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NSH and Segment Routing Integration for Service Function Chaining (SFC)
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Abstract

This document describes two application scenarios where Network Service Header (NSH) and Segment Routing (SR) techniques can be deployed together to support Service Function Chaining (SFC) in an efficient manner while maintaining separation of the service and transport planes as originally intended by the SFC architecture.

In the first scenario, an NSH-based SFC is created using SR as the transport between SFFs. SR in this case is just one of many encapsulations that could be used to maintain the transport-independent nature of NSH-based service chains.

In the second scenario, SR is used to represent each service hop of the NSH-based SFC as a segment within the segment-list. SR and NSH in this case are integrated.

In both scenarios SR is responsible for steering packets between SFFs along a given SFP while NSH is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the service plane, the SFC instance context, and any associated metadata.

These application scenarios demonstrate that NSH and SR can work jointly and complement each other leaving the network operator with the flexibility to use whichever transport technology makes sense in specific areas of their network infrastructure, and still maintain an end-to-end service plane using NSH.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
1.1. SFC Overview and Rationale	3
1.2. SFC within SR Networks	4
2. NSH-based SFC with SR-based transport tunnel	5
3. SR-based SFC with Integrated NSH Service Plane	9
4. Encapsulation Details	11
4.1. NSH using MPLS-SR Transport	11
4.2. NSH using SRv6 Transport	12
5. Security Considerations	13
6. IANA Considerations	13
7. Acknowledgments	13
8. References	13
8.1. Normative References	13
8.2. Informative References	13

Authors' Addresses	14
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1. Introduction

1.1. SFC Overview and Rationale

The dynamic enforcement of a service-derived, adequate forwarding policy for packets entering a network that supports advanced Service Functions (SFs) has become a key challenge for operators and service providers. Particularly, cascading SFs, for example at the Gi interface in the context of mobile network infrastructure, have shown their limits, such as the same redundant classification features must be supported by many SFs in order to execute their function, some SFs are receiving traffic that they are not supposed to process (e.g., TCP proxies receiving UDP traffic), which inevitably affects their dimensioning and performance, an increased design complexity related to the properly ordered invocation of several SFs, etc.

In order to solve those problems and to avoid the adherence with the underlying physical network topology while allowing for simplified service delivery, Service Function Chaining (SFC) techniques have been introduced.

SFC techniques are meant to rationalize the service delivery logic and master the companion complexity while optimizing service activation time cycles for operators that need more agile service delivery procedures to better accommodate ever-demanding customer requirements. Indeed, SFC allows to dynamically create service planes that can be used by specific traffic flows. Each service plane is realized by invoking and chaining the relevant service functions in the right sequence. [RFC7498] provides an overview of the SFC problem space and [RFC7665] specifies an SFC architecture. The SFC architecture has the merit to not make assumptions on how advanced features (e.g., load-balancing, loose or strict service paths) have to be enabled with a domain. Various deployment options are made available to operators with the SFC architecture and this approach is fundamental to accommodate various and heterogeneous deployment contexts.

Many approaches can be considered for encoding the information required for SFC purposes (e.g., communicate a service chain pointer, encode a list of loose/explicit paths, disseminate a service chain identifier together with a set of context information, etc.). Likewise, many approaches can also be considered for the channel to be used to carry SFC-specific information (e.g., define a new header, re-use existing fields, define an IPv6 extension header, etc.). Among all these approaches, the IETF endorsed a transport-independent SFC encapsulation scheme: NSH [RFC8300]; which is the most mature SFC

encapsulation solution. This design is pragmatic as it does not require replicating the same specification effort as a function of underlying transport encapsulation. Moreover, this design approach encourages consistent SFC-based service delivery in networks enabling distinct transport protocols in various segments of the network or even between SFFs vs SF-SFF hops.

1.2. SFC within SR Networks

As described in [I-D.ietf-spring-segment-routing], Segment Routing (SR) leverages the source routing technique. Concretely, a node steers a packet through an SR policy instantiated as an ordered list of instructions called segments. While initially designed for policy-based source routing, SR also finds its application in supporting SFC [I-D.xu-clad-spring-sr-service-chaining]. The two SR flavors, namely MPLS-SR [I-D.ietf-spring-segment-routing-mpls] and SRv6 [I-D.ietf-6man-segment-routing-header], can both encode a Service Function (SF) as a segment so that an SFC can be specified as a segment list. Nevertheless, and as discussed in [RFC7498], traffic steering is only a subset of the issues that motivated the design of the SFC architecture. Further considerations such as simplifying classification at intermediate SFs and allowing for coordinated behaviors among SFs by means of supplying context information should be taken into account when designing an SFC data plane solution.

While each scheme (i.e., NSH-based SFC and SR-based SFC) can work independently, this document describes how the two can be used together in concert and complement each other through two representative application scenarios. Both application scenarios may be supported using either MPLS-SR or SRv6:

- o NSH-based SFC with SR-based transport: in this scenario segment routing provides the transport encapsulation between SFFs while NSH is used to convey and trigger SFC policies.
- o SR-based SFC with integrated NSH service plane: in this scenario each service hop of the SFC is represented as a segment of the SR segment-list. SR is responsible for steering traffic through the necessary SFFs as part of the segment routing path and NSH is responsible for maintaining the service plane, and holding the SFC instance context and associated metadata.

It is of course possible to combine both of these two scenarios so as to support specific deployment requirements and use cases.

2. NSH-based SFC with SR-based transport tunnel

Because of the transport-independent nature of NSH-based service chains, it is expected that the NSH has broad applicability across different domains of a network. By way of illustration the various SFs involved in a service chain are available in a single data center, or spread throughout multiple locations (e.g., data centers, different POPs), depending upon the operator preference and/or availability of service resources. Regardless of where the service resources are deployed it is necessary to provide traffic steering through a set of SFFs and NSH-based service chains provide the flexibility for the network operator to choose which particular transport encapsulation to use between SFFs, which may be different depending upon which area of the network the SFFs/SFs are currently deployed. Therefore from an SFC architecture perspective, segment routing is simply one of multiple available transport encapsulations that can be used for traffic steering between SFFs. Concretely, NSH does not require to use a unique transport encapsulation when traversing a service chain. NSH-based service forwarding relies upon underlying service node capabilities.

The following three figures provide an example of an SFC established for flow F that has SF instances located in different data centers, DC1 and DC2. For the purpose of illustration, let the SFC's Service Path Identifier (SPI) be 100 and the initial Service Index (SI) be 255.

Referring to Figure 1, packets of flow F in DC1 are classified into an NSH-based SFC and encapsulated after classification as <Inner Pkt><NSH: SPI 100, SI 255><Outer-transport> and forwarded to SFF1 (which is the first SFF hop for this service chain).

After removing the outer transport encapsulation, that may or may not be MPLS-SR or SRv6, SFF1 uses the SPI and SI carried within the NSH encapsulation to determine that it should forward the packet to SF1. SF1 applies its service, decrements the SI by 1, and returns the packet to SFF1. SFF1 therefore has <SPI 100, SI 254> when the packet comes back from SF1. SFF1 does a lookup on <SPI 100, SI 254> which results in <next-hop: DC1-GW1> and forwards the packet to DC1-GW1.

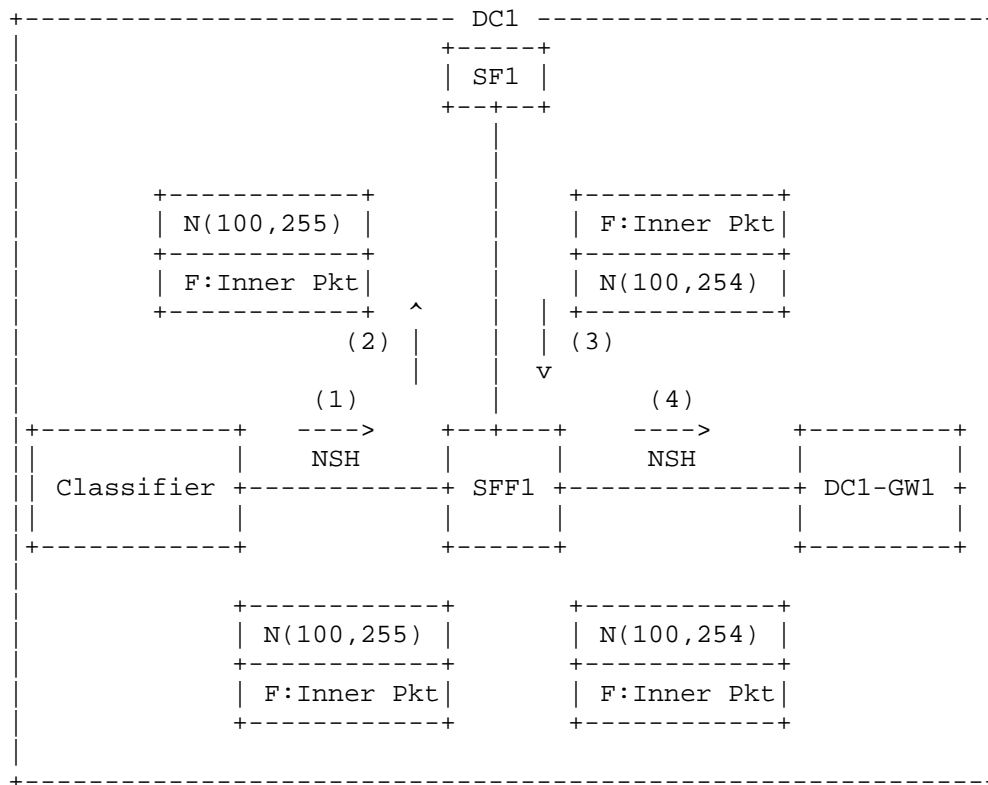


Figure 1: SR for inter-DC SFC - Part 1

Referring now to Figure 2, DC1-GW1 performs a lookup on the information conveyed in the NSH which results in <next-hop: DC2-GW1, encapsulation: SR>. The SR encapsulation has the SR segment-list to forward the packet across the inter-DC network to DC2.

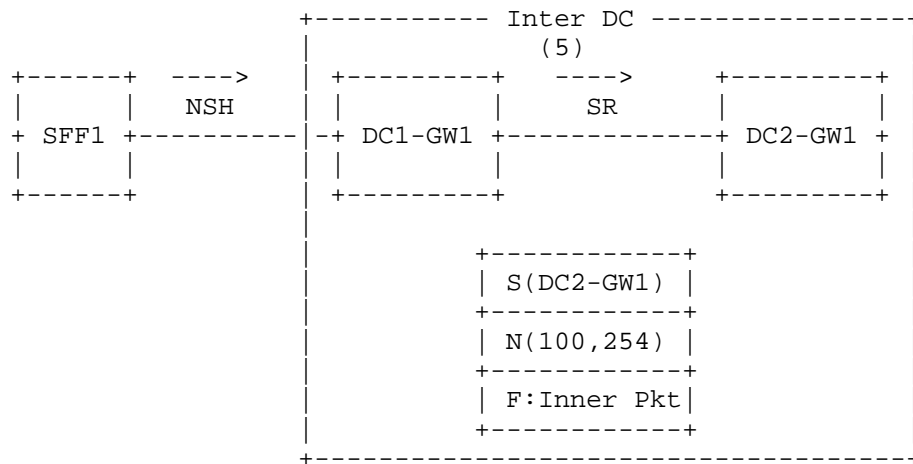


Figure 2: SR for inter-DC SFC - Part 2

When the packet arrives at DC2, as shown in Figure 3, the SR encapsulation is removed and DC2-GW1 performs a lookup on the NSH which results in next-hop: SFF2. The outer transport encapsulation may be any transport that is able to identify NSH as the next protocol.

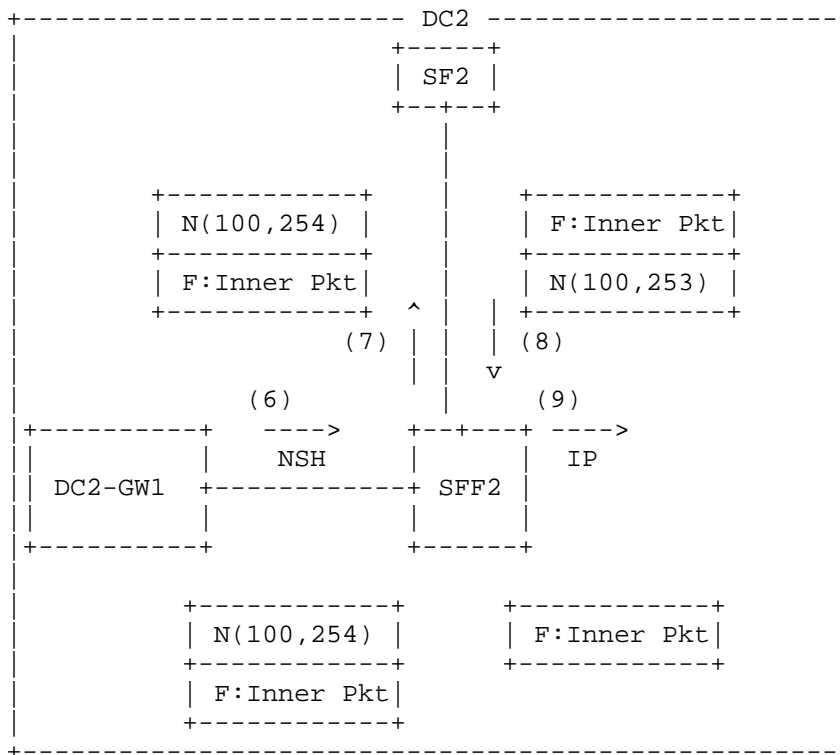


Figure 3: SR for inter-DC SFC - Part 3

The benefits of this scheme are listed hereafter:

- o The network operator is able to take advantage of the transport-independent nature of the NSH encapsulation.
- o The network operator is able to take advantage of the traffic steering capability of SR where appropriate.
- o Light-weight NSH is used in the data center for SFC and avoids more complex hierarchical SFC schemes between data centers.
- o Clear responsibility division and scope between NSH and SR.

Note that this scenario is applicable to any case where multiple segments of a service chain are distributed into multiple domains or where traffic-engineered paths are necessary between SFFs (strict forwarding paths for example).

3. SR-based SFC with Integrated NSH Service Plane

In this scenario we assume that the SFs are NSH-aware and therefore it should not be necessary to implement an SFC proxy to achieve Service Function Chaining. The operation relies upon SR to perform SFF-SFF transport and NSH to provide the service plane between SFs thereby maintaining SFC context and metadata.

When a service chain is established, a packet associated with that chain will first encapsulate an NSH that will be used to maintain the end-to-end service plane through use of the SFC context. The SFC context (e.g., the service plane path referenced by the SPI) is used by an SFF to determine the SR segment list for forwarding the packet to the next-hop SFFs. The packet is then encapsulated using the (transport-specific) SR header and forwarded in the SR domain following normal SR operation.

When a packet has to be forwarded to an SF attached to an SFF, the SFF strips the SR information of the packet, updates the SR information, and saves it to a cache indexed by the NSH SPI. This saved SR information is used to encapsulate and forward the packet(s) coming back from the SF.

When the SF receives the packet, it processes it as usual and sends it back to the SFF. Once the SFF receives this packet, it extracts the SR information using the NSH SPI as the index into the cache. The SFF then pushes the SR header on top of the NSH header, and forwards the packet to the next segment in the segment list.

Figure 4 illustrates an example of this scenario.

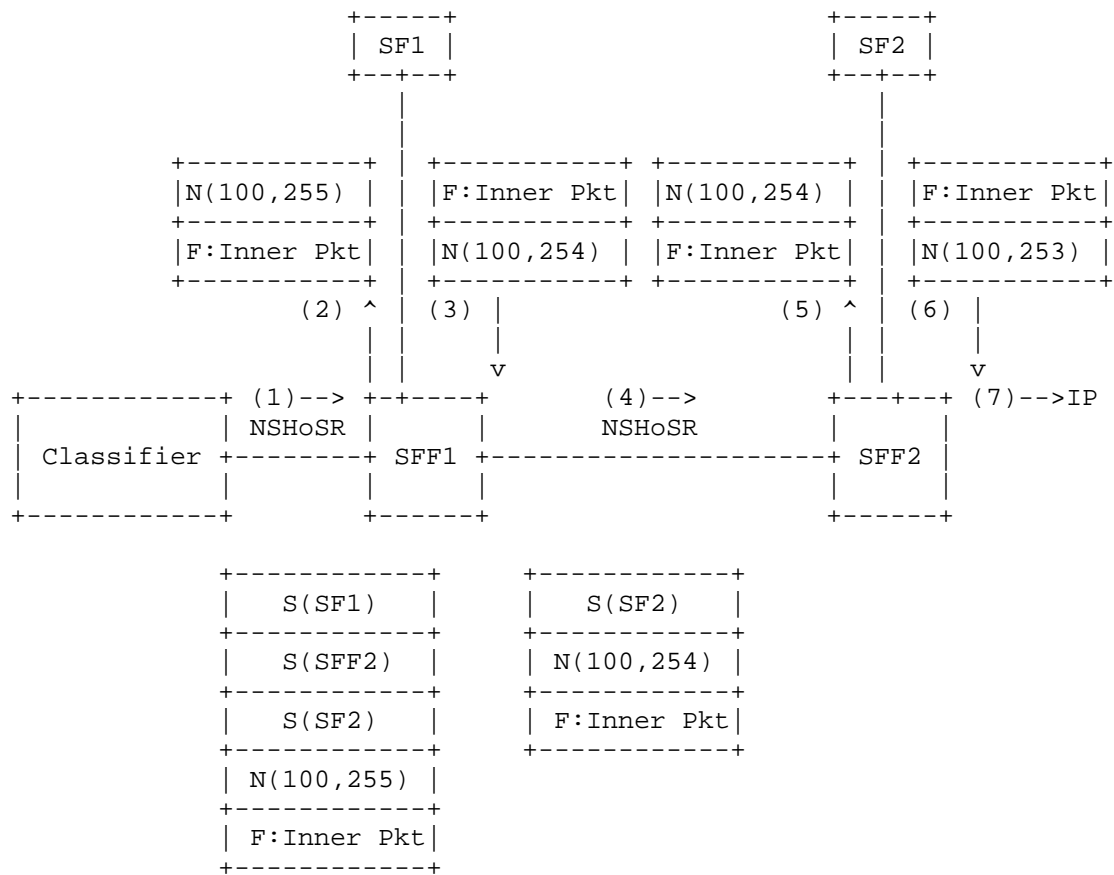


Figure 4: NSH over SR for SFC

The benefits of this scheme include:

- o It is economically sound for SF vendors to only support one unified SFC solution. The SF is unaware of the SR.
- o It simplifies the SFF (i.e., the SR router) by nullifying the needs for re-classification and SR proxy.
- o It provides a unique and standard way to pass metadata to SFs. Note that currently there is no solution for MPLS-SR to carry metadata and there is no solution to pass metadata to SR-unaware SFs.
- o SR is also used for forwarding purposes including between SFFs.

- o It takes advantage of SR to eliminate the NSH forwarding state in SFFs. This applies each time strict or loose SFFs are in use.
- o It requires no interworking as would be the case if MPLS-SR based SFC and NSH-based SFC were deployed as independent mechanisms in different parts of the network.

4. Encapsulation Details

4.1. NSH using MPLS-SR Transport

MPLS-SR instantiates Segment IDs (SIDs) as MPLS labels and therefore the segment routing header is a stack of MPLS labels.

When carrying NSH within an MPLS-SR transport, the full encapsulation headers are as illustrated in Figure 5.

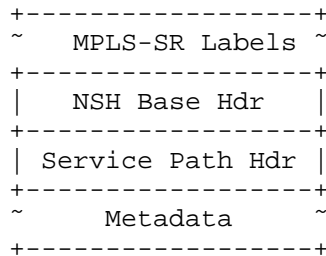


Figure 5: NSH using MPLS-SR Transport

As described in [I-D.ietf-spring-segment-routing] the IGP signaling extension for IGP-Prefix segment includes a flag to indicate whether directly connected neighbors of the node on which the prefix is attached should perform the NEXT operation or the CONTINUE operation when processing the SID. When NSH is carried beneath MPLS-SR it is necessary to terminate the NSH-based SFC at the tail-end node of the MPLS-SR label stack. This is the equivalent of MPLS Ultimate Hop Popping (UHP) and therefore the prefix-SID associated with the tail-end of the SFC MUST be advertised with the CONTINUE operation so that the penultimate hop node does not pop the top label of the MPLS-SR label stack and thereby expose NSH to the wrong SFF. It is RECOMMENDED that a specific prefix-SID be allocated at each node for use by the SFC application for this purpose.

At the end of the MPLS-SR path it is necessary to provide an indication to the tail-end that NSH follows the MPLS-SR label stack.

There are several ways to achieve this but its specification is outside the scope of this document.

4.2. NSH using SRv6 Transport

When carrying NSH within an SRv6 transport the full encapsulation is as illustrated in Figure 6.

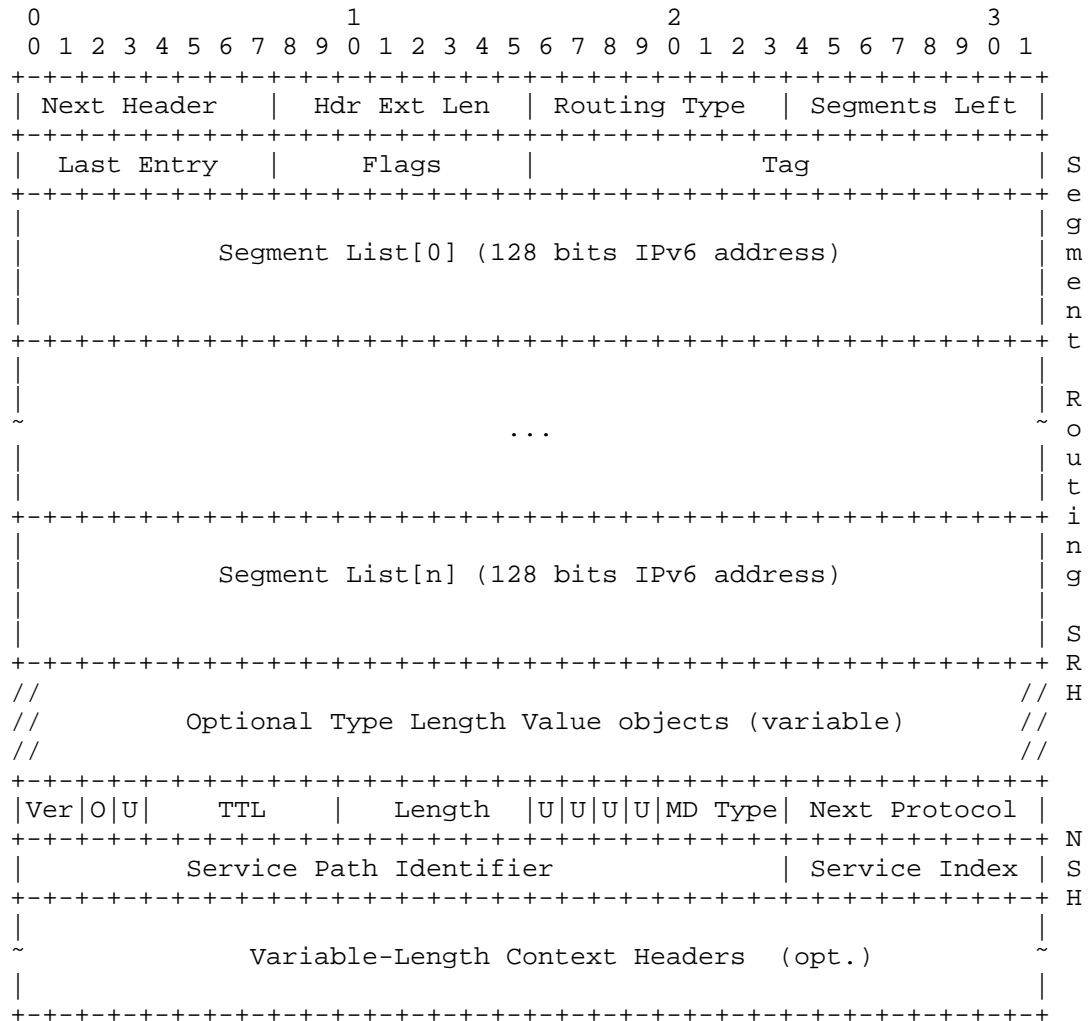


Figure 6: NSH using SRv6 Transport

5. Security Considerations

Generic SFC-related security considerations are discussed in [RFC7665]. NSH-specific security considerations are discussed in [RFC8300].

6. IANA Considerations

This memo includes no request to IANA.

7. Acknowledgments

TBD.

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