



The Changing Face of Firewalls: Evolution, Challenges, and Innovations

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The Changing Face of Firewalls: Evolution, Challenges, and Innovations

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Abstract: This discussion explores the evolution, challenges, innovations, and future directions of firewall technology. Firewalls have evolved from simple packet filtering routers to sophisticated Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs) with advanced features such as deep packet inspection, intrusion prevention, and application awareness. However, they have faced challenges such as scalability, complexity, and performance limitations.

Future firewall technology is expected to focus on integration with security orchestration tools, automation and orchestration, enhanced threat intelligence integration, and Zero Trust Networking (ZTN) principles. These advancements will enable firewalls to better protect against advanced threats, respond to security incidents more effectively, and adapt to changing network conditions and threat landscapes.

Keywords: *firewall, evolution, challenges, innovations, network security, cybersecurity, firewall technologies, threat management, firewall performance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Background of Firewalls:

Firewalls are essential components of network security, serving as a barrier between trusted internal networks and untrusted external networks. They monitor and control incoming and outgoing network traffic based on predetermined security rules, preventing unauthorized access and protecting against various cyber threats. Initially, firewalls were simple packet filters that examined packets based on their source and destination addresses, ports, and protocols[3]. However, with the evolution of the internet and the increasing sophistication of cyber-attacks, firewalls have undergone significant changes to keep pace with these developments[1].

Purpose and Scope of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the evolution, challenges, and innovations in firewall technology. By examining the historical development of firewalls, the study aims to provide insights into the factors driving their evolution and the challenges they face in today's complex network environments. Additionally, the study will investigate the latest innovations in firewall technology, including next-generation firewalls (NGFWs), deep packet inspection (DPI), and cloud-based firewalls, and their impact on network security.

Research Objectives:

- To examine the historical development of firewalls and their evolution into modern security appliances.

- To identify the key challenges faced by traditional firewalls in today's network environments.
- To explore the latest innovations in firewall technology and their effectiveness in addressing current security threats.
- To discuss the future directions of firewall development and their potential impact on network security.

II. RELATED WORK

Research on firewall technology has explored various aspects, focusing on new features, improved architectures, and innovative security methods. Here are some areas of related work:

Context-Aware Firewalls:

Recent studies have looked into firewalls that adapt their security rules based on the context of the traffic and user behavior. For example, a context-aware firewall might change its rules based on what is happening on the network in real time. This helps in better detecting and stopping sophisticated attacks that regular firewalls might miss. These firewalls can also prioritize traffic based on its importance, ensuring that critical business applications receive the necessary bandwidth and protection.

Behavioral Analysis and Anomaly Detection:

Some firewalls now use behavioral analysis to improve security. These firewalls learn what normal network behavior looks like and then watch for unusual activity that might indicate a threat. This method is useful for finding new types of attacks by spotting behavior that deviates from the norm. Studies have shown that behavioral analysis can effectively detect insider threats and advanced persistent threats (APTs) by monitoring for deviations from typical user behavior.

Adaptive Security Architectures:

Adaptive firewalls can change their security measures based on the latest threat information and network conditions. They adjust in real-time to provide a proactive defense against new and evolving threats. This makes them more effective in dealing with the constantly changing nature of cyber threats. Adaptive firewalls can also learn from past incidents to improve their response to future attacks, making them a dynamic and evolving component of network security.

Threat Intelligence Integration:

Modern firewalls often integrate with threat intelligence services, which provide real-time information about emerging threats and vulnerabilities. This integration allows firewalls to automatically update their rules and signatures to protect against the latest threats. Research has shown that threat intelligence integration can significantly enhance the effectiveness of firewalls by enabling them to respond more quickly to new and evolving threats.

Network Function Virtualization (NFV):

Network Function Virtualization (NFV) allows firewalls to be deployed as virtual appliances rather than physical devices. This provides greater flexibility and scalability, enabling organizations to quickly adapt their security infrastructure to changing network conditions. NFV also supports the deployment of firewalls in cloud environments, providing consistent security across both on-premises and cloud-based resources.

III. EVOLUTION OF FIREWALLS

Early Development of Firewalls

In the early days of networking, security was not a primary concern, and networks were relatively small and isolated. As networks began to grow and interconnect, the need for a security mechanism to protect them became apparent. The first firewalls were developed in the late 1980s as a response to this need [1]. These early firewalls were typically simple packet filtering routers that examined packets based on predetermined rules and blocked or allowed them based on their source and destination addresses, ports, and protocols. While effective at the time, these early firewalls lacked the ability to inspect traffic at the application layer, making them vulnerable to more sophisticated attacks [3].

First-Generation Firewalls

First-generation firewalls, also known as static packet filtering firewalls, emerged in the early 1990s as a more advanced form of packet filtering[3]. These firewalls added the ability to filter packets based on the state of the connection, allowing them to make more intelligent decisions about which packets to allow or block [1][6]. This stateful inspection capability significantly improved the security of early firewalls by preventing certain types of attacks, such as TCP SYN flooding attacks, which exploit the stateless nature of traditional packet filters.

Second-Generation Firewalls

Second-generation firewalls, introduced in the late 1990s, marked a significant advancement in firewall technology by adding support for application-layer filtering. Unlike first-generation firewalls, which could only filter packets based on their headers, second-generation firewalls could inspect the contents of packets and make decisions based on the specific application protocols being used[6]. This allowed for more granular control over network traffic and better protection against application-layer attacks, such as SQL injection and cross-site scripting (XSS) attacks [2].

Third-Generation Firewalls

Third-generation firewalls, often referred to as Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs), represent a significant advancement in firewall technology. These firewalls go beyond the capabilities of traditional and second-generation firewalls by incorporating advanced features such as application awareness, intrusion prevention, and deep packet inspection [1][8]. NGFWs can identify and control applications on the network, allowing for more granular control over traffic based on specific applications rather than just ports and protocols.

Next-Generation Firewalls

Next-generation firewalls (NGFWs) build upon the capabilities of third-generation firewalls by incorporating additional advanced features such as cloud-based management and integration with threat intelligence. NGFWs offer centralized management interfaces that allow administrators to easily configure and monitor security policies across the entire network[8]. They also often include integration with threat intelligence feeds, which provide up-to-date information on emerging threats, enhancing their ability to protect against new and evolving threats [5].

The Four Generations of Firewalls		
Generation	Capability	Attributes
First	Packet Filtering	Basic Network Policy
Second	Deep Packet Inspection	Application Identification
Third ("Next Gen")	Layer 7	User ID, Content Policy

Figure 1: Four Generations of Firewall [1]

IV. KEY FEATURES AND TECHNOLOGIES IN FIREWALLS

Packet Filtering:

Packet filtering is a basic form of firewall technology that examines packets of data as they pass through the firewall. It filters packets based on criteria such as source and destination IP addresses, source and destination port numbers, and the protocol used[6]. Packets that meet the criteria are allowed to pass, while others are blocked [5]. Packet filtering is effective for basic network security but lacks the ability to inspect the contents of packets.

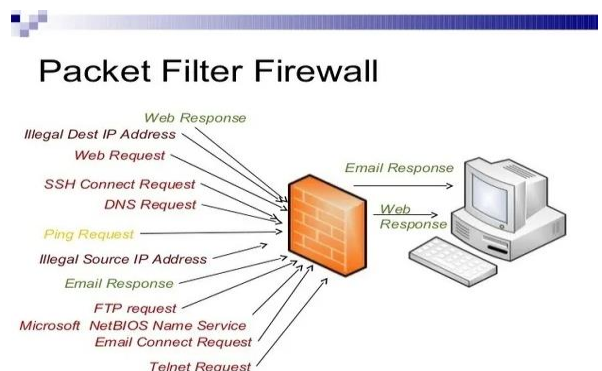


Figure 2: Packet Filter [2]

Stateful Inspection:

Stateful inspection is a more advanced form of firewall technology that keeps track of the state of active connections

and makes decisions based on the context of the traffic. Unlike simple packet filtering[5], which treats each packet in isolation, stateful inspection looks at the state of the connection to determine whether a packet should be allowed or blocked. This allows the firewall to identify legitimate responses to outgoing traffic and only allow them through, enhancing security [15].

Deep Packet Inspection:

Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) is an advanced form of packet filtering that involves inspecting the contents of packets at a deeper level. DPI can analyze the payload of packets to identify specific applications or protocols, allowing for more granular control over network traffic. DPI is often used to detect and block malicious content, such as malware and phishing attacks, in real time [1][3].

Stateful Packet Inspection



Stateful packet inspection looks at the **header** and **footer** of a packet.

Deep Packet Inspection



Deep packet inspection examines the **data part** of a packet.

Figure 3: Stateful Packet and Deep Packet [3]

Proxy Firewalls:

Proxy firewalls act as intermediaries between clients and servers, intercepting requests from clients and forwarding them to the appropriate server[14]. Proxy firewalls can hide the internal network structure and IP addresses from external users, providing an additional layer of security [11]. They can also provide content caching and filtering, allowing them to block malicious content before it reaches the client.

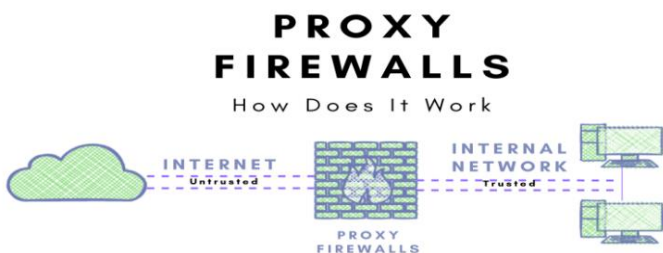


Figure 4: Proxy Firewalls [4]

Application Layer Gateways:

Application Layer Gateways (ALGs), also known as application-level gateways, are firewall components that operate at the application layer of the OSI model. ALGs can inspect and filter traffic based on specific application protocols, providing enhanced security for application-layer traffic[11]. ALGs are often used to enforce security policies

for specific applications, such as blocking certain types of traffic or enforcing encryption standards [9].

Application-Level-Gateway

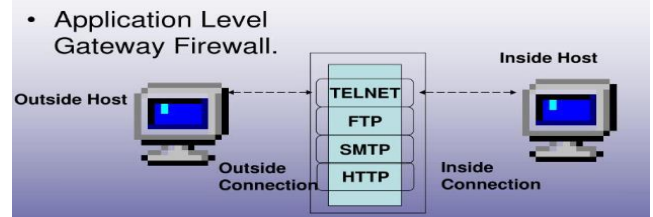


Figure 5: Application Level Gateway [5]

These key features and technologies are fundamental to the operation of firewalls and play a crucial role in protecting networks from unauthorized access and cyber threats. Each technology has its strengths and weaknesses, and organizations often use a combination of these technologies to create a layered approach to network security.

V. CHALLENGES IN FIREWALL EVOLUTION

Scalability Issues:

Scalability is a significant challenge in firewall evolution, particularly as networks grow larger and more complex. Traditional firewalls may struggle to handle the increasing volume of traffic, leading to performance issues and potential bottlenecks[4]. To address scalability challenges, organizations often need to implement distributed firewall architectures or deploy firewalls with higher processing power and memory capacity [14].

Complexity of Traffic Types:

Modern networks carry a diverse range of traffic types, including voice, video, data, and encrypted traffic. Traditional firewalls may have difficulty effectively inspecting and filtering this complex traffic mix, leading to gaps in security[16][4]. Next-generation firewalls (NGFWs) are designed to address this challenge by providing more advanced inspection and filtering capabilities that can identify and control traffic based on application, user, and content [17].

Evolving Threat Landscape:

The evolving threat landscape presents a constant challenge for firewall evolution. Cyber threats are becoming more sophisticated, with attackers using advanced techniques to evade detection and exploit vulnerabilities. Firewalls need to adapt to these changing threats by incorporating new security features and capabilities, such as threat intelligence feeds, machine learning, and behavior-based analysis. Regular updates and patches are essential to ensure that firewalls can effectively protect against the latest threats [4].

Performance Limitations:

As firewalls add more advanced features, such as deep packet inspection (DPI) and intrusion prevention systems (IPS), they may require more processing power and memory to operate effectively[4]. This can lead to performance limitations and degraded network performance. To address

performance issues, organizations may need to invest in high-performance firewall hardware or optimize their firewall configurations to improve efficiency [17].

Management and Configuration Complexity:

As firewalls become more advanced, they can also become more complex to manage and configure. Organizations need to ensure that their firewall administrators have the necessary skills and training to effectively configure and maintain their firewalls [18][4]. Centralized management interfaces and automation tools can help simplify firewall management, but they also introduce their own challenges in terms of complexity and security.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes technological innovation, proactive security measures, and ongoing monitoring and adaptation to the evolving threat landscape. By staying ahead of these challenges, organizations can ensure that their firewall infrastructure remains effective in protecting against modern cyber threats

VI. INNOVATIONS IN FIREWALL TECHNOLOGY

Machine Learning and AI in Firewalls:

Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly being used in firewalls to enhance security capabilities. These technologies can analyze vast amounts of network data to identify patterns and anomalies that may indicate a security threat[8]. Machine learning algorithms can help improve threat detection and response times, making firewalls more effective at protecting against advanced threats [4].

Cloud-Based Firewalls:

Cloud-based firewalls are designed to protect cloud-based resources and applications. These firewalls are hosted in the cloud and can provide the same level of security as traditional firewalls, but with the added flexibility and scalability of cloud-based services [18][8]. Cloud-based firewalls can also provide centralized management and monitoring capabilities, making them easier to deploy and manage across distributed environments.

Zero Trust Architecture:

Zero Trust Architecture (ZTA) is a security model that assumes no trust, even within the network perimeter. In ZTA, every user and device is treated as untrusted and must be authenticated and authorized before accessing any resources. Firewalls play a crucial role in implementing ZTA by enforcing access controls based on user identity [20], device posture, and other contextual factors, rather than relying solely on network boundaries.

Micro-Segmentation:

Micro-segmentation is a security technique that divides the network into small, isolated segments to reduce the impact of a potential security breach. Firewalls are used to enforce strict access controls between these segments, allowing organizations to limit lateral movement by attackers and contain the impact of a breach. Micro-

segmentation can improve overall network security by limiting the blast radius of potential attacks [13].

Software-Defined Networking (SDN) in Firewalls:

Software-Defined Networking (SDN) is a network architecture approach that allows network administrators to manage network services through abstraction of lower-level functionality. SDN can be used to dynamically adjust firewall policies based on real-time network conditions, such as traffic volume and performance requirements [13]. This flexibility and agility make SDN-based firewalls more responsive to changing security needs.

These innovations in firewall technology are helping organizations improve their security posture and adapt to the evolving threat landscape. By leveraging machine learning, cloud-based services, zero trust architecture, micro-segmentation, and SDN, organizations can enhance their firewall capabilities and better protect their networks and data.

VII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FIREWALL GENERATIONS

First-Generation Firewalls:

- **Strengths:** First-generation firewalls, also known as static packet filtering firewalls, provided a basic level of security by filtering packets based on predefined rules. They were relatively simple to configure and deploy, making them suitable for early network security needs.

- **Weaknesses:** However, first-generation firewalls lacked the ability to inspect the contents of packets or understand the context of network traffic, making them susceptible to certain types of attacks. They were also limited in their ability to handle complex traffic types and applications.

Second-Generation Firewalls:

- **Strengths:** Second-generation firewalls introduced application-layer filtering, allowing them to inspect the contents of packets and make decisions based on specific applications or protocols. This provided a higher level of security and control over network traffic.

- **Weaknesses:** However, second-generation firewalls still had limitations in terms of scalability and performance. They struggled to keep up with the increasing volume and complexity of network traffic, especially with the rise of new applications and services.

Third-Generation Firewalls (Next-Generation Firewalls):

- **Strengths:** Third-generation firewalls, or Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs), built upon the capabilities of second-generation firewalls by adding advanced features such as application awareness, intrusion prevention, and deep packet inspection. This provided organizations with greater security and control over their network traffic.

- **Weaknesses:** Despite their advancements, NGFWs can still face challenges with scalability,

complexity, and performance limitations, especially in large and complex network environments. They may also require more expertise to configure and manage effectively.

Advancements and Improvements Over Time:

Machine Learning and AI:

Machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) have significantly enhanced firewall capabilities. These technologies enable firewalls to analyze network traffic patterns and detect anomalies that may indicate a security threat [19]. Machine learning algorithms can also improve threat detection accuracy and response times, making firewalls more effective at protecting against advanced threats[4].

Cloud-Based Firewalls:

Cloud-based firewalls offer several advantages over traditional on-premises firewalls. They provide organizations with more flexibility and scalability in protecting their cloud-based resources and applications. Cloud-based firewalls can also centralize security management, making it easier for organizations to enforce consistent security policies across their entire network [18][4].

Zero Trust Architecture:

Zero Trust Architecture (ZTA) has revolutionized the way firewalls are deployed and configured. ZTA assumes that all network traffic is untrusted and requires verification before access is granted [20]. This approach helps organizations reduce the risk of insider threats and mitigate the impact of security breaches by limiting lateral movement within the network.

Micro-Segmentation:

Micro-segmentation has become an essential part of network security, particularly in large and complex environments. It allows organizations to isolate and protect critical assets within their network by dividing the network into smaller segments [20]. Each segment has its security policies, reducing the impact of a security breach and limiting lateral movement by attackers.

The evolution of firewalls has been driven by the need to keep pace with the changing nature of cyber threats and the increasing complexity of network environments. Each advancement, from machine learning and AI to cloud-based firewalls and zero trust architecture, has improved network security and helped organizations better protect their assets and data.

VIII. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN FIREWALL TECHNOLOGY

Integration with Security Orchestration:

Future firewalls will be tightly integrated with security orchestration tools, allowing for automated response to security incidents. This integration will enable firewalls to communicate with other security tools and platforms to orchestrate a coordinated response to threats. For example, if a firewall detects suspicious activity, it can automatically

trigger a response from other security tools to contain the threat.

Automation and Orchestration:

Automation and orchestration will be key features of future firewall technology. Firewalls will be able to automatically adjust security policies based on changing network conditions and threat intelligence. This will allow organizations to respond to threats in real-time and adapt their security posture dynamically. Automation will also streamline firewall management tasks, reducing the burden on security teams.

Enhanced Threat Intelligence Integration:

Future firewalls will have enhanced integration with threat intelligence feeds, allowing them to make more informed decisions about which traffic to allow or block. This integration will enable firewalls to leverage up-to-date threat intelligence to identify and mitigate emerging threats. Firewalls will also be able to share threat intelligence with other security tools, enhancing overall security posture.

Zero Trust Networking Principles:

Zero Trust Networking (ZTN) principles will be a fundamental part of future firewall technology. Firewalls will adopt a Zero Trust approach, where all network traffic is considered untrusted and must be verified before access is granted. This approach will help organizations protect against insider threats and minimize the impact of security breaches by limiting lateral movement within the network.

Future firewall technology will focus on enhancing automation, integration, and intelligence to provide organizations with more effective and adaptive network security. These advancements will help organizations better protect against advanced threats and respond to security incidents more efficiently.

IX. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, firewalls have evolved significantly over the years, from simple packet filtering routers to sophisticated Next-Generation Firewalls (NGFWs) with advanced features such as deep packet inspection, intrusion prevention, and application awareness. Each generation of firewalls has brought improvements in security capabilities, but they have also faced challenges such as scalability, complexity, and performance limitations.

To address these challenges, future firewall technology is expected to focus on integration with security orchestration tools, automation and orchestration, enhanced threat intelligence integration, and Zero Trust Networking (ZTN) principles. These advancements will enable firewalls to better protect against advanced threats, respond to security incidents more effectively, and adapt to changing network conditions and threat landscapes.

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