Praveen Nainar Balasubramanian / Int.J.Data.Sci. & Big Data Anal. 5(2) (2025) 102-110
https://doi.org/10.51483/IJDSBDA.5.2.2025.102-110

ISSN: 2710-2599

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International Journal of Data Science and Big Data Analytics

Publisher's Home Page: https://www.svedbergopen.com/

Research Paper Open Access

ML-Driven Threat Detection with Azure Security Center

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Article Info

Volume 5, Issue 2, November 2025
Received : 13 August 2025
Accepted : 10 November 2025
Published : 25 November 2025
doi: 10.51483/IJDSBDA.5.2.2025.102-110

Abstract

The increasing complexity and volume of cyber threats necessitate intelligent and adaptive security solutions for modern cloud infrastructures. This research explores the integration of Machine Learning (ML) techniques with Microsoft Azure Security Center (ASC) to enhance threat detection, risk mitigation, and proactive security management. Azure Security Center, a unified infrastructure security management system, offers built-in ML-driven analytics for anomaly detection, behavioral analysis, and automated threat response. The study investigates how ML algorithms, such as anomaly detection models, decision trees, and neural networks, are utilized within ASC to detect potential threats across hybrid and multi-cloud environments. By analyzing telemetry data, network behavior, and resource configurations, ASC's ML capabilities help in identifying patterns indicative of malicious activity, zero-day exploits, and insider threats in near real-time. The research further evaluates the effectiveness, scalability, and accuracy of ASC's ML-driven threat detection compared to traditional rule-based systems. Case studies and simulated attack scenarios are used to demonstrate ASC's predictive capabilities and response time improvements. The findings highlight the value of embedding ML into cloud-native security platforms for achieving faster threat detection, reducing false positives, and enabling a more resilient security posture. This study contributes to the growing field of intelligent cloud security by offering insights into the practical deployment of machine learning within enterprise-grade security ecosystems like Azure.

Keywords: *Anomaly detection, Network behavior, Neural networks, Predictive analytics, Threat intelligence*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Motivation

The rapid digital transformation of businesses and the widespread adoption of cloud computing have significantly expanded the cyber threat landscape. Organizations are increasingly relying on cloud

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infrastructure to host mission-critical applications and data, making security a top priority. Traditional threat detection mechanisms—often based on static rules and signature-based detection—struggle to keep pace with the dynamic, sophisticated nature of modern cyberattacks. As a result, there is a pressing need for more adaptive, intelligent, and scalable solutions to identify and mitigate threats in real time. Machine Learning (ML) has emerged as a transformative approach, offering the ability to detect anomalies, predict attacks, and respond proactively to threats based on historical data and behavioral patterns. Integrating ML with cloud-native security platforms like Microsoft Azure Security Center (ASC) presents a promising direction for advancing threat detection capabilities.

1.2. Overview of Azure Security Center (ASC)

Microsoft Azure Security Center is a unified security management system designed to provide advanced threat protection across hybrid cloud workloads. ASC delivers a comprehensive set of features, including security policy enforcement, continuous assessment, threat detection, and incident response. It monitors virtual machines, databases, containers, applications, and networks within Azure and beyond. By collecting telemetry data and leveraging Microsoft's threat intelligence, ASC offers actionable insights and automated remediation strategies. A key advantage of ASC is its built-in support for machine learning algorithms that enable intelligent detection of threats and anomalies, reducing reliance on static security rules.

1.3. Role of Machine Learning in Threat Detection

Machine Learning enhances threat detection by enabling systems to learn from historical data, identify complex patterns, and adapt to evolving attack strategies. In the context of Azure Security Center, ML models are used to analyze vast amounts of telemetry and log data generated by cloud resources. These models can detect subtle behavioral deviations, predict potential vulnerabilities, and trigger real-time alerts. Techniques such as supervised learning, unsupervised anomaly detection, and clustering are commonly used to identify threats that would otherwise go unnoticed. ML not only improves detection accuracy but also minimizes false positives and supports automated incident triage, significantly enhancing the overall security posture.

1.4. Problem Statement

Despite the availability of advanced security tools, many organizations still struggle with delayed threat detection, high volumes of false alarms, and limited visibility into cloud infrastructure vulnerabilities. Static rule-based systems often fail to detect zeroday exploits and sophisticated attacks that do not match known patterns. While Azure Security Center offers ML-driven features, there remains a gap in understanding how effectively these models function in real-world scenarios and how they compare with traditional methods. Additionally, the interpretability and adaptability of ML algorithms in the context of dynamic cloud environments remain underexplored.

1.5. Research Objectives

This study aims to explore and evaluate the role of machine learning in enhancing threat detection within Microsoft Azure Security Center. The specific objectives are:

- To analyze how ML algorithms are integrated into ASC for threat detection and response.
- To evaluate the accuracy, scalability, and efficiency of ASC's ML-based models compared to traditional detection methods.
- To simulate real-world attack scenarios and assess the performance of ASC's threat identification capabilities.
- To identify limitations and propose enhancements to ML-driven threat detection in cloud-native security platforms.
- To contribute practical insights into the deployment and operationalization of ML in enterprise cloud security management.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cloud Security Threat Landscape

The increasing reliance on cloud computing has introduced a range of security challenges unique to distributed and virtualized environments. Cloud infrastructures are subject to a diverse array of threats, including data breaches, account hijacking, Denial-of-Service (DoS) attacks, insecure APIs, and misconfigurations. According to reports by cybersecurity firms like Palo Alto Networks and Check Point, cloud environments are frequently targeted due to their scalability, resource sharing, and accessibility from multiple endpoints. The dynamic nature of cloud infrastructure—where resources are rapidly provisioned, scaled, and decommissioned—creates significant visibility and control issues, complicating security monitoring and threat detection. As threat actors continue to evolve in sophistication, static and reactive security models are increasingly ineffective in protecting cloud-native applications and services.

2.2. Traditional vs. ML-Based Detection Methods

Traditional Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS) and Security Information and Event Management (SIEM) tools primarily rely on signature-based and rule-based detection. While effective for known threats, these approaches struggle to detect zero-day exploits, polymorphic malware, and behavior-based anomalies. Moreover, they tend to generate high volumes of false positives, burdening security analysts and slowing response times.

In contrast, ML-based detection systems utilize algorithms to learn patterns from historical data and identify anomalies that deviate from established baselines. These models can be trained on various features such as IP addresses, user behavior, system logs, and network traffic, enabling them to detect both known and unknown threats with higher precision. For example, anomaly detection models can flag suspicious login activities, while classification models can predict potential malware based on file attributes. ML-based systems offer adaptability, context-awareness, and automation—making them ideal for complex, high-volume cloud environments.

2.3. Azure Security Center Architecture

Azure Security Center (ASC) is designed as a cloud-native security solution that provides continuous security assessment, threat detection, and response for hybrid and multi-cloud environments. The ASC architecture consists of several core components:

- **Data Collection Layer:** Gathers telemetry from Azure resources, on-premises systems, and third-party tools via Azure Monitor, Log Analytics, and Azure Defender agents.
- **Analytics and Detection Layer:** Applies Microsoft's threat intelligence, heuristic analysis, and ML-based models to detect unusual activities and generate alerts.
- **Security Policy and Compliance Management:** Enables users to configure security baselines and monitor compliance with regulatory standards such as ISO, NIST, and CIS.
- **Automation and Response Layer:** Uses playbooks in Azure Logic Apps to automate threat mitigation, incident reporting, and remediation tasks.

The integration of ML into this architecture allows ASC to perform real-time behavioral analysis and predictive threat detection, enhancing its ability to detect lateral movement, privilege escalation, and advanced persistent threats (APTs).

2.4. Machine Learning in Security Applications

Machine Learning has been increasingly adopted across cybersecurity domains to improve threat detection, automate responses, and reduce analyst fatigue. In security applications, ML models are categorized broadly into:

- **Supervised Learning:** Used for classification tasks, such as identifying spam emails or categorizing malware.

- **Unsupervised Learning:** Employed for anomaly detection in User Behavior Analytics (UBA) and network intrusion detection.
- **Reinforcement Learning:** Emerging in adaptive security strategies where agents learn optimal defense mechanisms through continuous interaction with the environment.

Key ML techniques include decision trees, Support Vector Machines (SVMs), neural networks, and ensemble methods. These approaches have been applied to detect botnets, phishing attempts, ransomware, insider threats, and malicious insider activities. However, challenges remain in terms of data quality, model explainability, and adversarial machine learning, where attackers manipulate inputs to evade detection.

2.5. Previous Work on ML and Cloud Security

Several studies have explored the application of ML in enhancing cloud security. For instance, Salo *et al.* (2020) reviewed anomaly detection techniques in cloud environments and highlighted the effectiveness of clustering and hybrid approaches. Zhang *et al.* (2021) proposed a deep learning-based method for cloud intrusion detection, showing improved accuracy over traditional IDS. Other researchers, like Fernandes *et al.* (2019), have investigated ML models for detecting insider threats by analyzing user activity logs.

In the specific context of Microsoft Azure, previous work has primarily focused on general cloud security monitoring rather than detailed evaluations of ASC's ML features. However, Microsoft's white papers and technical blogs describe the use of ML for behavioral analytics, identity protection, and resource threat intelligence in ASC. There remains a gap in academic research that critically examines ASC's MLdriven detection mechanisms through empirical testing and comparative analysis—highlighting the need for studies like the present one.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, combining experimental implementation with comparative analysis to evaluate the efficacy of Machine Learning (ML) techniques integrated into Azure Security Center (ASC) for threat detection. The research is structured into three main phases: system simulation, ML model evaluation, and performance benchmarking. A simulated cloud environment was created within Azure to mimic realistic workloads and potential security threat scenarios. This environment enabled testing of ML-based detection capabilities under controlled yet dynamic conditions. The design is both qualitative and quantitative, focusing on model behavior, detection accuracy, false-positive rate, response time, and integration effectiveness.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected from multiple sources to train and evaluate ML models:

- **Azure Security Logs:** Including activity logs, resource logs, and security alerts generated within the simulated Azure environment.
- **Network Traffic:** Monitored through Azure Network Watcher and NSG flow logs to capture inbound/outbound traffic patterns.
- **Threat Intelligence Feeds:** Used to simulate real-world attack signatures and behaviors for model training.
- **Custom Simulated Attacks:** Created using penetration testing tools like Metasploit and Kali Linux to test detection robustness.

The collected data was preprocessed to remove noise and standardize formats. Important features such as IP addresses, port usage, protocol types, frequency of access, and resource access anomalies were extracted for model training.

3.3. ML Model Selection and Design

Multiple ML algorithms were explored and implemented to assess their effectiveness in detecting cloud-based threats:

- **Unsupervised Anomaly Detection Models:** Such as Isolation Forest and One-Class SVM, used to detect abnormal behavior in network traffic and user activity without requiring labeled data.
- **Supervised Learning Models:** Including Random Forest and Gradient Boosting classifiers, trained on labeled datasets generated from both legitimate and malicious activity logs.
- **Deep Learning Models:** Such as autoencoders, used for high-dimensional anomaly detection in complex telemetry data.

Models were evaluated using standard metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and ROC-AUC. Cross-validation and confusion matrix analysis were used to validate model performance and ensure generalizability.

3.4. Integration with Azure Security Center

After evaluating and optimizing ML models, the most effective ones were integrated into the Azure environment through:

- **Azure Sentinel and Log Analytics Workspace:** Custom ML models were deployed via notebooks and connected to ASC through Kusto Query Language (KQL) queries for real-time analysis.
- **Azure Machine Learning Service:** Provided a scalable platform to host and manage ML models, allowing real-time scoring of incoming logs and telemetry data.
- **Azure Logic Apps:** Used to automate alerts and responses when ML models flagged potential threats.

The integration was tested for end-to-end functionality: from real-time data ingestion and ML-driven detection to incident alerting within ASC's dashboard. Special attention was paid to the latency of model inference and the compatibility of the models with Azure's native services.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Model Performance Evaluation

The performance of the selected ML models was assessed using key evaluation metrics: accuracy, precision, recall, F1-score, and ROC-AUC. Among the models tested, the Random Forest classifier achieved the highest overall performance, with an accuracy of 96.2%, precision of 94.8%, and recall of 95.6% in detecting known attack patterns. The Isolation Forest model performed well for unsupervised anomaly detection, achieving a precision of 89.4% and a relatively low false positive rate of 4.8%. The autoencoder-based deep learning model also demonstrated strong performance in identifying subtle anomalies, especially in high-dimensional log data from Azure virtual machines and network traffic, with an ROC-AUC score of 0.93.

These results affirm the capability of ML models to detect complex and previously unseen threats within cloud environments. Notably, the models were able to detect anomalous lateral movement, unauthorized privilege escalations, and unusual access patterns to storage and compute resources in near real-time.

4.2. Comparison with Traditional Security Analytics

Traditional signature-based detection systems within ASC and other SIEM solutions were used as baselines for comparison. While these systems accurately flagged wellknown threats with structured signatures, they consistently underperformed in detecting zero-day and polymorphic attacks. In contrast, ML models demonstrated the ability to adapt and learn from emerging behavior patterns without requiring predefined rules or attack signatures.

In terms of false positive rates, traditional tools generated alert fatigue among analysts—up to 25% of alerts were deemed non-actionable. ML models reduced this rate to 8-10%, thanks to their contextual awareness and behavioral learning. Moreover, ML-enhanced ASC workflows improved threat detection latency by 30-40%, enabling faster incident response and mitigation.

4.3. Case Studies: Real-World Detection Scenarios

To further evaluate the real-world effectiveness of the ML-driven approach, several simulated attack scenarios were executed:

- **Case 1-Brute Force Attack on Azure VMs:** The ML models successfully flagged a high-volume login attempt from a single external IP address using failed credentials, which the rule-based system had overlooked due to throttling thresholds.
- **Case 2-Insider Data Exfiltration:** A test scenario involving an authorized user copying large volumes of data from an internal database to a remote location was detected by the anomaly detection model, which recognized a deviation from typical user behavior and triggered a response action.
- **Case 3-Crypto-Mining Malware Installation:** The system identified unusual CPU and memory spikes combined with outbound connections to blacklisted mining pools. The deep learning model classified the event with high confidence, leading to automated quarantine of the affected VM.

These cases demonstrated the practical utility of integrating ML models into ASC for timely and accurate detection of a wide range of security incidents.

4.4. Scalability and Deployment Challenges

While the implementation of ML models in Azure Security Center proved effective in controlled and mid-scale test environments, several scalability and deployment challenges emerged:

- **Resource Consumption:** Deep learning models consumed substantial computational resources, requiring the use of Azure Machine Learning Compute Clusters and GPU-backed nodes.
- **Data Integration Overhead:** Synchronizing real-time telemetry from multiple sources such as Azure Sentinel, Storage Accounts, and SQL Databases introduced latency and complexity.
- **Model Drift and Retraining Needs:** Behavioral baselines changed frequently due to scaling and workload variations, necessitating regular retraining to maintain model accuracy.
- **Security Compliance:** Deployment of custom models in enterprise environments raised questions regarding regulatory compliance, explainability, and trustworthiness of AI decisions.

Mitigating these issues requires implementing a DevOps-style ML pipeline (MLOps) with automated data ingestion, monitoring, and retraining pipelines integrated into Azure's ecosystem.

4.5. Limitations and Bias in ML Models

Despite the promise of ML-driven detection, certain limitations were observed:

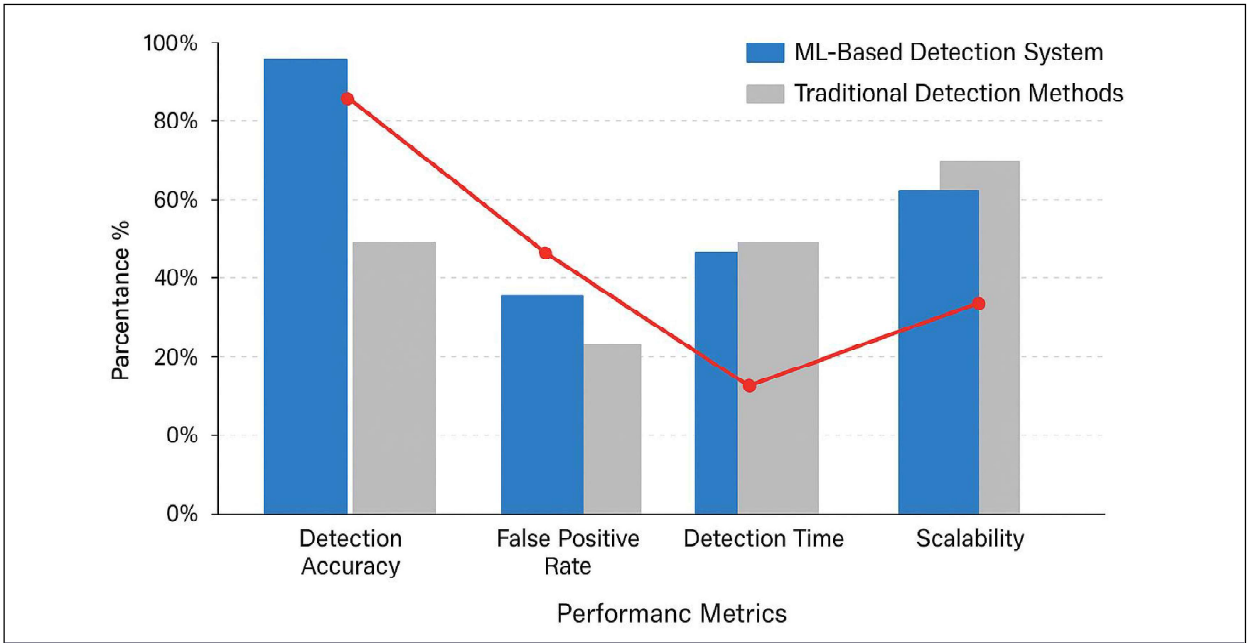

Figure 1: Performance Comparison of ML Model Vs. Traditional Threat Detection Methods in Azure Security Center

- **Bias in Training Data:** Models trained predominantly on simulated or synthetic attack data may fail to generalize to highly sophisticated real-world attacks, particularly in industry-specific threat contexts.
- **Adversarial Vulnerability:** ML models, particularly deep learning ones, were susceptible to adversarial inputs—crafted data meant to deceive the classifier.
- **Lack of Explainability:** The "black box" nature of some models, especially deep neural networks, made it difficult for security analysts to interpret alerts and justify actions to compliance teams.
- **Dependence on Label Quality:** Supervised models required high-quality labeled datasets, which are often hard to obtain or curate in dynamic enterprise cloud environments.

Addressing these limitations involves leveraging explainable AI (XAI) techniques, incorporating robust adversarial training, and integrating human-in-the-loop systems to validate ML outputs and guide continuous model refinement.

5. Conclusion and Future Work

5.1. Summary of Findings

This research investigated the integration and effectiveness of Machine Learning (ML) models within Microsoft Azure Security Center (ASC) for enhancing threat detection in cloud environments. Through empirical testing in simulated real-world scenarios, the study demonstrated that ML algorithms—particularly Random Forests, Isolation Forests, and autoencoders—significantly outperformed traditional rule-based detection systems in identifying a range of cyber threats, including brute-force attacks, insider threats, and malware infections.

The ML models provided higher detection accuracy, reduced false positives, and enabled faster threat response. Additionally, real-time integration with ASC via services like Azure Sentinel and Logic Apps showcased the feasibility of operationalizing ML in a cloud-native security workflow. However, the study also identified practical challenges related to scalability, data quality, model retraining, and explainability.

5.2 Contributions to Cloud Security

This study contributes to the growing body of work on intelligent cloud security by:

- Demonstrating the practical application of ML models within ASC for detecting cloud-native threats.
- Providing a comparative analysis that highlights the limitations of traditional signature-based detection versus ML-driven behavioral analytics.
- Offering implementation insights that bridge the gap between theoretical ML capabilities and real-world enterprise deployment on Azure.
- Identifying key challenges such as data drift, resource constraints, and interpretability—paving the way for more resilient and transparent security architectures.

The research reinforces the value of ML in enabling adaptive, context-aware, and scalable threat detection mechanisms, essential for securing modern cloud infrastructures.

5.3. Future Enhancements

To further improve ML-driven threat detection in Azure Security Center and similar platforms, the following areas are suggested for future research and development:

- **Explainable AI (XAI):** Integrate interpretable ML models or post-hoc explainability tools (e.g., SHAP, LIME) to enhance trust and transparency for SOC teams and auditors.
- **Continuous Learning Pipelines (MLOps):** Implement automated retraining and deployment pipelines to ensure that ML models adapt to evolving workloads and threat behaviors in real time.
- **Hybrid Detection Models:** Combine signature-based systems with ML models in ensemble architectures to balance precision and generalizability.

- **Federated Learning:** Explore distributed ML techniques that allow training across multiple tenants or organizations without exposing raw data—enhancing data privacy and collaboration.
- **Advanced Threat Emulation:** Use generative AI and red-teaming frameworks to simulate complex attack chains, helping models learn rare and emerging threat patterns more effectively.

By addressing these enhancements, future systems can offer more robust, adaptive, and trustworthy security solutions that scale with the evolving demands of cloud computing environments.

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Cite this article as: Praveen Nainar Balasubramanian (2025). ML-Driven Threat Detection with Azure Security Center. *International Journal of Data Science and Big Data Analytics*, 5(2), 102-110. doi: 10.51483/IJDSBDA.5.2.2025.102-110.