



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



DEEP REINFORCEMENT LEARNING-BASED DYNAMIC SPECTRUM ACCESS FOR 6G HETEROGENEOUS COGNITIVE RADIO NETWORKS

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Global Journal of Engineering and Technology Advances, 2026, 28(02), 129–135

Publication history: Received on 04 July 2026; revised on 16 August 2026; accepted on 18 August 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/gjeta.2026.28.2.0215>

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of heterogeneous radio access technologies in sixth-generation (6G) wireless networks demands a fundamental rethinking of spectrum management strategies. Traditional spectrum sensing approaches, designed for relatively static channel conditions, are inadequate for the dynamic, interference-rich environments that characterize 6G deployments spanning sub-6 GHz, millimetre-wave, and terahertz bands simultaneously. This paper proposes a Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL)-based framework for dynamic spectrum access in 6G heterogeneous Cognitive Radio Networks (Het-CRNs), wherein secondary users (SUs) learn optimal channel selection policies through direct interaction with the radio environment, without requiring explicit statistical channel models. Specifically, a Double Deep Q-Network (DDQN) architecture is adopted, augmented with a prioritized experience replay mechanism that accelerates policy convergence under non-stationary channel conditions. The proposed agent observes a composite state space encoding instantaneous channel occupancy, signal-to-interference-plus-noise ratio (SINR), primary user (PU) activity patterns, and residual energy levels, and selects actions that jointly optimize spectrum utilization efficiency, interference avoidance, and energy consumption. Simulation experiments conducted over a heterogeneous network topology with four primary users and eight secondary users demonstrate that the proposed DDQN-based scheme achieves a throughput gain of approximately 34% over conventional energy detection-based sensing, reduces interference to primary users by 61%, and attains a detection probability of 0.94 at a false alarm rate of 0.05. These results confirm the practical viability of DRL as a spectrum management backbone for next-generation cognitive radio systems.

Keywords: Cognitive Radio Networks, Deep Reinforcement Learning, Dynamic Spectrum Access, 6g Wireless, Double DQN, Spectrum Sensing, Heterogeneous Networks.

1 INTRODUCTION

The global demand for wireless connectivity has grown at an unprecedented pace over the past decade, driven by the concurrent expansion of machine-type communications, enhanced mobile broadband services, and ultra-reliable low-latency applications. Industry projections consistently estimate that mobile data traffic will exceed 5,000 exabytes per

month by 2030 [1], a target that existing fourth- and fifth-generation (4G/5G) infrastructure cannot sustain under current static spectrum allocation policies. The forthcoming sixth-generation (6G) wireless standard, expected to see commercial deployment between 2028 and 2030, is accordingly designed around a multi-band, heterogeneous architecture that simultaneously exploits sub-6 GHz bands for wide-area coverage, millimetre-wave (mmWave) frequencies for high-throughput dense deployments, and terahertz (THz) channels for ultra-wideband short-range links [2].

Cognitive Radio (CR) technology, originally conceived by Mitola and Maguire [3] as a mechanism for opportunistic spectrum reuse, remains among the most promising candidates for addressing spectral congestion. A CR-enabled secondary user monitors the radio environment and accesses licensed spectrum bands during periods of primary user inactivity, thereby improving overall spectrum utilization without causing harmful interference. The effectiveness of any CR system, however, is fundamentally conditioned by the quality of its spectrum sensing and decision-making subsystems. In conventional CR implementations, sensing is typically realized through energy detection, matched filter detection, or cyclostationary feature analysis [4]. Whereas these methods perform adequately under high signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) conditions and slowly varying channels, they degrade substantially in the interference-rich, rapidly time-varying environments that will be characteristic of 6G heterogeneous networks.

The integration of machine learning into cognitive radio systems has attracted considerable research attention as a means of overcoming these limitations. Reinforcement learning (RL), in particular, is well-suited to the sequential decision-making nature of dynamic spectrum access: an agent interacts with the radio environment, receives feedback in the form of reward signals reflecting transmission success and interference levels, and progressively refines its channel selection policy. The introduction of deep neural networks as function approximators within the RL framework, giving rise to Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL), has substantially extended the scalability of this approach to environments with large, continuous state spaces [5]. DQN-family algorithms [6], actor-critic methods such as Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO) [7], and multi-agent extensions of these frameworks have all demonstrated encouraging results in spectrum management contexts, though their application to the specific challenges posed by 6G heterogeneous architectures remains comparatively underexplored.

This paper addresses that gap directly. The principal contributions of the present work are as follows:

- I. A DRL-based dynamic spectrum access framework tailored to 6G Het-CRNs, wherein the sensing agent simultaneously manages channel selection across sub-6 GHz and mmWave bands;
- II. A Double DQN architecture with prioritized experience replay, which mitigates overestimation bias and accelerates convergence under non-stationary channel conditions;
- III. A composite reward function that jointly penalizes interference to primary users and unnecessary energy expenditure, moving beyond throughput-only optimization;
- IV. A systematic simulation study comparing the proposed scheme against energy detection, Q-learning, and standard DQN baselines across a range of SNR conditions and network loads.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section II reviews relevant prior work. Section III describes the system model and problem formulation. Section IV details the proposed DDQN-based algorithm. Section V presents simulation results and comparative analysis. Section VI concludes the paper and identifies directions for future work.

2 RELATED WORK

Research at the intersection of cognitive radio and machine learning has evolved through several distinct phases. Early work in the field applied tabular Q-learning to channel selection problems in multi-channel CR systems. Lai et al. [8] formulated spectrum access as a multi-armed bandit problem and demonstrated that an SU could asymptotically learn the optimal sensing order without prior knowledge of channel statistics. While theoretically elegant, bandit-based approaches scale poorly with the number of channels and fail to generalize across heterogeneous network configurations.

The application of deep neural networks to CR sensing was substantially advanced by Wang et al. [9], who proposed a DQN-based spectrum access scheme for single-band CR networks. Their agent learned to distinguish between idle and occupied channels from raw SINR measurements, achieving near-optimal throughput in simulated environments with up to eight channels. Subsequent work by Naparstek and Cohen [10] extended this formulation to multi-channel environments, employing a convolutional neural network to process the joint occupancy state of all monitored channels simultaneously. These contributions, while foundational, were evaluated exclusively under 4G-type channel models and did not account for the cross-band heterogeneity or THz propagation characteristics relevant to 6G scenarios.

Efforts to address the non-stationarity of wireless channels within the DRL framework have led to several architectural refinements. The Double DQN (DDQN) formulation proposed by van Hasselt et al. [11] decouples action selection from value estimation, substantially reducing the overestimation bias that destabilizes standard DQN training in environments with sparse or delayed rewards. Prioritized experience replay [12] complements this by assigning higher sampling probability to transitions associated with large temporal-difference errors, thereby making more efficient use of stored experiences. Both techniques have been incorporated into subsequent CR-oriented work, though typically in isolation rather than combination.

Multi-agent DRL (MADRL) extensions for CR networks have been explored by several groups. Zhong et al. [13] trained a team of SUs to cooperatively sense and access a shared spectrum pool using an independent Q-learning framework, reporting significant throughput improvements over non-cooperative baselines. The coordination overhead in MADRL systems, however, grows with network scale, motivating interest in centralized training with decentralized execution architectures [14]. In the 6G context specifically, recent work has begun examining the role of DRL in beam management [15] and THz link maintenance [16], but explicit integration with CR spectrum access policy learning remains limited.

The present work distinguishes itself from prior art in three respects: it targets the multi-band heterogeneous architecture of 6G networks, it combines DDQN with prioritized experience replay within a single coherent framework, and it employs a reward signal that explicitly accounts for both interference impact and energy expenditure. This combination has not, to the best of the authors' knowledge, been previously evaluated in a 6G Het-CRN setting.

3 SYSTEM MODEL AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

3.1 Network Architecture

We consider a heterogeneous cognitive radio network consisting of N_p primary users (PUs) and N_s secondary users (SUs), coexisting within a multi-band radio environment comprising K available channels. The channels are distributed across two frequency tiers: K_1 sub-6 GHz channels and K_2 mmWave channels, with $K = K_1 + K_2$. Primary users are licensed incumbents with priority access to all K channels. Secondary users are cognitive devices equipped with wideband spectrum sensing capability and a DRL-based decision engine. A central base station (CBS) serves as a softcoded coordinator, collecting aggregate interference measurements and periodically broadcasting coarse channel occupancy maps to SUs; fine-grained sensing and access decisions, however, remain the responsibility of individual SUs acting as independent DRL agents.

For the present study, we set $N_p = 4$, $N_s = 8$, $K_1 = 6$, and $K_2 = 4$, giving $K = 10$ channels in total. PU activity on each channel follows an independent ON-OFF process modeled as a two-state discrete-time Markov chain with transition probabilities α (idle-to-busy) and β (busy-to-idle). Sub-6 GHz channels are modeled with Rayleigh flat fading, while mmWave channels employ a Saleh-Valenzuela cluster model reflecting the higher path loss and directional propagation characteristics of mmWave propagation.

3.2 Channel and Sensing Model

At each discrete time slot t , the state of channel k is denoted by $s_k(t) \in \{0, 1\}$, where $s_k(t) = 0$ indicates the channel is idle (PU absent) and $s_k(t) = 1$ indicates it is occupied (PU active). An SU performing energy detection on channel k measures the received signal energy and compares it against a threshold λ , yielding a binary sensing decision $d_k(t) \in \{0, 1\}$. Two types of sensing errors can occur: a false alarm, in which $d_k(t) = 1$ when $s_k(t) = 0$, occurring with probability P_{FA} ; and a missed detection, in which $d_k(t) = 0$ when $s_k(t) = 1$, occurring with probability P_{MD} . These quantities are related to the detection probability $P_D = 1 - P_{MD}$ and are governed by the SNR at the SU receiver and the number of sensing samples collected per slot.

The received SNR at SU i on channel k is defined as $\gamma_{ik} = (P_t \cdot |h_{ik}|^2) / (\sigma^2 + I_{ik})$, where P_t is the PU transmit power, h_{ik} is the complex channel gain between PU and SU i on channel k , σ^2 is the noise variance, and I_{ik} represents aggregate co-channel interference from other active SUs. The sensing duration per slot is τ , during which $N_s = \tau \cdot f_s$ samples are collected, with f_s denoting the sampling frequency.

3.3 Problem Formulation

The objective of each SU agent is to learn a policy $\pi: S \rightarrow A$ that maximizes the long-run discounted cumulative reward, formally expressed as:

$$J(\pi) = E\pi \left[\sum_{t=0}^{\infty} \gamma^t \cdot r(t+\tau) \mid s(t) \right]$$

where $\gamma \in (0, 1)$ is the discount factor controlling the trade-off between immediate and future rewards, and $r(t)$ is the scalar reward received at time slot t . The state space S and action space A , together with the reward structure, are detailed in the following section.

4 PROPOSED DDQN-BASED SPECTRUM ACCESS FRAMEWORK

4.1 State, Action, and Reward Design

State Space: At each time slot t , the composite state vector observed by SU i is defined as $s(t) = [\Psi(t), \gamma_i(t), E_i(t), \Phi(t)]$, where $\Psi(t) = [d_1(t), d_2(t), \dots, d_k(t)]$ is the K -dimensional binary sensing vector encoding the perceived occupancy of all channels; $\gamma_i(t)$ is the vector of measured SINRs on sensed-idle channels; $E_i(t)$ is the normalized residual energy level of SU i ; and $\Phi(t)$ is a short-term PU activity estimate computed from a sliding window of the previous $L = 10$ sensing decisions on each channel.

Action Space: At each slot, the agent selects an action $a(t)$ from the discrete set $A = \{1, 2, \dots, K, K+1\}$, where actions 1 through K correspond to accessing the respective channel and action $K+1$ represents deferral (no transmission in the current slot). The deferral action allows the agent to conserve energy or wait for a higher-quality channel opportunity without incurring an interference penalty.

Reward Function: The scalar reward signal $r(t)$ is designed to simultaneously incentivize successful transmission, penalize interference to primary users, and discourage excessive energy expenditure:

$$r(t) = \alpha_1 \cdot T(t) - \alpha_2 \cdot I(t) - \alpha_3 \cdot E_{tot}(t)$$

where $T(t)$ is the normalized achievable throughput on the selected channel (set to zero if the channel is found occupied post-access); $I(t)$ is a binary interference indicator equal to 1 if the SU transmission collides with an active PU; and $E_{tot}(t)$ is the energy consumed in the current slot. Weights $\alpha_1 = 1.0$, $\alpha_2 = 2.0$, and $\alpha_3 = 0.3$ are assigned empirically, with the heavier penalty on interference reflecting the primary protection requirement of CR systems.

4.2 Double DQN Architecture with Prioritized Experience Replay

Standard DQN employs a single neural network $Q(s, a; \theta)$ to simultaneously select and evaluate actions, which introduces a systematic overestimation bias that can destabilize learning in sparse-reward environments. DDQN resolves this by decoupling selection from evaluation: the online network $Q(s, a; \theta)$ selects the greedy action, while a periodically synchronized target network $Q(s, a; \theta^-)$ evaluates the selected action's value. The resulting TD target is:

$$y(t) = r(t) + \gamma \cdot Q(s', \arg\max_a Q(s', a; \theta); \theta^-)$$

The online network $Q(s, a; \theta)$ is implemented as a fully connected feedforward neural network with three hidden layers of 256, 128, and 64 neurons respectively, all employing ReLU activations. The output layer produces Q -value estimates for each of the $K+1$ actions. Network weights are updated by minimizing the mean squared TD error using the Adam optimizer with a learning rate of 1×10^{-4} .

Experiences $(s(t), a(t), r(t), s(t+1))$ are stored in a prioritized replay buffer of capacity $C = 50,000$. Each transition is assigned a priority $p_i = |\delta_i| + \epsilon$, where δ_i is the TD error at the time of storage and $\epsilon = 0.01$ is a small constant ensuring all transitions retain non-zero sampling probability. Sampling is performed with probability proportional to p_i^α , with importance sampling weights used to correct for the introduced bias. This mechanism ensures that transitions from which the agent can still learn substantially are revisited more frequently, accelerating convergence relative to uniform random replay.

The target network parameters θ^- are synchronized with the online network every $C_{sync} = 500$ steps. Exploration follows an ϵ -greedy policy with ϵ decaying exponentially from 1.0 to 0.05 over 10,000 training steps, after which the policy operates greedily. A batch size of 64 is drawn from the replay buffer at each training step, and training commences after the buffer contains at least 1,000 transitions.

4.3 Algorithm Summary

Algorithm 1: DDQN-based Dynamic Spectrum Access

- Input: K channels, N_s SUs, γ , ϵ_{start} , ϵ_{end} , C , C_{sync} , $batch_size$
- Initialize: $Q(s,a;\theta)$ randomly; $Q(s,a;\theta^-) \leftarrow Q(s,a;\theta)$; replay buffer D
- for each episode do
- Observe initial state $s(0)$

- for $t = 0, 1, 2, \dots$ do
- Select $a(t) = \operatorname{argmax} Q(s,a;\theta)$ with prob. $1-\epsilon$; random otherwise
- Execute $a(t)$; observe $r(t), s(t+1)$
- Store $(s(t), a(t), r(t), s(t+1))$ in D with priority $|TD \text{ error}|$
- Sample batch from D via prioritized sampling
- Compute DDQN targets; update θ via Adam
- Every C_sync steps: $\theta^- \leftarrow \theta$
- Decay ϵ exponentially
- end for

5 SIMULATION RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Simulation Setup

All experiments were implemented in Python 3.10 using PyTorch 2.1. The simulated network topology places four PUs and eight SUs uniformly at random within a $500 \times 500 \text{ m}^2$ area. PU Markov chain parameters are set to $\alpha = 0.3$ and $\beta = 0.7$, yielding an average channel occupancy of approximately 30%, consistent with empirical measurements of licensed spectrum utilization in urban environments [17]. Simulation runs extend for 50,000 time slots per experiment, with performance metrics averaged over 10 independent trials with different random seeds to account for stochastic variability.

Four baseline methods are evaluated alongside the proposed scheme: (i) Random Access, in which the SU selects a channel uniformly at random at each slot; (ii) Energy Detection (ED) with fixed threshold, representing the conventional sensing approach; (iii) Tabular Q-Learning with a discretized state space; and (iv) Standard DQN, identical to the proposed architecture but without DDQN decoupling or prioritized replay. This progression of baselines isolates the contribution of each algorithmic component.

5.2 Throughput Performance

Table 1 summarizes the average throughput achieved by each method across three SNR regimes: low (0–5 dB), medium (5–15 dB), and high (15–25 dB). At medium SNR, which most closely reflects practical operating conditions, the proposed DDQN scheme achieves a normalized throughput of 0.81, compared to 0.72 for standard DQN, 0.60 for Q-learning, 0.48 for energy detection, and 0.31 for random access. The gain of 34% over energy detection is particularly significant given that ED remains the dominant practical sensing mechanism in deployed CR systems.

Table 1: Normalized Throughput Comparison Across SNR Regimes

Method	Low SNR (0–5 dB)	Med SNR (5–15 dB)	High SNR (15–25 dB)	Avg. PU Interf. Rate
Random Access	0.19	0.31	0.38	0.22
Energy Detection	0.31	0.48	0.61	0.18
Q-Learning	0.39	0.60	0.72	0.12
Standard DQN	0.51	0.72	0.84	0.09
Proposed DDQN	0.64	0.81	0.93	0.07

5.3 Receiver Operating Characteristic Analysis

The detection reliability of the proposed sensing scheme is characterized through its receiver operating characteristic (ROC), which plots detection probability P_D as a function of false alarm probability P_{FA} . At an operating point of $P_{FA} = 0.05$, the proposed DDQN agent achieves $P_D = 0.94$, compared to 0.88 for standard DQN, 0.79 for Q-learning, and 0.71 for energy detection. The superior detection performance of the DRL-based methods derives from their ability to exploit temporal correlation in PU activity patterns, which energy detection, being a memoryless single-shot test, cannot leverage. The DDQN agent's slight advantage over standard DQN at low false alarm rates reflects the stability gains of DDQN training, which produces a more reliable policy in the high-stakes regime where both false alarms and missed detections are costly.

5.4 Convergence Analysis

Convergence behavior across training episodes is a practically important characteristic, as it determines the time required for an SU to become operationally useful following deployment. The proposed DDQN with prioritized replay

converges to within 5% of its asymptotic performance level after approximately 8,000 training steps, compared to 14,000 steps for standard DQN and over 25,000 steps for tabular Q-learning. The acceleration attributable to prioritized experience replay is particularly pronounced in the early training phase (0–2,000 steps), where the policy transitions from near-random to near-greedy behavior significantly faster than uniform replay. This is a practically consequential finding: in dynamic spectrum environments where channel statistics may shift gradually over time, a faster-converging policy can adapt to environmental changes without extended periods of suboptimal performance.

5.5 Energy Efficiency and Interference Mitigation

Energy efficiency, measured as information bits successfully delivered per joule of energy consumed (bits/J), favors the proposed scheme across all operating conditions. At medium SNR, the DDQN agent achieves an energy efficiency of 4.3 Mbts/J, compared to 3.1 Mbts/J for standard DQN and 1.8 Mbts/J for energy detection. The energy gain is attributable to two mechanisms: first, the composite reward function's explicit penalization of sensing energy expenditure discourages unnecessary channel polling; second, the higher throughput per access event means that the energy cost of each transmission slot is amortized over more successfully delivered information.

The proposed scheme also achieves the lowest interference rate to primary users (0.07) among all evaluated methods, as shown in Table 1. This figure represents the fraction of time slots in which an SU transmission collides with an active PU. The 61% reduction in interference relative to energy detection (0.18) confirms that the DRL agent has effectively internalized the primary protection constraint embedded in the reward function.

6 CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a Double Deep Q-Network framework for dynamic spectrum access in 6G heterogeneous cognitive radio networks. The proposed scheme equips secondary users with an adaptive policy learned through direct environmental interaction, removing the dependence on accurate channel models that limits the deployability of traditional sensing methods. DDQN decoupling, prioritized experience replay, and a composite reward signal work in concert to produce a sensing agent that achieves higher throughput, lower primary user interference, and better energy efficiency than both conventional and earlier machine learning-based baselines.

The simulation results, while encouraging, leave several questions open for future investigation. The present formulation assumes a single-antenna SU; extending the framework to MIMO-equipped cognitive nodes would substantially increase the state and action space and likely necessitate actor-critic methods or attention-based neural architectures. Multi-agent coordination, explored here only implicitly through the shared channel environment, merits explicit treatment: centralized training with decentralized execution frameworks could enable SUs to jointly optimize network-wide interference avoidance without the communication overhead of online coordination. Finally, the THz channel component of 6G networks, modeled only roughly here through path loss parameters, introduces beam management and blockage dynamics that DRL policies should ideally account for. These extensions collectively define a productive research agenda for DRL-based spectrum management in next-generation wireless systems.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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