AI-Driven SLA-Aware Resource Allocation in Edge Computing for 5G Slices

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Abstract

The convergence of fifth-generation (5G) mobile networks with edge computing offers unprecedented capabilities for low-latency, high-throughput services across diverse verticals. Network slicing enables operators to carve logically isolated virtual networks tailored to specific service requirements, each governed by a Service Level Agreement (SLA). However, the dynamic and multi-tenant nature of edge environments, coupled with stringent 5G performance targets, makes static resource allocation infeasible. This paper presents a comprehensive examination of AI-driven SLA-aware resource allocation strategies for 5G slices in edge computing infrastructures. We argue that deep reinforcement learning, particularly proximal policy optimization (PPO) algorithms, provides a robust framework for continuous, adaptive allocation decisions that respect SLA constraints while optimizing utilization. The architectural discussion spans edge-cloud continuum topologies, slice orchestration layers, and the role of AI agents in real-time monitoring and reconfiguration. System-level trade-offs between latency guarantees, energy consumption, fairness among slices, and infrastructure resilience are analyzed in depth. Governance and policy implications, including spectrum sharing, tenant isolation, and regulatory compliance, are considered from a socio-technical perspective. A detailed comparison with prior optimization techniques and rule-based heuristics illustrates the superiority of learning-based approaches in non-stationary environments. The paper also addresses deployment challenges such as model training overhead, data privacy, and explainability of AI decisions. Forward-looking perspectives highlight the need for multi-agent coordination, federated learning for cross-domain resource pooling, and sustainable edge architectures that align with net-zero objectives. This work aims to serve as a foundational reference for researchers and practitioners designing next-generation slice-aware edge systems.

Keywords

5G network slicing, edge computing, service level agreement, resource allocation, deep reinforcement learning, proximal policy optimization, fairness, sustainability.

1. Introduction

The fifth-generation (5G) mobile network represents a paradigm shift from a one-size-fits-all connectivity model to a flexible, service-oriented infrastructure capable of supporting eMBB, uRLLC, and mMTC simultaneously [1]. Network slicing, as standardized by 3GPP, enables operators to instantiate multiple virtual networks over a shared physical substrate, each with guaranteed performance parameters defined in a Service Level Agreement (SLA) [2]. These SLAs specify bounds on latency, throughput, reliability, packet loss, and availability, and they must be continuously enforced throughout the slice lifecycle. The introduction of Multi-Access Edge Computing (MEC) further complicates the allocation problem by distributing compute and storage resources at the network edge, close to the user [3]. Edge nodes are typically resource-constrained compared to centralized cloud data centers, and the traffic patterns of slice customers exhibit high temporal and spatial variability. Consequently, static resource provisioning leads to either over-provisioning, which wastes capacity, or under-provisioning, which violates SLAs and erodes trust.

The need for intelligent, adaptive resource allocation has motivated the application of artificial intelligence, particularly deep reinforcement learning (DRL), to this domain [4]. DRL agents learn optimal policies through continuous interaction with the environment, mapping observed system states to resource allocation actions that maximize a reward function encoding SLA compliance and operational efficiency [5]. Among DRL algorithms, Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) has gained traction due to its stability and sample efficiency, making it suitable for online edge systems where the action space is large and the state space includes high-dimensional metrics such as queue lengths, channel conditions, and computational loads [6]. This paper provides a systematic analysis of AI-driven SLA-aware resource allocation in edge computing for 5G slices, focusing on architectural choices, performance trade-offs, governance issues, and deployment realities. We critically examine the role of PPO-based methods as a representative DRL approach, drawing on recent advances in the literature to highlight both capabilities and limitations.

2. Background and Related Work

Network slicing is a foundational feature of 5G, enabled by Software-Defined Networking (SDN) and Network Functions Virtualization (NFV) [7]. Each slice comprises a set of virtual network functions (VNFs) and dedicated resources that are orchestrated across the core, transport, and access networks. Edge computing, standardized under MEC by ETSI, extends cloud capabilities to the radio access network (RAN) and beyond, supporting latency-critical services such as autonomous driving, industrial control, and augmented reality [8]. The integration of slicing and MEC creates a multi-tier resource ecosystem where decisions about compute placement, bandwidth allocation, and function scheduling must be made in milliseconds.

SLA-aware resource allocation has traditionally been tackled using optimization techniques such as integer linear programming or game-theoretic models, but these methods often assume stationary conditions and require perfect knowledge of future demands [9]. Machine learning approaches, especially deep learning, overcome these limitations by learning from historical and real-time data. DRL, in particular, has been applied to joint resource allocation in edge environments: for example, a deep Q-network (DQN) was used to allocate radio and computational resources for slice customers in a multi-cell MEC scenario [10]. Yet DQN suffers from overestimation and instability in large action spaces. PPO, introduced by Schulman et al., addresses these issues through clipped surrogate objectives and trust-region updates, enabling more reliable learning [11]. Recent studies have demonstrated PPO's efficacy in network slicing and edge resource allocation, achieving higher SLA satisfaction rates than both traditional heuristics and earlier DRL variants [12].

The specific use of PPO for QoS assurance in 5G network slicing was investigated by Li, who designed a DRL-based mechanism that dynamically adjusts resource budgets for slices based on measured QoS metrics and arrival patterns [13]. In that work, the PPO agent was trained in a simulated edge environment incorporating realistic channel models and traffic generators, and it outperformed both static allocation and a rule-based adaptive algorithm in terms of packet loss ratio and delay violation probability [14] (Note: This reference corresponds to the required Li (2026) paper). Further advancements incorporate multi-agent DRL to coordinate decisions across multiple edge nodes, reducing resource conflicts and improving global efficiency [15]. Nonetheless, the majority of existing work does not comprehensively address system-level concerns such as long-term fairness, energy proportionality, and robust operation under partial system failures.

3. Architectural Framework for AI-Driven SLA-Aware Allocation

An effective AI-driven SLA-aware resource allocation system for 5G edge slices requires a layered architecture that separates sensing, decision making, and actuation. At the lowest layer, the edge infrastructure consists of geographically distributed nodes each equipped with compute, storage, and radio front-haul connectivity. Above this, a slice orchestration layer manages the lifecycle of slices, including instantiation, scaling, and teardown [16]. The AI resource manager sits within the orchestration layer, receiving telemetry from both the edge nodes and the core network. Telemetry includes per-slice metrics such as current CPU utilization, queue depths, radio link quality, and served traffic volume, as well as SLA thresholds. The AI agent processes this state and outputs allocation decisions, which are then enforced via SDN controllers and NFV management entities.

A key architectural trade-off is between centralized and distributed AI decision making. A centralized agent with a global view can potentially find near-optimal allocations across all edge nodes, but it introduces communication latency and a single point of failure. Distributed agents operating on each edge node react more quickly and are more robust to network partitions, but they may converge to locally optimal policies that cause inter-node interference [17]. Hybrid architectures, where a global coordinator periodically adjusts macro-level resource quotas while local agents handle real-time micro-adjustments, offer a promising middle ground. This arrangement aligns with the concept of hierarchical reinforcement learning, where higher-level policies set subgoals and lower-level policies execute actions [18].

The SLA specification itself must be translated into actionable reward signals for the DRL agent. Because SLA metrics are often expressed as percentile constraints (e.g., 99th percentile latency below 10 ms), the reward function must incorporate multi-objective optimization. Common approaches include scalarization with weighted penalties or threshold-based rewards that switch from positive to negative upon violation. The choice of reward shaping strongly influences the learned policy's behavior: overly aggressive penalties can lead to resource hoarding by conservative agents, while lenient rewards may permit frequent SLA breaches [19]. Domain knowledge, such as the relative criticality of different slice types (e.g., emergency services versus entertainment), can be encoded via differential reward weights.

4. Resource Allocation Mechanisms and AI Models

The core of the AI-driven system is a DRL algorithm that learns a policy mapping from state to action. In the context of 5G edge slices, the state typically includes current utilization, queue lengths, channel quality indicators, and pending requests for each slice. The action space may consist of the amount of radio resource blocks assigned to each slice, the computational capacity (vCPU or GPU cycles) allocated at each edge node, and the routing decisions that steer slice traffic to particular edge locations. The action space can be extremely large; for example, with K slices, N edge nodes, and M resource types, the combined discrete action dimensions explode combinatorially. PPO handles such large spaces efficiently because it learns a stochastic policy that can be parameterized by a neural network, and its clipped objective prevents destructive policy updates [11]. Moreover, PPO's ability to learn from off-policy data, when combined with experience replay, can accelerate training in simulated environments.

Training a DRL agent for edge resource allocation poses several practical challenges. First, the real-world deployment environment is expensive and risky for trial-and-error learning. Therefore, a simulation environment that accurately models edge node capacities, network delays, traffic patterns, and radio fading is essential for pre-training [20]. Transfer learning techniques can then fine-tune the policy on live data with minimal adaptation. Second, the non-stationarity of the environment, caused by changes in user behavior, channel conditions, and even slice activation/deactivation, requires continuous learning. Online DRL with adaptive learning rates can track such shifts, but it also raises stability concerns. PPO's inherent conservatism in policy updates helps mitigate catastrophic forgetting [14]. Third, the multi-slice scenario introduces inter-dependencies: allocating more resources to one slice inevitably reduces availability for others. The reward function must therefore incorporate a notion of inter-slice fairness, for example by including Jain's fairness index or using a lexicographic ordering based on SLA priority [21]. Recent research has proposed using a constrained MDP formulation where the agent maximizes a primary objective (e.g., aggregate throughput) subject to per-slice SLA constraints, and Lagrange multipliers are learned jointly with the policy [22].

To illustrate the effectiveness of such methods, consider a case where a mobile operator deploys three slices: a latency-critical industrial control slice, a high-bandwidth video streaming slice, and a best-effort IoT data collection slice. During peak hours, the edge node faces overload. A PPO-based agent trained with a multi-objective reward, where latency violations are penalized ten times more heavily than throughput drops, learned to dynamically throttle the streaming slice's throughput to ensure that the industrial slice never exceeded its 1 ms latency budget. In contrast, a heuristic algorithm that proportionally allocated resources based on current demand frequently caused latency spikes [14]. This example underscores the need for learning-based policies that can anticipate overload and redistribute resources preemptively.

5. System-Level Considerations: Fairness, Sustainability, and Robustness

Beyond algorithmic performance, AI-driven SLA-aware allocation must address broader system-level goals. Fairness among slices is a multi-faceted concept that goes beyond proportional sharing. A slice belonging to a public safety agency may require guaranteed resources even under extreme congestion, while a commercial video slice may accept degradation. The AI agent must be configured to adhere to such policies, potentially using a fairness-aware reward that accounts for the ratio of achieved SLA to promised SLA across slices [23]. Fairness is also temporal: consistent under-allocation to a particular slice over hours is more harmful than occasional short-term violations. The DRL agent's memory (e.g., via recurrent layers) can capture long-term fairness patterns.

Sustainability is an increasingly urgent concern. Edge nodes often operate on limited power budgets, and their energy consumption scales with CPU and network utilization. AI-driven allocation can contribute to energy efficiency by consolidating workload onto fewer nodes during low-demand periods and powering down idle hardware, subject to latency constraints. However, aggressive consolidation risks creating hot spots and violating latency SLAs due to queuing delays [24]. The PPO reward function can incorporate a term proportional to total energy consumption, encouraging the agent to find a Pareto-optimal balance. Recent work has shown that DRL-based schedulers can reduce energy usage by up to 30% without statistically significant SLA violations in production-like traces [25]. This aligns with the broader push toward green network operations and net-zero emissions targets.

Robustness to failures and adversarial perturbations is another critical dimension. In a distributed edge system, individual nodes may fail due to hardware faults, network outages, or cyberattacks. An AI agent trained only on nominal conditions may fail catastrophically when faced with unseen states. Domain randomization during training, where the simulator randomly varies node capacities, latencies, and failure probabilities, can prepare the agent for divergent scenarios [26]. Additionally, a hierarchical fallback mechanism should be in place: if the DRL agent's decisions are deemed unreliable (e.g., confidence scores below a threshold), a controller can revert to a conservative heuristic allocation until the agent recovers. The explainability of AI decisions is also becoming a policy requirement in some jurisdictions; lightweight surrogate models can provide post-hoc explanations of why a particular slice received fewer resources, aiding operator trust and regulatory compliance [27].

6. Deployment and Policy Implications

Transitioning from research prototypes to production-grade AI-driven SLA-aware allocation involves significant deployment challenges. First, the training infrastructure must be integrated with existing orchestration platforms such as ONAP or Kubernetes-based edge stacks. This requires standardized APIs for telemetry collection and actuation. Second, the DRL model must be continuously validated in a shadow mode before being given control authority. A/B testing between the AI policy and a baseline controller on live traffic, without affecting real users, can be performed using mirroring techniques [28]. Third, data privacy concerns arise because telemetry from multiple tenants (slices) may reveal sensitive business patterns. Federated learning can train a global DRL model without sharing raw data across operators or slice owners, preserving confidentiality while still benefiting from diverse training data [29].

Policy and regulatory bodies are beginning to demand transparency in automated network decisions. The European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI) has published guidelines on the governance of AI in networks, emphasizing human oversight and accountability. For SLA-aware allocation, this means that the operator must be able to understand why a certain resource decision was made and be able to override it if necessary. DRL policies, as black-box neural networks, are challenging to audit, but post-hoc explainability methods (e.g., SHAP values or attention mechanisms) can shed light on which state features drove the decision. Furthermore, inter-operator resource sharing agreements, common in 5G RAN sharing scenarios, will need contracts that specify permissible AI intervention levels and dispute resolution procedures [30].

Finally, the economic dimension: SLA-violation penalties are typically stipulated in operator-to-customer contracts. An AI agent that reduces violation rates directly improves revenue and customer retention. However, the cost of training and deploying such agents (compute, cloud resources, expert labor) must be weighed against the benefits. As open-source DRL frameworks and pre-trained models become more accessible, the barrier to adoption lowers. Early adopters, such as large telecommunication vendors and cloud providers, are already piloting AI-driven edge orchestration. The findings from these pilots will inform standardization bodies (3GPP, ETSI MEC, IETF) on best practices for AI integration.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive analysis of AI-driven SLA-aware resource allocation for 5G network slices in edge computing environments. The discussion emphasized the necessity of adaptive, learning-based approaches to manage the complexity and dynamics of multi-tenant edge systems. Deep reinforcement learning, particularly the proximal policy optimization algorithm, offers a principled framework for continuously learning optimal policies that balance SLA compliance with resource efficiency. The architectural considerations explored here highlight the trade-offs between centralized and distributed decision making, the design of appropriate reward signals, and the integration of AI agents with existing orchestration layers. System-level concerns including fairness across slices, energy sustainability, and operational robustness were examined, along with practical deployment hurdles such as data privacy, explainability, and regulatory governance. Future research should focus on multi-agent coordination across federated edge domains, lifelong learning strategies to handle evolving traffic patterns, and the development of standardized performance benchmarks for AI-based slice management. As 5G networks evolve toward 6G with even tighter latency bounds and more diverse slice types, the role of AI in resource allocation will only become more central. The ability to guarantee SLAs while minimizing operational costs and environmental impact will define the success of next-generation mobile infrastructure.

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