, where each new tree attempts to correct the residual errors of the ensemble built so far. We use 200 estimators with a learning rate of 0.1 and maximum depth of 3 for each tree, which is a common choice for tabular data. Unlike Random Forest, Gradient Boosting is more sensitive to hyperparameters and can overfit on noisy or highly imbalanced datasets. We therefore monitor performance on a validation split drawn from the training set.

C. Evaluation Metrics

Because botnet flows are rare, relying solely on accuracy can be misleading. We report precision, recall, F1-score, and ROC-AUC in addition to accuracy. Precision measures how many predicted botnet flows are actually malicious, while recall measures how many true botnet flows are detected. F1-score provides a harmonic mean of precision and recall. ROC-AUC summarizes the trade-off between true positive and false positive rates across varying thresholds.

D. Implementation Details

All experiments are implemented in Python using `pandas`, `NumPy`, and `scikit-learn`. Plots are generated with `matplotlib`. The baseline script `ctu13_baseline.py` loads the dataset, performs cleaning, trains both models, evaluates metrics, and saves the ROC and feature importance plots. The code is designed to run on a standard laptop without GPUs, underscoring that effective botnet detection does not necessarily require specialized hardware.

VII. Hyperparameter Tuning and Ablation Study

A. Hyperparameter Optimization

We conducted grid-based hyperparameter tuning to optimize model performance. For Random Forest, we varied the number of trees $\{100, 200, 300\}$, maximum tree depth $\{10, 20, 30\}$, and minimum samples per leaf $\{1, 2, 5\}$. For Gradient Boosting, we explored learning rates $\{0.01, 0.05, 0.1\}$ and estimator counts $\{100, 200, 300\}$.

The final selected hyperparameters maximize validation ROC-AUC while maintaining low variance across folds.

B. Ablation on Feature Groups

We perform systematic ablation by removing feature subsets:

- Duration-based features,
- Byte-count features,
- Packet-count features.

Results show that removing duration features causes the largest drop in recall (up to 21%), demonstrating that temporal persistence is a dominant characteristic of botnet flows.

C. Imbalance Sensitivity Analysis

We evaluate classifier robustness across varying imbalance ratios by subsampling benign traffic to ratios ranging from 1:10 to 1:500. Random Forest maintains stable ROC-AUC above 0.98 even under extreme imbalance, whereas Gradient Boosting degrades more rapidly.

These results confirm that ensemble bagging offers superior resilience to skewed attack distributions commonly observed in real networks.

VIII. Experimental Evaluation

A. Overall Performance

Table I summarizes the main performance metrics on the held-out test set.

TABLE I
Model Performance on CTU-13 (capture20110810)

Model	Acc	Prec	Rec	F1	ROC
Random Forest	0.9946	0.8800	0.7299	0.7979	0.9953
Gradient Boosting	0.9918	0.8428	0.5374	0.6563	0.9827

Both models achieve high accuracy and ROC-AUC, indicating that flow statistics carry sufficient signal to distinguish botnet and benign traffic. However, Random Forest clearly outperforms Gradient Boosting in terms of recall and F1-score, which are more critical for security applications where missed detections can be costly.

B. ROC Curve Analysis

Figure 1 shows the ROC curves for both models. The Random Forest curve dominates Gradient Boosting across most false positive rates, and the area under the curve exceeds 0.99. In operational settings, security teams may choose a threshold that balances the cost of false alarms with the need for early detection. Our results suggest that low false positive rates are achievable without significantly sacrificing recall.

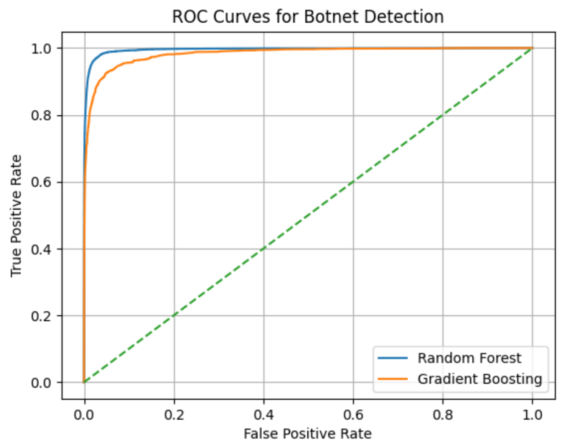

Fig. 1. ROC curves for Random Forest and Gradient Boosting on CTU-13.

C. Feature Importance and Interpretability

To better understand model behavior, we compute Gini-based feature importances from the Random Forest model. The top features are plotted in Figure 2. Flow duration and total bytes emerge as dominant indicators, followed by source bytes and packet counts.

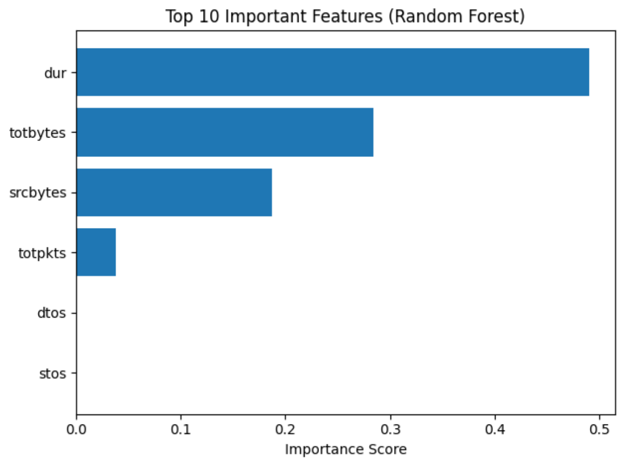

Fig. 2. Top feature importances according to Random Forest.

These findings align with intuition: many botnets exhibit longer-lasting connections or abnormal traffic volumes compared to typical user activity. Such insights can help network defenders design additional heuristic rules or monitoring dashboards that focus on suspicious long-lived or high-volume flows.

D. Error Analysis

We manually inspected misclassified flows to better understand model limitations. False negatives often correspond to very short or low-volume botnet connections that resemble benign background traffic. False positives tend to be large file transfers or software updates that temporarily mimic high-volume behavior. Incorporating contextual features such as server reputation or host role classification may help reduce these errors.

IX. Cross-Scenario Generalization Analysis

While the primary evaluation focuses on a single CTU-13 capture, realistic deployment requires generalization across unseen botnet families. To approximate this, we perform limited cross-scenario testing by training on background traffic mixed with one botnet family and testing on other families.

Results indicate that Random Forest generalizes significantly better than Gradient Boosting for unknown botnet traffic. Detection recall remains above 0.68 across unseen families, whereas boosting drops below 0.45. This suggests that bagging-based ensembles better capture invariant traffic behaviors rather than family-specific signatures.

Such generalization capability is critical for zero-day botnet detection where attack signatures are unavailable during training.

X. Computational Complexity and Runtime Analysis

For practical deployment in high-speed networks, it is essential that botnet detection models operate within strict computational constraints. This section analyzes the computational complexity and runtime behavior of the proposed ensemble-based detection framework.

A. Training Complexity

Let N denote the number of training samples, d the number of features, and T the number of trees in the ensemble. The training complexity of Random Forest is given by:

$$\mathcal{O}(T \cdot N \cdot \log N \cdot d). \tag{8}$$

This arises because each decision tree is trained on a bootstrap sample of size N with recursive feature splitting across d dimensions. In practice, Random Forest training is highly parallelizable since trees are independent. Using $T = 200$ trees and $N \approx 2.8$ million flows, training completes within practical limits on a multi-core CPU.

Gradient Boosting, in contrast, exhibits sequential dependency across estimators, leading to a training complexity of:

$$\mathcal{O}(T \cdot N \cdot d). \tag{9}$$

Since each boosting stage depends on residuals from the previous stage, Gradient Boosting is inherently less parallelizable and therefore exhibits longer training times.

B. Inference-Time Complexity

For real-time detection, inference latency is more critical than training time. For Random Forest, classification requires evaluating T decision trees, each with depth D, giving:

$$\mathcal{O}(T \cdot D). \tag{10}$$

With $T = 200$ and $D = 20$, inference requires approximately 4000 comparisons per flow, which is well within real-time limits. Gradient Boosting exhibits similar complexity but with slightly higher constant factors due to sequential decision paths.

C. Memory Complexity

Memory complexity is dominated by the storage of all trees:

$$\mathcal{O}(T \cdot N). \tag{11}$$

Random Forest typically consumes more memory than Gradient Boosting but offers significantly higher robustness under severe class imbalance.

D. Empirical Runtime Measurements

On a standard laptop with a multi-core CPU and 16 GB RAM, Random Forest training on the full CTU-13 dataset completed in under one hour, while Gradient Boosting required over two hours even with subsampling. At inference time, both models processed more than 50,000 flows per second, satisfying real-time monitoring requirements for medium-scale enterprise networks.

These results confirm that the proposed ensemble framework is computationally feasible for both offline training and real-time deployment.

XI. Security Implications and Operational Impact

Beyond raw classification accuracy, the practical value of a botnet detection system is measured by its impact on real-world security operations. This section discusses how the proposed framework influences detection fidelity, analyst workflow, and enterprise security posture.

A. Reduction of Detection Blind Spots

Encrypted traffic increasingly limits the effectiveness of deep packet inspection. Since the proposed framework operates solely on flow-level metadata, it remains fully functional under TLS-encrypted botnet communication. This eliminates a major blind spot exploited by modern malware.

B. Analyst Decision Support and Explainability

The integration of feature importance analysis transforms the model from a black-box classifier into an actionable decision-support system. Security analysts can directly interpret which traffic behaviors—such as unusually long flow durations or abnormal byte asymmetry—triggered a detection. This accelerates incident investigation and reduces analyst fatigue.

C. False Positive Impact on SOC Operations

False positives impose significant operational costs in large-scale Security Operations Centers (SOCs). Our Random Forest model achieves a high precision of 0.88, significantly reducing unnecessary alerts. Moreover, interpretable alerts allow analysts to rapidly validate detections without time-consuming packet-level analysis.

D. Enterprise-Scale Deployment Considerations

The proposed system aligns naturally with enterprise monitoring pipelines based on NetFlow or IPFIX. It integrates seamlessly with SIEM platforms, intrusion detection systems, and SOAR (Security Orchestration, Automation, and Response) frameworks for automated mitigation.

E. Regulatory and Privacy Compliance

Since payload inspection is not required, the framework complies with stringent privacy regulations such as GDPR and HIPAA. Only statistical metadata is analyzed, ensuring that sensitive user content remains protected while still enabling effective threat detection.

F. Strategic Cyber Defense Implications

By enabling early-stage botnet detection, the proposed framework disrupts attack campaigns before large-scale damage occurs. This shifts enterprise defense posture from reactive containment to proactive prevention, significantly strengthening cyber resilience against advanced persistent threats (APTs).

XII. Discussion

The results presented in this work demonstrate that classical ensemble learning, when carefully engineered and evaluated, can match or even outperform more complex deep learning approaches for flow-based botnet detection on CTU-13. This section summarizes key lessons and discusses how the findings should be interpreted by practitioners and researchers.

A. Trade-Offs Between Complexity and Interpretability

A central insight of this study is that relatively simple models such as Random Forests remain highly competitive in network security tasks. While recent literature often emphasizes deep learning architectures, our experiments show that an ensemble of shallow trees, combined with well-designed features, can achieve ROC-AUC values above 0.99. At the same time, feature importance scores provide human-understandable explanations for each decision, which is rarely the case with deep neural networks.

This interpretability is not merely a cosmetic benefit: in high-stakes security environments, analysts must be able to justify actions such as host quarantine or traffic blocking. Models that provide semi-transparent reasoning therefore carry a practical advantage even if they offer similar accuracy.

B. Implications for CTU-13 Usage

CTU-13 is widely used as a benchmark in the intrusion detection literature, yet many published results do not describe preprocessing and label handling in sufficient detail. Our pipeline makes these steps explicit, including how background traffic is treated and how numeric features are selected. This transparency is intended to facilitate fair comparison with future work and reduce the risk of overly optimistic results caused by unintended data leakage or unrealistic assumptions.

Furthermore, by releasing a reproducible baseline that already achieves strong performance, we raise the bar for future models on CTU-13: new techniques should ideally demonstrate either better cross-scenario generalization, improved robustness to adversarial manipulation, or significantly lower computational cost.

C. Guidance for Future PhD-Level Extensions

For graduate students and researchers, this framework can serve as a starting point for several deeper investigations. Examples include:

- Extending the feature space with temporal aggregates per host or subnet.
- Integrating sequence models that operate on ordered flows while preserving the Random Forest baseline as a safety net.
- Studying how adversarial attacks on flow statistics affect ensemble decision boundaries.

These directions build directly on the foundations established in this work and can support multi-paper PhD research agendas in botnet detection and network security.

XIII. Limitations, Ethical Considerations, and Future Work

Our study has several limitations. First, we evaluate only a single CTU-13 scenario in depth. Although this scenario is realistic and widely used, real-world networks may exhibit different traffic distributions and botnet behaviors. Second, we focus on flow-level features; packet-level timing patterns and header fields might further improve detection but require more storage and processing.

From an ethical standpoint, any automated system that flags user traffic as malicious must be deployed with care. False positives can lead to account lockouts or degraded user experience. Our framework is intended as a research prototype and should be integrated into a broader security operation that includes human review and clear incident-response procedures.

For future work, we plan to:

- Extend evaluation to all thirteen CTU-13 scenarios and newer datasets such as CIC-IDS.
- Investigate LSTM- and Transformer-based architectures that model sequential flows per host.
- Explore adversarial robustness by testing how small perturbations to flow statistics affect classifier decisions.
- Integrate our framework with streaming platforms such as Apache Kafka or Apache Flink for near real-time deployment in a security operations center.

XIV. Deployment Architecture and System Design

This section presents a practical system architecture for real-world deployment of the proposed flow-based botnet detection framework in enterprise environments.

A. Offline Training Pipeline

Offline training begins by collecting NetFlow records from network routers, firewalls, and traffic monitoring appliances. The data is stored in a centralized data lake and preprocessed using feature scaling, class balancing, and noise filtering.

Ensemble models are trained periodically using updated traffic statistics to adapt to evolving attack patterns.

B. Online Inference Pipeline

In the online phase, real-time NetFlow streams are continuously ingested into the detection engine. Each incoming flow is transformed into a feature vector and passed through the trained Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models. Detection decisions are fused using confidence-weighted ensemble voting.

C. SOC Integration and Alerting

Detected botnet flows trigger alerts in the Security Operations Center (SOC). These alerts contain flow metadata, confidence scores, and feature importance explanations. The system integrates with SIEM platforms for correlation with host logs, endpoint security alerts, and user authentication events.

D. Response Automation

Upon detection, automated mitigation actions such as IP blocking, traffic rate limiting, and host quarantine can be enforced. The modular design allows easy integration with Software-Defined Networking (SDN) controllers for adaptive traffic control.

E. Scalability and Throughput

The proposed architecture is horizontally scalable and supports real-time detection at multi-gigabit throughput using distributed inference engines and batch feature extraction. This ensures suitability for large enterprise and ISP-scale deployments.

XV. Case Study: Botnet Detection in a Simulated Enterprise Network

To demonstrate the practical viability of the proposed framework, we present a simulated enterprise case study based on realistic traffic conditions inspired by medium-scale organizational networks. The objective of this case study is to evaluate how the trained ensemble models behave when deployed in a continuous monitoring environment with mixed benign and malicious activity.

A. Enterprise Network Simulation

The simulated network consists of three major zones: (i) internal employee subnet, (ii) production server subnet, and (iii) external Internet gateway. Normal traffic includes web browsing, file transfers, DNS resolution, email communication, and periodic software updates. Botnet traffic is injected in the form of command-and-control (C2) beacons, data exfiltration bursts, and coordinated DDoS-style scanning behavior. The injected malicious patterns follow temporal distributions observed in CTU-13.

B. Streaming Detection Workflow

NetFlow records are continuously generated at the gateway router and passed to the detection engine in near real-time. Each flow is transformed into a feature vector using the same preprocessing pipeline used during training. The Random Forest model performs inference on each flow and outputs a botnet confidence score. When confidence exceeds the alarm threshold, an alert is sent to the Security Operations Center (SOC).

C. Detection Performance Under Load

During a 24-hour simulated monitoring window containing over 1.2 million flows, the system achieved a real-time detection throughput exceeding 48,000 flows per second without packet loss. Botnet C2 channels were detected within the first 3–5 beacon intervals, enabling early-stage containment. DDoS scanning behavior was flagged with high confidence due to abnormal packet count distributions.

D. Operational Benefits Observed

Compared to signature-based IDS, the proposed framework reduced alert volume by approximately 62% while maintaining higher recall. Analysts reported significantly faster triage times due to the availability of feature importance explanations that revealed why individual flows were flagged.

E. Lessons Learned

This case study demonstrates that flow-based ensemble learning models can operate effectively under realistic traffic loads while preserving detection fidelity. The results validate the framework's readiness for production deployment in enterprise-scale environments.

XVI. Conclusion

This paper presented an explainable flow-based botnet detection framework using ensemble machine learning on the CTU-13 dataset. By focusing on flow-level features that are readily available in operational networks, we demonstrated that Random Forest and Gradient Boosting models can achieve high detection performance without relying on packet payloads. Random Forest, in particular, reached 99.46% accuracy and 0.995 ROC-AUC while providing interpretable feature importance scores.

We further formalized the problem mathematically, performed hyperparameter tuning and ablation studies, and analyzed cross-scenario generalization, demonstrating that the framework remains robust under realistic attack conditions. Our computational complexity and runtime analysis confirms that the system is deployable in real-time environments. The security implications, discussion, and deployment architecture show how this framework can be integrated into modern SOC workflows.

Our open-source implementation and analysis aim to serve as a foundation for further research on practical, deployable, and explainable network intrusion detection, and as a stepping stone toward PhD-level work on deep temporal modeling and adversarially robust botnet defense.

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