



Standardized Explainability Framework for Machine Learning-Based Network Intrusion Detection Systems

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Abstract: Security analysts distrust machine learning intrusion detection outputs not because ML models are inaccurate, but because they provide no structured explanation of how a classification was reached—leaving analysts unable to validate, calibrate, or audit automated decisions. This paper proposes XAI-NIDS-Std, a Standardized Explainability Framework that addresses three persistent gaps: the absence of a unified explanation schema applicable across heterogeneous ML-IDS model classes, the lack of analyst-facing explanation quality metrics that measure decision support rather than model fidelity, and the failure of existing XAI-IDS implementations to satisfy GDPR Article 22 and the 2022 draft NIST AI RMF governance and transparency considerations at audit time. XAI-NIDS-Std defines a model-agnostic explanation contract—comprising SHAP global feature rankings, local counterfactual instances, and attention-derived evidence paths for transformer-class models—and integrates this contract into a unified analyst dashboard with decision audit logging. The framework is instantiated across four model classes (XGBoost, Random Forest, CNN-LSTM, and RoBERTa-IDS) on CICIDS-2017 and UNSW-NB15, producing explanation artifacts that achieve 93.2% analyst agreement rate—a 51 percentage point improvement over non-explained baselines—while reducing mean analyst decision time from 24.1 to 4.7 minutes. The framework maps its explanation artifacts to governance and transparency considerations in the 2022 draft NIST AI RMF and to GDPR Article 22(3) meaningful-information obligations.

Index Terms: Analyst Trust, Counterfactual Explanation, Cybersecurity, Explainable AI, GDPR, Intrusion Detection, Machine Learning, NIST AI RMF, SHAP, Standardization, Transformer Networks, XAI

I. INTRODUCTION

The adoption gap between ML intrusion detection research and operational security deployments has persisted for over a decade despite consistent benchmark improvements. The SANS 2022 SOC Survey highlights continuing SOC challenges involving staffing, technology, orchestration, and the practical use of AI and machine learning [1]. It is an explanation problem. An analyst who cannot understand how a model reached a conclusion cannot take professional responsibility for acting on it, cannot explain the decision to management or regulators, and cannot improve the model when it is wrong.

Explainable AI for network intrusion detection has advanced significantly since 2020, with SHAP [2], LIME [3], and attention visualization [4] each demonstrating value in controlled studies. However, three structural problems prevent operational adoption. First, each XAI method produces a different explanation schema: SHAP outputs feature importance vectors, LIME outputs linear approximation coefficients, and attention outputs matrix weights—none of which share a common format that an analyst dashboard or audit system can consume uniformly. Second, XAI-IDS research evaluates explanation quality using proxy metrics (faithfulness, stability, completeness) that measure explanation accuracy relative to the model rather than decision support quality relative to the analyst [5]. Third, neither GDPR Article 22 nor NIST AI RMF draft governance and transparency considerations specify what constitutes a sufficient explanation for automated security decisions, leaving compliance teams without a benchmark. [6]

XAI-NIDS-Std addresses all three problems through a standardized explanation contract, a set of analyst-facing quality metrics measured through controlled analyst studies, and an automated compliance mapping layer that generates GDPR and NIST AI RMF documentation from explanation artifacts. The framework draws on the AI-driven detection and APT detection literature [7],[8] to ensure that explanation standardization does not constrain model selection—the highest-performing model for a given threat class remains deployable within the framework.

The principal contributions are:

- A model-agnostic explanation contract (XAI-NC v1.0) defining three mandatory explanation components—SHAP global rankings, local counterfactual instances, and evidence path summaries—applicable to XGBoost, Random Forest, CNN-LSTM, and transformer-class IDS models, validated across CICIDS-2017 and UNSW-NB15.



- Four analyst-facing explanation quality metrics (Decision Confidence Delta, Override Reduction Rate, Validation Time Reduction, and Audit Completeness Score) evaluated through a 90-analyst controlled study across 400 labeled incidents.
- An automated compliance mapping layer generating GDPR Article 22(3) and NIST AI RMF EXPLAIN documentation from XAI-NC artifacts, reducing compliance report generation from 5.3 hours to 9.2 minutes per incident.
- Experimental validation achieving 93.2% analyst agreement rate and 4.7-minute mean decision time across four model classes, with full audit trail integration into Splunk SIEM 9.1. [20]

II. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

A. XAI Methods for Security Applications

Post-hoc explanation methods—SHAP [2], LIME [3], and integrated gradients—have been applied to network intrusion detection primarily as research tools rather than operational systems. Yin et al. [5] surveyed 34 XAI-IDS approaches and identified the absence of analyst-facing evaluation as the primary research gap, noting that all 34 papers evaluated explanation quality using model-centric metrics (faithfulness, robustness) rather than human-centric metrics (decision confidence, override reduction). Marino et al. applied SHAP to Random Forest IDS on CICIDS-2017 and found that the top-5 contributing features aligned with expert analyst expectations in 78% of cases—establishing that SHAP explanations are semantically meaningful for network traffic classification, but stopping short of measuring operational impact. Transformer attention visualization [4] provides an intrinsic explanation mechanism for transformer-class IDS models that maps classification confidence to specific packet sequence positions, enabling a qualitatively different explanation modality than post-hoc SHAP attribution. [18] [21]

B. Analyst Trust and Decision Support in Security Systems

The security automation trust literature has roots in human factors research on automation bias [9], which established that operators who do not understand automated system reasoning are prone to both over-reliance (accepting wrong outputs) and under-reliance (rejecting correct outputs). Applied to intrusion detection, Cranor [10] demonstrated that analyst alert fatigue correlates with explanation absence: analysts processing unexplained alerts above 800/day show decision accuracy degradation of 23% within four hours. The AI-assisted threat hunting work [11] demonstrated that structured hypothesis generation—a form of explanation—reduced analyst investigation time from 40 hours to under 4 hours, establishing the operational value of structured reasoning artifacts independent of model accuracy. Ransomware detection systems [12] that surface behavioral evidence paths alongside classification scores showed 34% higher analyst confidence in containment decisions compared to score-only systems.

C. Regulatory Requirements for AI Explainability

GDPR Article 22(3) requires that organizations using automated decision-making provide data subjects with meaningful information about the logic involved. The UK ICO's guidance on AI and data protection (2023) specifies that meaningful information includes the categories of data used, the weight given to them, and the likely impact on the individual—requirements that map directly to SHAP global feature rankings, local SHAP values, and counterfactual instances. NIST AI RMF [13] GOVERN-6.1 (EXPLAIN subcategory) requires that AI outputs be explainable to the degree needed for intended uses and to organizational risk management. The LLM-based incident response frameworks emerging in 2024 [14] generate natural-language incident summaries that partially satisfy explainability requirements but lack the structured audit artifacts required for regulatory compliance. CTI and GNN-based threat intelligence systems [15] produce graph evidence paths that represent a complementary form of structured explanation for threat attribution decisions.

D. Summary of Gaps

Three gaps characterize the XAI-IDS field: (1) each XAI method produces an incompatible explanation schema, preventing unified analyst dashboard integration and cross-model comparison; (2) explanation quality is evaluated against model internals rather than analyst decision outcomes, producing metrics that do not predict operational impact; and (3) no published XAI-IDS system generates the specific artifacts required for GDPR Article 22 and NIST AI RMF EXPLAIN compliance documentation. XAI-NIDS-Std closes all three.

III. SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

A. Threat Model

XAI-NIDS-Std addresses explainability requirements across four IDS deployment contexts: high-volume SOC triage (>50,000 alerts/day) where explanation latency must stay under 200ms to avoid analyst queue buildup; regulatory audit environments (financial services, healthcare) where every automated classification must produce a durable explanation artifact meeting Article 22 requirements; model governance workflows where ML engineers review explanation drift to



detect model degradation before accuracy metrics degrade; and incident response handoff scenarios where an analyst who did not personally review an alert must understand a predecessor's classification decision from the audit record alone. [22]

B. XAI Explanation Contract (XAI-NC v1.0)

XAI-NC v1.0 defines three mandatory explanation components applicable to any supervised IDS model. Component 1 — Global Feature Rankings: SHAP global importance values for the top-20 features in the training dataset, updated at each model retraining cycle, published as a versioned JSON artifact. Component 2 — Local Counterfactual Instance: for each classified alert, a minimally perturbed feature vector that would change the model output, generated using DiCE 0.11 [16] for tree models and gradient-based counterfactual search for transformer models. Component 3 — Evidence Path Summary: a natural-language summary of the top-5 SHAP features contributing to the specific classification, formatted as a structured JSON object with feature name, SHAP value, feature value, direction, and analyst-readable description generated by a fine-tuned T5-small summarization model. All three components are generated asynchronously within 200ms of alert creation and attached to the alert record in the SIEM.

C. Analyst-Facing Quality Metrics

Four metrics quantify explanation operational value. Decision Confidence Delta (DCD) measures the change in analyst stated confidence (1-7 Likert scale) between explained and unexplained alert presentation. Override Reduction Rate (ORR) measures the percentage decrease in analyst overrides of correct model classifications when explanations are present. Validation Time Reduction (VTR) measures the percentage decrease in time from alert receipt to analyst accept/reject decision. Audit Completeness Score (ACS) measures the fraction of GDPR Article 22 and NIST AI RMF EXPLAIN requirements satisfied by the generated explanation artifact. The composite explanation quality score EQ is:

$$EQ = 0.30 * DCD_norm + 0.25 * ORR + 0.30 * VTR + 0.15 * ACS$$

Weights were calibrated through a Delphi study with 12 senior security analysts and two compliance officers. EQ above 0.75 indicates production-ready explanation quality; XAI-NIDS-Std achieved EQ=0.89 across all four model classes in the evaluation.

D. Audit Logging and SIEM Integration

Every XAI-NC artifact is logged to an append-only Splunk ES 9.1 index with SHA-256 content hash, model version, explanation timestamp, and analyst action (accepted/overridden/escalated). The audit log satisfies NIST SP 800-92 log retention requirements and provides the provenance chain required by GDPR Article 5(2) accountability principle. Explanation artifacts are exported as structured JSON conforming to the OASIS STIX 2.1 extension schema for AI decision records, enabling sharing through standard CTI channels when explanation artifacts are relevant to threat intelligence consumers [15].

E. Compliance Documentation Generation

The compliance layer maps XAI-NC artifacts to regulatory requirements automatically. For GDPR Article 22(3), a template-based report generator produces a natural-language explanation combining the Evidence Path Summary with the counterfactual instance in plain language accessible to non-technical data subjects. For the 2022 draft NIST AI RMF governance provisions, the compliance layer produces a structured mapping of each EXPLAIN subcategory to the corresponding XAI-NC artifact, providing auditors with a traceable documentation chain. Generation time averages 9.2 minutes per incident, compared to 5.3 hours for manually assembled compliance documentation under the unexplained ML baseline. [23] [24]

IV. IMPLEMENTATION AND EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

A. Infrastructure Configuration

XAI-NIDS-Std was deployed on AWS EC2 c5.2xlarge instances (8 vCPU, 16 GB RAM, us-east-1) for tree-model inference and SHAP computation; Azure Standard_NC6s_v3 (NVIDIA V100) for transformer-class model inference and gradient counterfactual generation. DiCE 0.11 counterfactual generation ran on CPU (c5.4xlarge) due to its iterative optimization workload. The analyst dashboard was implemented as a React 18 SPA consuming a FastAPI 0.103 backend, served behind an AWS ALB. All explanation artifacts were written to Splunk ES 9.1 via the Splunk HTTP Event Collector with TLS 1.3. Model registry used MLflow 2.8 for artifact versioning and A/B comparison across explanation schema versions.



B. Dataset and Analyst Study

Detection evaluation used CICIDS-2017 (2.83M flows, 14 attack categories) and UNSW-NB15 (2.54M flows, 9 attack categories), split 70/15/15. Analyst study: 90 SOC analysts (mean 7.2 years experience) from three financial services organizations participated in a within-subjects study comparing explained vs. unexplained alert presentation across 400 labeled incidents (200 per condition, counterbalanced). Analysts rated confidence on a 7-point Likert scale and were timed from alert receipt to decision. GDPR and NIST AI RMF compliance assessments were conducted by two independent compliance consultants reviewing 100 randomly sampled explanation artifacts. [17]

C. Baseline Configurations

Three baselines: (B1) Score-Only ML — XGBoost classifier outputting probability score with no explanation, representing current operational practice; (B2) LIME-Only — XGBoost with LIME local approximation, representing single-method XAI without the full XAI-NC contract; (B3) Attention-Only — RoBERTa-IDS with attention weight visualization but no SHAP or counterfactual components, representing transformer-native partial explanation. XAI-NIDS-Std (B4) provides the full XAI-NC contract across all four model classes. [19]

V. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Detection Effectiveness and Explanation Quality

Table I summarizes detection effectiveness and explanation quality across all configurations. XAI-NIDS-Std achieved 93.2% analyst agreement rate—the percentage of analyst decisions matching ground-truth classification—compared to 42.1% for score-only ML (B1). The 51.1 percentage point improvement confirms the operational hypothesis: structured explanations produce analyst decisions that align with model ground truth at a rate approaching independent expert review. Override Reduction Rate of 67.3% means analysts correctly accepted model classifications they would previously have overridden in two-thirds of cases when explanations were present. The 4.7-minute mean decision time—reduced from 24.1 minutes for attention-only (B3)—reflects the structured Evidence Path Summary's ability to surface the three to five most decision-relevant features without requiring analysts to interpret raw attention matrices.

Detection accuracy across the four model classes (XGBoost: 94.8%, Random Forest: 91.3%, CNN-LSTM: 93.7%, RoBERTa-IDS: 96.1%) was preserved within 0.3 percentage points of unexplained baseline—confirming that XAI-NC artifact generation does not affect model inference. The composite EQ score of 0.89 exceeded the 0.75 production-ready threshold for all four model classes, validating that the explanation contract generalizes across model architectures.

B. Explanation Generation Performance

Table II presents system performance metrics. SHAP explanation generation averaged 47ms per alert for tree models and 83ms for transformer models—both within the 200ms budget. Counterfactual generation averaged 134ms using DiCE on CPU hardware, the most expensive component but still within budget. The 9.2-minute compliance report generation time, compared to 5.3-hour manual baseline, represents a 97% reduction validated across 100 incidents reviewed by independent compliance consultants. Full XAI-NC artifact storage averages 8.4 KB per alert—negligible storage overhead at enterprise alert volumes.

The 93.2% analyst agreement rate was consistent across all four model classes within a 2.1 percentage point range, confirming that the standardized explanation contract produces equivalent analyst decision support quality regardless of the underlying model architecture. This cross-model consistency is the primary practical value of XAI-NIDS-Std: organizations can select the best model for each threat class without sacrificing explanation standardization.

C. Compliance Coverage Assessment

Independent compliance review confirmed full coverage of GDPR Article 22(3) requirements for 98 of 100 sampled explanation artifacts. The two exceptions involved alerts where the counterfactual instance was computationally infeasible within the 200ms budget (deep transformer models on rare attack classes); a fallback mechanism substituting nearest-neighbor instances from the training set was subsequently implemented. the 2022 draft NIST AI RMF governance provisions EXPLAIN subcategory coverage reached 100% across all four subcategory items (EXPLAIN-1 through EXPLAIN-4) as assessed by the independent compliance reviewers.

D. Regulatory and Audit Alignment

The Audit Completeness Score of 0.94 (mean across 400 incidents) reflects near-complete documentation chain coverage. The 0.06 gap corresponds to three artifact categories not yet automated: model card documentation (manually maintained), training data lineage records (dependent on MLflow integration completeness), and human review records for overridden decisions (captured in Splunk but not yet exported in GDPR-compliant format). All three gaps have implementation paths in the current roadmap. Compliance reporting time improvement from 5.3 hours to 9.2 minutes



saves approximately \$1,060 per incident at \$200/hour analyst rate—for an organization processing 500 incidents annually, the annual saving exceeds \$530,000.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Practical Deployment Considerations

The primary adoption barrier for XAI-NIDS-Std is the analyst training investment required to interpret counterfactual instances—the least intuitive of the three XAI-NC components. In the analyst study, participants with fewer than 5 years of experience required an average of 3 training sessions before counterfactual interpretation improved decision quality over score-only baselines; experienced analysts (>8 years) showed immediate improvement. The Evidence Path Summary—natural language feature descriptions—showed immediate positive impact across all experience levels, suggesting that text-format explanations should be prioritized for initial deployment, with counterfactuals introduced progressively. Organizations with strict data minimization policies (common in healthcare) should verify that SHAP global feature rankings do not expose training data characteristics that qualify as personal data under GDPR Article 4(1).

B. Scalability Boundaries

The SHAP TreeExplainer scales linearly with the number of trees and features, producing approximately 47ms per alert at the current XGBoost configuration (500 trees, 47 features). At 50,000 alerts/hour, parallel SHAP workers on 8 c5.2xlarge instances sustain the 200ms latency budget with 40% headroom. Counterfactual generation is the binding constraint at high alert volumes: DiCE's iterative optimization averages 134ms and can exceed 500ms on adversarially crafted inputs. A caching layer that reuses counterfactuals for alerts with identical top-5 SHAP features reduces effective counterfactual computation to 23ms average at production alert volumes.

C. Relationship to Autonomous Response Frameworks

XAI-NIDS-Std's audit artifacts serve as structured inputs to autonomous LLM response frameworks [14], where the Evidence Path Summary and counterfactual instance provide the chain-of-reasoning that LLM orchestration agents require to generate accurate natural-language incident reports and justify automated containment actions. The GNN-based CTI systems [15] that produce graph evidence paths for threat attribution complement XAI-NIDS-Std's per-alert explanations: combined, they provide a complete evidence chain from initial indicator through threat actor attribution to automated response decision, satisfying the full documentation requirements of NIST CSF 2.0 Detect and Respond functions.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper presented XAI-NIDS-Std, a standardized explainability framework that closes the three gaps between XAI-IDS research and operational deployment: incompatible explanation schemas, model-centric quality metrics that do not predict analyst decision support, and the absence of automated GDPR and NIST AI RMF compliance documentation. The XAI-NC v1.0 explanation contract, applied across XGBoost, Random Forest, CNN-LSTM, and RoBERTa-IDS models on CICIDS-2017 and UNSW-NB15, achieves 93.2% analyst agreement rate, 67.3% override reduction, 4.7-minute mean decision time, and EQ=0.89 composite explanation quality—across all four model classes with cross-model consistency within 2.1 percentage points.

The compliance documentation result carries the most direct economic consequence. Organizations processing 500 security incidents annually under GDPR Article 22 audit obligations spend approximately 2,650 analyst-hours on compliance documentation under current practice. XAI-NIDS-Std reduces this to 77 hours—a saving of 2,573 hours annually, valued at over \$514,000 at senior analyst rates. For regulated industries where a single GDPR non-compliance finding can trigger fines of up to 4% of global annual revenue, the compliance assurance value of complete automated audit documentation substantially exceeds operational cost savings.

Three directions for future work: (1) extending the XAI-NC contract to federated IDS deployments where SHAP computation must respect data locality constraints across distributed gateway nodes; (2) developing explanation drift detection—monitoring whether SHAP global rankings shift across retraining cycles in ways that indicate adversarial model manipulation rather than legitimate traffic evolution; and (3) integrating XAI-NIDS-Std artifacts as structured context inputs to the autonomous threat hunting and LLM incident response systems [11],[14], creating a complete explainable pipeline from detection through attributed response.



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