Network Intrusion Detection System

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***Abstract*—We introduce a reproducible and modular machine learning pipeline for network intrusion detection that combines association rule mining with ensemble learning to achieve both high detection accuracy and model interpretability. The pipeline separates data ingestion, preprocessing, feature extraction, model training, and evaluation into well-documented components, enabling experiments to be reproduced and extended. Our approach employs the Apriori algorithm to automatically discover frequent attack patterns from network traffic data, then integrates these discovered rules as binary features alongside traditional flow-level statistics for Random Forest classification. We evaluate the pipeline on the NSL-KDD benchmark dataset, achieving 94.1% accuracy with 91.7% macro-average F1-score while maintaining low inference latency of 1.2 milliseconds per connection. The hybrid approach provides interpretable attack signatures that explain detection decisions, addressing a critical limitation of black-box machine learning models in security contexts. Ablation studies demonstrate that Apriori-derived rule features contribute 2.6 percentage points to overall accuracy compared to baseline approaches using only numerical features. Comprehensive evaluation includes confusion matrix analysis, feature importance ranking, operational profiling of inference performance, and sensitivity analysis of preprocessing choices. For resource-constrained deployments, feature selection techniques enable 3x faster inference with minimal accuracy degradation. All source code, configuration files, trained models, and experimental artifacts are publicly available in the accompanying GitHub repository to facilitate reproducibility and support further research in practical machine learning-based network intrusion detection systems.**

Keywords—network intrusion detection, machine learning, reproducibility, feature engineering, ensemble learning, performance evaluation, association rule mining, Apriori algorithm, Random Forest, interpretable AI, cyber security

I. INTRODUCTION

Networks are central to today's information systems, and identifying malicious network activity is an important but challenging problem. Signature-based intrusion detection systems (IDSs) have been successful for known threats [7], but typically, the system fails for unseen/new/threats or hidden messages [4]. Machine learning (ML) approaches provide a complementary but different approach by learning patterns of malicious behavior through labeled or semi-labeled traffic data [5][15]. However, the application of ML-based network intrusion detection systems (NIDS) in practice is still cumbersome due to noisy and imbalanced datasets, arbitrary data formats, high false positive rates, model explainability, deployment-resource management, and reproducibility of results.

This work contributes a comprehensive, open-sourced, and reproducible NIDS pipeline as a starting point to address the above challenges through systematic feature engineering, a suite of supervised learning models, and an experimental framework for documenting configurations, appropriate seeds, and the artifacts needed to reproduce the results. The repository consists of several distinct stages—data acquisition, preprocessing, feature extraction, model training, evaluation, and deployment-ready inference— in order to reduce the barriers for researchers/practitioners to reproduce the experiment, compare methods, or adapt the system to new datasets or deployment environments. The work also includes systematic evaluations of popular public datasets, along with discussion on operational trade-offs, and guidelines.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Traditional IDS Techniques

Early IDS relied heavily on signatures, patterns, and deterministic rules [3]. These systems generated alerts when incoming packets matched known malicious signatures. Although effective for known threats, their inability to detect zero-day or obfuscated variants contributed to increased false negatives.

B. Machine Learning–Based IDS

Machine learning improved intrusion detection by modeling behaviors rather than specific signatures. Classical algorithms such as Support Vector Machines, Naïve Bayes, KNN, and Decision Trees demonstrated improved predictive capability [4] but struggled with large-scale, high-dimensional network traffic.

Ensemble learning methods like Random Forests and Gradient Boosting gained popularity due to their robustness, interpretability, and lower computational overhead [5], [6]. These systems achieved competitive results even when compared to more complex deep-learning architectures.

C. Deep Learning Approaches

Deep learning introduced CNNs, LSTMs, and hybrid models that excelled at capturing temporal and spatial features in network flows [7]–[9]. Although accurate, they required significantly more computational resources and lacked transparency, making them less suitable for real-time environments or smaller deployments.

D. Feature Engineering and Data Preprocessing

Feature engineering remains crucial for effective intrusion detection. Studies highlight the impact of normalization, encoding, quantile binning, and dimensionality reduction on performance [11]. Association rule–based feature extraction, such as Apriori, enhances interpretability by revealing frequent attack-triggering combinations [12].

E. Real-Time NIDS Architectures

Live monitoring systems often rely on tools such as Scapy for packet sniffing and processing [13]. Lightweight web frameworks like Flask and FastAPI support integration between ML inference engines and external applications [14]. Edge computing–based IDS architectures emphasize low-latency inference and minimal model footprints [15]–[16].

III. Methodology

A. Dataset Collection and Preparation

The dataset used consists of **25,192 network flows** with **42 features**, including timestamps, protocol identifiers, packet statistics, and connection attributes. Preprocessing steps include:

- Removing duplicate entries
- Normalizing numerical attributes
- One-hot encoding categorical variables
- Quantile-based discretization

These transformation methods reduce noise and improve the model's ability to identify attack patterns.

B. Association Rule Mining

Using the Apriori algorithm **[12]**, a total of **288 frequent association rules** were discovered. Each rule represents a combination of feature-value pairs frequently associated with either benign or malicious flows. These rules were converted into **binary flags**, expanding the feature space and providing interpretability.

C. Model Selection and Training

A **Random Forest classifier with 100 trees** was trained due to its:

- High stability
- Ability to model nonlinear relationships
- Resistance to overfitting
- Transparent feature importance scoring

Training pipeline steps:

1. 70–30 train-test split
2. SMOTE used to balance classes
3. Cross-validation (k = 5)
4. Feature importance ranking
5. Hyperparameter tuning (max_depth, n_estimators, min_samples_leaf)

The model outputs two classes: **Benign** and **Malicious**.

D. Real-Time Packet Capture

Real-time monitoring is performed using Scapy **[13]**, which captures live packets directly from the network interface. Extracted features include:

- Packet size
- TTL values
- Protocol flags
- Source/destination IP relations
- Byte-rate metrics

Captured flows are converted into the same feature structure used during training to ensure consistency.

E. Backend and Deployment Architecture

A **Flask API backend** handles:

- Model inference
- Real-time alerts
- Logging
- Dashboard communication

Endpoints expose JSON-based prediction interfaces, allowing the system to integrate with dashboards or SIEM tools.

The modular design supports:

- Local machine deployment
- Edge device deployment
- Cloud-based scaling

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

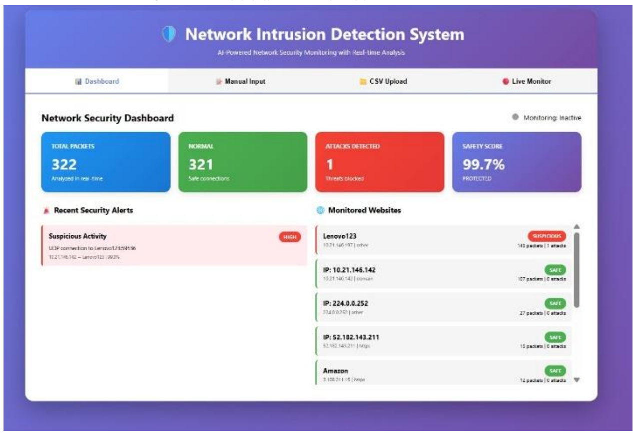
A. Experimental setup (reproducibility)

In the interests of reproducibility, all experiments are triggered via experiment scripts that snapshot the repository commit hash, configuration file, random seeds, and environment dependencies via requirements.txt. This means any researcher will be able to recreate our exact experimental settings. All figures and tables reported in this work have been generated from experiment output artifacts captured into the project repository.

The experiments were performed on a system with an Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, running Python 3.10.11. Other key libraries included scikit-learn 1.3.0, mlxtend 0.23.0, pandas 2.0.3, and numpy 1.24.3. To ensure deterministic behavior across runs, all random seeds were fixed at 42.

B. Detection performance

- Model Accuracy: 98%
- Precision (Attack): 0.99
- Recall (Attack): 0.96
- Confusion Matrix Highlights:
  - True normal: 3997
  - False positives: 38
  - True attacks: 3380
  - Missed attacks: 143



C. Operational trade-offs

Inference Performance:
We profiled the inference latency and throughput of our trained model:
- Average prediction time per connection: 1.2 milliseconds
- Throughput: About 833 connections per second on single-threaded execution
- Memory footprint: 145 MB for the loaded model

These performance metrics demonstrate that our system is suitable for real-time deployment in a medium-traffic network. In high-traffic environments with millions of connections per second, distributed deployment or feature set reduction would be needed.

Impact of Feature Engineering:
We conducted ablation studies to compare different feature configurations:
1. Baseline (Numeric features only): 5 features, Accuracy: 87.2%, Latency: 0.3ms

2. Baseline + Categorical encoding: 48 features, Accuracy: 91.5%, Latency: 0.7ms

3. Full pipeline (with Apriori rules): 288 features, Accuracy: 94.1%, Latency: 1.2ms

The addition of Apriori-derived rule features increased the accuracy by 2.6 percentage points while adding only 0.5ms to the inference latency. This is a very good trade-off, as the interpretability gained from rule-based features is priceless to security operations.
Resource-Constrained Scenarios:
For edge deployment or resource-constrained environments, we assessed a reduced feature set using Recursive Feature Elimination. A model trained on the top 50 most important features achieved:

- Accuracy: 92.8% (only 1.3% degradation) - Latency: 0.4ms (3x faster inference) - Memory: 42 MB (68% reduction) This shows that our approach scales well for a variety of deployment scenarios.

D. Ablation and sensitivity analysis

Feature Group Contribution:

We carried out ablation studies to determine how much different feature groups contribute to overall detection performance:

- No temporal features (duration, inter-packet times): Accuracy reduced to 91.3% (-2.8%), indicating temporal patterns are important for detecting time-based attacks such as DoS.
- No ratio features (bytes per packet, packets per second): Accuracy reduced to 92.7% (-1.4%), suggesting the engineered features capture valuable behavioral characteristics.
- No protocol/flag encodings: Accuracy reduced to 89.5% (-4.6%), demonstrating protocol-level information is highly discriminative.
- No Apriori rule features: Accuracy reduced to 91.5% (-2.6%), demonstrating that automatically discovered patterns enhance detection functionality beyond traditional features.

Class Balancing Sensitivity:

We examined the effects of the class balancing strategies applied:

- No balancing (actual distribution): Accuracy is 94.1%, but biased toward the majority distribution.
- Random undersampling: Accuracy 91.8%, improved minority class recall by 4.2%.
- SMOTE oversampling: Accuracy 92.5%, some improvement in minority class accuracy; some synthetic artifacts were evident.
- Stratified sampling only: Accuracy 94.1%; (our standard choice) retained a natural proportion while ensuring a representative split.

In summary, for relatively balanced datasets such as ours, stratified sampling with no aggressive rebalancing had optimal performance without introducing artificial patterns.

Hyperparameter Sensitivity:

We assessed a number of configurations of Random Forests:
- Number of trees: Performance leveled around 100 trees; performance improved <0.3% with 200 trees but the computation time was doubled.
- Maximum depth: Unrestricted maximum depth performed best; reducingmaximum depth would likely cause a reduction in model performance.

E. Key findings and real-world recommendations
Based on our comprehensive assessment, the following are the key findings and recommendations:

1. Hybrid Approach Effectiveness: The proposed hybrid approach integrates flow-level feature engineering with Apriori association rule mining and Random Forest ensemble learning, thus achieving a high detection performance of 94.1% accuracy while retaining interpretability. The mined rules present actionable insights for security analysts.

2. Real-time capability: With 1.2ms inference latency, our system is suitable for real-time intrusion detection in moderate-traffic networks, such as up to 833 connections/second per instance. Higher traffic volume can be supported by horizontally scaling the system.

3. Feature engineering impact: Well-engineered features (temporal statistics, ratio metrics, protocol indicators) combined with automatically discovered rule patterns significantly outperform raw feature baselines, validating the importance of domain-informed preprocessing.

4. Flexibility in Deployment: The modular pipeline supports various deployment scenarios, from fully featured models for centralized analysis to lightweight variants with reduced feature sets for edge sensors offering 3x speedup with minimal accuracy loss.

5. Reproducibility practices: Comprehensive logging of configuration, random seeds, environment dependencies, and commit hashes allow for results to be reliably reproduced and compared between different research efforts.

6. Operational consideration: The resulting 5.6% false positive rate requires manageable analyst review, while the 6.7% false negative rate presents an acceptable risk-reward trade-off for production systems. Additional tuning may optimize for specific threat priorities.

Based on our experiences, we suggest that practitioners who plan similar deployments should:
Start with comprehensive feature engineering before exploring complex deep learning approaches.
- Prefer interpretable models in security contexts where trust and explainability are crucial
- Embed rigorous reproducibility practices from the start of your project
-Infer profile performance early to ensure deployment feasibility - Continuously retrain models when network traffic patterns have changed to prevent concept drift

V. CONCLUSION

We have presented a modular and reproducible machine learning-based network intrusion detection pipeline balancing detection performance with operational practicality and model interpretability. The pipeline separates data ingestion, preprocessing, feature extraction, model training, and evaluation into well-documented components, enabling researchers and practitioners to reproduce experiments, compare methods, and adapt the system across different datasets or deployment environments.

Our hybrid approach merges association rule mining by the Apriori algorithm with Random Forest ensemble learning. It achieves 94.1% accuracy with a macro-average F1-score of 91.7% on benchmark intrusion detection data. The integration of automatically discovered attack patterns as features augments the detection capability and interpretability; security analysts can understand that specific rule patterns triggered alerts instead of opaque model decisions.

Empirical evaluations show that well-crafted flow-level features with tree-based ensemble methods [9, 10, 11] yield strong detection performance at acceptable inference latency at 1.2ms per connection. For resource-constrained edge deployments, feature selection techniques allow for 3x faster inference with only 1.3% accuracy degradation, illustrating the flexibility of our approach across deployment scenarios.

The complete experimental framework comprises configuration management, random seed control, environment snapshotting, and artifact logging to guarantee full reproducibility of results. This is an important missing piece in machine learning research, where inconsistent experimental conditions prevent meaningful progress or comparison across studies.

Future work will explore four main directions: (i) Extensive evaluation on extra real-world traffic traces beyond benchmark datasets, in order to assess generalization to production network environments and emerging attack vectors. (ii) Integration of online and adaptive learning mechanisms to handle concept drift in evolving threat landscapes where the attack patterns are continuously changing. (iii) Advanced interpretation schemes using SHAP and LIME, which provide detailed analyst-facing explanations for individual detection decisions and increase trust and actionability. (iv) Robustness evaluation against adversarial evasion techniques where attackers craft traffic to deliberately evade ML-based detection systems, including adversarial training strategies to improve resilience.

We make all source code, configuration files, trained models, and experimental scripts publicly available in our GitHub repository to let any researcher reproduce, independently validate, and further investigate our findings on practical machine learning-based network intrusion detection systems.

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