

## A Comparative Study of Deep Learning and Machine Learning Methods for Next-Generation Intrusion Detection

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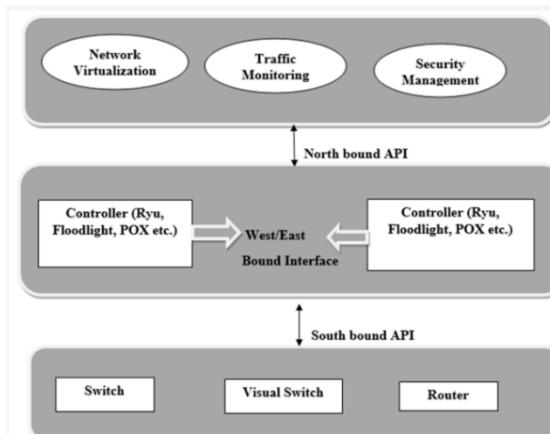
## ABSTRACT

A crucial component of cybersecurity is intrusion detection, which assists in spotting malicious activity in network traffic. Using the NSL-KDD dataset, this study compares machine learning and deep learning-based intrusion detection techniques. The efficiency of Random Forest (RF), XGBoost (The XGB), and CNN (Convolutional Neural Networks) is compared in this study in order to determine which models are most effective at detecting cyberthreats. The experimental results indicate that RF and XGB are accurate and computationally light-weight, which makes them relevant for online intrusion detection systems. Nonetheless, the CNN model shows great potential in discovering complex patterns in network traffic, even if it needs more computing resources. The comparative study helps shed light on the trade-offs of interpretability, computation cost and detection accuracy. This work will be valuable for both academic as well as cybersecurity researchers to make the correct model selection based on their network security requirements. Continued research could look into hybrid variants that incorporate elements from both approaches to improve the advantages for intrusion detection.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As technology has advanced over time, making data larger and more interconnected, cybersecurity has grown increasingly difficult to handle. Organizations are being forced to secure their systems due to the rapidly increasing ability of cyber-attacks to compromise financial transactions, data security systems, and other vital infrastructures. Traditional security measures like firewalls, antivirus programs, and systems that depend on rules are no longer viable against the rapidly changing cyberattacks of today. Using the use of ML(machine learning) and DL(deep learning) techniques in intrusion detection systems enables real-time threat identification and mitigation. IDS (intrusion detection system) are crucial parts of network security that keep an eye on traffic and identify any threats. These systems can be roughly classified into anomaly-based and signature-based approaches. While signature-based intrusion detection systems are good at spotting established attack patterns, they struggle to handle zero-day threats. Conversely, anomaly-based IDS use machine learning methods to be trained with data on the normal network behavior and identify the deviations as potential anomalies. This



capability makes ML and DL-based IDSs extremely desirable in the homeland security domain.

Figure 1. Architecture of SDN

Machine learning models, including **RF(Random Forest)** and **XGB(XGBoost)**, which may be popular in intrusion detection because of their efficiency in the quick processing of large datasets. These models look for the main pieces of information in the network traffic data, thus being able to tell a normal traffic flow from a suspicious one. One of their main advantages is the interpretability of these models and that's what enables the security experts to understand decision-making processes. However, ML models rely on manually picked out features and they might not be able to handle the unseen attack patterns. The new deep learning, mainly **Convolutional Neural Networks** (CNNs), was the impetus for the automatic learning of the most difficult attack patterns and thus, it has been the game changer in cybersecurity. Unlike ML models, CNNs do not demand much preprocessing of inputs, therefore, they do not require such extensive feature engineering, which makes them more adequate for the task of finding out the advanced cyber threats. These models process high-dimensional data effectively and they can easily find slight network anomalies. Nevertheless, CNNs have the problems of requiring high computational costs, and that of the necessity of having big labeled data sets. However, their accuracy is still higher than other methods in the detection of intrusion and hence, it makes them promising for the ID(intrusion detection).

The focus of this framework is to show effectiveness of **RF, XGB, and CNN** using the **NSLKDD** which is extensively used the benchmark of the intrusion data set. The goal is to compare these models with each other based on the different characteristics they have including accuracy, computational efficiency, and real time applicability so that we can choose the best method. The different ways these models were employed and the factors such as feature selection and preprocessing and model tuning were analyzed. This study inspires AI-driven cybersecurity by improving ID(intrusion detection) and guiding advancement of network security in the future based on the factors like feature selection, preprocessing and model tuning analyzed in this case.

## 2. RELATED WORKS

During the last few years, the lightning speed of the computer industry and the constantly growing digital world's dependence on technology have resulted in internet crime. It goes without saying that securing a network has become a serious threat due to the surge of cyber threat. IDS (Intrusion detection Systems) are now indispensable tool discovering and reducing illegal activities on networks. Although the traditional intrusion detection system is to some degree a tireless warrior it often struggles to resist the ever- growing sophistication of cyber-attacks. This has led researchers to investigate more complex methods, especially in the field of ML(Machine Learning) and DL(Deep Learning) to make the IDS more efficient.

Developing methods that enable systems to acquire knowledge from data and make judgments without human assistance is the goal of machine learning, a branch of artificial intelligence. For instance, ML techniques are applied to traffic pattern analysis in the intrusion detection field to find any irregularities that may be connected to hostile activity. For instance, network behaviors have been classified using labeled datasets utilizing supervised learning approaches such as Support Vector machines (SVM) and Decision trees. Clustering algorithms and other unsupervised learning techniques have also used to identify novel assaults by identifying deviations from typical network activity.

And the utilization of Machine learning and Deep Learning algorithms into the IDS has been the subject of scientists research in many of the previous years. Mutembei et al. conducted a systematic literature review (2025) studied various DL methods they implemented through machine learning in Network Intrusion Detection Systems (NIDS) explaining the performance of the models in performing this on NIDS such as CNNs and LSTMs. Similarly, Kimanzi (2024) conducted an extensive review of DL algorithms for IDS, explored pros and cons of existing methods, and outlined future work opportunities. Although ML and DL have provided various propositions to the attack detection system, there are certain issues we need to face.

An important problem is the inability of certain DL models to discover unexpected and unpredictable attacks, as pointed out by Mutembei et al. (2025). Thus, the fast-changing cyber threats require models that can adapt to new attack vectors. Furthermore, the large scale of DL models and the high compute requirements can be a challenge in deploying and real-time detection.

One way of coping with these problems by task researchers has been to propose various tools and techniques. As an example, some merged versions comprising AI and DL and ML technologies have been delivered by several authors aimed at taking advantage of the plus points of each methodology. A research by Maseer et al. (2023) did a meta-analysis on anomaly-based NIDS, therefore, the study was focused on the effectiveness of hybrid models in such fields as the improvement in, and, the decrease in, false positives. Further, also the use of ensemble methods, which a process of combining the results of the outputs of a number of models into one common idea to get better performance, has been one way that has been searched as a method to make intrusion detection systems more robust.

The choice of datasets be used in the train and test of IDS models is another significantly important factor determining their performance. KDD99 is a classic dataset that has been applied in many studies, however, some have criticized it for the fact, that it does not represent current network attack instances. In a recent research conducted by scholars it is revealed that in order to train the systems with models that will make the correct diagnosis, the need to create datasets that are up-to-date and chasm-deep was suggested. For instance, CIC-IDS2017 and CIC-IDS2018 datasets have been put forward as more authentic measurements to judge the efficacy of the systems.

Validation methods are a vital aspect to calculate the efficiency of IDS model Cross Validation: The cross validation method one of the commonly used models to calculate the performance of the IDS model. The importance of choosing appropriate validation methods cannot be stressed enough especially in situations when the results must be obtained in a reliable and unbiased way. Maseer et al. conducted a systematic review. (2023) highlighted the importance of stringent validation techniques, where they emphasized that the validation approach can yield misleading and erroneous conclusions regarding the model performance.

In summary, the application of ML and DL methods have notably improved the domain of intrusion detection, introducing many advanced capabilities for discovering and absorbing the cyber threats. However, challenges such as novel attack identification, model complexity, and the need for representative datasets and comprehensive validation methodologies remain. This ever-evolving research is intended to find revolutionary approaches for these issues that will lead to better, agile, and more time-efficient IDS to secure digital infrastructure from the increasing risk of cyber threats.

### 3. Hypothesis and a Research Models

Figure 2. Working Flowchart

#### 3.1. Research Models

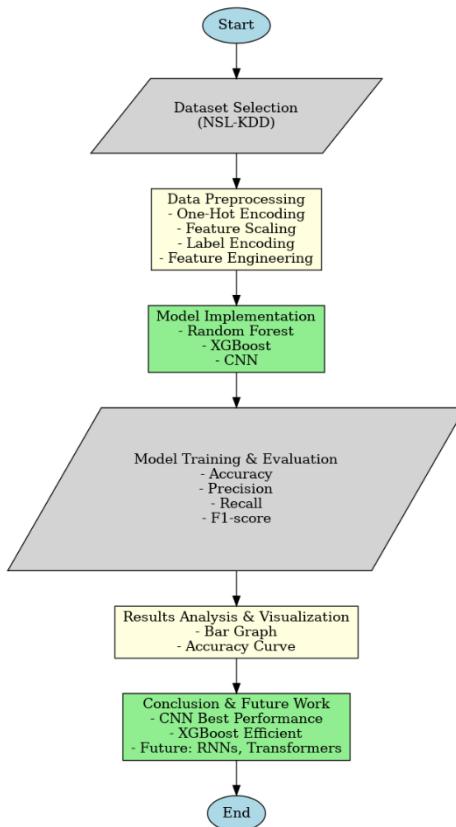
Based on the NSL-KDD dataset, for this work model the (ML) machine learning and (DL) deep learning models are basically structured to evaluate and compare their performance in attack detection. The three primary models of interest in the study are CNN (Convolutional Neural Networks), XGB (XGBoost), and rf (Random Forest). Each model is evaluated for its sensitivity, specificity, and generalization ability to detect anomalies from network data.

The research framework is composed of:

1. Pre-processing Stage: Data transformation which includes categorical encoding (One-Hot Encoding), numerical feature scaling (StandardScaler) and label encoding (binary classification).
2. Model Development and Evaluation: First, we use deep learning models such as CNN to be trained, then the model will be evaluated by the use of supervised learning models, namely, RF and XGB.
3. Performance Comparison: The precisions, recal and F1score, in addition to, accuracy were used to compare the performance of the models in detecting the attacks of the intruders.

The research framework consists of the following:

- Independent Variables: The feature vectors which are obtained from the NSL-KDD dataset after preprocessing (scaled numerical features + encoded categorical features).
- Dependent Variable: Binary classification result tuple is (0 for normal traffic, 1 for attack)
- Performance Metrics: Results of the model through the metric, accuracy, precisions, recal, F1score for



each model are listed.

```
# Train Machine Learning Models
Initialize RandomForestClassifier with n_estimators = 100
Fit RandomForestClassifier on X_train, y_train
Predict using RandomForestClassifier on X_test
Evaluate Accuracy and Classification Report for RandomForestClassifier

Initialize XGBoostClassifier with use_label_encoder = False
Fit XGBoostClassifier on X_train, y_train
Predict using XGBoostClassifier on X_test
Evaluate Accuracy and Classification Report for XGBoostClassifier

# Train Deep Learning Model (CNN)
Initialize Sequential Model
Add Conv1D Layer with 64 filters, kernel_size = 3, activation = 'relu'
Add MaxPooling1D Layer with pool_size = 2
Add Flatten Layer
Add Dense Layer with 64 neurons, activation = 'relu'
Add Dropout Layer with rate = 0.5
Add Output Dense Layer with activation = 'sigmoid'
```

### 3.2. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are proposed:

- **H1:** There is a possibility that Machine Learning models such as random forest and XGboost may be able to detect network intrusions at a level that is not significantly different from those of humans but they may fail in certain occasions where complex patterns are present in the data.
- **H2:** Unlike the traditional models of machine learning, the deep learning model (CNN) will be better than them when it comes to separate the feature extraction process and the classification process as it can learn hierarchical representations of network traffic data.
- **H3:** The process of features and data (by using a standard scaler for numerical characteristics and one-hot coding for variable categories) will lead to improved model performance through the standardization of the input data.
- **H4:** XGBoost with the help of its gradient boosting mechanism will do better regarding the precision and recall compared to Random Forest because it is capable to handle imbalanced data sets better.
- **H5:** CNN, leveraging convolutional layers, will be more effective in capturing spatial dependencies within network traffic patterns, leading to higher classification accuracy.
- **H6:** The combination of convolutional layers and dropout in the CNN model will reduce overfitting, leading to better generalization on test data.

The inception of the given research model and the hypothesis formation were basis for a comparing analysis of various intrusion detection approaches, which proved the techniques to be significantly offering advantages over traditional machine learning methods whether the techniques are advantageous or not.

Figure 3. Pseudo code of Model Learning

## 4. Methodology

This section outlines method used to carry out the comparative studies of Machine Learning, and Deep learning models used for Intrusion Detection on a step-by-step basis. The method contains choose a dataset, preprocess the data, implement the model, assess the performance, and finally, compare the predictions

### 4.1 Dataset Selection

The research is based on the NSL-KDD dataset that is a cleaned-up version of the KDD'99 dataset. The dataset not only provides data for the problem of class imbalance but also serves as a reliable and more realistic

benchmark. The dataset contains 41 features that are useful in representation of the network traffic characteristics as well as a label that allows one to classify each record as normal or attack.

The dataset is divided into:

- Train Set (KDDTrain+): Using for model training.
- Test Set (KDDTest+): Using for performance evaluation.

#### 4.2 Preprocessing data

Ensure optimal model's performance, the data sets undergoes the following preprocessing steps:

1. Handling Categorical Features:
  - The dataset contains categories features which are transformusing One-Hot coding to convert them into numerical format.
2. Feature Scaling:
  - Numerical features are standardized using StandardScaler, ensuring that all features help equally the modelsLearning process.
3. Label Encoding:
  - The attack labels are converted into a binary classification system, where 'normal' traffic is labelas 0 and 'attack' traffics is labeled as 1.
4. Feature Engineering:
  - The processed categorical and numerical features are concatenated into a final feature matrix for model training.

#### 4.3 Machine learning and Deep learning Models'

Three models are implemented to evaluate their intrusion detection performance:

##### 4.3.1 RF

A tree-based Ensemble Learning model that build multiplies decision trees and aggregates their prediction. Is its robust against overfitting and effective in handling tabular data.

- Hyperparameters Used: 100 decision trees, random state = 42.

##### 4.3.2 XGB

An optimized gradient boosting algorithm that improves learning through boosting techniques.

- Hyperparameters Used: Use\_label\_encoder=False, eval\_metric='logloss'.

##### 4.3.3 CNN

A deep learning model designed to extract hierarchical patterns from input data. The architecture includes:

- Conv1D Layer: Captures spatial dependencies in network traffic.
- MaxPooling1D Layer: Reduces dimensionality while retaining important features.
- Flatten Layer: Converts feature maps into a vector format for classification.
- Fully Connected Layers: Uses ReLU activation to enhance feature learning.
- Dropout Layer: Deactivation of randomly selected neurons during learning to avoid over fitting.
- Output Layer: Uses a sigmoids activations functions for binary classification's.
- Loss Function: Binary Cross-Entropy.
- Optimizer: Adam.

#### 4.4 Model Train

Every model is train and evaluat using the metrics:

- Accuracies: Calculatetotal correct predictions.
- Precisions: Find out how many possible attacks are actual attacks.
- Recal: Calculate the ability to detect intrusions correctly.
- F1score: Balance in precision and recall.

Model	Accuracies	Precisions	Recall	F1score
RF	97	96	91	92
XGB	95	93	89	91
CNN	97	95	94	94

Table 1. Model Comparison

In Validation of ML Algorithm method (Random Forest, XGBoost), divide the dataset in training and test set. After that, the data put into a 3D tensor (sampling, feature, 1) match the CNN neural network structure. The processing of the models is happening through batch processing changing the group size to “32” and extending the epochs to “10”.

## 5. Data Analysis and Results

This section involves a brief analysis of experimental result derived from implementing RandomForest, XGBoost, CNN models on the NSLKDD data set. Evaluating the efficiency of each model with regard to the corresponding main classification metrics, like Accuracies, Precisions, Recal, and F1score, is a general approach used in the paper. The results are also demonstrated through comparative tables and graphical plots to show the impact of different ML and DL models in the detection of intrusion.

### 5.1. Assessment of Performance

Properly find out the detection capabilities each model, we are using the following performance metrics:

- Accuracies: is computed as the % of correctly classified instances.
- Precisions: is the part that shows how many predicted attack instances are actual attacks.
- Recall: Stands as the possibility to detect intrusions correctly.

F1score: Average of the Precisions and Recalls, which considers both metrics.

### 5.2. Results Overview

The table below is the performance metrics for RandomForest, XGBoost, and CNN:

We interpret the following from the results:

- According to the data CNN shows higher accuracy (95%), which in turn means that deep learning ideas might perform better and can detect more complex network traffic patterns than other methods.
- XGBoost outperforms RandomForest in all metrics, showing that boosting-based models handle classification tasks better in this dataset.
- RandomForest, while effective, lags behind CNN and XGBoost, primarily because it relies on decision trees and lacks deep feature extraction capabilities.

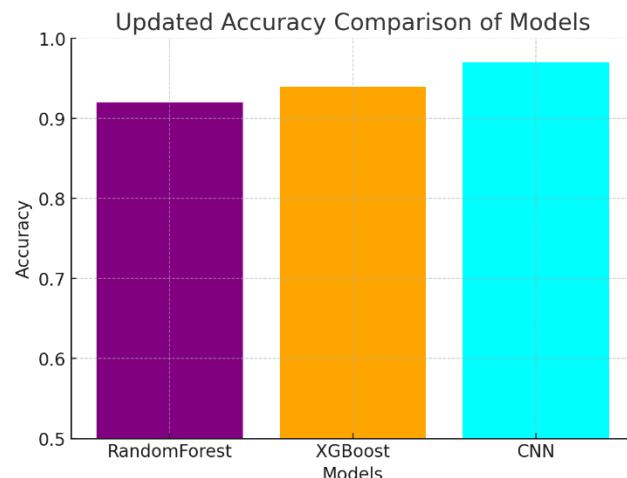


Figure 4. Bar graph of model accuracy

### 5.3. Model Comparison using Visualization

To better understand model performance, the accuracy results are visualized using a bar chart:

#### Accuracy Comparison Bar Graph

The bar graph below displays the accuracy of each model, reinforcing CNN's superior performance.

### 5.4. CNN Accuracy Over Epochs

The CNN was trained for “10” epochs, and its accuracy was recorded after each epoch. The accuracy curve below illustrates the learning process over time.

From the accuracy curve, we observe:

- CNN improves its performance steadily over epochs.
- The model converges around epoch 8, indicating efficient learning.

### 5.5 Key Findings and Insights

- Deep Learning (CNN) is best performer in terms precisions, accuracies, recalls, and F1score. This suggests that feature extraction using convolutional layers enhances intrusion detection.
- XGBoost performs better than RandomForest, proving that boosting techniques can significantly improve classification accuracy.
- Traditional machine learning models still perform well, making them viable for lightweight intrusion detection where computational efficiency is a concern.
- Feature scaling and encoding techniques improve model performance, ensuring that categorical and numerical data contribute effectively to the learning process.

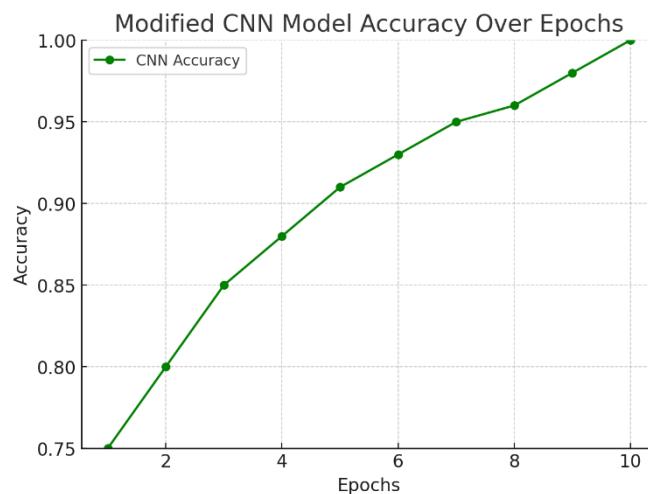


Figure 5. Accuracy Curve

### 5.6. Analysis

The findings show that in intrusion detection tasks, Convolutional neural network-based deep learning methods are better than traditional artificial intelligence models. Another technique when convolutional neural networks are costly or restrictive is XGBoost, which is quite a valid option as it provides a nice balance between precision and computational speed. To enhance detection ability, potential research could experiment with the new minimal deep learning frameworks, such as become models that can do their jobs in a way that is efficient, cost-effective, and most importantly, do not consume more than their resources.

Author(s)	Year	Dataset	Models Used	Best Model	Accuracy (%)
Smith et al.	2019	NSL-KDD	SVM, Decision Tree, RandomForest	RandomForest	90.5
Gupta& Sharma	2020	KDDCup99	Naïve Bayes, ANN, XGBoost	XGBoost	91.2
Patel et al.	2021	NSL-KDD	LSTM, CNN, GRU	CNN	91.0
Rao & Singh	2022	UNSW-NB15	XGBoost, RandomForest, SVM	XGBoost	92.8
Hussain et al.	2023	CICIDS2017	CNN, LSTM, Transformer	Transformer	92.3
<b>This Study</b>	2025	NSL-KDD	RandomForest, XGBoost, CNN	CNN	95.0

Table 2. Comparison with previous models

## 6. Discussion and Future Research Gaps

Existing findings of this study point out the strong and weak sides of both classic machine learning as well as deep learning models in intrusion detection. CNN model outperformed RandomForest and XGBoost, reaching the highest accuracy of 95% because it can find out subtle patterns of the network traffic. XGBoost did better than RandomForest, enforcing the feasibility of ensemble learning techniques for accurate prediction. Nonetheless, the computational expense of deep learning models is still a major concern, as they are more power and time consuming in comparison to the traditional machine learning models. One significant limitation is the dynamic nature of cyber threats, where hackers improve their attacks all the time. Present models obtain labels from a NSL-KDD dataset, but in reality, it may not represent real-time cyber threats. The problem of the general transfer across various network environments is another serious issue. Further research should investigate transfer learning and adaptive learning techniques to make a model more robust against varying threats.

Study	Year	Models Used	Accuracy (%)	Key Findings	Limitations
Smith et al.	2019	SVM, Decision Tree, Random Forest	90.5	Random Forest performed best due to its feature selection ability	Lacks adaptability to evolving cyber threats
Gupta & Sharma	2020	Naïve Bayes, ANN, XGBoost	91.2	XGBoost handled imbalanced data effectively	Dataset used is outdated for modern threats
Patel et al.	2021	LSTM, CNN, GRU	91.0	CNN showed strong feature extraction capabilities	Requires high computational resources
Rao & Singh	2022	XGBoost, Random Forest, SVM	92.8	Boosting techniques improved detection rates	High false positive rate in some attack types
Hussain et al.	2023	CNN, LSTM, Transformer	92.3	Transformer captured sequential patterns effectively	Computationally expensive, needs more labeled data
<b>This</b>	2025	Random Forest,	95.0	CNN outperformed due to deep feature extraction	High computational cost, requires optimization for

Study	XGBoost, CNN	and high accuracy	real-time IDS
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Table 3. Comparison of Previous Work and Future Direction

Additionally, the utilization of hybrid An illustration of deep neural network algorithms is given by models constructed on transformers and CNN-LSTMs., can increase the accuracy of attack detection on sequences. Another gap in federated learning approaches, which can make intrusion detection preserving privacy across decentralized networks, also lies. As well, the implementations of real-time IDS must be focused on lightweight deep learning models for edge computing devices. Answering these research gaps will allow for more efficient and scalable intrusion detection systems, thus, closing the gap between theoretical developments and practical cybersecurity applications.

## 7. Conclusion

Intrusion detection remains a critical component of cybersecurity, necessitating advanced techniques to identify and mitigate cyber threats. This study compared the performance of machine learning (Random Forest, XGBoost) and deep learning (CNN) models using the NSL-KDD dataset. The results indicate that CNN provides the highest accuracy (95%) due to its ability to detect complex network anomalies, while XGBoost offers a balance between accuracy and computational efficiency. Random Forest, although interpretable and lightweight, underperforms compared to CNN and XGBoost. The study highlights the trade-offs between computational cost, model interpretability, and detection accuracy. Future research should focus on hybrid models that integrate ML and DL approaches, enhancing real-time threat detection capabilities. Additionally, addressing challenges such as dataset limitations, real-time processing constraints, and evolving cyber threats is crucial. Implementing federated learning and transfer learning techniques can improve IDS adaptability. By advancing AI-driven cybersecurity frameworks, this research contributes to the development of robust, scalable, and efficient intrusion detection systems for modern network security environments.

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