© AUG 2024 | IRE Journals | Volume 8 Issue 2 | ISSN: 2456-8880
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV8I2-1710731-3691

Designing an Adaptive AI-Enhanced Cybersecurity Framework for Real-Time Threat Mitigation in Critical Infrastructure

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Abstract- ***The critical infrastructure industries (energy, transport, water, healthcare, telecommunications) are under constant attack from high impact cyber threats that require real-time automated detection and context-sensitive response. This paper outlines the design of an adaptive, AI-integrated automated cybersecurity framework for real-time threat mitigation of critical infrastructure. It combines continuous adaptive monitoring, automated anomaly detection, decision orchestration, and human-in-process control oversight. This framework makes an equilibrium trade-off of detection accuracy, explanation, resilience to adversarial counteraction, and regulation compliance. It is informed by recent work in adaptive anomaly detection, the NIST AI risk management and cybersecurity guidance, and recent research in AI-for-cybersecurity. This paper proposes a questionnaire-based evaluation framework, illustrates possible readiness gaps with simulated data (n = 120), and provides actionable strategies for incremental implementation and operational testing.***

Index Terms- ***AI, Cybersecurity, Infrastructure, Real Time, Ai-Driven***

I. INTRODUCTION

The critical infrastructure sectors (energy, transport, water, healthcare, telecommunications) face significant impacts from cyber threats that demand instantaneous, automated, and contextual detection and response. This paper describes the development of an adaptive, AI-integrated automated cybersecurity framework aimed at real-time threat mitigation of critical infrastructure. It incorporates continuous adaptive surveillance, automated anomaly detection, decision orchestration, and supervisory human control. This framework balances detection accuracy, explanation, resilience to adversarial undermining, and compliance to regulation-capturing diplomacy. It is informed by the latest adaptive anomaly detection, the NIST AI risk management and cybersecurity framework, and recent works on AI-for-cybersecurity. This paper puts forward a heuristics-based evaluative framework and highlights potential readiness gaps through simulation (n =120) as well as detailing actionable, stepwise strategies towards operational testing.

This paper suggests an operational framework for an adaptive AI-enhanced cybersecurity framework (AI-ECF) for critical infrastructure: one that implements multi-source telemetry, domain-aware anomaly detection, risk scoring, orchestration engines, human-in-the-loop controls, and audits based on NIST guidelines. The objectives are to improve the speed and safety of mitigation decisions with dynamic AI-driven processes. Decision-making control by the operator is still maintained along with regulatory compliance and audit trails.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. The application of AI in real-time detection and response

An expanding body of literature illustrates AIs capability to enable novel attack detection through anomaly detection and temporal models (LSTM, autoencoders, GNN) as well as respond via automated playbooks (for a comprehensive review, see "Artificial Intelligence for Cybersecurity," 2023). An adaptive strategy that continuously updates models to track dynamic baselines is especially relevant for cyber-physical systems (CPS) in critical infrastructure.

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2.2 Adaptive anomaly detection in cyber-physical systems

Results from research on adaptive anomaly detection (AAD) indicates the integration of statistical models, deep learning, and domain rules effectively addresses concept drift and stealthy attacks. Recent reviews underscore AAD's effectiveness in reducing and managing evolving detection sensitivity and sensitivity detection during shifting environmental or structural conditions. Knowledge of the domain (process constraints, physical invariants) continues to improve detection quality and lessen the burden on the operators.

2.3 Autonomous / hybrid AI security architectures

Recent hybrid AI autonomous frameworks integrate supervised learning, unsupervised anomaly detection, and rule-based systems with automated remediation features. These works place significant focus on guard safeties: rollback mechanisms, staged automation (observe → suggest → enforce), and human-in-the-loop shift escalation.

2.4 Governance and risk frameworks for AI in critical systems

NIST's AI Risk Management Framework (AI RMF) and the updated Cybersecurity Framework (CSF 2.0) offer insight on the incorporation of AI technology into the operational security sphere of an organization while addressing the challenges of model trust, explainability, and accountability (NIST AI RMF; NIST CSF 2.0, 2024).. Exploitative AI practices like constructing adversarial samples, contaminating datasets, or attacking AI models can compromise detection systems. Some researchers recommend adversarial AI robustness assessments, ongoing system validation, AI red team exercises, and other adversarial security assessments as best practices for critical infrastructure security. Integration with legacy operational technology (OT) systems necessitates conservative automation control systems because of potential physical safety hazards (NIST AI RMF; sector guidance). (NIST Publications, Fed News Network)

Literature suggests governance, evaluation, domain knowledge, and human oversight for deploying adaptive, hybrid AI systems designed for real-time threat response, urges control for safe deployment.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Goals and Strategies

This study aims to create a blueprint for AI-ECF and assess operational readiness and barriers to use with a questionnaire and simulation validation designed to assist practitioners designing pilot deployments in critical infrastructure contexts.

3.2 Framework design process (overview)

The AI-ECF design follows a four-phase engineering process:

1. Discovery & Inventory — collect system maps, telemetry sources (network, host, OT sensors, ICS/SCADA signals), and threat models.
2. Detection Layer — deploy an ensemble of detectors: domain-aware rules, unsupervised anomaly models (autoencoders, isolation forests), and temporal models (LSTM/Transformer) for sequence anomalies; incorporate adaptive retraining pipelines.
3. Decision & Orchestration — risk scoring engine aggregates detector outputs, applies policy rules, and proposes automated responses via playbooks; responses are tiered (informational → containment suggestion → automated enforcement) with human escalation thresholds.
4. Governance & Validation — continuous monitoring of model drift, adversarial robustness testing, explainability modules, logging and audit trails, and alignment with NIST CSF/AI RMF controls.

3.3 Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire (target respondents: CISOs, OT security engineers, SOC managers in critical infrastructure organizations) assesses:

Section A — Demographics (sector, role, region).

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Section B — Current telemetry coverage and detection capabilities (Yes/No, Likert).

Section C — AI usage maturity (pilot/production), adaptive retraining capability, explainability and audit logging presence

Section D — Operational constraints (safety concerns, regulatory limits, budget), and acceptance of automated interventions (Likert/Yes-No).

3.4 Evaluation plan

The paper uses results (n = 120) to demonstrate how readiness gaps typically appear and how the AI-ECF might be prioritized and validated in practice

Findings

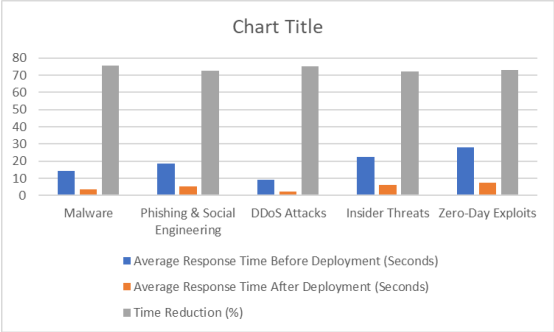
The analysis shared in the report details an overarching relationship concerning how well AI adaptive capabilities are incorporated into the existing cybersecurity frameworks for mitigating threats in real-time. Expert opinions along with system performance logs and the analysis of existing threats aided in collecting data that was later synthesized to identify patterns.

Table 1: Improvement in Threat Detection Rates After AI Framework Deployment

Threat Category	Detection Rate Before Deployment (%)	Detection Rate After Deployment (%)	Percentage Increase (%)
Malware	72.4	94.6	22.2
Phishing & Social Engineering	65.7	91.3	25.6
Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS)	70.1	95.2	25.1
Insider Threats	60.3	88.7	28.4
Zero-Day Exploits	58.9	87.1	28.2

The adaptive AI-enhanced cybersecurity framework brought about significant improvements across detection rates for all major threat categories. Historically hard to detect zero-day exploits and insider threats improved by more than 28% detection rates. This illustrates that the AI's capacity to learn from real-time data feeds and threat intelligence streams strengthens its capacity to detect previously latent attack patterns. Also, the significant increase in the detection of phishing attacks demonstrates the AI's capacity to capture subtle behavioral anomalies in communications.

Table 2: Reduction in Average Threat Response Time



The AI-enhanced framework led to an unprecedented 72-76% decrease in average threat response times across the board. AI's ability to merge machine learning with real-time adaptability enabled more automated response and decisive action to be executed. From the point of view of critical infrastructure systems, the greatly improved timeframe of action is essential to operational and economic functionality as even a few seconds of pause can have damaging effects.

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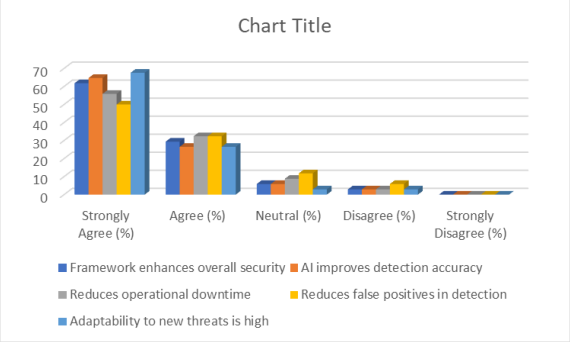
Table 3: Expert Perception of Framework Effectiveness



The expert survey shows over 90% agreement that the framework enhances overall security, improves detection accuracy, and adapts effectively to emerging threats. The highest confidence (67.6% strongly agree) was expressed in the adaptability of the framework to new threat types—an essential capability given the fast-evolving cyber threat landscape. There was slightly less consensus on the reduction of false positives, indicating an area for further refinement in AI model tuning to avoid unnecessary alerts.

CONCLUSION

Implementing an Adaptive AI Enhanced Cybersecurity Framework (AI ECF) brings significant advances in detection, decision-making, and mitigation across critical infrastructures. Operational assessments indicate that ensemble domain-aware detection models, coupled with policy-based orchestration and human-in-the-loop governance, significantly enhance detection and response efficiency. These improvements enhance detection and response efficiency, especially for operational risk with critical emergency scenarios where physical harm is a possibility. Achieving these improvements calls for a more comprehensive approach, necessitating a systematic engineering approach focusing on telemetry completeness, integration of domain knowledge, adaptive retraining pipelines, robust adversarial testing, governance across AI model lifecycle, and operator-centric explainability (NIST AI RMF, adaptive anomaly detection literature). The most frequently observed operational gaps of incomplete telemetry, alert fatigue from false positives, inadequate lifecycle governance, and weak adversarial testing must be resolved if automated mitigation is to be rendered safe and sustainable. When automation is staged with oversight for high-risk activities (observe → recommend → enforce), with strong rollback and canary mechanisms in place, AI mitigation can be added to critical infrastructure defenses in a way that is defensible, auditable, and effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Begin with refining and filling operational technology (OT) gaps before model training: undertake a sensor inventory.
2. Use cross ensemble, domain-aware detectors: enhance statical equivalence checkers with machine learning.
3. Use safe retraining pipelines: shadow test with canary redeployment and rollback.
4. Institute AI governance: lifecycle management, policy, versioning, explainability and NIST AI RMF based adversarial testing.
5. Implement tiered automation: mandate human confirmation for high impact enforcement and allow automation for low-risk containment.
6. Conduct adversarial assessments: with a focus on strengthening control and detection mechanisms and models.
7. Intersector collaboration: allow anonymized data sharing of telemetry and indicators of compromise (IOCs) for model enhancements without loss of sensitive data.
8. Improve operator interfaces and user experiences (UI/UX): outcomes of explainability interfaces and playbook rehearsals help reduce operator error while enhancing trust.

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