

Network Working Group  
Internet-Draft  
Obsoletes: [4742](#) (if approved)  
Intended status: Standards Track  
Expires: August 27, 2011

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February 23, 2011

**Using the NETCONF Configuration Protocol over Secure Shell (SSH)**  
**draft-ietf-netconf-rfc4742bis-07.txt**

Abstract

This document describes a method for invoking and running the NETCONF protocol within a Secure Shell (SSH) session as an SSH subsystem.

Status of this Memo

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## **1. Introduction**

The NETCONF protocol [[I-D.ietf-netconf-4741bis](#)] is an XML-based protocol used to manage the configuration of networking equipment. NETCONF is defined to be session-layer and transport independent, allowing mappings to be defined for multiple session-layer or transport protocols. This document defines how NETCONF can be used within a Secure Shell (SSH) session, using the SSH connection protocol [[RFC4254](#)] over the SSH transport protocol [[RFC4253](#)]. This mapping will allow NETCONF to be executed from a secure shell session by a user or application.

Although this document gives specific examples of how NETCONF messages are sent over an SSH connection, use of this transport is not restricted to the messages shown in the examples below. This transport can be used for any NETCONF message.

## **2. Requirements Terminology**

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in [RFC 2119](#) [[RFC2119](#)].

## **3. Starting NETCONF over SSH**

To run NETCONF over SSH, the SSH client will first establish an SSH transport connection using the SSH transport protocol, and the SSH client and SSH server will exchange keys for message integrity and encryption. The SSH client will then invoke the "ssh-userauth" service to authenticate the user, as described in the SSH authentication protocol [[RFC4252](#)]. Once the user has been successfully authenticated, the SSH client will invoke the "ssh-connection" service, also known as the SSH connection protocol.

How the NETCONF Server extracts the SSH user name from the SSH layer is implementation-dependent.

After the ssh-connection service is established, the SSH client will open a channel of type "session", which will result in an SSH session.

Once the SSH session has been established, the NETCONF client will invoke NETCONF as an SSH subsystem called "netconf". Subsystem support is a feature of SSH version 2 (SSHv2) and is not included in SSHv1. Running NETCONF as an SSH subsystem avoids the need for the script to recognize shell prompts or skip over extraneous



information, such as a system message that is sent at shell start-up.

In order to allow NETCONF traffic to be easily identified and filtered by firewalls and other network devices, NETCONF servers **MUST** default to providing access to the "netconf" SSH subsystem only when the SSH session is established using the IANA-assigned TCP port 830. Servers **SHOULD** be configurable to allow access to the netconf SSH subsystem over other ports.

A user (or application) could use the following command line to invoke NETCONF as an SSH subsystem on the IANA-assigned port:

```
[user@client]$ ssh -s server.example.org -p 830 netconf
```

Note that the `-s` option causes the command ("netconf") to be invoked as an SSH subsystem.

### **3.1. Capabilities Exchange**

The NETCONF server **MUST** indicate its capabilities by sending an XML document containing a `<hello>` element as soon as the NETCONF session is established. The NETCONF client can parse this message to determine which NETCONF capabilities are supported by the NETCONF server.

The NETCONF client must also send an XML document containing a `<hello>` element to indicate the NETCONF client's capabilities to the NETCONF server. The document containing the `<hello>` element **MUST** be the first XML document that the NETCONF client sends after the NETCONF session is established.

The following example shows a capability exchange. Data sent by the NETCONF client are marked with "C:" and data sent by the NETCONF server are marked with "S:".



```
S: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
S: <hello xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">
S:   <capabilities>
S:     <capability>
S:       urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.1
S:     </capability>
S:     <capability>
S:       urn:ietf:params:ns:netconf:capability:startup:1.0
S:     </capability>
S:   </capabilities>
S:   <session-id>4</session-id>
S: </hello>
S: ]]>]]>
```

```
C: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
C: <hello xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">
C:   <capabilities>
C:     <capability>
C:       urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.1
C:     </capability>
C:   </capabilities>
C: </hello>
C: ]]>]]>
```

Although the example shows the NETCONF server sending a `<hello>` message followed by the NETCONF client's `<hello>` message, both sides will send the message as soon as the NETCONF subsystem is initialized, perhaps simultaneously.

#### **4. Using NETCONF over SSH**

A NETCONF over SSH session consists of a NETCONF client and NETCONF server exchanging complete XML documents. Once the session has been established and capabilities have been exchanged, the NETCONF client will send complete XML documents containing `<rpc>` elements to the server, and the NETCONF server will respond with complete XML documents containing `<rpc-reply>` elements.

##### **4.1. Framing protocol**

The previous version of this document defined the character sequence `]]>]]>` as a message separator, under the assumption that it could not be found in well-formed XML documents. However, this assumption is not correct. It can legally appear in XML attributes, comments, and processing instructions. In order to solve this problem, and at the same time be compatible with existing implementations, this document defines the following framing protocol.





The <hello> message MUST be followed by the character sequence `]]>]]>`. Upon reception of the <hello> message, the receiving peer's SSH Transport layer conceptually passes the <hello> message to the Messages layer. If the :base:1.1 capability is advertised by both peers, the chunked transfer mechanism (see [Section 4.2](#)) is used for the remainder of the NETCONF session. Otherwise, the old end-of-message based mechanism (see [Section 4.3](#)) is used.

#### [4.2](#). Chunked Framing Mechanism

This mechanism encodes all NETCONF messages with a chunked framing. Specifically, the message follows the ABNF [[RFC5234](#)] rule Chunked-Message:

```
Chunked-Message = 1*chunk
                  end-of-chunks

chunk            = LF HASH chunk-size LF
                  chunk-data
chunk-size       = 1*DIGIT1 0*DIGIT
chunk-data       = 1*OCTET

end-of-chunks    = LF HASH HASH LF

DIGIT1           = %x31-39
DIGIT            = %x30-39
HASH             = %x23
LF               = %x0A
OCTET            = %x00-FF
```

The chunk-size field is a string of decimal digits indicating the number of octets in chunk-data. Leading zeros are prohibited, and the maximum allowed chunk-size value is 4294967295.

As an example, the message:

```
<rpc message-id="102"
  xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">
  <close-session/>
</rpc>
```

could be encoded as (using '\n' as a visible representation of the LineFeed character):



```
C: \n#4\nC: <rpc\nC: \n#18\nC:   message-id="102"\nC: \n#79\nC:     xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">\nC:   <close-session/>\nC: </rpc>\nC: \n##\n
```

Conceptually, the SSH Transport layer encodes messages sent by the Messages layer, and decodes messages received on the SSH channel before passing them to the Messages layer.

In the second and third chunks quoted above, each line is terminated by a LineFeed. For all the XML lines (except the last one), this example treats the LineFeed as part of the chunk-data and so contributing to the chunk-size. Note that there is no LineFeed character after the <rpc> end tag in this message. The LineFeed required by the start of the end-of-chunks block immediately follows the last '>' character in the message.

If an error occurs during the decoding process, the peer **MUST** terminate the NETCONF session by closing the corresponding SSH channel.

#### **4.3. End-of-message Framing Mechanism**

This mechanism exists for backwards compatibility with implementations of previous versions of this document. It is only used when the remote peer does not advertise a base protocol version supporting chunked encoding, i.e. a NETCONF implementation only supporting :base:1.0.

When this mechanism is used, the special character sequence ]]>]], **MUST** be sent by both the NETCONF client and the NETCONF server after each message (XML document) in the NETCONF exchange. Conceptually, the SSH Transport layer passes any data found in between the ]]>]] characters to the Messages layer.

A NETCONF over SSH session, using the backwards-compatible end-of-message framing, to retrieve a set of configuration information might look like this:



```
C: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
C: <rpc message-id="105"
C: xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">
C:   <get-config>
C:     <source><running/></source>
C:     <config xmlns="http://example.com/schema/1.2/config">
C:       <users/>
C:     </config>
C:   </get-config>
C: </rpc>
C: ]]>]]>

S: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>
S: <rpc-reply message-id="105"
S: xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">
S:   <config xmlns="http://example.com/schema/1.2/config">
S:     <users>
S:       <user><name>root</name><type>superuser</type></user>
S:       <user><name>fred</name><type>admin</type></user>
S:       <user><name>barney</name><type>admin</type></user>
S:     </users>
S:   </config>
S: </rpc-reply>
S: ]]>]]>
```

## 5. Exiting the NETCONF Subsystem

Exiting NETCONF is accomplished using the `<close-session>` operation. A NETCONF server will process NETCONF messages from the NETCONF client in the order in which they are received. When the NETCONF server processes a `<close-session>` operation, the NETCONF server SHALL respond and close the SSH session channel. The NETCONF server MUST NOT process any NETCONF messages received after the `<close-session>` operation.

To continue the example used in [section 4.2](#), an existing NETCONF subsystem session could be closed as follows:



```
C: \n#140\nC: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>\nC: <rpc message-id="106"\nC:      xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">\nC:   <close-session/>\nC: </rpc>\nC: \n##\n\nS: \n#139\nS: <?xml version="1.0" encoding="UTF-8"?>\nS: <rpc-reply id="106"\nS:      xmlns="urn:ietf:params:xml:ns:netconf:base:1.0">\nS:   <ok/>\nS: </rpc-reply>\nS: \n##\n
```

## 6. Security Considerations

NETCONF is used to access configuration and state information and to modify configuration information, so the ability to access this protocol should be limited to users and systems that are authorized to view the NETCONF server's configuration and state or to modify the NETCONF server's configuration.

The identity of the SSH server MUST be verified and authenticated by the SSH client according to local policy before password-based authentication data or any configuration or state data is sent to or received from the SSH server. The identity of the SSH client MUST also be verified and authenticated by the SSH server according to local policy to ensure that the incoming SSH client request is legitimate before any configuration or state data is sent to or received from the SSH client. Neither side should establish a NETCONF over SSH connection with an unknown, unexpected or incorrect identity on the opposite side.

Configuration or state data may include sensitive information, such as usernames or security keys. So, NETCONF should only be used over communications channels that provide strong encryption for data privacy. This document defines a NETCONF over SSH mapping which provides for support of strong encryption and authentication.

This document requires that SSH servers default to allowing access to the "netconf" SSH subsystem only when using a specific TCP port assigned by IANA for this purpose. This will allow NETCONF over SSH traffic to be easily identified and filtered by firewalls and other network nodes. However, it will also allow NETCONF over SSH traffic





to be more easily identified by attackers.

This document also recommends that SSH servers be configurable to allow access to the "netconf" SSH subsystem over other ports. Use of that configuration option without corresponding changes to firewall or network device configuration may unintentionally result in the ability for nodes outside of the firewall or other administrative boundary to gain access to "netconf" SSH subsystem.

[RFC 4742](#) assumes that the EOM sequence, `]]>]]>`, cannot appear in any well-formed XML document, which turned out to be mistaken. The EOM sequence can cause operational problems and open space for attacks if sent deliberately in RPC messages. It is however believed that the associated threat is not very high. This document still uses the EOM sequence for the initial <hello> message to avoid incompatibility with existing implementations. When both peers implement base:1.1 capability, a proper framing protocol (Chunked Framing Mechanism, see [Section 4.2](#)) is used for the rest of the NETCONF session, to avoid injection attacks.

## 7. IANA Considerations

Based on the previous version of this document, [RFC 4742](#), IANA assigned port 830 as the default port for NETCONF over SSH sessions.

IANA has also assigned "netconf" as an SSH Subsystem Name, as defined in [[RFC4250](#)], as follows:

Subsystem Name	Reference
-----	-----
netconf	<a href="#">RFC 4742</a>

IANA is requested to update these allocations to reference this document when it is published as an RFC.

## 8. Acknowledgements

This document was written using the xml2rfc tool described in [RFC 2629](#) [[RFC2629](#)].

Extensive input was received from the other members of the NETCONF design team, including: Andy Bierman, Weijing Chen, Rob Enns, Wes Hardaker, David Harrington, Eliot Lear, Simon Leinen, Phil Shafer, Juergen Schoenwaelder and Steve Waldbusser. The following people



have also reviewed this document and provided valuable input: Olafur Gudmundsson, Sam Hartman, Scott Hollenbeck, Bill Sommerfeld, Balazs Lengyel, Bert Wijnen, Mehmet Ersue, Martin Bjorklund, Lada Lothka, Ken Watson, and Tom Petch.

## **9. Change Log**

[RFC Editor: Please remove this section before publication as an RFC.]

### **9.1. Changes from RFC4742bis-05 to [RFC4742-bis-06](#)**

- o Updated chunked encoding to include location of new lines.
- o Updated examples to show new chunked encoding properly.
- o Minor editorial fixes.

### **9.2. Changes from RFC4742bis-04 to [RFC4742-bis-05](#)**

- o Added option for chunked encoding.
- o Added 1.1 capability to enable chunked encoding.

### **9.3. Changes from RFC4742bis-03 to [RFC4742-bis-04](#)**

- o Shortened text about EOM sequence.
- o Added text to Security Considerations about EOM issues.

### **9.4. Changes from RFC4742bis-02 to [RFC4742-bis-03](#)**

- o Added intended status and "obsoletes" to headers.
- o Very minor editorial changes.

### **9.5. Changes from RFC4742bis-01 to [RFC4742-bis-02](#)**

- o Removed unneeded wording about client/server, made unnecessary by previous changes.
- o Stated that how a server extracts the SSH user name is implementation-dependent.
- o Further fixes to operation/message/data wording.



### **9.6. Changes from RFC4742bis-00 to [RFC4742](#)-bis-01**

- o Changed use of client/server, manager/agent to SSH client/server and NETCONF client/server.
- o Consistently used term operation, instead of command or message.
- o Clarified some sections based on review feedback.
- o Fixed several typos.

### **9.7. Changes from [RFC4742](#) to RFC4742bis-00**

- o Integrated previously-approved errata from [http://rfc-editor.org/errata\\_search.php/doc/html/rfc4742](http://rfc-editor.org/errata_search.php/doc/html/rfc4742)
- o Removed text requiring implementations to skip to an XML start directive at the beginning of a session.
- o Made it clear the ]]>]]> is illegal in XML documents only outside of comments.

## **10. References**

### **10.1. Normative References**

- [I-D.ietf-netconf-4741bis]  
Enns, R., Bjorklund, M., Schoenwaelder, J., and A. Bierman, "Network Configuration Protocol (NETCONF)", [draft-ietf-netconf-4741bis-09](#) (work in progress), February 2011.
- [RFC2119] Bradner, S., "Key words for use in RFCs to Indicate Requirement Levels", [BCP 14](#), [RFC 2119](#), March 1997.
- [RFC4250] Lehtinen, S. and C. Lonvick, "The Secure Shell (SSH) Protocol Assigned Numbers", [RFC 4250](#), January 2006.
- [RFC4252] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, "The Secure Shell (SSH) Authentication Protocol", [RFC 4252](#), January 2006.
- [RFC4253] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, "The Secure Shell (SSH) Transport Layer Protocol", [RFC 4253](#), January 2006.
- [RFC4254] Ylonen, T. and C. Lonvick, "The Secure Shell (SSH) Connection Protocol", [RFC 4254](#), January 2006.



[RFC5234] Crocker, D. and P. Overell, "Augmented BNF for Syntax Specifications: ABNF", STD 68, [RFC 5234](#), January 2008.

## **10.2. Informative References**

[RFC2629] Rose, M., "Writing I-Ds and RFCs using XML", [RFC 2629](#), June 1999.

## **Appendix A. Changes from [RFC 4742](#)**

This section lists major changes between this document and [RFC 4742](#).

- o Introduced the new Chunked Framing Mechanism to solve known security issues with the EOM framing.
- o Extended text in Security Considerations, added text on EOM issues.
- o Added examples to show new chunked encoding properly, highlighted the location of new lines.
- o Stated that the extraction of the SSH user name by a NETCONF server is implementation-dependent.
- o Changed use of the terms client/server, manager/agent to SSH client/server and NETCONF client/server.
- o Consistently used the term operation, instead of command or message.
- o Integrated previously-approved errata from [http://rfc-editor.org/errata\\_search.php/doc/html/rfc4742](http://rfc-editor.org/errata_search.php/doc/html/rfc4742)

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