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TCP vs UDP

Rimmy chhabra [1], Piyush kumar[2], Mohit kumar[3]

B.Tech Student, Department of CSE, Quantum University, Roorkee, India.Assistant Professor, Department of CSE, Quantum University, Roorkee, India

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Abstract - The Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and User Datagram Protocol (UDP) constitute the two foundational pillars of the internet's transport layer, codified in IETF RFC 793 and RFC 768 respectively. Despite being standardized over four decades ago, both protocols remain central to modern networked applications ranging from cloud-scale distributed systems and financial trading infrastructure to real-time multimedia delivery and Internet of Things (IoT) deployments. Yet the choice between them is frequently misunderstood, made by convention rather than careful analysis, or deferred to framework defaults — leading to suboptimal system performance, unnecessary latency, or fragile reliability guarantees.

This paper presents a rigorous, multi-dimensional comparative analysis of TCP and UDP, examining them through five complementary lenses: (1) formal protocol architecture and state-machine semantics, (2) mathematical performance models grounded in queuing theory and information theory, (3) empirical benchmarking under diverse network conditions using a controlled testbed, (4) security threat landscape and known attack vectors, and (5) relevance to next-generation protocols including QUIC, MPTCP, DCCP, and SCTP.

Our experimental results demonstrate that TCP throughput degrades by up to 94% at 10% packet loss compared to near-linear degradation for UDP, while UDP's first-packet latency advantage ranges from 23% to 150% depending on connection frequency and RTT. We further quantify the head-of-line blocking penalty in TCP multiplexing environments, derive closed-form approximations for optimal buffer sizing, and present a structured decision framework mapping application requirements to protocol selection criteria.

This work aims to serve as a definitive reference for network engineers, systems architects, and researchers navigating protocol selection in an era of increasingly diverse application requirements and rapidly evolving transport-layer standards.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Motivation

The modern internet is built on a layered protocol architecture that separates concerns between network layers. At the transport layer — responsible for end-to-end data delivery between application processes — two protocols have dominated since the early 1980s: the Transmission Control Protocol (TCP, RFC 793, 1981) and the User Datagram Protocol (UDP, RFC 768, 1980). Together, they carry virtually all application traffic on the internet today, from a simple DNS lookup to a petabyte-scale data center replication job.

The internet has changed dramatically since these protocols were designed. Bandwidth has grown from kilobits to terabits per second. Wireless networks introduce loss rates and variability inconceivable on the original ARPANET. Cloud computing, microservices, and streaming media have created application profiles that stress both protocols in ways their original authors did not anticipate. In this context, the choice of transport protocol is no longer a footnote in system design — it is a foundational architectural decision with measurable consequences for latency, throughput, reliability, and cost.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This paper is organized around five primary research questions:

1. Under what quantitative network conditions does TCP's reliability overhead become a performance bottleneck?
2. How does UDP's absence of reliability mechanisms affect application-level goodput in lossy or high-RTT environments?
3. What are the security implications of each protocol, and how do they influence protocol selection in adversarial environments?
4. How do modern application-layer and transport-layer innovations (QUIC, MPTCP, SCTP) address the limitations of both TCP and UDP?
5. Can a formal, evidence-based decision framework be constructed to guide protocol selection across diverse application classes?

1.3 Contributions

The primary contributions of this paper are:

- A formal mathematical treatment of TCP and UDP performance, including closed-form throughput and latency bounds.
- A controlled empirical study with 100-trial averages across 45 distinct network configurations, producing statistically significant performance data.
- A comprehensive security analysis covering 12 distinct attack vectors specific to each protocol.
- An application taxonomy mapping 20+ real-world application classes to protocol selection criteria.
- A structured decision framework and scoring rubric for protocol selection.

1.4 Paper Organization

Section 2 traces the historical development of both protocols. Sections 3 covers protocol architecture in detail. Section 4 develops formal performance models. Sections 5 and 6 present the experimental methodology and results. Section 7 analyzes the security landscape. Section 8 examines real-world application analysis. Section 9 surveys next-generation protocols. Section 10 presents the decision framework. Sections 11 and 12 discuss limitations and conclude.

2. Historical Context and Standardization

The origins of TCP and UDP trace back to the DARPA-funded ARPANET project and the foundational work of Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn. Their 1974 paper, 'A Protocol for Packet Network Intercommunication,' introduced the concept of a universal transmission protocol — what would evolve into TCP/IP. The original design bundled both reliability and addressing into a single protocol. It was Jon Postel who later decomposed this into TCP (reliability, ordering, flow control) and IP (routing, addressing), with UDP added as a minimal service for applications that did not need TCP's overhead.

TCP was standardized as RFC 793 in September 1981, incorporating Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn's earlier work. UDP was standardized as RFC 768 in August 1980, authored by Jon Postel. These documents remain foundational references. Subsequent extensions have enriched TCP significantly: RFC 1122 clarified host requirements, RFC 2581 formalized congestion control algorithms, RFC 2018 introduced Selective Acknowledgement (SACK), RFC 3168 added Explicit Congestion Notification (ECN), and RFC 7413 introduced TCP Fast Open (TFO).

UDP's specification has remained largely unchanged — its 768-byte RFC is one of the shortest and simplest in the IETF catalog. This simplicity is a feature: it has made UDP the ideal substrate for application-layer innovation, from DNS (RFC 1035) to RTP (RFC 3550) to the modern QUIC protocol (RFC 9000).

Milestone	TCP	UDP
Original RFC	RFC 793 (Sept 1981)	RFC 768 (Aug 1980)
Authors	Jon Postel (DARPA/ISI)	Jon Postel (DARPA/ISI)
Header Size	20 bytes minimum	8 bytes fixed
Key Extensions	SACK (RFC 2018), ECN (RFC 3168), TFO (RFC 7413)	None (minimal by design)
Modern Successors	MPTCP (RFC 8684), TCP BBR	QUIC (RFC 9000), DCCP (RFC 4340)
Current Status	Active, widely extended	Active, intentionally minimal

Table 2.1 — Historical development milestones for TCP and UDP

3. Protocol Architecture

3.1 TCP: Architectural Deep-Dive

3.1.1 Segment Structure

The TCP segment header (Figure 3.1) consists of a mandatory 20-byte fixed portion and an optional variable-length options field (up to 40 bytes). The fixed portion contains:

- Source Port (16 bits) and Destination Port (16 bits): Together with the IP addresses, these form the 4-tuple that uniquely identifies a TCP connection.
- Sequence Number (32 bits): Identifies the byte offset of the first data byte in the segment within the byte stream. Wraps around modulo 2^32.
- Acknowledgement Number (32 bits): The sequence number of the next byte the receiver expects, implicitly acknowledging all previous bytes.
- Data Offset (4 bits): Header length in 32-bit words; minimum value is 5 (20 bytes).
- Control Flags (9 bits): NS, CWR, ECE, URG, ACK, PSH, RST, SYN, FIN — each governing a specific aspect of connection management.
- Window Size (16 bits): Advertised receive buffer size for flow control; scaled by the Window Scale option (RFC 7323) up to 2^30 bytes.
- Checksum (16 bits): One's complement checksum over a pseudo-header (source/dest IP), TCP header, and data.

- Urgent Pointer (16 bits): Offset to the end of urgent data when the URG flag is set.

> *Note: The TCP options field carries extensions such as Maximum Segment Size (MSS), Window Scale, SACK-Permitted, SACK blocks, Timestamps (RFC 7323), and TCP Fast Open cookie (RFC 7413).*

3.1.2 Connection Lifecycle and State Machine

TCP defines a rigorous finite state machine with 11 states. The nominal connection path proceeds as follows:

Connection Establishment (Three-Way Handshake):

- Client sends SYN(seq=x) — consumes 1.5 RTT minimum before data can flow.
- Server replies SYN-ACK(seq=y, ack=x+1).
- Client sends ACK(ack=y+1); connection enters ESTABLISHED on both sides.

Connection Termination (Four-Way Handshake):

- Active closer sends FIN; enters FIN_WAIT_1.
- Passive closer sends ACK; active closer enters FIN_WAIT_2.
- Passive closer sends its own FIN; enters LAST_ACK.
- Active closer sends final ACK; enters TIME_WAIT for 2*MSL (Maximum Segment Lifetime, typically 60s).

3.1.3 Reliability Mechanisms

TCP guarantees reliable, in-order delivery through a combination of positive acknowledgement with retransmission (PAR) and sequence numbering. Key mechanisms include:

- Cumulative ACKs: A single ACK acknowledges all data up to the acknowledged sequence number.
- Selective Acknowledgement (SACK, RFC 2018): Allows the receiver to acknowledge non-contiguous blocks, enabling the sender to retransmit only lost segments rather than everything after the loss.
- Fast Retransmit: Three duplicate ACKs trigger immediate retransmission without waiting for the retransmission timer.
- Retransmission Timeout (RTO): Calculated using Karn's algorithm and RTTVAR estimation (RFC 6298): RTO = SRTT + max(G, 4*RTTVAR), minimum 1 second per RFC.

3.1.4 Congestion Control Algorithms

TCP's congestion control is the primary mechanism preventing internet congestion collapse (Nagle, 1984). The canonical algorithm (RFC 5681) operates in four phases:

- Slow Start: Begin with cwnd=1 MSS; double cwnd each RTT until ssthresh is reached.
- Congestion Avoidance: Increase cwnd by 1 MSS per RTT (additive increase).
- Fast Retransmit/Fast Recovery: On triple duplicate ACK, set ssthresh=cwnd/2, retransmit lost segment, continue in Congestion Avoidance.
- On timeout: ssthresh=cwnd/2, cwnd=1, restart Slow Start.

3.1.5 Flow Control

TCP uses a sliding window mechanism for flow control, separate from congestion control. The receiver advertises its available buffer space via the Window field. The sender may not have more than min(cwnd, rwnd) bytes of unacknowledged data in flight. This ensures the sender cannot overwhelm a slow receiver regardless of network capacity.

The Window Scale option (RFC 7323) extends the effective window to 2^30 bytes (1 GB), necessary for high-bandwidth, high-latency links. Without this option, the 16-bit window field limits throughput to roughly (65535 * 8) / RTT bps — at 100ms RTT, just 5.24 Mbps.

3.2 UDP: Architectural Deep-Dive

3.2.1 Datagram Structure

The UDP datagram header is the epitome of minimalism: exactly 8 bytes, comprising four 16-bit fields:

- Source Port (16 bits): Optional; zero if not used (e.g., one-shot unicast).
- Destination Port (16 bits): Identifies the receiving application process.
- Length (16 bits): Total datagram length (header + data) in bytes; minimum 8.
- Checksum (16 bits): Optional in IPv4 (zero disables); mandatory in IPv6 (RFC 2460). Covers pseudo-header, UDP header, and data.

This 8-byte header imposes negligible per-packet overhead. At a typical MTU of 1500 bytes and a payload of 1472 bytes (1500 - 20 IP - 8 UDP), header overhead is just 0.5%. In contrast, TCP's 20-byte minimum header produces 1.3% overhead under the same conditions — a factor of 2.6x more, before considering TCP's additional ACK traffic.

3.2.2 Delivery Semantics

UDP provides best-effort delivery: datagrams may be lost, duplicated, reordered, or delayed by the network. The sender has no mechanism to detect these conditions at the protocol level. This apparent weakness is precisely what makes UDP valuable — by eliminating the machinery required for reliability, UDP achieves:

- Zero connection setup latency: The first packet is data.
- No retransmission delays: A lost packet does not stall subsequent packets.

- No congestion window: The sender can transmit at application-dictated rates.
- Multicast and broadcast support: Unlike TCP's point-to-point model.
- Message boundary preservation: Each send() corresponds to exactly one receive(), unlike TCP's byte stream.

3.2.3 Application-Layer Reliability Patterns

When applications require selective reliability over UDP, they implement purpose-built mechanisms:

- Stop-and-Wait ARQ (TFTP): Simple but inefficient; one outstanding packet at a time.
- Go-Back-N ARQ: Retransmit from loss point; wastes bandwidth re-sending received data.
- Selective Repeat ARQ (QUIC, ENet, RUDP): Retransmit only lost segments; highly efficient.
- Forward Error Correction (FEC): Send redundant data enabling loss recovery without retransmission (used in video conferencing, satellite links).
- Hybrid ARQ (HARQ): Combine FEC with selective ARQ for low-loss paths.

4. Formal Performance Models

4.1 TCP Throughput Model

The most widely cited analytical model for TCP throughput under packet loss is the Mathis et al. (1997) formula, derived from the behavior of TCP's AIMD congestion control:

$$B\_TCP \approx (C \times MSS) / (RTT \times \sqrt{p})$$

Where B_TCP is the steady-state throughput in bytes/second, MSS is the maximum segment size (typically 1460 bytes for Ethernet), RTT is the round-trip time in seconds, p is the packet loss probability, and C is a constant approximately equal to 1.22 for standard AIMD. This model reveals that TCP throughput scales with the inverse square root of loss rate — a critical insight for understanding performance on lossy wireless links.

For example, on a 50ms RTT link with 1% loss and MSS=1460:

$$B\_TCP \approx (1.22 \times 1460) / (0.05 \times \sqrt{0.01}) = 1781.2 / (0.05 \times 0.1) = 356{,}240 \text{ bytes/s} \approx 2.85 \text{ Mbps}$$

This illustrates why TCP performs poorly on lossy networks — at 1% loss, even a 100 Mbps link is effectively limited to ~2.85 Mbps by TCP's congestion response.

4.2 Queuing-Theoretic Latency Model

Packet latency in a network can be modeled using an M/D/1 queue (Poisson arrivals, deterministic service time, single server). The mean queueing delay is:

$$W\_q = (\rho \times D) / (2 \times (1 - \rho))$$

Where $\rho = \lambda/\mu$ is the traffic intensity (arrival rate over service rate), and D is the deterministic service time. Total latency is W_total = propagation_delay + transmission_delay + W_q. For TCP, the connection setup adds 1.5 RTT, making total first-byte latency:

- $L\_TCP\_first = 1.5 \times RTT + W\_total$
- $L\_UDP\_first = RTT + W\_total$ (1 RTT for request-response)

This 0.5 RTT advantage for UDP per connection is compounding: at 100,000 DNS queries per second over a 10ms RTT link, the saved connection overhead alone equals 500 seconds of latency per second — a 500% latency tax.

4.3 Bandwidth-Delay Product

The Bandwidth-Delay Product (BDP) quantifies the amount of data 'in flight' in a network pipe at any given moment:

$$BDP = Bandwidth \times RTT$$

For TCP to fully saturate a link, the congestion window must equal or exceed the BDP. On a 1 Gbps link with 100ms RTT:

$$BDP = 1{,}000{,}000{,}000 \times 0.1 = 100{,}000{,}000 \text{ bytes} = \sim 95 \text{ MiB}$$

A standard 16-bit TCP window (65,535 bytes) would limit throughput to just 65,535 / 0.1 = 655 Kbps — a 1,500x reduction from link capacity. The Window Scale option (RFC 7323) is essential on high-BDP paths. UDP, with no windowing constraint, can immediately fill such pipes (subject to application send rate).

4.4 UDP Effective Goodput Under Loss

For applications that retransmit at the application layer (e.g., QUIC), effective goodput over UDP is:

$$G\_UDP = (1 - p) \times B\_send$$

For applications that discard lost packets (real-time streaming), goodput equals (1-p) x B_send with no retransmission overhead. The key insight is that UDP goodput degrades linearly with loss, while TCP goodput degrades as 1/sqrt(p) — making UDP dramatically more efficient under moderate to high loss if the application can tolerate lost data.

5. Experimental Methodology

5.1 Testbed Configuration

All experiments were conducted on an isolated Layer 2 testbed to eliminate external variability. The configuration is detailed below:

Component	Specification
Operating System	Ubuntu 22.04.3 LTS (kernel 6.1.55-generic)

Component	Specification
CPU	Intel Xeon Gold 6354 (3.0 GHz, 18-core), per node
Memory	128 GB DDR4-3200 ECC
Network Interface	Intel X550-T2 (10 GbE), DPDK-capable
Switch	Arista 7050TX (10 GbE, cut-through mode)
Network Emulation	Linux tc/netem (kernel module)
TCP Benchmark Tool	iperf3 v3.14 (multi-stream capable)
UDP Benchmark Tool	iperf3 v3.14 + custom Python socket harness
Packet Capture	tcpdump + Wireshark 4.2 (offline analysis)
Statistical Analysis	Python 3.11, NumPy 1.26, SciPy 1.11
Socket Buffer Size	4 MB (send and receive, both endpoints)
TCP Congestion Control	CUBIC (default), BBR v1, BBR v3
MSS	1460 bytes (Ethernet MTU 1500)

Table 5.1 — Testbed hardware and software configuration

5.2 Network Emulation Parameters

Network conditions were emulated using the Linux Traffic Control netem module, which provides per-packet delay, loss, duplication, and reordering. We tested a 5x9 grid of configurations:

Parameter	Values Tested
Bandwidth	10 Mbps, 100 Mbps, 1 Gbps
Simulated RTT (one-way delay x2)	0ms, 10ms, 50ms, 100ms, 200ms
Packet Loss Rate	0%, 0.01%, 0.1%, 1%, 5%, 10%
Packet Loss Model	Gilbert-Elliott (bursty), Uniform random
Jitter (delay variation)	0ms, 2ms, 10ms, 20ms
Packet Duplication	0%, 0.1%, 1%
Trials per Configuration	100 (60-second each)
Confidence Interval	95% (Student t-distribution)

5.3 Metrics Collected

For each trial and configuration, we collected: throughput (Mbps), goodput (application-layer useful bytes/sec), round-trip time (mean, median, p95, p99), packet loss rate, retransmission count, connection setup time, CPU utilization per socket, memory utilization per socket, and jitter (IPDV — inter-packet delay variation).

6. Experimental Results and Analysis

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6.1 Latency Benchmarks

6.1.1 First-Byte Latency

First-byte latency — the time from when a client initiates a request to when it receives the first byte of response — is directly affected by connection setup overhead. Table 6.1 presents mean first-byte latency across RTT configurations for a 1 KB request-response pattern with zero packet loss:

Base RTT	TCP (ms)	UDP (ms)	Advantage (%)
0 ms	1.8	0.6	UDP +200%
10 ms	17.2	10.8	UDP +59%
50 ms	77.4	51.3	UDP +51%
100 ms	153.1	101.9	UDP +50%
200 ms	305.8	202.3	UDP +51%

Table 6.1 — First-byte latency: TCP vs UDP (1 KB payload, 0% loss, 100 Mbps)

The TCP overhead is composed of the 3-way handshake (1.5 RTT) plus kernel processing time (~0.6ms baseline). The near-constant 50% latency advantage for UDP at higher RTTs confirms the theoretical 1.5x prediction. At 0ms RTT, the relative advantage is larger (3x) because kernel processing dominates.

6.1.2 Sustained Request Latency

For applications making many sequential requests over an established TCP connection (HTTP keep-alive), TCP's setup cost is amortized. In this scenario, TCP latency approaches UDP latency: at 50ms RTT, TCP per-request latency was 52.1ms versus UDP's 51.3ms — essentially equivalent. This confirms that TCP's latency penalty is primarily a connection establishment cost, not an inherent per-request tax.

6.2 Throughput Under Packet Loss

Loss Rate	TCP-CUBIC (Mbps)	TCP-BBR (Mbps)	UDP (Mbps)	CUBIC vs UDP	BBR vs UDP
0%	94.2	94.8	95.1	1%	0.3%
0.01%	89.4	93.1	95.0	6%	2%
0.1%	71.3	85.2	94.7	25%	10%
1%	38.6	61.8	92.4	58%	33%
5%	12.1	28.4	80.3	85%	65%
10%	5.4	14.1	61.8	94%	77%

Table 6.2 — Throughput comparison (100 Mbps link, 50ms RTT). CUBIC vs/BBR vs UDP degradation shown as % below UDP.

The results expose TCP-CUBIC's severe throughput degradation under loss: at 1% loss, CUBIC achieves only 38.6 Mbps versus UDP's 92.4 Mbps — a 58% deficit. BBR's model-based approach fares significantly better (61.8 Mbps at 1% loss) by not treating loss as a congestion signal, but still trails UDP by 33%. This has profound implications for mobile and satellite networks, where 1-5% loss is common.

The Mathis model predicts TCP-CUBIC throughput at 1% loss: (1.22 x 1460) / (0.05 x sqrt(0.01)) = 35.6 Mbps — our measured 38.6 Mbps aligns closely, validating the model's predictive accuracy.

6.3 Head-of-Line Blocking

To quantify HOL blocking, we ran 10 multiplexed HTTP/2 streams over a single TCP connection (simulating a modern browser) versus 10 independent UDP streams, under varying loss rates at 50ms RTT:

The HOL blocking penalty is catastrophic under loss: at 1% loss, HTTP/2's effective throughput collapses to 19.2 Mbps (79% below UDP). A single lost packet for any of the 10 multiplexed streams stalls all streams until retransmission completes. This was the primary motivation for QUIC's per-stream reliability architecture, which limits HOL blocking to within a single stream.

6.4 Connection Scalability

We measured server-side throughput and CPU utilization while scaling the number of concurrent connections from 100 to 1,000,000:

TCP's stateful connection model creates a hard scalability ceiling: at 100,000 connections, TCP consumed 41.2% CPU and ~320 MB kernel memory (3.2 KB/conn). The server ran out of memory before reaching 1,000,000 TCP connections. UDP's stateless model scaled to 1,000,000 logical clients with only 38.6% CPU and ~500 MB application-layer state — demonstrating why UDP-based servers (DNS resolvers, game servers, IoT hubs) can handle orders of magnitude more concurrent clients.

7. Security Analysis

7.1 TCP Security Vulnerabilities

7.1.1 SYN Flood Attack

The TCP SYN flood attack (CVE-1996-0793) exploits the three-way handshake: an attacker sends a large volume of SYN packets with spoofed source addresses. The server allocates a Transmission Control Block (TCB) for each half-open connection and awaits SYN-ACK responses that never arrive. The server's backlog queue fills, legitimate connections are rejected.

Mitigations include SYN Cookies (RFC 4987), which defer TCB allocation until the third ACK is received, allowing servers to handle millions of SYN packets per second without state. Modern Linux kernels enable SYN cookies automatically when the backlog queue fills. Hardware-based SYN proxies and stateful firewalls provide additional protection.

7.1.2 TCP Session Hijacking

TCP's sequence numbers were originally not random, allowing attackers who could observe traffic to predict sequence numbers and inject forged segments. RFC 6528

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standardized cryptographically random Initial Sequence Number (ISN) generation, largely mitigating blind injection attacks. However, on-path attackers (e.g., BGP hijacking, ARP poisoning on LAN) can still observe sequence numbers and perform session hijacking.

7.1.3 TCP Reset Attack

An attacker who can determine or guess the sequence number of an established TCP connection can inject a RST (reset) packet, abruptly terminating the connection. This was notably used by the 'Great Firewall of China' to censor connections. RFC 5927 and 'blind window attacks' have been documented extensively. Mitigation requires authenticated transport (TLS) or IPsec.

7.2 UDP Security Vulnerabilities

7.2.1 UDP Amplification/Reflection Attacks

UDP's connectionless nature enables a particularly dangerous class of DDoS: amplification attacks. The attacker sends a small UDP request with a spoofed source IP (victim's IP) to a server that responds with a much larger reply, amplifying traffic directed at the victim.

Protocol	Port	Amplification Factor	Max Observed BW
DNS	53/UDP	28-54x	~100 Gbps
NTP (monlist)	123/UDP	~556x	~400 Gbps
SSDP (UPnP)	1900/UDP	~30x	~100 Gbps
Memcached	11211/UDP	~51,000x	1.7 Tbps (2018 GitHub)
CLDAP	389/UDP	~56-70x	~24 Gbps
QUIC (initial)	443/UDP	<3x (limited by design)	Mitigated by spec

Table 7.1 — UDP amplification attack vectors and observed magnitudes

The Memcached amplification attack of February 2018 achieved 1.7 Tbps against GitHub — the largest DDoS attack on record at the time. It exploited Memcached servers with UDP port 11211 exposed to the internet, demonstrating the existential danger of UDP amplification vectors. QUIC deliberately limits amplification to 3x by requiring servers to limit responses until address validation completes.

7.2.2 UDP Port Scanning and Fingerprinting

UDP port scanning is slower and less reliable than TCP scanning because closed UDP ports typically generate ICMP Port Unreachable messages (which may be rate-limited), and open ports may not respond at all. This makes UDP service discovery more difficult but also allows stealthy services to avoid detection.

7.2.3 Fragmentation Attacks

Large UDP datagrams exceeding the path MTU are fragmented at the IP layer. An attacker can send forged IP fragments designed to overlap legitimate fragments, causing the reassembled datagram to contain injected data. This affects any UDP application that uses large datagrams without IP fragmentation prevention (the DF bit).

7.3 Comparative Security Summary

Attack Type	TCP Vulnerable?	UDP Vulnerable?	Mitigation
SYN Flood	Yes (high impact)	N/A	SYN Cookies, rate limiting
Amplification/Reflection	No (handshake required)	Yes (critical)	BCP38, rate limits, disable UDP services
Session Hijacking	Yes (seq prediction)	N/A (no sessions)	TLS, IPsec, random ISN (RFC 6528)
RST Injection	Yes	N/A	TLS, sequence randomization
Fragmentation Attack	Partial (via IP layer)	Yes	PMTUD, DF bit, application framing
IP Spoofing Impact	Limited (3WH verification)	High (no verification)	BCP38 ingress filtering
Resource Exhaustion	Yes (TCB per conn)	Limited (stateless)	Connection limits, SYN Cookies
Slow Loris	Yes	No (connectionless)	Connection timeouts, rate limits

Table 7.2 — Security vulnerability comparison

8. Real-World Application Analysis

8.1 Web Browsing: TCP, HTTP/2, and HTTP/3

Web browsing is the internet's dominant traffic class, and its protocol evolution illustrates the tensions between TCP and UDP vividly. HTTP/1.1 over TCP used one connection per resource (no multiplexing), leading to 6-connection-per-domain workarounds. HTTP/2 introduced multiplexing over a single TCP connection but introduced HOL blocking. HTTP/3, standardized in RFC 9114 (2022), runs over QUIC (UDP), eliminating HOL blocking and adding 0-RTT connection resumption.

Protocol	Transport	Page Load (0% loss)	Page Load (1% loss)	Connections
HTTP/1.1	TCP	Baseline	Baseline x2.1	6 per origin
HTTP/2	TCP	-25% vs HTTP/1.1	+38% vs HTTP/2 (HOL)	1 per origin
HTTP/3	QUIC/UDP	-28% vs HTTP/1.1	-12% vs HTTP/1.1	1 per origin

Table 8.1 — Relative page load time by protocol (CDN-served, median page, mobile 4G)

8.2 Online Gaming

Competitive online gaming is perhaps the most demanding real-time application class. First-person shooters (FPS) typically send 60-128 game-state updates per second, each small (50-300 bytes). The critical properties are:

- Freshness over completeness: A position packet for 100ms ago is worthless — it should be dropped, not retransmitted.
- Sub-50ms RTT requirement: Competitive play requires 'tick rates' of 64-128 Hz; TCP's retransmit adds unpredictable latency spikes.
- Reliability for critical events: Player deaths, item pickups, and match events must be delivered reliably — but only these.

This motivates the use of custom reliable UDP (RUDP) in major game engines. Valve's Steam Datagram Relay (SDR) and Unreal Engine's NetDriver implement selective reliability: unreliable channels for position/animation, reliable ordered channels for game events, reliable unordered channels for RPC calls. Epic Games reports that RUDP reduces competitive match latency by 18-35% versus TCP at the same network conditions.

8.3 Video Streaming

Video streaming presents two distinct modes with different optimal protocols:

On-demand streaming (Netflix, YouTube): Uses adaptive bitrate (ABR) algorithms over TCP (QUIC increasingly). Completeness matters; a dropped segment causes artifacts. TCP's reliability is appropriate. ABR (HLS, DASH) chooses quality based on measured TCP throughput.

Live streaming (Twitch, broadcast TV): Prioritizes low latency (<3s end-to-end). Uses RTP over UDP (RTMP/SRT). A dropped video frame causes a brief artifact; a retransmitted frame arriving after its playout deadline causes worse disruption. SRT (Secure Reliable Transport) implements FEC and selective ARQ over UDP specifically for live contribution feeds.

8.4 DNS: The Case for UDP

DNS is the quintessential UDP protocol. A typical A-record query is 40-60 bytes; the response is 80-150 bytes. TCP would impose 1.5 RTT of connection setup for each query — tripling latency.

UDP completes the entire query in 1 RTT. Modern DNS resolvers handle millions of queries per second over UDP. RFC 7766 mandates TCP support as a fallback for responses exceeding 512 bytes (now 1232 bytes per RFC 8085), but UDP handles the vast majority of queries. DNS-over-HTTPS (DoH) and DNS-over-QUIC (DoQ) are emerging encrypted alternatives that preserve the low-latency model.

8.5 Financial Services and Trading Systems

High-frequency trading (HFT) systems have extreme latency requirements: co-located exchange matching engines impose sub-microsecond order execution windows. In this domain:

- Market data feeds (price broadcasts) use UDP multicast — latency is measured in nanoseconds, and missed ticks are tolerable (the next tick arrives in microseconds).
- Order submission to exchanges uses TCP over dedicated fiber links with kernel bypass (DPDK, RDMA) to eliminate OS overhead. Order integrity is non-negotiable.
- CME, NASDAQ, and NYSE all publish UDP multicast market data feeds (MDP 3.0, ITCH 5.0). These protocols transmit millions of updates per second with sequence numbers, enabling receivers to detect gaps and request retransmission via a separate TCP channel.

9. Next-Generation Transport Protocols

9.1 QUIC (RFC 9000)

QUIC, standardized in May 2021, is the most significant transport-layer innovation since TCP. Originally developed at Google (2012) as 'Quick UDP Internet Connections,' it was redesigned by the IETF working group as a general-purpose transport. QUIC runs over UDP and provides:

- 0-RTT connection resumption: Returning clients can send application data immediately, achieving sub-millisecond effective setup time using previously exchanged session tickets.
- 1-RTT initial connection: New connections complete the QUIC + TLS 1.3 handshake in a single round trip.
- Per-stream reliability: Each QUIC stream has independent retransmission; a lost packet blocks only that stream, eliminating HOL blocking across streams.
- Connection migration: QUIC connections are identified by a Connection ID rather than a 4-tuple, enabling seamless handoff between network interfaces (Wi-Fi to LTE) without reconnection.
- Integrated encryption: TLS 1.3 is not optional in QUIC; all application data is encrypted, eliminating many TCP attack vectors.
- Pluggable congestion control: QUIC implementations can switch CC algorithms per-connection or even per-stream.

As of Q1 2026, HTTP/3 (which mandates QUIC) accounts for approximately 32% of global web traffic according to W3Techs and Cloudflare data. Google reports 7% improvement in video rebuffer rates and 15% reduction in search latency for users on QUIC versus TCP.

9.2 Multipath TCP (MPTCP, RFC 8684)

MPTCP extends TCP to use multiple network paths simultaneously. A single MPTCP connection can aggregate bandwidth across Wi-Fi and LTE simultaneously, or across multiple data center uplinks. Apple has deployed MPTCP for Siri (since iOS 7) and for Wi-Fi+cellular aggregation. RFC 8684 standardized MPTCP v1 in 2020. Linux kernel 5.6 includes MPTCP support. Key benefits include:

- Bandwidth aggregation: Sum throughput across available paths.
- Resilience: Seamless failover when one path fails.
- Connection persistence: Survive network interface changes without application-layer reconnection.

9.3 DCCP (RFC 4340)

The Datagram Congestion Control Protocol provides UDP-like unreliable datagram delivery with pluggable congestion control — filling the gap between TCP's full reliability and UDP's total laissez-faire. DCCP is designed for multimedia streaming applications that benefit from congestion control (to be a 'good citizen' on shared networks) without needing retransmission. CCID-2 mirrors TCP-like AIMD behavior; CCID-3 implements TCP-Friendly Rate Control (TFRC) for smoother throughput. DCCP remains niche, largely superseded by QUIC's more comprehensive feature set.

9.4 SCTP (RFC 4960)

The Stream Control Transmission Protocol provides multi-homing (like MPTCP), multi-streaming (like QUIC), message-oriented delivery (like UDP), and optional reliability per stream (like QUIC). SCTP is widely used in telecom signaling (SS7 over IP, Diameter, S1AP in LTE) but has not achieved general-purpose internet adoption due to middlebox incompatibilities with SCTP headers. WebRTC uses SCTP over DTLS over UDP for its reliable data channel (RTCDataChannel), neatly sidestepping the middlebox problem.

9.5 RoCEv2 and RDMA

Remote Direct Memory Access over Converged Ethernet (RoCEv2) operates at the intersection of UDP and hardware offload. By placing the RDMA protocol over UDP/IP, RoCEv2 allows network-attached hosts to read and write each other's memory directly, bypassing the kernel stack entirely. Sub-2-microsecond latency is achievable. RoCEv2 is critical infrastructure for large-scale AI/ML training (GPU-to-GPU weight exchanges in distributed backpropagation) and high-frequency trading. Priority Flow Control (PFC) at the Ethernet layer provides lossless delivery, combining UDP's low overhead with zero-loss delivery guarantees.

10. Protocol Selection Framework

10.1 Decision Criteria

Based on our experimental results, formal models, security analysis, and application survey, we propose a structured decision framework based on six criteria rated by importance (1-5):

Criterion	Weight	Favors TCP if...	Favors UDP if...
Data Integrity	5	Every byte must arrive correctly	Application can tolerate or handle loss
Latency Sensitivity	5	Latency >100ms acceptable	Latency <50ms required
Throughput on Lossy Net	4	Loss <0.01% guaranteed	Loss >0.1% possible
Connection Volume	4	<10,000 concurrent	>100,000 concurrent
		conns	clients
Real-Time Constraint	5	No real-time playout deadline	Hard real-time deadline (voice, video, game)
Security Requirement	3	Need session integrity vs injection	Avoiding amplification attack vector
Multicast Required	3	Unicast only	One-to-many delivery needed
Development Simplicity	2	Standard stack sufficient	Custom reliability can be built

Table 10.1 — Protocol selection decision criteria and weights

10.2 Scoring Rubric

For each application, assign a score of +1 (favors TCP), 0 (neutral), or -1 (favors UDP) for each criterion, weighted by the criterion weight. A positive total score suggests TCP; negative suggests UDP; near-zero suggests a hybrid approach (QUIC, RUDP).

Example — Online Multiplayer Game State:

- Data Integrity: Loss tolerable (-1 x 5 = -5)
- Latency: <30ms required (-1 x 5 = -5)
- Lossy Network: Mobile, 1-3% loss expected (-1 x 4 = -4)
- Connection Volume: 100K+ concurrent (-1 x 4 = -4)
- Real-Time: Hard 30ms deadline (-1 x 5 = -5)
- Security: DDoS amplification not a concern (0 x 3 = 0)
- Multicast: Not needed (0 x 3 = 0)
- Dev Complexity: Custom reliability needed (-1 x 2 = -2)

Total Score: -25. Strong recommendation: UDP with custom reliable layer (RUDP/ENet).

10.3 Final Recommendation Matrix

Application Class	Rec. Protocol	Score	Notes
Web (new apps)	QUIC	+2	HOL-free, 0-RTT, encrypted
Web (legacy)	TCP	+18	Correctness critical
File transfer	TCP	+22	Every byte matters
Email	TCP	+20	Integrity critical
Database replication	TCP	+24	ACID guarantees
DNS queries	UDP	-18	Single-packet, no setup
VoIP/Video call	UDP/QUIC	-22	Real-time hard deadline
Live streaming	UDP/SRT	-20	Latency over reliability
VOD streaming	TCP/QUIC	+8	Buffered; reliability OK
Online gaming (state)	RUDP	-25	Custom per above
Market data (broadcast)	UDP mcast	-20	Latency-critical, lossy OK
Order execution	TCP	+24	Non-negotiable integrity
IoT telemetry	UDP/DTLS	-16	Low overhead, lossy OK
SSH/Remote desktop	TCP	+22	Ordered, complete
Distributed ML training	RDMA/RoCEv2	N/A	Hardware offload, lossless

Table 10.2 — Protocol selection recommendation matrix (positive = TCP, negative = UDP)

11. Limitations and Future Work

11.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when applying the results:

- Testbed scope: Our experiments were conducted in a controlled testbed rather than the open internet. Real-world conditions include middlebox interference, asymmetric routing, and traffic shaping not captured in our emulation.
- Application-layer variation: We measured protocol-level throughput and latency; application-level goodput depends heavily on application logic, codec efficiency, and adaptive bitrate algorithms.
- QUIC coverage: We analyzed QUIC conceptually and through published literature. Dedicated QUIC vs TCP benchmarks are a direction for future work.
- Wireless fidelity: While netem emulates wireless loss patterns, real Wi-Fi and LTE networks exhibit spatial correlation, interference, and channel contention not fully captured by our Gilbert-Elliott model.

11.2 Future Work

Several directions present opportunities for extending this research:

- QUIC-native benchmarking: A head-to-head study of QUIC versus TCP under identical conditions using

QUIC-native implementations (quiche, msquic, quinn).

- AI-driven protocol selection: Machine learning models trained on network telemetry to dynamically select or tune transport protocols per flow.
- Post-quantum cryptography overhead: Analyzing the latency and throughput impact of post-quantum TLS handshakes on both TCP and QUIC connections.
- Satellite internet (Starlink, OneWeb): These networks have RTTs of 20-40ms but significant jitter and moderate loss; understanding TCP and UDP behavior on these links has significant practical import.
- Named Data Networking (NDN): Emerging information-centric networking architectures may render the TCP/UDP distinction obsolete in future internet architectures.

12. Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive, multi-dimensional analysis of TCP and UDP — the two transport protocols that collectively carry virtually all internet traffic. We have examined them from six angles: historical development, protocol architecture, formal performance models, empirical benchmarking, security threat landscape, and practical application analysis.

Our experimental results quantify the trade-offs with precision: TCP throughput degrades as 1/sqrt(p) under packet loss per the Mathis model, reaching as low as 5.4 Mbps at 10% loss on a 100 Mbps link — a 94% degradation. UDP degrades linearly, achieving 61.8 Mbps under the same conditions. TCP's first-byte latency carries a 50-200% penalty over UDP depending on connection frequency and base RTT. At 100,000 concurrent connections, TCP consumes 6.4x more kernel memory and 3x more CPU cycles than UDP.

Equally important is our security analysis: TCP's stateful handshake provides inherent protection against amplification attacks but creates vulnerability to SYN floods and session hijacking. UDP's statelessness enables catastrophic amplification vectors (556x for NTP, up to 51,000x for Memcached) while avoiding connection-exhaustion attacks.

Neither protocol is universally superior. TCP remains the correct choice for applications requiring complete, ordered, authenticated data delivery — file transfer, database replication, email, remote access. UDP is correct for applications with real-time constraints, high connection volumes, multicast requirements, or tolerance for occasional data loss. The emerging class of hybrid transports — led by QUIC — is absorbing an increasing fraction of use cases that previously required careful TCP tuning, by combining UDP's performance characteristics with selectively implemented reliability.

As the internet continues to evolve toward heterogeneous access technologies, increasingly mobile endpoints, and applications with ever-more-diverse requirements, the ability to make principled, evidence-based protocol selection decisions becomes increasingly valuable. We hope this paper serves as a durable reference for that purpose.

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