Neighbor-Specific BGP: More Flexible Routing Policies While Improving Global Stability

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Please Note: This document was written to summarize and facilitate discussion regarding (1) the benefits of changing the way BGP selects routes to selecting the most preferred route allowed by export policies, or more generally, to selecting BGP routes on a per-neighbor basis, (2) the safety condition that guarantees global routing stability under the *Neighbor-Specific BGP* model, and (3) ways of deploying this model in practice. A paper presenting the formal model and proof of the stability conditions was published at SIGMETRICS 2009 and is available online [19].

1 Introduction

BGP is used by tens of thousands of independently operated networks (i.e., ASes) in the Internet to exchange reachability information. However, in current BGP (and ever since it was first introduced almost twenty years ago [10]), a router is restricted to selecting a single best route (for each destination), and either exporting this route or no route to each neighbor. This restriction has two adverse implications:

- **Correctness problems:** A router may not announce any route to a neighbor even if a valid route is available, which could cause an ISP to violate its agreements with its neighbors (i.e., policy violation), or lead to routing oscillation.
- **Lack of customizable route selection:** An ISP cannot capitalize its path diversity by offering customized route selection services to different neighbors.

We discuss the two issues in Section 2 and 3, respectively. In each section, we first motivate the problem using examples, then present the corresponding solution and discuss how the solution can be deployed in practice. To address the correctness problems, we propose to apply export filtering policies *before* the route selection process; to provide customizable route selection, we propose *Neighbor-Specific BGP*, which selects routes on a per-neighbor basis. By using existing mechanisms like Virtual Routing and Forwarding (VRF), encapsulation, BGP add-paths, etc., both solutions can be incrementally deployed by a single ISP with only software changes to its routers.

2 Fixing BGP's Correctness Problems

We illustrate two correctness problems of BGP by examples, and then propose a simple solution to both problems and discuss how it can be deployed by individual ISPs incrementally.

2.1 BGP's Correctness Problems

An ISP usually has multiple policy objectives it wants to realize through its BGP configuration, such as "consistent export" [1], "hot-potato routing" [2], "provide no transit service for peers or providers", etc. However, even these natural and appealing policy objectives can be in conflict under the current BGP, as illustrated in the examples below.

2.1.1 Problem 1: Policy violation

We first give an example in which the way BGP selects and exports route leads to inevitable violation of its export agreement with its neighbor.

Neighboring ISPs "peer" with each other to reach each other's customers. It is common practice for ISPs to require "consistent export" in their peering contracts when they are connected in multiple geographic locations [4]. Consider the topology in Figure 1. AS 0 learns two routes (r1 and r2) to destination d from Customer 2 and Peer 2 respectively. Assume AS 0 equally prefers customer- and peer-learned routes, and r1 and r2 are equally preferred in the first few steps of the BGP decision process (e.g., local preference, AS-path length, etc.). Due to hot-potato routing, router R1 selects r1 and router r2 selects r2. In this case, R1 will export r1 to Peer 1 whereas R2 will filter r2 and export no route to Peer 1, because r2 is a peer-learned route and AS 0 does not provide transit service for its peers. This results in a violation of the "consistent export" policy, which requires AS 0 to export "equally good" routes through all peering links. AS 0 could satisfy the consistent export policy by having R2 select r1 as the best route, so that Peer 1 learns r1 from both R1 and R2. However, Customer 1 will be "forced" to use r1 as well, even if AS 0 wants to do hot potato routing and use r2 for Customer 1's traffic.

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[1] That is, an AS must make each destination reachable at every peering point with a neighbor via "equally good routes [4].

[2] Or, "early exit" routing, a router selects the "closest" egress point in terms of the intradomain path costs, in order to reduce the network resources required to carry the traffic [4].

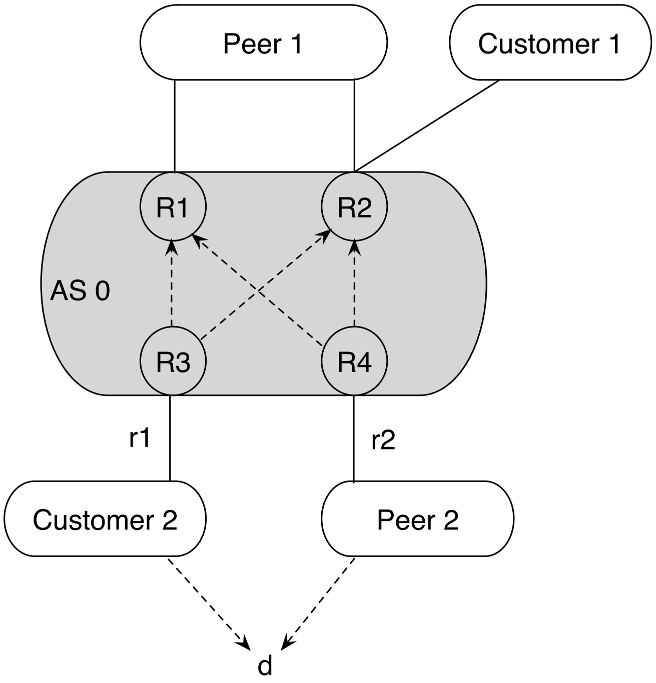

Figure 1: In conventional BGP, R2 has to either export r1 to both Peer 1 and Customer 1, thus violating its hot-potato policy of choosing the closest exit R4 (i.e., r2); or it has to export r2 to Customer 1 but export nothing to Peer 1 (as r2 is a peer-learned route), thus violating the consistent export policy with Peer 1.

In summary, the one-route-fits-all restriction of the BGP route selection process makes it impossible for AS 0 to export routes consistently for Peer 1 and implement hot-potato routing for Customer 1's traffic at the same time, even though both policies are completely natural and reasonable.

2.1.2 Problem 2: Routing Oscillation

Figure 2 shows a routing system in which BGP will always diverge, which is called BGP `Bad Gadget` [6]. In this example, λ^1, λ^2 and λ^3 are the *ranking functions* used by nodes 1, 2 and 3 to select the best route, respectively. It is easy to see that BGP will never converge in this system. For example, the routes chosen by nodes 1, 2 and 3 could change over time in the following sequence: $((1\ d), (2\ d), (3\ d)) \rightarrow \boxed{(\underline{(1\ 3\ d)}, (2\ d), (3\ d))} \rightarrow ((1\ 3\ \mathrm{d}), (2\ d), \underline{(3\ 2\ d)}) \rightarrow (\underline{(1\ d)}, (2\ d), (3\ 2\ d)) \rightarrow ((1\ d), \underline{(2\ 1\ d)}, (3\ 2\ d)) \rightarrow ((1\ d), (2\ 1\ d), \underline{(3\ d)}) \rightarrow (\underline{(1\ 3\ d)}, (2\ 1\ d), (3\ d))$

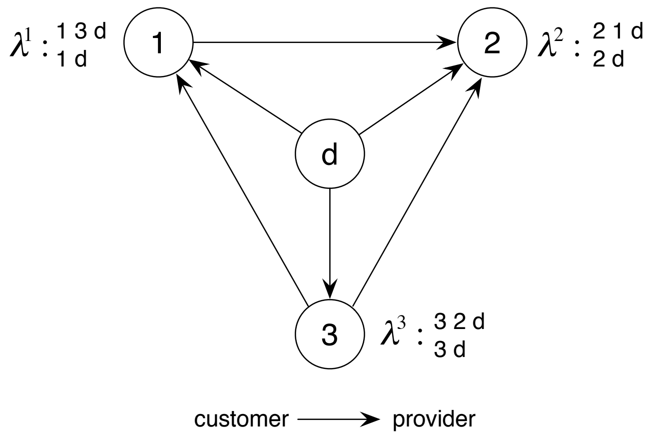

Figure 2: In this BGP "Bad Gadget", the routing system will oscillate forever. (Each node i's preference of routes is specified in the ranking function λ^i. Each node picks the highest-ranked route that is consistent with its neighbors' choices.)

$\rightarrow \boxed{((1\ 3\ d), \underline{(2\ d)}, (3\ d))}$. (An underlined route indicates that it has changed from the previous state.) Notice that the second state of the system is the same as the last one. Therefore, the system will continue to oscillate and never terminate.

2.2 A Simple Solution to Both Problems

Both the policy violation and the oscillation problems of BGP stem from the same root cause: a router chooses the single best route (for all neighbors) *before* applying export policies. As a result, *a router may not export any route to a neighbor because of the presence or absence of another route.*

In the policy violation example (Figure 1), r1 is not exported to Peer 1 because of the presence of r2: R2 selects r2 as the best route (for all of its neighbors), but as a peer-learned route, r2 is filtered by the "no transit service for peers" export policy. If r2 was not available, R2 would have chosen r1 instead, and Peer 1 would have gotten consistent export from AS 0. In the route oscillation example (Figure 2), when node 3 learns the route ($2\ d$) from node 2, it switches its best route from ($3\ d$) to the more preferred ($3\ 2\ d$), and withdraws route ($3\ d$) from node 1. However, since ($2\ d$) is a provider-learned route and node 1 is another provider of node 3, ($2\ d$) is filtered by the "no transit service for providers" export policy. This results in a *pathological* situation: node 3 is exporting *nothing* to node 1, even though the previously announced route ($3\ d$) is still available. As illustrated by the oscillation sequence earlier, the withdrawal of route ($3\ d$) by node 3 is the direct cause of the route oscillation, which is due to the presence (availability) of route

(2 *d*).

Both correctness problems can be fixed by simply applying export policies *before* the BGP route selection process. That is, **only select the best route among the available *exportable* routes for each neighbor**. In Figure 1's example, after applying the export policy for Peer 1, the only exportable route left to choose from is r1, so R2 would export r1 to Peer 1. However, both r1 and r2 are exportable for Customer 1, so R2 can choose the one most preferred by its ranking function as the best route (i.e., in this case, r2), and export it to Customer 1. This way, AS 0 can simultaneously satisfy the consistent export policy with Peer 1 and its own hot-potato policy of forwarding Customer 1's traffic. Similarly, the oscillation problem can be fixed by only selecting the best route among the available *exportable* routes for each neighbor. In this example, although node 3 learns two routes to reach d (i.e., (3 *d*) and (3 2 *d*)), only (3 *d*) is exportable to node 1, so node 3 would export route (3 *d*) to node 1. At the same time, node 3 could choose route (3 2 *d*) to forward its own traffic to d. If node 1 and 2 also follow the same principle, the system will converge to a stable state where every node gets its most preferred route.

2.3 Deployment

The above solution to BGP's correctness problems can be deployed by simply moving the "export filtering" step before the route selection process. In practice, since export filtering is usually performed according to business relationships, which, in turn, are determined by neighbor types, grouping export policies into several classes according to neighbor types (such as "customers", "peers" and "providers") can achieve the benefit with little extra configuration overhead. Since this modification could result in different best routes for different neighboring domains, an iBGP speaker may need to disseminate extra routes besides its own best route. However, the number of extra routes that need to be disseminated is not large, e.g., at most 2x in the case where there are two main classes of export policies — "export all routes" and "export only customer-learned routes". Existing MPLS or IP-in-IP tunneling mechanisms can be used to ensure that traffic from different ingress points is forwarded to the correct egress points, as detailed in Section 3.3.

3 Making BGP Route Selection Customizable

3.1 BGP's Lack of Customized Route Selection

Besides causing correctness problems, BGP's one-route-fits-all restriction also makes it impossible for an ISP to capitalize its path diversity by offering customized route selection services. Different neighbors of an ISP may have completely different preferences for the kinds of paths that should carry their traffic. For example, an online gaming provider may prefer paths with low latency, whereas a financial institution may prioritize security over performance. However, in today's BGP, each router selects and advertises a *single* best route, limiting an AS's ability to offer customized route selection for its neighbors.

We argue that an extension to BGP that allows a router to offer different interdomain routes to different neighbors is beneficial to ISPs for three main reasons:

(1) Many ISPs have rich path diversity. ISPs offering transit service usually connect to many other ASes, often at multiple locations [11, 12]. As a result, it is quite common for large networks to have 5-10 paths per prefix, with some prefixes having more than 20 different paths [13].

(2) Different paths have different properties. The many alternative paths an ISP has could have different security [9] and performance [15] properties. In fact, alternative interdomain paths often have significantly better performance than the paths chosen by BGP [3].

(3) Different neighbors may want different paths. Different neighbors of an ISP may have very different preferences on the types of paths they get from the ISP. For example, financial institutions may prefer the most secure paths (e.g., paths that avoid traversing untrusted ASes, such as ASes known to censor traffic), while providers of interactive applications like online gaming and VoIP may prefer paths with low latency. If such options were available, they might be willing to pay a higher price to have the paths they want. Yet some other neighbors may be perfectly happy with whatever paths the ISP provides for a relatively low price.

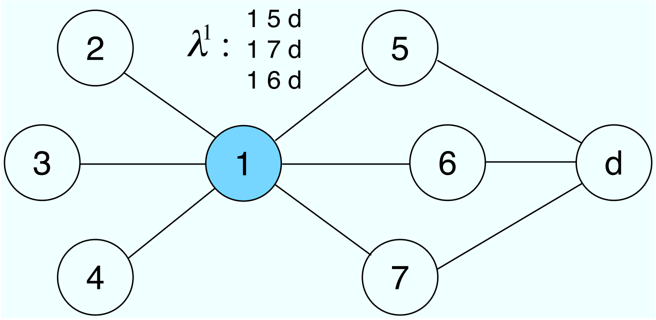

Figure 3: In conventional BGP, node 1 uses a single ranking function (λ^1) to select routes for all neighbors, making it impossible for nodes 2, 3, and 4 to use the different routes available to reach the same destination d.

Ideally, an ISP should be able to offer different routes to different neighbors, regardless of whether they connect to the same edge router. However, this is not possible with conventional BGP. For example, in Figure 3, even though neighbor 2, 3, and 4 would like to use the three different routes node 1 has to reach d, node 1 uses a single "ranking function" to select the best route, forcing the three neighbors to use the same route.

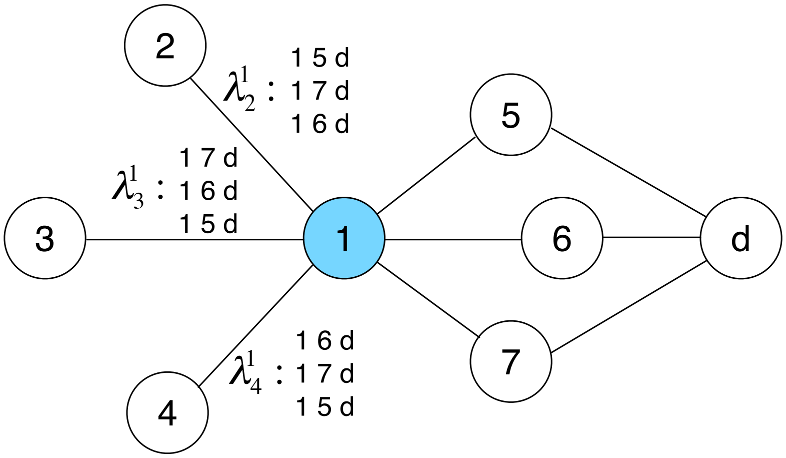

Figure 4: In NS-BGP, node 1 uses three different ranking functions (λ_2^1, λ_3^1, and λ_4^1) for the three neighbors 2, 3, and 4, allowing them to use different routes to reach the same destination d.

3.2 Customized Route Selection with Neighbor-Specific BGP

In [19], we proposed *Neighbor-Specific BGP* (NS-BGP), a simple extension to BGP that allows a router to select routes on a per-neighbor basis. NS-BGP inherits everything from conventional BGP (from the message format to the way messages are disseminated between ASes) except for how it selects routes. As a result, an individual ISP can independently deploy NS-BGP and offer value-added route-selection services. All the changes required for an AS to deploy NS-BGP are within its own network and practically feasible, as discussed in Section 3.3.

Recall that in conventional BGP, a router uses a single "ranking function" to select best routes for all its neighbors. Even in the fix to the BGP correctness issues described in Section 2.2, a router still uses a single ranking function (but the same ranking function is used to select the best route from potentially different sets of exportable routes for different neighbors). In NS-BGP, however, a router **can use multiple *different* ranking functions to select routes for different neighbors**. With this additional flexibility, a router can select a different best route for different neighbors even with the same set of available routes. For example, in Figure 4, node 1 uses a different ranking function for each neighbor, therefore allowing nodes 2, 3, and 4 all have their most preferred route.

3.3 Deployment

With the availability of Virtual Routing and Forwarding (VRF), MPLS/IP-in-IP tunneling mechanisms and the on-going development of BGP add-paths capability [8], NS-BGP is practically feasible and can be deployed by individual ISPs independently. We first describe how an AS can correctly forward traffic from different neighbors (and from within its own network) along different paths. We then discuss how to disseminate multiple routes to the edge routers of an AS to enable flexible route selection. Finally, we present three models an NS-BGP-enabled AS can use to provide different levels of customized route-selection services. When deploying NS-BGP, an AS can handle all these issues by itself without requiring any changes from neighboring ASes, as no BGP message format or external BGP (eBGP) configuration changes are needed.

3.3.1 Neighbor-Specific Forwarding

NS-BGP requires routers to be able to forward traffic from different neighbors along different paths. Fortunately, today's routers already provide such capabilities. For example, the "virtual routing and forwarding (VRF)" feature commonly used for Multi-protocol Label Switching Virtual Private Networks (MPLS-VPNs) supports the installation of different forwarding-table entries for different neighbors [14].

Since an AS typically consists of many routers, traffic entering from various *ingress* routers of the AS must be forwarded to the correct *egress* routers. In conventional BGP, this is achieved in a hop-by-hop fashion to ensure that all routers in the AS agree to forward traffic to the closest egress point that has one of potentially multiple "equally good" best paths to the destination. For example, in Figure 5, if $R5$ learns one path from $R3$ and another path from $R4$ to D, and the two routes are considered "equally good" in BGP's route-selection process, it will choose to use the closest egress point (according to the IGP distances). However, this approach no longer works in NS-BGP, as traffic entering the AS at the same ingress point may be from different neighbors (ingress links), and thus may need to be forwarded to different egress points, or different egress links of the same egress point. Fortunately, ASes have an efficient solution available—encapsulation (or tunneling). Many commercial routers deployed in today's networks can perform MPLS or IP-in-IP encapsulation / decapsulation at line rate. To provide customized forwarding for neighbors connected at the same edge router, the tunnels need to be configured from ingress *links* (rather than ingress routers) to egress *links* (rather than egress routers). For example, in Figure 5, $C1$'s and $C2$'s traffic can be tunneled from $R1$ to $R6$ and $R7$ (that connect to the same egress point $R3$) independently. To avoid routers in neighboring domains having to decapsulate packets, egress routers need to remove the encapsulation header before sending the packets to the next-hop router, using technique similar to the penultimate hop popping [2]. Similar to transit traffic originated from other ASes, traffic originated within the AS itself can also be forwarded to the correct egress links using tunneling.

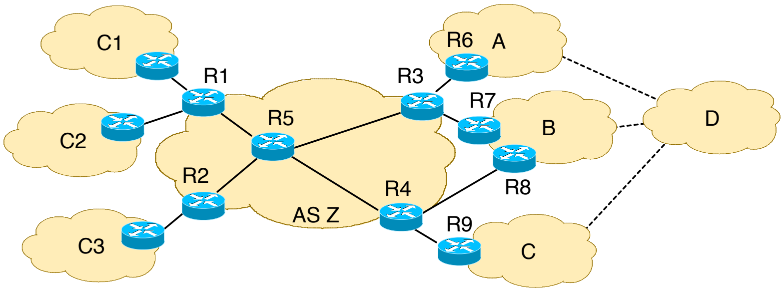

Figure 5: AS Z has multiple interdomain routes for destination D

3.3.2 Route Dissemination Within an AS

A prerequisite for an edge router to provide meaningful "customized" route-selection services is that it needs to have multiple available routes to choose from (otherwise, all its neighbors would inevitably receive the same route). Unfortunately, the way BGP routes are disseminated within today's ASes makes such "route visibility" often impossible. For example, in Figure 5, the AS Z as a whole learns four routes to D from four different neighboring edge routers ($R6$, $R7$, $R8$, $R9$). However, as BGP only allows a router to select and announce a single route for a destination, router $R5$ will only learn two of the available routes, one from $R3$ and $R4$. Even worse, $R1$ and $R2$ will only learn the one route selected by $R5$. For similar reasons, in large ASes where route reflectors are commonly used for better scalability, most edge routers have significantly reduced visibility of BGP routes [16].

To provide better route visibility to the edge routers of an AS, a router in the AS needs to be able to *disseminate* multiple routes (per destination) to each neighbor. For backwards compatibility, this can be achieved by using multiple internal BGP (iBGP) sessions between routers. The BGP ADD-PATH extension, which supports the dissemination of multiple routes (per destination) through one BGP session [8], makes the dissemination process much more efficient. We note that, depending on how much flexibility an AS plans to provide, *not* all available routes need to be disseminated. For example, if an AS decides to have a couple of notions of "best routes" (e.g., best of all routes, and best of customer-learned routes), it only needs to disseminate at most two routes per destination (one of which must be a customer-learned route). Different ASes can make different trade-offs between the overhead of disseminating more routes within their own networks and the benefit of providing more routes to their neighbors to choose from.

Alternatively, an AS can also improve its route visibility by using a logically-centralized Routing Control Platform (RCP) [1, 17, 18]. In this case, an AS can deploy a set of servers in its network, each of which has a complete view of all available BGP routes. These servers then select routes on behalf of all the edge routers and install the selected routes to the respective routers.

3.3.3 Control Over Customized Selection

A big motivation of NS-BGP is to enable individual ASes to provide customized route-selection services to their neighbors. Therefore, an NS-BGP-enabled AS needs to take its neighbors' preferences of routes into account when selecting routes. Here we describe how an AS can control the amount of customer influence over its route-selection process, and how the customized route selection can be realized.

An AS can use different models to grant a neighbor different levels of control over the ranking function it uses for that neighbor. For example, it could adopt a *"subscription"* model, in which it offers several different services (ranking functions) for its neighbors to choose from, such as "shortest path", "most secure", and "least expensive". A neighbor has the flexibility to decide which one to "subscribe" to, but does not have direct influence on how the ranking functions are specified. Although more flexible than conventional BGP, this model is a still fairly restrictive.

For neighbors that require maximum flexibility in choosing their routes, an AS could offer a *"total-control"* model. In this model, the AS gives a neighbor direct and complete control over the ranking function it uses for this neighbor. Therefore, the neighbor is guaranteed to receive its most preferred routes among all of all available routes.

For neighbors that require a level of flexibility that is in between what the previous two models offer, an AS could adopt a third, *"hybrid"* model. In this model, a neighbor is allowed to specify certain preference to an AS directly (e.g., avoid paths containing an untrusted AS if possible). When determining the ranking function for that neighbor, the AS takes both the neighbor's preference and its own preference into account (as the "best route" according to the neighbor's preference may not be the best for the AS's own economic interest). Nevertheless, the AS still controls how much influence ("weight") the neighbor's preference has on the ranking function.

In [18], we described in detail how these different models can be implemented by using a new, weighted-sum-based route-selection process with an intuitive configuration interface. When deciding which model(s) to offer, an AS needs to consider the *flexibility* required by its neighbors as well as the *scalability* of its network, as the three service models impose different resource requirements on the provider's network. For example, the "subscription" model introduces the least overhead in terms of forwarding table size, route dissemination and customized route selection (e.g., each edge router or RCP server only needs to run a small number of route selection processes). On the other hand, the "total-control" model, while providing the finest grain of customization, imposes the most demanding requirements on system resources and results in the highest cost for the provider. Therefore, we expect an AS to only provide such service to a small number of neighbors for a relatively high price. Since the costs of offering the three types of service models are in line with the degrees of flexibility they offer, we believe that an AS can economically benefit from offering any one or more of these models with appropriate pricing strategy.

It is worth mentioning that the "hybrid" and "total-control" models can be realized in two different ways. The simpler way is that a neighbor tells the AS what ranking function to use, so the AS only needs to select and export one route to the neighbor. The other way is that the AS announces all exportable routes to a neighbor, and let the neighbor to select amongst them itself. The latter approach allows the neighbor to hide its policy (ranking function) but requires the AS's ability to export multiple routes to the neighbor, and the neighbor's ability to directly tunnel its traffic to the AS's egress links.

3.4 NS-BGP Is Safe

Despite the benefits of greater flexibility, enhancements to BGP should not come at the expense of routing instability. In fact, even *without* neighbor-specific route selection, today's BGP can easily oscillate, depending on the local policies ASes apply in selecting and exporting routes [6,7].

Fortunately, we were able to prove that the *more* flexible NS-BGP requires significantly *less* restrictive conditions to guarantee routing stability, comparing to conventional BGP [19]. Specifically, an AS can freely choose *any* "exportable" path (i.e., a path consistent with the export condition) for each neighbor without compromising global stability. That is, an AS can select *any route* for a customer, and *any customer-learned route* for a peer or provider. Intuitively, this is because in NS-BGP, a route announced to a peer or provider is no longer dependent on the presence or absence of any *non-exportable* (e.g., peer- or provider-learned) routes chosen for customers. This result is less restrictive than the best-known stability conditions for conventional BGP (known as the "Gao-Rexford conditions" [5]), which require an AS to always prefer a customer-learned route over a peer- or provider-learned route.

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