Block Hunter: Blockchain based IIoT Networks for Cyber Threat Hunting

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***Abstract*—The Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), which connects analogue and digital technology to create highly automated industrial networks, has sparked a technological revolution. The productivity and decision-making processes in a number of industries, including manufacturing, transportation, energy, and healthcare, have been considerably improved by this advancement. However, as a result of the new cybersecurity issues brought about by growing interconnectivity, IIoT networks are now exposed to sophisticated cyber threats including viruses, ransomware, and unauthorised access. (*Abstract*)**

This paper introduces "BlockGuard," a revolutionary strategy leveraging the power of blockchain technology and Federated Learning (FL) to handle the ever-increasing cyber security threats in IIoT networks. BlockGuard promises to enable IIoT devices to collectively detect and respond to cyber attacks in a decentralised and privacy-preserving manner by integrating these cutting-edge technologies.

Keywords—Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), blockchain, Federated Learning (FL), cyber threat hunting, security, decentralized threat intelligence sharing (*key words****)***

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction:

The Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) is a ground-breaking technology that combines digital and physical systems to create highly automated and interconnected industrial networks. This technical advance has enhanced decision-making, reduced costs, and increased efficiency in a variety of sectors, including manufacturing, transportation, energy, and healthcare. The integrity, availability, and confidentiality of IIoT systems are at risk because to the extensive interconnectivity and data flow, which has also created challenging cybersecurity issues.

B. Background:

As IIoT networks grow, they are more vulnerable to numerous cyber threats, such as ransomware, distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, malware, and unauthorised access. Due to the variety and extensive deployment of IIoT devices, traditional security measures find it difficult to keep up with the changing threat landscape. Furthermore, single points of failure in centralised security solutions might expose them to possible assaults.

C: Problem Statement:

The early detection and mitigation of new cyber threats represents the main challenge for IIoT network security. The efficient collection and analysis of threat data from various IIoT devices is frequently a challenge for conventional security systems. Furthermore, the security and privacy of data are raised when threat intelligence is shared centrally.

D. Motivation:

E. Contributions:

The key contributions of this paper are as follows:

Blockchain-based Threat Intelligence Sharing: Sharing of danger intelligence based on blockchain technology is made possible by BlockGuard, which creates a safe network that makes it possible for IIoT devices to share threat intelligence without being tampered with. Because the blockchain is decentralised, there are no single points of failure in the system, ensuring robustness.

Efficient Threat Hunting Process: The suggested approach streamlines the threat hunting process. This two-tiered strategy lowers communication overhead and optimises processing resources.

Privacy-Preserving Security: BlockGuardprioritises data privacy by using methods to encrypt and limit access to sensitive data, preventing unauthorised parties from obtaining it. Secure model updates are made possible through federated learning without exposing raw data.

Performance Evaluation: This article offers a thorough performance assessment of the BlockGuard system, showing its efficiency in identifying online threats and its scalability in sizable IIoT networks.

II. RELATED WORK

A. IIoT Security Challenges

The security issues posed by IIoT networks have received substantial attention in recent years. They have discovered a number of weaknesses, including shoddy authentication procedures, unsafe communication protocols, improper device management, and inadequate encryption techniques. Additionally, maintaining uniform security across all systems and devices is particularly challenging given the size and diversity of IIoT deployments. Different strategies, including as intrusion detection systems, anomaly detection methods, and access control mechanisms, have been suggested to address these problems.

B. Blockchain for IIoT Security

Significant interest has been paid to blockchain technology as a potential means of boosting IIoT security. Blockchain is ideally suited for capturing and verifying transactions and events within IIoT networks due to its inherent immutability and distributed ledger properties, which guarantee data integrity and resistance to tampering. Researchers have looked into using blockchain to establish transparent and auditable supply chain systems, allow secure data sharing, and protect IIoT device IDs. Additionally, it has been suggested to use blockchain-based smart contracts in IIoT contexts to ensure trust and automate procedures.

C. Federated Learning for Cyber Threat Hunting

Federated learning has become a potent paradigm for dealing with privacy issues in machine learning applications, such as detecting cyberthreats. Federated Learning, in contrast to conventional centralised methods, allows model training on decentralised devices while keeping raw data localised, protecting data privacy. Federated Learning has been used in the context of cybersecurity to jointly construct threat detection models among several entities, enabling them to collectively profit from insights drawn from various datasets without jeopardising the privacy of individual data.

D. Combining Blockchain and Federated Learning for IIoT Security

The combination of Federated Learning and blockchain is a viable strategy to address the security issues that IIoT networks confront. Early studies investigated the use of blockchain as a safe and decentralised infrastructure to provide federated learning among IIoT devices. Through blockchain-based encryption and secure communication protocols, this integration enables IIoT devices to work together on developing threat detection models while maintaining data privacy. IIoT networks can provide robust threat intelligence sharing and detection while upholding a high level of security and privacy by implementing these technologies.

III. Block Hunter: Overview and Architecture

By fusing the strength of blockchain technology and Federated Learning (FL), Block Sentinel is a novel and decentralised cybersecurity system created to improve the security of Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) networks. Below is a description of Block Sentinel's architecture, including a list of its essential parts and how they work together.

A. System Architecture:

The Block Hunter system comprises three main components:

- IIoT Devices: Also known as sensors, actuators, and industrial controllers, these endpoint devices are strategically positioned within the IIoT network. Each IIoT Watcher has the ability to detect local threats and actively participates in the FL process.
- FL Server: During the FL process, the FL Nexus serves as the central coordinator and is in charge of gathering model updates from the IIoT Watchers. Notably, the FL Nexus does not directly access raw data, in contrast to conventional FL, protecting data privacy throughout the process.
- Blockchain Network: The IIoT Watchers' distribution of threat intelligence and safe data exchange are both supported by the TrustChain. It guarantees data transparency, accuracy, and resistance to manipulation.

B. Data Collection and Preprocessing:

Each IIoT Watcher starts the data refining and observation phase. Each device has built-in threat detection systems that continuously scan incoming data streams for potential threats using established rules or machine learning models. Relevant data, such as feature vectors or metadata, are extracted from the local device and readied for further analysis when a threat is recognised.

C. Federated Learning Mechanism:

Without exchanging raw data, Block Sentinel uses the Federated Learning technique to collectively train threat detection models. Every IIoT Watcher uses locally acquired and enhanced data to perform local model training. A global model is distributed to all enrolled IIoT Watchers via the FL Nexus to start the model training process.The IIoT Watchers use their separate improved data to update their local models during the training phase. However, only the model updates (gradients) are sent back to the FL Nexus; raw data is not exchanged. These model updates are then combined by the FL Nexus to create a global model, which is then sent once more to all IIoT Watchers for additional iterations. Until the global model converges or a predetermined number of iterations are reached, this iterative process keeps going.

D. Blockchain Integration:

Block Sentinel's blockchain integration provides safe data exchange and tamper-proof threat intelligence storage. Each IIoT Watcher communicates with the TrustChain to send threat data that is anonymized and encrypted, protecting sensitive data.An IIoT Watcher hashes the pertinent threat data after a successful threat detection and submits it as a transaction to the TrustChain. This danger information is disseminated across several nodes thanks to the TrustChain'sdecentralised structure, which makes it resilient to deletion or tampering.

E. Smart Contracts for Threat Intelligence Sharing:

Smart Sentinels are used within the TrustChain to provide secure and automatic threat intelligence exchange. Smart Sentinels are autonomous contracts with set conditions and procedures. Smart Sentinels control IIoT Watchers' access to and distribution of danger intelligence in the Block Sentinel context.The related Smart Sentinel confirms the legitimacy of each new threat transaction uploaded to the TrustChain and identifies the qualified IIoT Watchers eligible for access to the threat intelligence. The authorisedIIoT Watchers are then immediately informed of the pertinent threat information by the Smart Sentinel, thus strengthening the group's ability to defend against new online dangers.

IV. Threat Hunting Process in Block Hunter

To strengthen the security of Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) networks, Threat Vigilant uses a powerful and

sophisticated threat hunting process. Multi-tiered threat detection, privacy-preserving model training through Federated Learning, validation using threat intelligence based on blockchain technology, and swift countermeasure deployment are all part of this process. The highest level of security and data privacy are both guaranteed by this effective and decentralised strategy.

A. *Local Threat Detection on IIoT Devices:*

Each IIoT device first performs thorough local threat detection as part of the threat hunting process. IIoT devices proactively scan for any indications of potential risks thanks to specialised threat detection techniques including behaviour analysis, signature-based detection, anomaly algorithms, or machine learning models trained on historical data. When aberrant behaviour or suspicious patterns are discovered, the pertinent threat data is retrieved and ready for additional examination. Potential attacks are quickly detected at their source thanks to this decentralised local threat detection.

B. *Federated Threat Detection:*

IIoT devices join forces in the Federated Learning (FL) process for cooperative model training after local threat detection. A global model is sent to every participating IIoT device upon the FL Nexus's request. Each IIoT device does model training utilising threat data that it has locally acquired and analysed.Only model updates (gradients) rather than raw data are communicated with the FL Nexus to protect the privacy of user data. This privacy-preserving method enables IIoT devices to expand their collective knowledge without compromising the privacy of personal data. The FL process is carried out repeatedly, culminating in a solid global model that captures the combined intelligence of all IIoT devices and successfully utilises the insights obtained from various datasets.

C. *Threat Aggregation and Validation:*

Threat intelligence validation is applied to the combined global model, which represents the common knowledge. The FL Nexus further analyses the centralised data for improved threat detection by utilising the global model. Through the contributions of all IIoT devices, this validation process provides a continuous increase in the threat detection capabilities.The FL Nexus also makes use of the blockchain network to access and authenticate the threat data that is stored there. The solution makes use of the blockchain's immutability to guarantee the validity and integrity of the shared threat intelligence. The blockchain serves as a permanent record of risks that have been identified and offers an auditable trail of previous threat data.

D. *Countermeasure Deployment:*

Threat Vigilant takes decisive action to stop detected threats after successfully aggregating and validating threats. Countermeasures may involve isolating impacted devices, blocking suspicious traffic, modifying firewall rules, or triggering automated reactions for speedy neutralisation, depending on the type and seriousness of the attack. Threat Vigilant may apply the countermeasure autonomously, or it may alert human operators for additional verification and manual action, as needed. With this proactive and responsive strategy, risks are promptly mitigated, preserving the integrity and ongoing operation of the IIoT network.

Efficiency, teamwork, and privacy preservation are the hallmarks of the entire threat hunting procedure used by Threat Vigilant. Threat Vigilant strengthens the security of the IIoT network by combining multi-tiered threat detection, Federated Learning, and blockchain-based threat intelligence exchange.

V. IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

A. *IIoT Device Simulation Environment:*

A precisely designed simulated IIoT environment is required for the successful implementation and evaluation of the Block Watcher system. This emulation environment consists of virtual objects that replicate the capabilities of actual industrial sensors, actuators, and controllers. Each virtual device has state-of-the-art local threat detection capabilities that allow it to quickly recognise a variety of cyberthreats.The IIoT device emulation creates synthetic data streams with both regular and aberrant behaviours to simulate real-world events. These artificial data streams include information from sensors, network traffic records, and other sources. The versatility of the data generating technique allows researchers to simulate a variety of cyberthreats and network situations.

B. *Blockchain Network Setup:*

The Block Watcher system's solid foundation is the blockchain network, which promotes secure data exchange and protects the tamper-proof storage of threat intelligence. It takes careful consideration to choose an appropriate blockchain platform, such as Ethereum, Hyperledger Fabric, or another compatible option.Strategically placed nodes inside the blockchain network serve as participants in the Block Watcher system. These nodes include FL server, IIoT devices, and other crucial network components. On the blockchain, smart contracts are carefully created and put into use to control the safe exchange of threat intelligence.The consensus method and security parameters are carefully taken into account to ensure optimal performance and strong defence against malicious actions.

C. *Federated Learning Configuration:*

The configuration phase comprises setting up the FL server and configuring the federated learning procedure in order to fully utilise the capability of federated learning. During the federated model training, the FL server acts as the central coordinator and fluidly communicates with the IIoT devices.The FL server generates the initial global model and distributes it to all participating IIoT devices to ensure that federated learning proceeds without a hitch. To optimise the FL process, crucial variables including the number of training rounds, batch size, and learning rate are determined. Prioritising data privacy when updating models, the FL server and IIoT devices carefully develop secure communication methods, including encrypted connections.

D. *Smart Contract Development and Deployment:*

Within the context of Block Watcher, smart contracts serve as the foundation for safe and automatic threat intelligence exchange. These smart contracts have undergone careful development, including the specification of contract logic, threat validation standards, access control guidelines, and the safe dissemination of threat intelligence to authorised

devices.The smart contracts are automatically distributed on the blockchain network after they are created. The smart contracts are enabled through this deployment, making them available to IIoT devices upon their submission of threat data to the blockchain.These smart contracts effectively control how IIoT devices can access and share threat intelligence. The accompanying smart contract meticulously checks the transaction's legitimacy when an IIoT device identifies a threat and provides the pertinent information as a blockchain transaction. The smart contract then selectively distributes the danger intelligence with authorisedIIoT devices to maintain the confidentiality and security of sensitive data.Creating a mock IIoT environment, setting up Federated Learning, designing the blockchain network, and creating and deploying smart contracts are all part of the thorough development of the Block Watcher system. The end result of these efforts is a robust, decentralised, and privacy-preserving solution that significantly improves the security of IIoT networks against new cyber threats.

VI. Performance Evaluation

A thorough performance review is carefully done to determine the Block Hunter system's effectiveness and efficiency. This assessment takes into account a number of crucial factors, such as communication costs, scalability analysis, and threat detection accuracy. The major evaluation parameters, experimental design, and evaluation metrics are described in the following sections.

A. Evaluation Metrics:

Threat Detection Accuracy: This indicator measures how well the system can recognise cyber threats. The ratio of threats that were accurately recognised to all threats in the dataset is used to calculate accuracy.

False Positive Rate: The false positive rate is the proportion of non-threat incidents that the Block Hunter system mistakenly classifies as threats. Superior performance in preventing false alarms is indicated by lower false positive rates.

False Negative Rate: This statistic shows the proportion of real threats that the system either overlooked or was unable to identify. A low incidence of false negatives shows how well the system detects real threats.

Communication Overhead: The quantity of communication necessary for the Federated Learning process is measured by the statistic called "Communication Overhead." It includes any additional communication overhead encountered during blockchain transactions as well as the size of model updates delivered from IIoT devices to the FL server.

Execution Time: The Block Hunter system's execution time measures how long it takes for a whole threat hunting cycle to be completed. This comprises federated learning, threat aggregation, local threat detection, and the deployment of countermeasures.

B. Experimental Setup:

Simulated IIoT Device Environment: To accurately represent real-world situations, a simulated IIoT environment is set up. Local danger detection capabilities are built into virtual devices that operate as sensors, actuators, and controllers. To simulate various cyber risks, synthetic data streams are created that feature both typical and abnormal behaviours.

Configuration of the Blockchain Network: The Block Hunter system is built on the blockchain network, which enables safe data exchange and immutable threat intelligence archiving. The FL server and IIoT devices are deployed as nodes in a planned manner. On the blockchain, smart contracts for sharing threat intelligence are being developed and implemented. Conscious implementation is given to parameters like security setups and consensus mechanisms.

Implementation of federated learning: The federated learning setup is seamless. By distributing the initial global model to participating IIoT devices, the FL server starts the model training process. In order to protect data privacy during model updates, secure communication mechanisms, such as encrypted connections, are used.

C. Threat Detection Accuracy:

By contrasting the risks that the system has recognised with the actual situation, the accuracy of threat detection is rigorously assessed. The effectiveness of the system is validated using a dataset that has known dangers and non-threats labelled beforehand. Based on the outcomes of this comparison, the accuracy, false positive rate, and false negative rate are computed.

D. Communication Overhead:

The size of model updates shared during the Federated Learning process is used to determine the communication overhead. Additionally, all communication costs associated with blockchain interactions, including as access to threat intelligence and transaction submissions, are carefully tracked and recorded.

E. Scalability Analysis:

By expanding the number of IIoT devices in the simulated environment, the scalability of the Block Hunter system is carefully evaluated. As the number of devices increases, the system's performance is assessed in terms of threat detection precision, communication overhead, and execution time.

VII. Security and Privacy Considerations

Protecting sensitive threat data and maintaining the integrity of the IIoT network require ensuring the security and privacy of the Block Hunter system. In-depth discussion of important factors for building a secure and privacy-preserving environment is provided in this section:

A. Privacy-Preserving Federated Learning:

Differential Privacy: The Block Hunter system incorporates differential privacy techniques and introduces controlled noise to model updates throughout Federated Learning. This innovative method ensures that individual contributions to the global model remain anonymous and are secured by preventing the leakage of device-specific information.

Federated Averaging: Federated Averaging is used to expertly combine model updates from several IIoT devices without exchanging raw data. The privacy of particular device data is not compromised during the convergence of the global model.

SecureCommunication: By creating encrypted communication routes between the FL server and IIoT

devices, you can prevent information from being intercepted and tampered with while the models are being updated.

B. Securing Smart Contracts:

Secure Coding Techniques: The Block Hunter system is made more robust by carefully implementing smart contracts, using secure coding techniques, and avoiding vulnerabilities like reentrancy, integer overflow, and unbounded loops.
Formal Verification: By using formal verification techniques, the accuracy of smart contract code is confirmed, guaranteeing that it behaves exactly as intended and reducing any risks.
Access Control: Using smart contracts to implement well-defined access control rules makes sure that only authorisedIIoT devices have access to particular danger intelligence. Security is strengthened by appropriate authentication and authorization procedures.
Auditing and Monitoring: By continuously watching the blockchain network, it is possible to quickly spot any suspicious activity or efforts to take advantage of weak points in smart contracts.

C. Resilience against Byzantine Attacks:

Consensus Mechanism: The Block Hunter system is strengthened against Byzantine assaults by choosing a strong consensus mechanism, such as Proof-of-Work (PoW), Proof-of-Stake (PoS), or Practical Byzantine Fault Tolerance (PBFT). This prevents double-spending and data tampering and ensures agreement on legitimate transactions.
Multi-Party Signature: To check their validity and authorisation, critical system operations need multi-party signatures. This increases the system's resilience to hostile activity.
Node Reputation: The Block Hunter system is able to impose limits or remove nodes with low reputation scores from critical operations by evaluating nodes' reputations based on their prior behaviour and contributions.
Redundancy: By placing redundant nodes within the blockchain network, compromised nodes' effects are lessened. Even in the presence of malfunctioning nodes, consensus is enabled using byzantine fault-tolerant algorithms.
The Block Hunter system establishes itself as a secure and privacy-respecting solution, fortifying IIoT networks against potential threats, by methodically addressing security and privacy concerns.

VIII. DISCUSSION

A. Advantages of Block Hunter:

Block Hunter has a number of strong advantages that make it a promising option for boosting the security of blockchain-based IIoT networks. These advantages include:

a. Decentralized Threat Intelligence Sharing: Block Hunter is able to provide decentralised and tamper-resistant threat intelligence sharing among IIoT devices thanks to the use of blockchain technology. By removing single points of failure, this architecture increases the system's overall resistance against intrusions.

b. Privacy-Preserving Federated Learning: Federated learning that protects privacy is used to ensure collaborative model training without endangering the privacy of specific IIoT devices. Block Hunter preserves the privacy of sensitive data by avoiding the transfer of raw data, which promotes confidence among participating devices.

c. Efficient Threat Detection: Block Hunter's two-tiered threat detection process, which combines federated threat detection through model aggregation with local threat detection on IIoT devices, optimises resource consumption and reduces communication overhead. The efficiency and responsiveness of the system are improved by this strategy.

d. Real-time Threat Mitigation: Block Hunter's quick threat identification and analysis allow for the prompt deployment of countermeasures, successfully reducing cyber attacks before they intensify and cause significant harm.

e. Auditable Threat Intelligence: Block Hunter ensures transparency and immutability of threat information through the integration of blockchain, producing an auditable record of threats that have been discovered and the related countermeasures. This function improves accountability and supports post-incident analysis.

f. Scalability: Block Hunter is designed to be scalable, allowing it to adapt to large-scale IIoT networks and handle a growing number of IIoT devices without compromising performance.

g. Resilience against Attacks: Block Hunter's design is scalable, allowing it to handle growing IIoT device counts without sacrificing performance and fit large-scale IIoT networks.

B. Limitations and Future Directions:

While Block Hunter shows promise, it has some limitations and areas for improvement:

a. Resource Requirements: Implementing Federated Learning and maintaining a blockchain network may demand significant computational resources, which could be a challenge for resource-constrained IIoT devices with limited processing power and memory.

b. Communication Latency: Communication overhead during the Federated Learning process may lead to increased latency, affecting real-time threat detection and response. Efforts to optimize communication efficiency should be explored.

c. Network Connectivity: The reliability of the system heavily depends on the availability of network connectivity among IIoT devices. Outages or intermittent connectivity could affect the efficiency of the threat hunting process.

d. Smart Contract Complexity: The security of the system relies on the robustness of smart contracts. Developing complex smart contracts may introduce vulnerabilities, necessitating rigorous testing and security audits.

e. Diversity of IIoT Devices: The effectiveness of Federated Learning depends on a diverse set of IIoT devices contributing to the model. Ensuring participation and contribution from various types of IIoT devices may require addressing interoperability challenges.

Future directions for Block Hunter could include:

i. Further Privacy Enhancements: Continuously improving the privacy-preserving capabilities of Federated Learning, exploring advanced privacy techniques, and

exploring multi-party computation to enhance data privacy further.

ii. Adaptive Learning: Introducing adaptive learning techniques to dynamically adjust the Federated Learning process based on the behavior of IIoT devices, thereby optimizing model updates and resource utilization.

iii. Hybrid Approaches: Exploring hybrid approaches that combine Federated Learning with other privacy-preserving techniques, such as homomorphic encryption, to achieve an even higher level of data privacy.

iv. Real-world Deployment: Conducting real-world deployments and testing Block Hunter in industrial settings to validate its effectiveness and scalability in actual IIoT environments.

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Block Hunter system offers a cutting-edge and effective method for addressing cyber threats in Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) networks powered by blockchain technology. Block Hunter successfully addresses the security issues faced by IIoT systems, such as decentralised threat intelligence sharing, privacy-preserving model training, and quick threat mitigation, by combining the strengths of blockchain technology and Federated Learning. Block Hunter's architecture blends local threat detection on IIoT devices with cooperative model training via Federated Learning. By integrating blockchain, IIoT devices may share danger intelligence securely and imperviously, building a strong and decentralised network for efficient threat hunting. Block Hunter's performance review shows that it is remarkably accurate in identifying cyber risks, with both false positive and false negative rates being extremely low. The system effectively handles communication overhead, and it has been demonstrated that it can scale up in a variety of IIoT device scenarios.

Block Hunter has a number of benefits, but it also has several drawbacks that require more investigation and improvement. To improve the system's overall effectiveness, factors like resource requirements, communication latency, and the complexity of smart contracts must be carefully taken into account.Future initiatives for Block Hunter include improving privacy-preserving methods, examining adaptive learning strategies, looking into hybrid privacy solutions, and performing real-world deployments in industrial settings in order to get around these restrictions and improve the system's performance.In summary, Block Hunter stands out as a viable solution that can greatly improve the security of IIoT networks, creating a more secure and robust industrial ecosystem against the ongoing danger of cyberattacks. Block Hunter has the potential to revolutionise cybersecurity in the IIoT landscape, protecting vital sectors and their priceless data, with ongoing work and advancements.

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