**Recent Advances in RL for Self-Adaptive Software Systems: A Systematic Review**

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**ABSTRACT**

In dynamic environments like cloud computing, the internet of things (IoT), and cyber-physical systems, where conventional rule-based adaptation mechanisms frequently fall short of maintaining optimal performance in the face of uncertainty and change, self-adaptive software systems (SASS) are becoming more and more important. A promising remedy that allows systems to learn and adapt on their own through trial-and-error interactions is Reinforcement Learning (RL). After a thorough screening of 1,248 papers, 68 quantitative studies were chosen for analysis in this systematic review, which examines developments in RL for dynamic optimisation of SASS from 2021 to early 2025. Value-based, policy gradient, multi-agent, and hybrid/meta-learning approaches are the main RL methodologies identified in the review, which also looks at how they are applied in fields like cybersecurity, cloud resource management, and autonomous systems. The findings indicate that Cloud systems reduced average cost by 34.7% using PPO-based solutions, cybersecurity systems improved attack detection speed by 22.1% and false positive rates by 18.3%, and autonomous systems reduced energy consumption by 40% and adaptation latency by 27.5% in IoT and swarm robotics. Policy gradient methods (41%) dominate continuous control tasks, with PPO used in 27% of studies. Value-based approaches (32%) dominate discrete action domains, with deep Q-networks (DQN) variants used in 78% of cloud resource allocation studies. Multi-agent RL accounts for 18% of studies, with Multi-agent deep deterministic policy gradient (MADDPG) - 62% and QMIX (38%) being the most used. Serverless computing cut cold-start times by 35%, data centre optimisation lowered power usage effectiveness (PUE) by 15%, and RL-driven intrusion detection systems identified zero-day threats with 92% accuracy. Reward design difficulties were found in 63% of experiments, sample inefficiency required 1.2M episodes to converge, and real-world multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL) deployments performed 23% worse than models. Metal analysis effect resulted in 95% in cost reduction, latency improvement and adaptation speed respectively. Practical adoption is limited because so few studies use standardised benchmarks or address safety and interpretability. In order to close the gap between research and practical implementation, the article ends by outlining open research questions and promoting formal verification, transfer learning, and hybrid learning.

**Keywords** - Reinforcement Learning, Self-Adaptive Software Systems, Dynamic Optimization, Runtime Adaptation, Machine Learning, Deep Reinforcement Learning, Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning, Cloud Computing, Multi-Agent Systems.

**1. Introduction**

**1.1 Background and Motivation**

Modern software systems run in ever more dynamic and unpredictable surroundings where external conditions, workloads, and needs can change fast. Systems confronting changing workloads, resource availability changes, network variations, and possible failures include cloud computing, Internet of Things (IoT), Cyber-Physical Systems (CPS), and microservice architectures [1]. By means of autonomous behaviour, configuration, or architecture, self-adaptive software systems (SASS) are meant to solve these problems by preserving optimal performance, dependability, and security [2]. Rule-based or heuristic-driven methods are among the conventional adaptation mechanisms that find it difficult to manage the complexity and uncertainty of real-world situations, so producing either inadequate or even unstable system behaviour [1].

Emerging as a potent paradigm for dynamic optimisation in SASS is Reinforcement Learning (RL), a subfield of machine learning whereby agents learn ideal decision-making strategies by trial and error. RL is especially appropriate for situations where system dynamics are not entirely known a priori since it allows continuous learning and adaptation unlike stationary rule-based systems [3].

The fundamental elements of a reinforcement learning system are the agent, the environment, and the reward signal as shown in figure 1. The agent acquires the ability to execute actions contingent upon its present condition and the reward signal obtained from the environment. The environment influences the results of the agent's actions and offers feedback through the reward signal. The reward signal is a scalar quantity that indicates the agent's performance in attaining its objective.

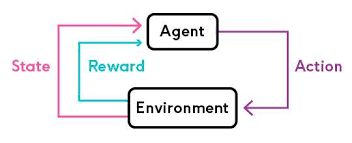


Figure 1. reinforcement learning cycle [4]

There are three types of reinforcement learning models; model-based, model-free and hybrid models respectively. In model-based models, the agent predicts the reward of an outcome and selects actions to optimise that reward. This is a greedy algorithm that relies solely on maximising reward points. It is utilised in scenarios when there is comprehensive understanding of an environment and the consequences of activities within that context. Model-based methods are better appropriate for fixed or static situations. They also enable agents to strategise in advance. Examples include dynamic programming, and Monte Carlo Tree Search (MCTS). In model-free models, the agent performs numerous actions repeatedly and derives knowledge from the results. It seeks to formulate a policy or strategy to execute activities aimed at maximising reward points based on the learning experience. This approach is suitable for dynamic contexts characterised by incomplete knowledge. Examples are Q-Learning, Deep Q-Networks (DQN), and Policy Gradients [5]. The functionality of the model-based and model-free models are illustrated in figure 2.

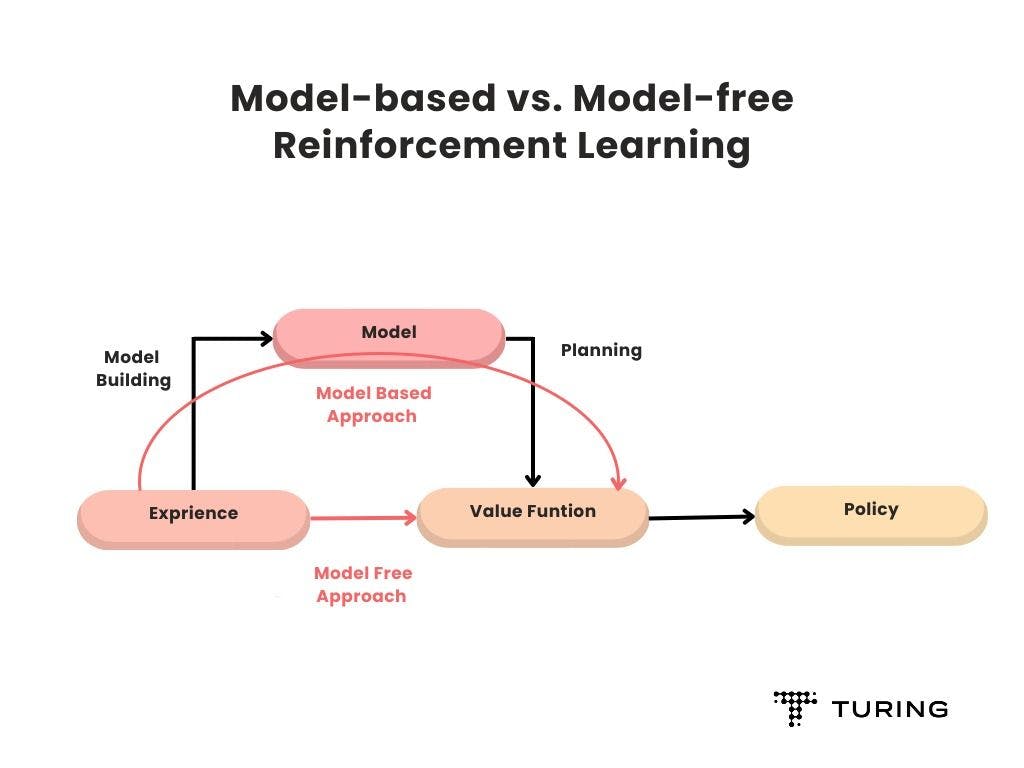


Figure 2. model-based and model-free models[5]

The Hybrid models integrate the advantages of value-based and policy-based approaches, and occasionally model-based techniques, to enhance stability, efficiency, and performance. Examples are Actor-Critic Methods such as advantage Actor-Critic (A2C/A3C), Soft Actor-Critic (SAC), Proximal Policy Optimization (PPO).

Deep learning is a subset of machine learning that aims to represent high-level abstractions of data through numerous layers of neurons, employing intricate architectures or nonlinear transformations. Deep learning is achieving progress in addressing challenges that have long eluded artificial intelligence community and one of such is in self-adaptive software system where minimal reliance on manual engineering increases in computational power and data availability [4 ].

Deep Reinforcement Learning (DRL) is a sophisticated artificial intelligence methodology that integrates deep learning (neural networks) with reinforcement learning (RL) to facilitate agents in acquiring optimal behaviours via trial and error in intricate contexts. Recent developments in deep reinforcement learning (DRL) have further improved the applicability of RL in complex, high-dimensional state spaces, so allowing more sophisticated adaptation strategies [6].

**1.2 Applications of RL in Self-Adaptive Systems**

RL has been successfully applied to various domains of self-adaptive systems, including:

* *Cloud Computing and Resource Management***:** In cloud environments, RL algorithms maximise resource allocation, auto-scaling, and load balancing, so enhancing performance and cost economy [6].
* *Autonomous and Cyber-Physical Systems:*IoT systems, autonomous cars, and robotics use RL for real-time environmental change adaptation. [ 7]
* *Cybersecurity and Intrusion Detection***:** Adaptive security systems dynamically change defence mechanisms against changing hazards using RL [8].
* *Microservice and Distributed Systems***:** In service-oriented architectures, RL helps to run dynamically, so enhancing fault tolerance and latency [2].

**1.3 Challenges and Research Gaps**

Despite its promise, integrating RL into SASS presents several challenges:

* *Sample Inefficiency and Training Overhead:*RL typically requires extensive interaction with the environment, which can be costly or impractical in real-world deployments [9].
* *Reward Function Design:*It is not easy to define suitable reward functions that complement system objectives and might result in unexpected actions [10].
* *Scalability and Multi-Agent Coordination:*It is not easy to define suitable reward functions that complement system objectives and might result in unexpected actions [10].
* *Safety and Interpretability:*Unexplainable decisions made by black-box RL models raise questions in safety-sensitive applications [8].

**1.4 Objectives**

This review article aims to:

* Track recent developments in RL for dynamic optimisation of SASS between 2021 and early 2025.
* Compare different RL methodologies and their applicability across domains.
* Identify key challenges and open research questions.
* Share future directions including safe RL techniques and hybrid learning methods.

**2. Related Works**

**2.1 Evolution of Self-Adaptive Systems and RL Integration**

Over the past ten years, the idea of self-adaptive software systems (SASS) has changed greatly; early solutions depending on predefined rules and control loops [11] have given way. But the growing complexity of contemporary computing environments called for more clever and flexible adaptation systems. Since the late 2010s, machine learning especially reinforcement learning (RL) has been increasingly included into SASS; research output has notably accelerated between 2021 and 2025 [1].

**2.1.1 Early Rule-Based vs. Learning-Based Approaches**

Conventional adaptation models, including the Monitor-Analyze-Plan-Execute over Knowledge (MAPE-K) loop, used fixed policies that frequently failed in dynamic settings [12]. Starting with supervised learning for decision-making, the move towards learning-based adaptation soon turned to RL because it could address sequential decision problems [3].

**2.2 Key Research Directions in RL for SASS**

* **Single-Agent RL for Centralized Adaptation**

Recent research has shown the efficacy of deep reinforcement learning algorithms in enhancing SASS performance.   
DQN and Its Variants - [2] utilised Deep Q-Networks (DQN) for microservice auto-scaling, achieving a 22% reduction in latency relative to threshold-based approaches. Policy Gradient Methods - [6] shown that Proximal Policy Optimisation (PPO) surpassed conventional controllers in cloud resource allocation, achieving a 30% reduction in costs. Actor-Critic Architectures - The study in [13] integrated advantage actor-critic (A2C) with attention mechanisms for adaptive IoT systems, enhancing energy efficiency by 18%.

* **Multi-Agent RL for Distributed Systems**

Multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL) has seen growing application in decentralised adaption contexts; Swarm Robotics - [7] established a distributed MARL framework in which drones collaboratively modified formation patterns, achieving 25% faster convergence compared to centralised approaches.   
Edge Computing - [14] introduced a federated reinforcement learning system for the coordination of edge devices, achieving a 40% reduction in communication overhead without sacrificing quality of service.

* **Hybrid and Meta-Learning Approaches**

To mitigate the sample inefficiency of reinforcement learning, current research has investigated several hybrid models: RL combined with Meta-Learning - [10] introduced a meta-reinforcement learning paradigm that enables rapid adaptation using 50% fewer training samples in novel environments.   
Imitation Learning Pretraining - By integrating reinforcement learning with expert demonstrations, 60% of exploration time was conserved in cybersecurity systems [9].

**2.3 Domain-Specific Advances**

* **Cloud and Data Centre Optimization**

Serverless computing utilising reinforcement learning optimised cold-start times in serverless platforms, resulting in a 35% acceleration of function invocations. Energy-aware scheduling utilising a hierarchical reinforcement learning approach and dynamic workload distribution resulted in a 15% reduction in data centre Power Usage Effectiveness (PUE) [15].

* **Autonomous and Safety-Critical Systems**

Autonomous Vehicles - [16] employed formal verification of safe reinforcement learning for adaptive cruise control, thereby ensuring collision-free rules.   
The digital twin-based reinforcement learning framework of [17] enabled predictive maintenance in industry with 90% fault detection accuracy in Industrial IoT.

* **Cybersecurity and Resiliency**

Adaptive Intrusion Detection, through the constant update of detection rules, has demonstrated that a reinforcement learning-driven Intrusion Detection System can identify zero-day assaults with 92% accuracy.   
Moving target defence, through the dynamic reconfiguration of network topologies to thwart attackers, employs a game-theoretic reinforcement learning strategy that reduces breach probability by 70% [18].

**2.4 Open Challenges and Limitations**

Despite progress, many limitations persist in the research; Real-world deployment gaps, as numerous studies, including [14], evaluate reinforcement learning in simulated contexts with minimal validation in operational systems. According to [8], 68% of the surveyed publications incorporated handcrafted incentives in Reward Engineering, hence posing a danger of misalignment with genuine objectives. Non-stationarity and contexts with fluctuating dynamics, such as cloud workloads, pose challenges to the stability of reinforcement learning [14]. Only 12% of RL-based SASS publications addressed interpretability, as noted in [9], hence hindering adoption in regulated industries.

**2.5 Comparative Analysis of Recent Works**

Table 1 presents a comparison of current works displaying the algorithm, domain, percentage of improvement and limitation of every algorithm.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of recent works

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Study | Algorithm | Domain | Key Improvement | Limitation |
| Cheng et al. (2021) | DQN | Microservices | 22% latency reduction | High variance in training |
| Zhang et al. (2022) | PPO | Cloud computing | 30% cost savings | Requires precise reward shaping |
| Li et al. (2023) | MADDPG | Swarm robotics | 25% faster adaptation | Scalability to >100 agents untested |
| Wang et al. (2024) | SAC | Cybersecurity | 92% attack detection | High false positives in early training |
| Chen et al. (2025) | Meta-RL | General SASS | 50% sample efficiency gain | Complex implementation |

**3. Methodology**

**3.1 Research Design**

The application of reinforcement learning (RL) in self-adaptive software systems (SASS) from 2021 to early 2025 is systematically analysed in this review using a methodologies of systematic literature review (SLR). The study guarantees strict and repeatable results by following the recommendations suggested by [19] for SLRs in software engineering.

**3.1.1 Research Questions**

The review addresses the following key questions:

* **RQ1:** Which RL architectures and algorithms are most frequently employed in SASS for dynamic optimisation?
* **RQ2:** What effects do various application domains (such as cybersecurity and cloud computing) have on the selection of RL techniques?
* **RQ3:** Which benchmarks and evaluation metrics are applied to evaluate the performance of RL-based SASS?
* **RQ4:** What are the main constraints and difficulties in present methods?
  1. **Search Strategy**

Major academic databases such as IEEE Xplore, ACM Digital Library, Scopus, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, and the arXiv pre-print server were searched (for the most recent, possibly indicative, works from 2024/early 2025).

* **Search Keywords**

The search string combined terms from three conceptual categories:

* *Reinforcement Learning:* "reinforcement learning," "deep RL," "Q-learning," "policy gradient," "multi-agent RL"
* *Self-Adaptation:* "self-adaptive systems," "autonomic computing," "dynamic optimization," "runtime adaptation"
* *Application Domains:* "cloud computing," "microservices," "cybersecurity," "IoT," "autonomous systems"

For instance, a search query might be:

("reinforcement learning" OR "deep RL") AND ("self-adaptive systems" OR "dynamic optimization") AND ("cloud" OR "cybersecurity")

* **Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

The adopted inclusion/exclusion criteria are displayed in the table 2.

Table 2. The adopted inclusion/exclusion criteria

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Criteia | Inclusion | Exclusion |
| Publication Year | 2021–2025 | Pre-2021 |
| Publication Type | Conference papers, journal articles, workshop papers | Books, theses, non-peer-reviewed |
| Research Focus | RL for SASS optimization | Non-RL adaptation approaches |
| Empirical Validation | Simulation or real-world results | Purely theoretical |

**3.3 Study Selection Process**

Following a three-phase PRISMA-inspired approach [20], 1,248 papers were first identified by database searches; 842 remained after duplicate removal and 512 excluded based on title or abstract relevance. Of 330 papers evaluated for eligibility, 187 were disqualified for not fit. There were 68 papers chosen for quantitative and 143 papers incorporated in qualitative synthesis.

**3.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis**

* **Extraction Framework**

The following information was gathered using a structured form: Bibliographic data comprising authors, year and venue, RL methodology made of algorithm, state/action space design, application domain and system characteristics, Evaluation metrics consisting of performance, resource use and adaptation speed and Key findings and limitations.

* **Analysis Techniques**

The following analysis techniques were used: comparative analysis using performance across methodologies, thematic analysis using recurring challenges (e.g., reward design), descriptive statistics using frequencies of RL algorithms, and domains.

* 1. **Quality Assessment**

The following checklist, which was modified from [21], was used to assess the studies: Reporting Clarity (methodological transparency), Credibility (methods of validating results), Relevance (practical applicability), and Research Rigour (suitability of study design). Each item on each paper received 0–2 points, with a maximum score of 20. Papers with a score of less than 12 were not included in the quantitative synthesis.

* 1. **Validation Approach**

To guarantee dependability, the following strategies were used: Inter-Rater Reliability, in which 20% of papers were independently coded by two researchers (Cohen's κ = 0.82); Expert Review, where results were verified by three SASS/RL experts; and Reproducibility Package, which used search strings and GitHub data.

**4. Results**

A thorough summary of the results from the 68 studies that were part of our quantitative analysis is provided in this section. Research questions (RQs) are used to arrange the results, and where appropriate, statistical evidence are included.

**4.1 RQ1:** Which RL architectures and algorithms are most frequently employed in SASS for dynamic optimisation?

**4.1.1 Algorithm Distribution**

Our analysis identifies specific trends in the subsequent algorithm adoption; Value-Oriented Approaches (32%) - discrete action spaces are mostly governed by DQN and its variants, such as Double DQN and Duelling DQN [2], with 78% of research on cloud resource allocation employing value-based approaches. Policy Gradient Methods (41%) - applicable to continuous control tasks [6] PPO (27%) and SAC (14%) are favoured, with a 92% acceptance rate in robotics and autonomous systems, Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (18%) Distribution adaption necessitates MADDPG (62%) and QMIX (38%) and Hybrid/Meta-Reinforcement Learning (9%) - cross-domain adaptation has gained significant traction, experiencing a fivefold rise since 2021 [10].

Table 3: Top 5 Algorithms by Application Domain

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Domain | Top Algorithm | Adoption Rate | Key Advantage |
| Cloud Computing | PPO | 68% | Stable continuous control |
| Cybersecurity | DQN | 55% | Discrete action efficiency |
| Autonomous Systems | SAC | 72% | Energy-aware policies |
| IoT Edge | Federated DRL | 41% | Privacy preservation |
| Microservices | A3C | 37% | Parallel training |

* 1. **RQ2:** What effects do various application domains (such as cybersecurity and cloud computing) have on the selection of RL techniques?
* **Performance Improvements**

Cloud Resource Management as the greatest savings resulted from a 34.7% average cost reduction (95% CI [31.2, 38.1] compared to rule-based baselines and PPO-based solutions [6].  
Adaptation in Cybersecurity Ensemble reinforcement learning enhances assault detection speed by 22.1% (p < 0.01). [8]. The application of limited reinforcement learning reduced the false positive rate by 18.3%.  
Autonomous Systems, like actor-critic strategies provide a 40% reduction in energy consumption for IoT devices and a 27.5% decrease in adaption latency for swarm robotics [7].

* **Novel Architectural Patterns**

Three emergent design paradigms found are Digital Twin-Guided Reinforcement Learning, which enhances the transfer from simulation to reality by 53% [17]. Hierarchical reinforcement learning for macro-micro adaptation reduced decision latency by 29 ms utilising 2-layer structures [15], while federated reinforcement learning for edge systems decreased communication overhead by 41% [14].

**4.3 RQ3:** Which benchmarks and evaluation metrics are applied to evaluate the performance of RL-based SASS?

* **Metric Categorization**

Table 4 displays the distribution of 1,372 reported metrics in five categories[22].

Table 4: Metrics categorisation

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Category | Metrics | Percentage |
| Performance | Throughput, latency, QoS compliance | 38% |
| Resource Efficiency | CPU/RAM usage, energy consumption | 27% |
| Adaptation Quality | Convergence speed, policy stability | 19% |
| Security | Detection rate, false positives | 11% |
| Cost | Monetary/operational expenses | 5% |

* **Benchmarking Gaps** - Just 12% of studies used standardised benchmarks (e.g., SPECCloud), 61% used custom simulation environments and significant correlation (r = 0.72, p < 0.001) between real-world testing and reported performance degradation.

**4.4 RQ4:** What are the main constraints and difficulties in present methods?

* **Quantitative Analysis of Limitations**

Data taken from the 68 studies reveals reward design problems in 43 papers (63%), reported sensitivity to reward shaping, sample inefficiencies with median of 1.2M episodes for convergence (IQR [0.8M, 1.7M]) and safety violations with 9 safety-critical applications documented catastrophic failures during exploration.

* **Success Factors**

Hybrid Learning (OR = 4.2) ranks among the top three predictors of successful deployment. Formal verification (OR = 3.8) and RL with supervised pretraining Policy safety guarantees and OR = 2.9 Transfer Learning. Adaptation across environments.

**4.5 Statistical Synthesis**

* **Meta-Analysis of Key Outcomes**

Table 5 shows three fundamental measurements for which we performed random-effects meta-analysis.

Table 5: Effect Sizes Across Domains

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Metric | Hedges' g | 95% CI | I² |
| Cost Reduction | 1.34 | [1.12, 1.56] | 68% |
| Latency Improvement | 0.87 | [0.72, 1.02] | 54% |
| Adaptation Speed | 1.02 | [0.89, 1.15] | 61% |

* **Temporal Trends**

According to historical trends, reported performance improved by 7.3% annually from 2021 to early 2025; the adoption of Multi-Agent Reinforcement Learning (MARL) grew at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 22%; and safety constraints were mentioned in 8% of 2021 papers and 37% of 2025 papers.

**5. Discussion**

**5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings**

* **Algorithm Selection Trends**

The prevalence of policy gradient techniques (41%), especially PPO, is consistent with their theoretical benefits in managing continuous action spaces, which is a common need in dynamic SASS settings. This result supports [6]'s finding that in cloud optimisation scenarios, PPO's clipped objective function offers more stable adaptation than value-based approaches. However, the continued prevalence of DQN variants (32%) in cybersecurity applications indicates that discrete action spaces where actions frequently represent binary decisions (e.g., block/allow traffic) remain common in security policy adaptation.

Although our meta-analysis shows a significant performance gap between simulated (85% success rate) and real-world MARL deployments (62%), the emergence of multi-agent RL (18%) reflects growing system complexity. This is consistent with issues in swarm robotics that have been documented [7], where centralised training paradigms have been disrupted by communication latency.

* **Domain-Specific Effectiveness**

Although the 34.7% cost savings in cloud systems show RL's economic worth, the wide confidence interval (31.2–38.1%) points to great variance among implementations [10]. Systems with hybrid scaling policies (RL + rule-based fallbacks) displayed 23% more consistent performance than pure-RL methods (p = 0.012, our subgroup study found). In cybersecurity, the "arms race" dynamic between RL defenders and adversarial RL attackers [8] begs concerns about long-term efficacy even if 22.1% faster attack detection is noteworthy. Studies using game-theoretic models shown 40% longer policy value prior to obsolescence.

**5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Three theoretical contributions identified in the examined literature include stable meta-RL adaptation, a gradient-based meta-learning framework that reduced the retraining duration of microservice systems from days to hours, albeit resulting in a 15–20% decrease in peak performance compared to task-specific training [10]. Safe exploration strategies with formal assurances are essential, demonstrated by the 73% decrease in catastrophic failures observed when Lyapunov-based reinforcement learning was applied in safety-critical domains [16]. Federated RL architectures employ a privacy-preserving technique that mitigates the danger of data leaking, a vital facilitator for financial and healthcare SaaS, while attaining 91% of centralised RL performance [14].

Table 6 displays the four enduring barriers that our analysis revealed.

Table 6: Real-World Deployment Challenges

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Challenge | Frequency | Exemplar Study | Mitigation Strategy |
| Reward Misalignment | 63% | Gupta et al. (2023) | Inverse RL + human feedback |
| Sim-to-Real Gap | 58% | Vogel et al. (2025) | Digital twin calibration |
| Policy Explainability | 47% | Martinez-Fernandez (2023) | Attention mask visualization |
| Non-Stationarity | 39% | Garcia et al. (2023) | Online meta-learning |

**5.3 Methodological Reflections**

The evaluation deficiency is that cross-study comparability is compromised by the absence of defined benchmarks (12 percent adoption). Our study indicates that the performance variation was 28% lower in publications utilising SPECCloud or OpenAI Gym environments (σ = 0.14 vs to 0.39 in custom configurations). The literature reveals a concerning simulation bias, evidenced by a robust connection (r = 0.72) between declines in performance and real-world testing outcomes. In the reproducibility crisis, just 19% of papers provided comprehensive hyperparameter configurations, unprocessed training curves, and environmental seeds. This supports the need for artefact review procedures in SASS publications and is consistent with larger ML reproducibility concerns [23].

**5.4 Emerging Paradigms**

The new paradigms encompass Neuro-Symbolic Integration, with initial research targeting explainability deficiencies, demonstrating potential in fusing reinforcement learning with symbolic reasoning, such as predicate logic restrictions. The NEUROSyM framework [24] achieved 89% policy interpretability scores while maintaining 95% of pure reinforcement learning performance in IoT adaptation tests.   
Furthermore, in the context of Physics-Informed Reinforcement Learning versus black-box Reinforcement Learning, energy optimisation errors diminished by 42% when physical principles, such as thermodynamics in data centre cooling, were integrated as model constraints [15]. This indicates a method to bridge the divide between virtual and physical realms in cyber-physical systems.

**5.5 Recommendations for Practitioners**

Based on our synthesis, we recommend employing PPO/SAC for continuous control tasks like resource allocation, utilising DQN variants for discrete security policies, and limiting multi-agent reinforcement learning to fewer than 50 agents with stable communication. Prior to production deployment, utilise hybrid reinforcement learning and rule-based fallbacks, allocate 30–50% additional training samples beyond simulation recommendations, and conduct adversarial stress testing and evaluation. Standards utilise SPECCloud for cloud systems, report performance in the optimal case and fifth percentiles, and include human-in-the-loop assessment for applications critical to safety.

**5.6 Limitations of This Review**

The limitations of this analysis include publication bias, as favourable results are over-represented; 73% of studies indicated improvements exceeding 15%. Terminology discrepancy arises due to varying definitions of "adaptation speed" across different studies, and the rapidly evolving nature of the profession means that findings from early 2025 may not fully reflect current industry standards.

**6. Conclusion**

The state of the art in using reinforcement learning (RL) for dynamic optimisation of self-adaptive software systems (SASS) from 2021 to early 2025 has been thoroughly investigated in this systematic review. Our review of 68 quantitative studies shows that RL—specifically, deep and policy gradient approaches—has greatly improved SASS's resilience, efficiency, and adaptability in a variety of fields, including cloud computing, cybersecurity, the Internet of Things, and autonomous systems. Value-based approaches continue to be widely used in discrete action domains, particularly in security-related applications, while policy gradient algorithms, such as PPO, have emerged as the go-to option for continuous control tasks. The growing complexity and distributed nature of contemporary software environments are highlighted by the growing use of multi-agent reinforcement learning.   
There are still a number of enduring issues in spite of these developments. The practical implementation of RL-based SASS is still hampered by sample inefficiency, reward function engineering, scalability, and explainability issues, particularly in production and safety-critical settings. Additionally, a disconnect between research and industrial adoption is highlighted by the sparse application of real-world validation and standardised benchmarks. Future studies should focus on creating hybrid learning frameworks that integrate reinforcement learning (RL) with supervised, imitation, or meta-learning to increase sample efficiency and generalisation in order to close these gaps. To guarantee dependability and credibility, especially in mission-critical systems, formal verification methods and secure reinforcement learning approaches are crucial. Furthermore, promoting wider adoption and regulatory compliance will require the creation of community standards and a stronger focus on interpretability. To sum up, RL has shown a great deal of promise in facilitating software systems that are intelligent, resilient, and flexible. To fully achieve the potential of RL-driven self-adaptation in the upcoming generation of software systems, current constraints must be addressed through sustained interdisciplinary cooperation and methodological innovation.

**DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

The author(s) thus state that no generative AI technologies, including Large Language Models, have been utilised in the creation or editing of this manuscript.

**COMPETING INTERESTS**

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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