Emerging Drone Cybersecurity Framework with NIST integration

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Abstract

Recently, the widespread adoption of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones, has brought about notable security concerns in addition to their broad range of uses. As these devices become more powerful and readily available, they present threats spanning from privacy breaches to potential use in terrorism. This study examines and analyzes the latest developments in drone security and vulnerabilities, with a focus on bringing forth a layered framework in counter-drone systems, changes in regulatory policies, and the rise of cybersecurity vulnerabilities affecting UAVs.

Introduction

As drones become increasingly integrated into civilian, commercial, and governmental operations, the need for secure and efficient communication channels grows more critical. Drones, also known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, are aerial robots that can fly autonomously or be controlled through various methods like joysticks, smartphones, and other ground control systems (GCS). As drones become more popular and available, traffic must be monitored. As drones become more accessible to individuals and organizations alike, the threat of unauthorized surveillance, data breaches, smuggling, and even terrorism grows. Understanding the evolving trends in drone security is essential not only to safeguard critical infrastructure and airspace but also to protect public privacy and national security. With advancements in AI, cybersecurity, and counter-drone measures, these fields are moving fast, and staying ahead of threats requires constant innovation, awareness, and proactive regulation. Exploring these trends empowers engineers, policymakers, and tech developers to build a safer, smarter airspace for the future.

UAVs are used primarily used for the military due to their high mobility, and as technology advances drones have become more accessible leading to more civilian uses including: sports, photography, construction, racing and precision agriculture, fishery protection, package delivery, infrastructure monitoring, aerial photography, land surveying, environmental assessment, security surveillance, emergency medical response, forest fire detection, search and rescue, contamination measurement and recreation. [1][3]

The common figuration and components of drones are very similar to a common computer, including CPU/RAM, Wi-Fi/ RF communications, camera, storage, sensors, and battery. What makes a drone different from a common computer is the Aeronautical hardware and a controller for manual flight operations. Because of these similarities, drones are susceptible to cyber attacks, including de-authentication for drones that use Wi-Fi, GPS spoofing, GPS jamming, Hijacking(Man in the Middle), and geofence spoofing.[2]

Some of these common threats include the controller being disconnected from the drone. This attack can be counteracted with a script called Drone Hole. This script identifies 2 types of drones: a DGI drone, which is are Chinese-manufactured drone taking up 70 percent of the market, and Parriot drones, which are French drone vendors that take up 30 percent. The script uses the MAC address to identify the drone. It then sends the hang-up packet, which breaks the drone and controller link. This kind of attack is referred to as a deauthentication attack, as the script interjects a command into the controller drone link; this type of attack only works on Wi-Fi networks. As a result, some drones will return to their home as they will remember the geo location from where it was taken off, and some drones will automatically return to the ground. Some drones might fall from the sky and cause property damage or be stolen. Find

Another threat involves the GPS, GPS spoofing requires the drone, controller, and the GPS satellite. There can be a use of a civilian band which is used to create or identify the geo location. This occurs

through triangulation, meaning it takes more than one satellite to indicate an accurate longitude and latitude location. The civilian bands are not authenticated, not encrypted and have weak signals.

GPS spoofing occurs because weak signal, not authentication, and a bad actor/ attacker can create a stronger signal that overrides the weak GPS signals, and the spoof signals have fake coordinates. Once picked up by the drone, it loose track of where it is as it has false geo location which can be a problem if the controller is relying on gps data from authentic gps satellite.[7]

Existing Drone Security Threats

UAVs are highly vulnerable to a variety of cybersecurity threats due to the open and often unencrypted nature of their communication and control systems, which will affect either Confidentiality, Integrity, or Availability[3]. One of the most common attack vectors is Man-in-the-Middle (MitM) Attacks, where adversaries intercept and potentially alter the data transmitted between the drone and its Ground Control Station (GCS). This poses a significant risk to the integrity of the drone and its confidentiality, especially when older MAVLink versions use plaintext protocols, which are more susceptible to interception[4]. Another major threat is GPS Spoofing, where attackers broadcast counterfeit GPS signals to mislead drones into incorrect navigation paths, potentially causing them to crash or veer off course, which affects the Integrity and availability[5]. Denial of Service (DoS) attacks can overwhelm communication channels with excessive traffic, preventing legitimate commands from reaching the drone, leading to system crashes or loss of control, leading to a loss of availability. Similarly, GPS Jamming involves high-powered RF signals that interfere with GPS receivers, causing navigational failure or forcing the drone to land. Lastly, De-Authentication Attacks exploit vulnerabilities in Wi-Fi protocols that are not protected by 802.11w, disconnecting the drone from its controller by sending forged deauthentication frames, rendering the UAV unresponsive or potentially causing it to fall from the sky, which affects the drone's availability and Integrity. These vulnerabilities span hardware, software, and communication layers and are often exacerbated by poor device configuration, lack of monitoring, and insecure firmware updates.

NIST Detect ACT

NIST(National Institute of Standards and Technology) is a cybersecurity framework to provide a common language for understanding, managing, and describing cybersecurity risks. Organizations can have more productive conversations among themselves, along with agencies and external partners. It also helps identify and prioritize the actions that should be taken to reduce cybersecurity risk and manage remaining risk. It also helps organizations align security actions across control types. Some organizations map all controls to the framework and build their security program with the framework in mind. Some may use the framework as a reference to identify whether they missed any critical security controls. NIST(National Institute of Standards and Technology) Cybersecurity Framework 2.0. Initially released in 2014, and in February 2024, NIST released the first major update, known as the CSF 2.0. Initially created to help secure the United States' critical infrastructure, but was quickly adopted by companies across all industries.

This was helpful to know what to do without having it prescribed to them, of exactly how they needed to implement cybersecurity. The cybersecurity framework has 3 primary components. The core, implementation tiers, and the profiles. The core is a set of cybersecurity outcomes that can be used to understand what it is that I need to do, or a series of desired outcomes that are understood by all. This core is a set of cybersecurity outcomes that can be used to understand what it is that I need to do or a series of desired outcomes that are understood by all. This core is made up of 5 functions: Identify, protect, detect, respond, and recover.

These functions are then divided into categories that have subcategories. The framework provides references that have details for the subcategories. An example is the identity functions, this function has the categories: Assets Management, Business Environment, Governance, Risk

Assessment, Risk Management Strategy, and supply chain risk management. These categories are split into subcategories containing more detail. Ex: Asset management will have subcategories including Physical devices within the organization are inventoried, Software platforms and applications within the organization are inventoried, Organizational communication and data flows are mapped, and External information systems are catalogued.[9]

Implementation tiers are tools for measuring how well in manage those capabilities are managed and categorizing how to improve security risk management based on processes already in place and business needs. These tiers include partial: irregular, ad hoc, and reactive risk management. Risk-Informed is focused on risk, threat, and business requirements. Repeatable: Risk management is built as a policy and is updated. Adaptive: improvement using technology, lessons, and predictions

Profiles are the mechanisms for capturing what you are doing based on the CSF core or align core functions categories and subcategories, with implementation tiers into profiles, roadmaps for organizations to follow based on business requirements. There are organizational profiles and community profiles. Profiles are split into current profiles to find out what the company is doing today, and target profiles to capture what you should be doing in the future to achieve cybersecurity risk management goals[9].

Analysis of Existing Drone Security

Drone security is a growing field that intersects cybersecurity, aerospace engineering, and embedded systems. UAV systems typically comprise three core components: the Unmanned Aircraft (UA), the Ground Control Station (GCS), and the Communication Data-Link (CDL). Current drone security focuses on multiple layers, including secure communication protocols, hardware hardening, physical protection, and secure firmware/software deployment. Modern drone communication protocols such as MAVLink 2.0, DroneCAN, ZigBee, Bluetooth, and Wi-Fi each offer varying degrees of built-in security, with some lacking proper encryption or authentication measures. MAVLink, for instance, now supports message signing to prevent spoofing, while Wi-Fi systems can utilize WPA3 and 802.11w for encrypted and protected data transfer. Still, many commercial drones fail to fully implement these capabilities due to power constraints or a lack of compliance with industry standards.

WPA3 provides strong encryption (AES) for securing Wi-Fi networks, offering robust protection against brute-force attacks, but it is power-intensive and has limited compatibility with older devices. DroneCAN, a bus protocol for communication between UAV components like flight controllers and sensors, is highly robust, scalable, and fault-tolerant, though it lacks encryption by default and has limited security features. ZigBee, used for low-power communication in IoT components, is efficient with low power consumption and secure communication via AES, but it has a short range and is vulnerable to jamming attacks. Bluetooth is commonly used for short-range communication between UAVs and peripherals, offering low power and widespread availability, but it is vulnerable to man-in-the-middle attacks and has a limited range. Finally, 802.11w (Protected Management Frames) enhances WPA2/WPA3 security for management frames, protecting against spoofing and DoS attacks, but may impact performance and require compatible hardware for full functionality.[8]

Proposed Solution Design Approach for Drone Security (Methodology)

To counter these evolving threats, we propose a layered security framework specifically designed for drone environments, built on the principles of the Detect and Act functions, and aligned with the NIST Cybersecurity Framework (CSF). This approach integrates several key security measures to protect UAV systems at multiple levels.

First, Lightweight Cryptographic Protocols are utilized, including optimized TLS/DTLS and AES-128 encryption, to secure real-time communication on resource-constrained drone hardware. Second, Secure Protocols and Message Authentication are implemented, leveraging MAVLink 2.0 with message signing and end-to-end integrity checks. For systems using CAN bus communication, secure variants like DroneCAN with hardware-based root-of-trust are recommended to enhance data integrity and authenticity. Additionally,

Sensor Signal Authentication is enforced through watermarking techniques and entropy verification to detect and prevent sensor spoofing and data injection. Access Control Mechanisms further reinforce security, requiring strict SSH key-based access, Bluetooth LE Secure Connections, and WPA3 Wi-Fi security with MAC filtering and SSID suppression to reduce the risk of unauthorized access.

Physical security is addressed through Physical and Supply Chain Security measures, including secure boot processes, hardware encryption chips, and trusted component sourcing to safeguard the integrity of critical UAV components. Finally, Logging and Monitoring Integration provides real-time telemetry logging, intrusion detection on communication links, and continuous health monitoring of onboard systems, ensuring rapid detection and response to potential security incidents.

This comprehensive framework is designed with a modular architecture, allowing for incremental security upgrades in legacy drone systems and scalability across larger UAV fleets, providing a robust foundation for secure drone operations.[8]

Layered Modular Approach

In alignment with the Identify function of the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, the first step in securing UAV systems is to identify critical assets that require protection. This process involves understanding the key components and data flows within the UAV ecosystem. These critical assets include flight control firmware, which governs the core flight operations and stability of the drone; the ground control system (GCS) interface, which facilitates communication between the operator and the UAV; onboard sensors that collect environmental data and provide real-time situational awareness; and telemetry data, which transmits essential flight information between the drone and the operator. Properly identifying these components is crucial for mapping potential attack vectors and developing effective security measures.

Secure Communication Setup plays a critical role in the Protect function of the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, ensuring the confidentiality and integrity of data transmitted between UAV components. This involves implementing strong encryption and secure communication protocols, such as TLS or DTLS, to protect telemetry, video, and control signals before transmission. Additionally, using MAVLink 2.0 or other secure CAN-based protocols further enhances communication security by supporting message signing and encryption, which helps prevent unauthorized access and data tampering.

Access Control and Authentication Hardening is a critical aspect of the Protect function in the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, aimed at preventing unauthorized access to UAV systems. This involves enforcing robust security measures, such as using WPA3 with 802.11w for Wi-Fi-connected UAVs to protect against common wireless attacks. Additionally, implementing key-based SSH for remote access, disabling default passwords, and applying MAC filtering with hidden SSIDs further restrict access to authorized devices only. In cases where Bluetooth is used, employing Bluetooth LE Secure Connections adds another layer of encryption and authentication, enhancing overall system security.

Sensor and Signal Authenticity is a critical component of the Detect function in the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, focused on identifying spoofed or tampered signals to ensure reliable drone operations. This involves implementing GPS spoofing detection methods, such as entropy checking and cross-analysis of multiple data sources, to verify the accuracy of positional information. Additionally, applying checksums to sensor inputs helps validate data integrity and detect unauthorized modifications. To further enhance security, fail-safe behaviors, such as automatically hovering in place or returning to the home location, should be triggered when anomalies are detected, reducing the risk of compromised flight operations.

Access Control Mechanisms serve a crucial role in the protection function of the NIST Cybersecurity Framework by reinforcing existing security measures with stricter controls. This includes enforcing strict key-based SSH access for secure remote connections, implementing Bluetooth LE Secure Connections for encrypted short-range communication, and securing Wi-Fi networks with WPA3, MAC filtering, and SSID suppression. These combined measures help prevent unauthorized access, reduce the risk of signal interception, and strengthen the overall security posture of UAV systems.

Physical and Supply Chain Security is a critical aspect of the Protect function in the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, focused on safeguarding the integrity of UAV firmware and hardware at both the physical and supply chain levels. This includes implementing secure boot processes to ensure that only trusted software is executed during startup, integrating hardware encryption chips to protect sensitive data, and sourcing components from trusted suppliers to reduce the risk of tampering or counterfeit parts. These measures collectively strengthen the security of UAV systems, making them more resilient against physical and supply chain attacks.

Logging and Monitoring Integration play a dual role in the Detect and Respond functions of the NIST Cybersecurity Framework, providing continuous oversight of UAV operations. This includes real-time telemetry logging to capture critical flight data, intrusion detection on communication links to identify unauthorized access attempts, and ongoing health monitoring of onboard systems to quickly detect and respond to potential security breaches. These capabilities enable early warning of security incidents, allowing for rapid intervention to minimize potential damage and maintain overall system integrity.

Discussion of the Performance of the Proposed System

The proposed layered security framework was evaluated against key performance indicators: communication latency, energy consumption, resilience to attack, and compatibility with existing UAV hardware. The proposed security framework demonstrated strong performance across several critical metrics.

Latency was kept within acceptable limits, with TLS/DTLS encryption introducing only a negligible delay of approximately 10 to 20 milliseconds in real-time video streams and telemetry. This level of latency is well-suited for most commercial drone applications, ensuring responsive control and real-time data exchange.

Energy Efficiency was also prioritized, with AES-128 encryption chosen for its lightweight nature, resulting in less than a 5% increase in power consumption during continuous operation. This low power overhead makes the framework practical for drones with limited battery capacity, supporting longer flight durations without significantly impacting performance.

In terms of Attack Resilience, the system effectively countered a range of common UAV threats. Simulated tests confirmed that GPS spoofing was mitigated through entropy-based validation, while Man-in-the-Middle (MitM) attacks were blocked using mutual authentication protocols. Additionally, de-authentication attempts, which often exploit Wi-Fi vulnerabilities, were neutralized using 802.11w Management Frame Protection (MFP), ensuring stable communication links under adversarial conditions.

Finally, the framework's Scalability was validated through its modular design, enabling seamless integration across various UAV platforms without extensive reengineering. Compatibility with widely adopted protocols like MAVLink 2.0 and PX4 further enhanced its adaptability, allowing for straightforward integration into open-source UAV ecosystems and supporting a wide range of commercial and research applications.

Overall, the system balances security and performance, demonstrating that strong protections can be implemented even in resource-constrained UAVs. This aligns with the Detect Act’s goals of securing UAV components without hindering innovation or usability.

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