

# XDP – challenges and future work

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## ABSTRACT

XDP continues to see significant development, and is far from a finished system. However, XDP already offers rich facilities for high performance packet processing, and has seen deployment in several production systems.

In this work, we provide an overview over some of the ongoing work around XDP, and seek to start a discussion on some of the future challenges that need to be addressed to make sure the XDP ecosystem can continue to flourish.

The overview of ongoing work focuses on the XDP-related topics being discussed at the LPC networking track in Vancouver, where we provide a short overview of each topic, and refer to the talk for more details. These topics include production deployment reports, using XDP as a backend for the P4 language, zero-copy to userspace with AF\_XDP, and the use of kernel helpers to evolve the XDP feature set. We also include some performance numbers from the academic paper on XDP that we have co-authored with many of the other XDP developers.

In the forward-looking section, we discuss some future developments that we believe would be beneficial to work on going forward. These topics include NIC memory models and DMA mapping; moving SKB allocation out of drivers; the resource allocation around `ndo_xdp_xmit`; whether it is still realistic to aim for full support of all XDP features in all drivers; and the possibility for adding an XDP egress hook. We are hoping to solicit feedback on these from the wider community during and after LPC.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We have recently finished writing an academic paper on XDP [7], which includes a description of the architecture, and performance comparison with DPDK. As part of that work, we have discussed several areas of potential improvements to XDP as a whole. The purpose of this paper, and the associated talk, is to broaden that discussion to the wider community, and to solicit feedback on some of the future directions we see as beneficial for XDP.

To provide some context to the discussion of future directions, we first look at some of the work that is currently ongoing. We do this in the form of an overview of the other XDP-related talk and topics that will be covered at the networking track at LPC '18. Those topics will not be covered in detail in this work, but we provide a

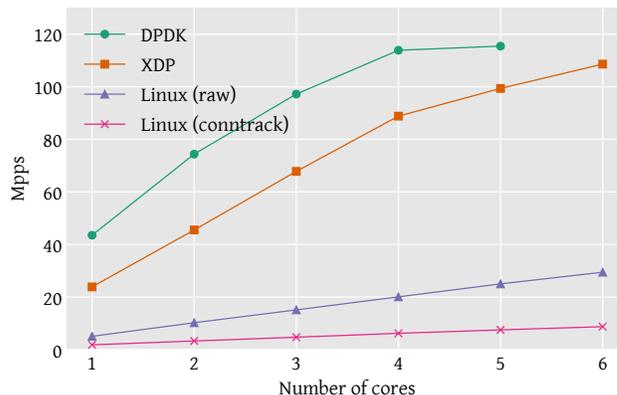


Figure 1: Packet drop performance. DPDK uses one core for control tasks, so only 5 are available for packet processing.

short summary of each, with references to the other talks. This is the topic of Section 2.

Following this, we discuss some possible future developments that we believe will be beneficial to XDP's development going forward. This is the topic of Section 3, and takes the form of a short summary of each development, which should be seen more as an invitation to provide feedback than a finished roadmap.

## 2 CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AROUND XDP

Even though XDP is still being very actively developed (as the large number of talks at LPC shows), we have already seen examples of it being successfully deployed in production environments. High-profile examples include Cloudflare's use for DDOS protection [3], and Facebook's Katran load balancer [5]. There are also XDP plugins for Suricata [2], Open vSwitch [10], and even DPDK [14].

There are two other talks at LPC that cover Facebook's production use of XDP in more detail [4, 9].

In this section we seek to give an overview of the current state of XDP and some of the ongoing development that is being presented at LPC.

### 2.1 The state of XDP performance

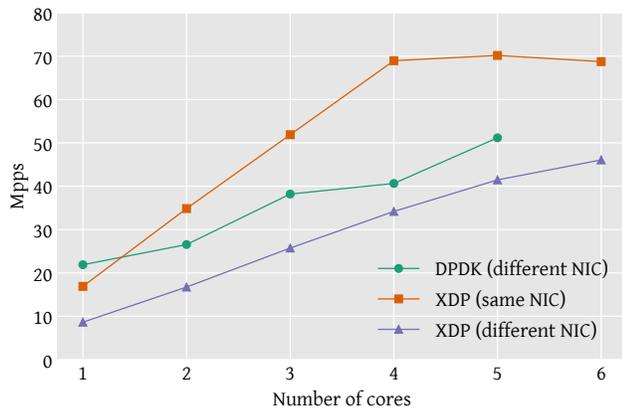
XDP has been deliberately designed to achieve maximum packet processing performance. This is achieved by combining several techniques, such as avoiding memory allocations in the processing path, and running the processing at the earliest possible time after packets are received from the hardware. The results of these efforts is the impressive performance shown in Figures 1 and 2 (both from the XDP paper [7]).

However, attaining this level of performance is not trivial, and the smallest optimisations (or conversely, small additions of overhead)

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LPC '18 Networking Track, Nov 13–14, 2018, Vancouver, British Columbia

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**Figure 2: Packet forwarding throughput. Sending and receiving on the same interface takes up more bandwidth on the same PCI port, which means we hit the PCI bus limit at 70 Mpps.**

can have a large impact. As an example, the Mellanox driver we used for our tests (mlx5), performs 10 non-inlined function calls for every packet. Our tests show that the overhead of *just the function calls* corresponds to an additional 9 Mpps of performance on a single core.

Because of this sensitivity to overhead, it is imperative that thorough performance evaluations of new features are performed to avoid regressions, and a guiding principle should be that new features must not negatively affect baseline XDP performance. One optimisation technique that can be used to achieve this is to move as many checks as possible to setup time rather than execution time.

## 2.2 XDP as a building block

XDP offers low-level functionality on which higher level systems can be built. As such, it is clear that there is substantial room for other open source projects to build upon the XDP architecture, and only time will tell what it will be used for. In our view, this also means that viewing XDP (and eBPF) as a competitor to something like P4 is the wrong attitude. Rather, XDP can be one backend among many for P4, as is already possible with the XDP P4 compiler backend that will also be discussed at LPC [11].

Another direction we hope to see XDP take, is as an accelerator for forwarding packets into virtual machines. There’s already support for redirecting packets directly to the tuntap driver from XDP, with a single packet copy but bypassing the host OS stack. With the AF\_XDP zero-copy approach, it may be possible to accelerate this even further.

## 2.3 Zero-copy to userspace with AF\_XDP

A major source of speedup in both XDP and other high-performance packet processing frameworks, is avoiding the overhead of traversing the userspace to kernel boundary. In XDP this is done by moving the processing into the kernel which is possible thanks to the eBPF virtual machine and associated infrastructure. This works really well for raw packet processing that can be implemented directly

as an eBPF program. However, sometimes packets do need to go out to userspace applications, and avoiding overhead in this case is important as well. The XDP solution to this problem is AF\_XDP, which is covered in two separate LPC talks [8, 12].

The main benefit of AF\_XDP is that it uses the existing XDP facilities to steer packets to either AF\_XDP or the regular network stack. This avoids taking over the network device entirely, unlike kernel bypass solutions where control of the entire networking device is passed to userspace. This also means that the packet verdict can be decided before the packet leaves the kernel, rather than forcing the application to reinject frames back into network stack as described in [3].

AF\_XDP has both copy and zero-copy modes, but the userspace API is the same, and uses Single Producer Single Consumer queues for communication between kernel and userspace. In both cases, userspace provides a chunk of pre-allocated memory that is used for raw frame delivery. In copy mode, the XDP subsystem copies frames into this memory, and drivers only need to support XDP\_REDIRECT. In zero-copy mode, the userspace-provided memory is used directly for DMA delivery; supporting this requires more driver changes, and is currently only supported by the i40e driver.

The zero-copy mode is enabled on a per RX-ring basis, which again avoids taking over the entire NIC. This also means that NIC hardware filters can be used for RX-queue steering, to avoid giving the AF\_XDP userspace application memory access to packets that are unrelated to its function. In zero-copy mode, the XDP\_PASS action will allocate a new memory area and copy the raw frame contents before delivering the frame to the networking stack. This is done to avoid crashing the kernel if a userspace application modifies the packet data while the kernel is parsing it.

## 2.4 Evolving XDP using helpers

One way to view XDP is as a “software offload”, which can accelerate critical parts of the packet processing path, while allowing the regular network stack to handle the rest. This is possible because of the ability to mix custom high-speed packet processing with the features already implemented in the kernel. The networking stack already contains high-quality implementations of features such as routing and bridging, which an XDP program can cherry-pick among to perform its tasks without incurring the overhead of the full networking stack. An example of this approach is the routing lookup helper added by David Ahern, which he covers in a separate talk [1].

We foresee that the addition of additional kernel helpers as an important avenue for extending the functionality of XDP. In many cases, functionality can be implemented by a custom eBPF program using maps; however, exposing existing kernel functionality has the advantage of retaining the existing configuration and management interface of the kernel. In addition, this makes it possible to let the regular networking stack handle tricky edge cases, allowing the XDP program to focus on accelerating the fast path. We believe this is a killer feature of XDP, and we wish to encourage people to think about adding (or requesting!) such helpers where it makes sense for their use case.

### 3 FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR XDP

While the previous section covered ongoing work related to XDP, in this section we venture a bit further into the future and look at some of the developments we believe are necessary for the XDP ecosystem to flourish in the future. As such, this section should be viewed more as a discussion paper than as a roadmap, and we hope to collect feedback on these ideas from the rest of the community.

#### 3.1 NIC memory models and DMA mapping

XDP recently (v4.18) acquired support for different memory models per driver RX-queue, via the `xdp_return_frame()` and `xdp_rxq_info_reg_mem_model()` APIs.

This allows drivers to innovate with new memory models, but also makes it possible to generalise and share common code to handle memory recycle schemes for drivers. The `page_pool` is one example of such common code. We want to see more drivers need to use `page_pool`, and work on `page_pool` is needed, especially in the area of keeping frames DMA mapped.

We plan to extend the `xdp_return_frame` API with a bulking option, because it can naturally do bulking at DMA-TX completion, and the `page_pool` needs this to handle a known weakness (of concurrent CPUs returning frames to the same RX-queue).

On Intel machines the DMA map/unmap/sync operations are very lightweight, due the coherency model; however, this might not be true for other architectures. As XDP has been very Intel focused, the DMA overhead has not received much attention thus far. However, the Spectre-V2 mitigation efforts has changed this picture, and will force us to address the DMA overhead issues even on Intel machines, due to the indirect call API employed by this subsystem.

#### 3.2 Moving SKB allocation out of device drivers

One important performance optimisation made possible by XDP\_REDIRECT, is the ability to offload packet processing to another CPU, by redirecting with a CPU map. This also moves the SKB creation to the target CPU, where it is created based on the `xdp_frame` data. This frees up the CPU running the XDP program to process more packets without the deep calls into the networking stack. An example application that benefits from this is DDoS protection in XDP, which we tested in the XDP paper, and which showed impressive results (see Figure 3).

We believe it is possible to generalise the mechanism that defers SKB creation, to the point where this can be moved out of drivers entirely. The main thing missing before we can achieve this, is a way to transfer the information from different driver offloads (e.g., checksums, RX hashing, HW-marking) in a vendor neutral and generic way. We have high hopes that the metadata work also presented at LPC [13] will be a way to achieve this.

#### 3.3 Decoupling `ndo_xdp_xmit` resource allocation from XDP loading

When XDP redirects a frame out another `net_device`, then the `ndo_xdp_xmit()` function of that device's driver is called. However, enabling `ndo_xdp_xmit()` means a hardware TX queue needs to be allocated per CPU core, which ties up resources, and so drivers don't enable this by default. The problem is that there is currently no

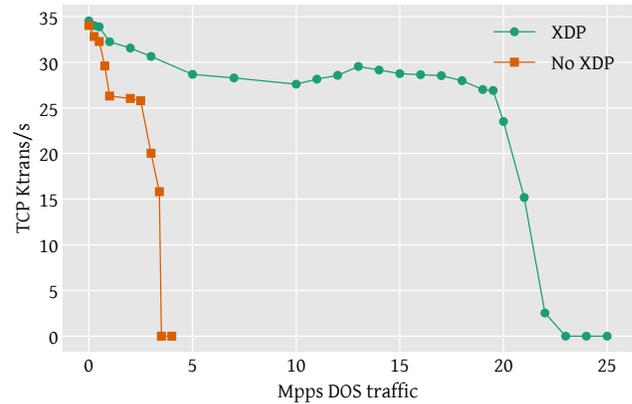


Figure 3: DDoS protection performance. Number of TCP transactions per second as the level of attack traffic directed at the server increases.

interface to enable `ndo_xdp_xmit()` by itself; rather, it is enabled when an XDP program is loaded. This leads to the current situation where a dummy XDP program needs to be loaded on the device that is the target of an XDP redirect. This needs to be done even if that device doesn't need to do any XDP ingress processing itself, and if no XDP program is loaded on the target device, packets will just be dropped silently.

Apart from being a bad user interface, this coupling of TX queue allocation to XDP program loading is a waste of resources in the case where a device is *not* going to be a target of redirects. In the worst case this can make it impossible to use XDP on systems with many cores (for instance, it was discovered that the `ixgbe` driver cannot load XDP on systems with more than 96 CPU cores). But even on smaller systems, reserving hardware queues that are not really needed is wasteful. For this reason, we propose that the enabling `ndo_xdp_xmit()` is decoupled from the loading of XDP programs, and that a better trigger mechanism be implemented. An obvious choice is to enable the functionality when a device is first inserted into a `DEVMAP` to be used in `XDP_REDIRECT`, although this leaves the question of what to do with the non-map variant of `REDIRECT`.

#### 3.4 Partial XDP support in drivers

Not all drivers that support loading XDP programs actually support the full feature set, and there is currently no way for userspace to discover what a device actually supports. For instance, if a driver doesn't support `XDP_REDIRECT`, then it can only be detected at runtime by observing a `WARN_ONCE` kernel log message; and afterwards packets are silently dropped. This is problematic for applications that want to use XDP where it is available, but fall back to another mechanism when it is not. Suricata is an example of an application that has experienced this problem.

Originally, the decision not to expose XDP feature bits was taken based on the assumption that all drivers would implement the full feature set. However, the question is if this is still a realistic goal, given that there are still only three hardware drivers that implement `XDP_REDIRECT`, and that some users are happy with

just XDP\_DROP and XDP\_TX support. For this reason, we would like to bring up this discussion again.

### 3.5 XDP egress hook

A limitation of the current design of XDP is that programs get no feedback if a redirect to another device fails. Instead, the packet is just silently dropped, and the only way to see why is by attaching to the right tracepoint. This is especially problematic when forwarding packets from a fast device to a slower one. And the way XDP\_REDIRECT is implemented, there is no way for the XDP program to gain insight into the state of the device being forwarded to.

We believe that a possible fix for this is to add another eBPF hook at packet egress from a device, i.e., at the latest possible time before a packet is put into the device TX ring. At this point, it is possible for the driver to supply information about the current state of the TX ring buffer (such as free space), which the eBPF program can react appropriately to, for example by signaling ingress XDP programs to send traffic another way if the TX ring is full, or by implementing AQM-like reactions when TX ring pressure increases.

A crazy idea is to allow this egress eBPF hook to perform a new XDP action if it sees the TX ring is full, such as redirecting the frame out another interface. Allowing the full XDP feature set of modifying and truncating packet length would also make it possible to implement a signaling protocol like that described in [6].

## 4 CONCLUSION

We have provided an overview of the current XDP-related work being discussed at LPC '18, which includes production deployment reports, using XDP as a backend for the P4 language, zero-copy to userspace with AF\_XDP, and the use of kernel helpers to evolve the XDP feature set. We have also discussed some future directions for XDP development which we believe will be beneficial to pursue. These include NIC memory models and DMA mapping; moving SKB allocation out of drivers; the resource allocation around `ndo_xdp_xmit`; whether it is still realistic to aim for full support of all XDP features in all drivers; and the possibility for adding an XDP egress hook.

It is our hope that this can serve as a useful overview, and as a catalyst for discussion of the longer-term future for the XDP system as a whole.

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