autossh Self-healing ssh tunnels

CONCEPTS

autossh runs ssh for you: every argument except its own flags goes to ssh unchanged. Get the plain ssh command working first, then put autossh in front.

Use key or agent login: autossh cannot answer a password prompt, and -f makes that impossible.

autossh supervisor
↓ spawns
ssh your tunnel or session
↓ keepalive or test data
Remote host sshd
↓ ssh exits or stalls
Restart backs off up to the poll time

RUNNING AUTOSSH

autossh -M 0 *<host>*
Supervised login session

autossh -M 0 -N -L *<lport>*:*<dst>*:*<dport>* *<host>*
Keep a local forward alive

autossh -M 0 -N -R *<rp>*:**localhost:***<p>* *<host>*
Keep a reverse tunnel alive

autossh -M 0 -N -D *<port>* *<host>*
Keep a SOCKS proxy alive

autossh -M 0 -f -N *<ssh args>*
Drop to the background

autossh -M 0 -i *<key>* **-p** *<port>* *<user>*@*<host>*
Choose key and port as for ssh

Prefer an entry in ~/.ssh/config for the forwards and keepalives, then run just autossh -M 0 -f -N <host>.

MONITORING

-M 0
Disable the monitor port, rely on ssh keepalives

-M *<port>*
Monitor with a port pair

-M *<port>*:*<echo_port>*
Monitor via a remote echo service

MONITORING (cont.)

-o ServerAliveInterval=30 -o ServerAliveCountMax=3
Ssh quits after ~90 s of silence

-o ExitOnForwardFailure=yes
Exit ssh if a forward cannot bind

-o ConnectTimeout=10
Fail fast when the host is down

-o BatchMode=yes
Never prompt: fail instead

On the server side ClientAliveInterval in sshd_config closes stale listening sockets when the client vanishes, so a restarted reverse tunnel can bind again.

ENVIRONMENT VARIABLES

AUTOSSH_GATETIME=*<s>*
Seconds ssh must survive to count as started (30)

AUTOSSH_POLL=*<s>*
Seconds between connection tests (600)

AUTOSSH_FIRST_POLL=*<s>*
Delay before the first test

AUTOSSH_PORT=*<port>*
Monitor port; overrides -M

AUTOSSH_DEBUG=1
Debug log, copied to stderr

AUTOSSH_LOGLEVEL=*<0-7>*
Syslog level, 7 chattiest

AUTOSSH_LOGFILE=*<file>*
Log to a file instead of syslog

AUTOSSH_PIDFILE=*<file>*
Write the autossh pid

Variables go in front of the command (AUTOSSH_GATETIME=0 autossh ...) or in a systemd Environment= line.

CONTROL AND TROUBLESHOOTING

kill -USR1 *<pid>*
Kill ssh and start a new one

kill -HUP *<pid>*
Prod autossh to retry now after back-off

CONTROL AND TROUBLESHOOTING (cont.)

kill *<pid>*
Stop autossh and its ssh child

pgrep -af autossh
Find running autossh processes

AUTOSSH_DEBUG=1 autossh -M 0 -v *<ssh args>*
Debug autossh and ssh together

ss -tlnp | grep *<port>*
Check that the tunnel port is listening

If autossh exits at once, ssh failed in the first 30 s (gate time) or with status 1: run the ssh command alone to see the error.

Repeated quick failures make autossh back off, up to the poll time (10 minutes by default).

SERVICES

systemd unit

```
[Unit]
Description=Tunnel to <host>
After=network-online.target
Wants=network-online.target

[Service]
User=<user>
Environment=AUTOSSH_GATETIME=0
ExecStart=/usr/bin/autossh -M 0 -N \
  -o ServerAliveInterval=30 -o ServerAliveCountMax=3 \
  -o ExitOnForwardFailure=yes \
  -L <lport>:localhost:<dport> <host>
Restart=on-failure
RestartSec=10

[Install]
WantedBy=multi-user.target
```

systemctl enable --now autossh-*<name>*
Start the unit now and at boot

journalctl -u autossh-*<name>* **-f**
Follow the unit's log

Under systemd do not use -f: stay in the foreground so systemd can supervise the process.