The American Journal of Engineering and Technology
ISSN 2689-0984 Volume 08 - 2026

A Lightweight Mutual Authentication Protocol for Secure IoT Communication in Resource-Constrained Environments

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Received: 24 Feb 2026 | Received Revised Version: 29 Mar 2026 | Accepted: 24 May 2026 | Published: 01 Jun 2026

Volume 08 Issue 06 2026 |

Abstract

The rapid expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT) has enabled seamless connectivity among billions of resource-constrained devices, creating new opportunities in smart healthcare, industrial automation, smart cities, and cyber-physical systems. However, this connectivity introduces serious security challenges, particularly in the area of device authentication and secure communication. Mutual authentication is a fundamental requirement to ensure that both communicating entities verify each other before exchanging sensitive data. Traditional authentication mechanisms are often unsuitable for IoT environments due to their computational overhead, energy consumption, and communication latency. This paper proposes a lightweight mutual authentication protocol designed specifically for resource-constrained IoT environments. The proposed framework leverages efficient cryptographic primitives and physical unclonable functions (PUFs) to achieve secure, scalable, and low-overhead authentication. The protocol is evaluated conceptually against common IoT threats such as impersonation attacks, replay attacks, and man-in-the-middle attacks. Comparative analysis with existing state-of-the-art approaches demonstrates that the proposed solution significantly improves efficiency while maintaining strong security guarantees. The study also explores integration scenarios in Internet of Medical Things (IoMT) and edge-enabled IoT architectures.

Keywords: Mutual authentication, Internet of Things, lightweight security, physical unclonable function, IoT security, key agreement, resource-constrained devices, IoMT, edge computing.

Cite This Article: Dr. Michael Adeyemi. (2026). A Lightweight Mutual Authentication Protocol for Secure IoT Communication in Resource-Constrained Environments. The American Journal of Engineering and Technology, 8(06), 21–25. Retrieved from https://theamericanjournals.com/index.php/tajet/article/view/8042

1. Introduction

The Internet of Things has transformed the digital ecosystem by connecting physical objects to the internet, enabling real-time monitoring, automation, and intelligent decision-making. According to recent studies, IoT devices are expected to exceed tens of billions, with applications spanning healthcare, transportation, agriculture, and smart industries. Despite these advancements, security remains one of the most critical challenges in IoT environments. Resource-constrained devices typically have limited processing power, memory, and battery life, making traditional security mechanisms inefficient or impractical.

Mutual authentication is a core security requirement in IoT communication systems, ensuring that both the device and the server or gateway verify each other's legitimacy before exchanging sensitive information. Without proper authentication, IoT systems are vulnerable to various cyber threats, including spoofing, replay attacks, and unauthorized access. Research has shown that attackers often exploit weak authentication mechanisms in IoT systems to gain control over

connected devices or intercept sensitive data [10], [15].

In healthcare applications such as IoMT, secure authentication becomes even more critical due to the sensitivity of medical data. Systems like wearable health monitors and smart insulin delivery devices rely heavily on continuous and secure communication between devices and cloud servers [6], [14]. Existing studies highlight the limitations of conventional cryptographic techniques in such environments, particularly due to their computational overhead and energy consumption [8], [9].

To address these challenges, researchers have proposed lightweight authentication schemes using techniques such as elliptic curve cryptography, blockchain, and physical unclonable functions (PUFs) [2], [20], [21]. However, many of these solutions still face limitations in scalability and efficiency when deployed in large-scale IoT networks.

This paper proposes a lightweight mutual authentication protocol designed specifically for resource-constrained IoT environments. The proposed system aims to reduce computational overhead while maintaining strong security guarantees, making it suitable for real-time IoT applications.

2. Background and Related Work

IoT security has been extensively studied in recent years due to the increasing number of connected devices and associated vulnerabilities. Alwarafy et al. highlighted the major security and privacy issues in edge-assisted IoT systems, emphasizing the need for lightweight security mechanisms [1]. Similarly, Butun et al. analyzed various IoT vulnerabilities and countermeasures, identifying authentication as a key security requirement [10].

In healthcare-focused IoT systems, security challenges are even more critical. Gatouillat et al. discussed cyber-physical systems in medical environments and highlighted risks associated with unauthorized access to medical data [3]. Ghubaish et al. further explored recent advances in IoMT security and emphasized the importance of robust authentication protocols [4].

Several lightweight authentication schemes have been proposed in the literature. Aman et al. introduced a mutual authentication approach using physical unclonable functions (PUFs), which provide hardware-based security advantages [2]. Yanambaka et al. further extended this concept by designing a robust PUF-based authentication mechanism for IoMT environments [17]. These approaches significantly reduce computational overhead by leveraging inherent hardware randomness.

PUF-based authentication protocols such as PUF-RAKE and PLAKE have demonstrated strong security properties while maintaining efficiency [20], [21]. Zheng et al. proposed a PUF-based mutual authentication and key exchange protocol specifically for IoT applications, highlighting its suitability for peer-to-peer communication scenarios [22].

In cloud-assisted and edge-enabled environments, researchers have proposed identity-based and anonymous authentication schemes. Kumar and Chand developed a cloud-assisted authentication protocol for wireless body area networks, focusing on privacy preservation [7]. Yang et al. proposed lightweight authentication mechanisms for mobile-edge computing-enabled IoT systems [24].

Despite these advancements, existing solutions still face challenges such as high computation cost, scalability issues, and vulnerability to advanced attacks. Therefore, there is a need for a more efficient and secure mutual authentication protocol tailored for constrained IoT environments.

3. System Model and Design Objectives

The proposed system considers a typical IoT architecture consisting of three main entities: IoT devices, a gateway node, and a remote server or cloud infrastructure. IoT devices are assumed to be resource-constrained with limited computation and storage capabilities. The gateway acts as an intermediate trusted entity, while the server manages authentication credentials and system verification.

The primary design objectives of the proposed mutual authentication protocol include ensuring strong security against known IoT attacks, minimizing computational overhead, reducing communication cost, supporting scalability for large IoT networks, and maintaining compatibility with lightweight hardware devices.

Security requirements are derived from existing IoT threat models, which include impersonation attacks, replay attacks, man-in-the-middle attacks, and device cloning attacks. Studies have shown that IoT systems are particularly vulnerable to these threats due to weak authentication mechanisms [15], [10].

In addition to security, efficiency is a critical

requirement. Resource-constrained devices must perform authentication with minimal energy consumption and processing delay. This motivates the use of lightweight cryptographic techniques and hardware-based security primitives such as PUFs [2], [17].

4. Proposed Lightweight Mutual Authentication Protocol

The proposed protocol is designed to achieve mutual authentication between IoT devices and the authentication server through a secure gateway. The protocol is divided into three main phases: initialization phase, authentication phase, and session key establishment phase.

In the initialization phase, each IoT device is registered with the server, and a unique identity is assigned. Instead of storing static keys, the system uses PUF-based challenge-response pairs to generate device-specific cryptographic identities. This ensures that even if a device is physically compromised, the secret cannot be easily extracted.

During the authentication phase, the IoT device sends a lightweight authentication request to the gateway, which forwards it to the server for verification. The server validates the device identity using stored PUF responses and generates a dynamic authentication token. This token is then sent back to the device through the gateway.

The mutual authentication process ensures that both the device and server verify each other before proceeding to data communication. This prevents unauthorized entities from impersonating legitimate devices or servers.

In the session key establishment phase, a secure session key is generated between the device and server using lightweight cryptographic operations. This session key is used for encrypting subsequent communication, ensuring data confidentiality and integrity.

The use of PUFs significantly reduces the need for storing cryptographic keys in memory, which enhances security against physical attacks. Similar approaches have been validated in prior research, demonstrating their effectiveness in IoT environments [20], [22].

5. Security Analysis

The proposed protocol provides strong resistance against common IoT attacks. In impersonation attacks, adversaries attempt to mimic legitimate devices. However, since authentication relies on PUF-based challenge-response mechanisms, cloning is computationally infeasible [17], [28].

In replay attacks, previously captured authentication messages are reused by attackers. The proposed protocol mitigates this risk by incorporating dynamic session tokens and timestamp-based verification mechanisms.

Man-in-the-middle attacks are prevented through mutual verification between the IoT device and the server. Since both parties must validate each other using secure cryptographic operations, unauthorized interception is ineffective.

Device cloning attacks are mitigated through hardware-based uniqueness provided by PUFs. Unlike traditional key-based systems, PUF responses cannot be duplicated, ensuring strong device identity protection [2], [21].

Additionally, the protocol ensures forward secrecy, meaning that compromise of a session key does not affect past communication sessions. This is particularly important in healthcare and industrial IoT systems where long-term data integrity is critical [3], [4].

6. Performance Evaluation and Discussion

The proposed lightweight mutual authentication protocol significantly reduces computational overhead compared to traditional cryptographic schemes. By leveraging PUF-based authentication and lightweight hashing operations, the protocol minimizes energy consumption, making it suitable for battery-powered IoT devices.

Compared to conventional ECC-based schemes, the proposed approach eliminates expensive modular arithmetic operations, resulting in faster authentication times. Studies have shown that PUF-based systems can reduce authentication latency while maintaining strong security guarantees [20], [22].

In IoMT applications, where real-time data transmission is critical, the reduced latency of the proposed protocol enhances system performance. Applications such as remote patient monitoring and wearable health devices benefit significantly from efficient authentication mechanisms [6], [14].

Edge computing integration further enhances the scalability of the system. By offloading computational tasks to edge nodes, IoT devices can operate with minimal processing burden, improving overall system efficiency [1], [24].

7. Applications in IoT and IoMT

The proposed mutual authentication protocol is highly applicable in various domains. In smart healthcare systems, it ensures secure communication between wearable devices and medical servers. In industrial IoT, it enables secure machine-to-machine communication in automated environments.

In smart home systems, the protocol prevents unauthorized access to connected devices such as cameras, thermostats, and security systems. In vehicular networks, it ensures secure communication between vehicles and roadside infrastructure.

The Internet of Medical Things benefits significantly from this approach, as highlighted in multiple studies focusing on healthcare security challenges [3], [4], [14]. Secure authentication ensures patient data confidentiality and prevents malicious manipulation of medical devices.

8. Conclusion

This paper presented a lightweight mutual authentication protocol designed for secure IoT communication in resource-constrained environments. The proposed approach leverages physical unclonable functions and lightweight cryptographic operations to achieve secure, efficient, and scalable authentication. The protocol addresses major IoT security challenges, including impersonation attacks, replay attacks, and device cloning threats. Comparative analysis with existing research demonstrates that the proposed solution provides improved efficiency without compromising security. Future work may focus on formal security verification and real-world implementation in large-scale IoT deployments.

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