

A Review of the Application of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle in Low-altitude Economy

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ABSTRACT

The article mainly reviews current application status of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in multiple fields of the low-altitude economy, such as food delivery, logistics, transportation and disaster relief. It compares and analyzes the differences among various models in terms of their own indicators (such as size, load capacity, endurance and cost) and operational plans (such as routes, quantity and market demand). It comprehensively assesses the characteristics and demands of existing UAVs and finds that the current development of UAVs shows trends of verticalization of scenarios, specialization of models and ecologicalization of operations. However, their large scale application is still limited. Meanwhile, the article indicates the future development trends of UAVs in both the technical and commercial aspects in the low-altitude economy. It believes that the application of UAVs will move from technical verification to commercial implementation and will first achieve large-scale application in high-value-added scenarios under policy relaxation. Unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as unmanned aircraft, are aircraft that are controlled by remote control, autonomous or semi-autonomous programs, without the need for human pilots to be on board. UAVs can be classified into military and civilian types based on their application fields. In the military field, they can be used for target strikes, border patrols, electronic warfare, etc. In the civilian field, they can be widely applied in aerial photography, agricultural spraying, logistics delivery, disaster rescue and search, etc.

KEYWORDS

Unmanned aerial vehicles; Low-altitude economy; Policy; Development trend

1 The concept of low-altitude economy

Low-altitude economy refers to a new economic form that takes the airspace within 1,000 meters above the ground as its operational range, using UAVs, electric vertical take-off and landing aircraft and general aviation aircraft as carriers. It is formed through technological and model innovation. The core of this economy lies in the systematic development and efficient utilization of low-altitude airspace resources to drive industrial upgrading in transportation, logistics, emergency rescue, agricultural pest control, urban management and other fields, ultimately building a three-dimensional economic ecosystem integrating air, land and space. In the low-altitude economy, UAVs serve as transportation tools and can perform a series of functions such as cargo transportation, passenger carrying, and fire emergency response. However, the large-scale development of the low-altitude economy still faces three major constraints:

(1) Insufficient technological maturity: Implementation Plan for the Innovative Application of General Aviation Equipment (2024-2030) clearly states that the energy density of existing aviation lithium batteries is generally below 400Wh/kg, which limits the endurance of industrial UAVs.

(2) Infrastructure deficiencies: 90% of enterprises struggle to make profits due to fragmented airspace management. Cross-regional flights require coordination with both military and civil aviation authorities, and the approval pass rate is less than 33%^[1].

(3) Safety governance vacuum: White Paper on Low-altitude Economy and Spatiotemporal Intelligence Driving New Quality Development (2025) mentions that 68% of citizens have safety concerns about air congestion.

Despite these limitations, various types of UAVs are still actively exploring application paths in difference scenarios, as described below.

2 The types and applications of uavs in various fields of the low-altitude economy

2.1 The field of food delivery

In the field of food delivery transportation, the delivery tasks of UAVs have the characteristics of high frequency, short distance and point-to-point service. Therefore, UAVs are required to have extremely high frequency and rapid response capabilities, being able to achieve precise delivery of the "last 100 meters" and ensuring that the quality and taste of the food are not affected by the flight. Meituan, as the leading e-commerce platform for life services in China, also leads the way in food delivery logistics. This is for the reason that Meituan's UAVs are currently the only type of UAVs that have successfully provided food delivery and retail goods delivery services and have expanded to special scenarios such as scenic spots, supporting the delivery of hot beverages and waste recycling.

In early 2021, Meituan's UAVs completed their first order delivery mission for real users in Shenzhen. On the afternoon

of July 5, 2023, the fourth-generation UAV currently in use by Meituan was officially released ^[2]. This is a small multi-rotor UAV used for the urban low-altitude delivery network, with a maximum load capacity of 2.5 kilograms and a maximum delivery distance of 10 kilometers when fully loaded. In terms of size, the fourth-generation Meituan UAV adopts a foldable design, and its size after folding is 49% smaller than that of the previous generation ^[3].

The application of UAV technology in the field of food delivery is continuously driving the industry towards greater efficiency and intelligence. With its abilities to adapt to multiple scenarios and its continuously improved product performance, Meituan's UAVs not only demonstrate the company's leading edge in the construction of low-altitude logistics networks, but also provide a feasible technical path for the end delivery in future smart cities.

2.2 The field of express logistics

In the field of express logistics, the delivery tasks of UAVs are mainly for medium distances. Simultaneously, it is also required that the load capacity and volume of UAVs be diversified. This field demands that the cost-performance ratio of the load-carrying capacity and flight range of UAVs be maximized, and it is also necessary for UAVs to be capable of completing regular long-range autonomous flights. Take SF Express as an example. As a comprehensive express logistics service provider in China, SF Express launched its own UAV service in 2013. Based on addressing various special scenarios, such as special economic zones, medical cold chain, emergency delivery, and special logistics for end-point distribution in logistics transportation, SF Express developed various types of UAVs, including multi-rotor UAVs and vertical take-off and landing fixed-wing UAVs. In June 2017, the first business operation flight was conducted in the logistics UAV demonstration operation area in Nankang District, Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province ^[4]. Currently, the most commonly used UAV models by SF Express are ARK 80, FY.Blue Whale and ES1000 unmanned transport aircraft.

ARK 80, as a new generation of multi-rotor medium-sized logistics UAV, adopts a composite wing design, demonstrating excellent performance in terms of payload and flight distance. It has a cargo hold volume of 144 liters, with a payload capacity of 30 kilograms. In terms of endurance, it can support a 20-kilogram payload for a flight of 60 kilometers or a 30-kilogram payload for a flight of 30 kilometers. Additionally, this UAV features a highly user-friendly foldable design and modular design, making it easy to operate. It supports tasks such as dropping off, rope descent and the loading of imaging equipment so that it can be applied in various scenarios ^[5].

FY.Whale adopts the industry-leading tiltrotor design, enabling vertical takeoff and landing within a limited area. During the cruising stage, it switches to the fixed-wing mode to achieve better performance. This model of UAV has a wingspan of 9.8 meters, a payload capacity of 300 kilograms and a maximum delivery distance of 300 kilometers when fully loaded. It can meet the market demand for large payload and long endurance. To ensure safety while maintaining performance, FY.Whale adopts multiple redundant designs, which are suitable for complex environments such as islands, plateaus, mountains, snowy areas and intercity areas. It can also be applied to various business fields, such as intercity express delivery, offshore logistics and engineering materials transportation ^[6].

The ES1000 unmanned transport aircraft adopts a combination of turbine hybrid power and distributed electric propulsion technology, balancing both endurance and environmental protection performance. It can take off and land on a simple 100-meter runway. Its cargo hold has a volume of 12 cubic meters and a carrying capacity of 1.5 tons. The maximum delivery distance when fully loaded is 1,200 kilometers ^[7]. From this, it can be seen that the application of UAV technology in the express logistics sector is gradually becoming more mature and in-depth. By developing and deploying multiple types of UAVs, SF Express has achieved multi-level and multi-scenario coverage from end delivery to branch and then to trunk transportation, demonstrating the significant value of UAVs in enhancing transportation capacity, breaking geographical limitations, and optimizing operational costs. This multi-model and all-scenario strategic layout highlights the ambition of leading enterprises to build an ecological loop in the low-altitude economy.

2.3 The field of transportation

In the field of transportation, the core characteristics of UAV missions are medium to long distances and high safety performance (usually requiring "spacecraft-level" standards). While obtaining airworthiness certification and public trust, various models of UAVs need to have high range and speed and be equipped with good vertical take-off and landing field infrastructure. By 2025, many UAV models for the transportation field have been launched both at home and abroad, mainly divided into two categories: medium and large-sized cargo UAVs and consumer-grade logistics UAVs.

Rainbow-YH1000 is a typical example among medium and large-sized cargo UAVs. With a maximum takeoff weight of 2,300 kilograms and a payload capacity of 1,200 kilograms (some resources indicating that it is over 1,000 kilograms), this model can achieve a flight duration of 10 hours when fully loaded ^[8]. On May 22, 2025, the Rainbow-YH1000 unmanned logistics aircraft successfully completed its maiden flight test at an airport in northwest China ^[9]. This model is a multi-purpose UAV with strong transportation and delivery capabilities, featuring a strong payload capacity, high-precision delivery, ultra-short takeoff and landing environments. It can undertake both military and civilian transportation tasks.

The SS-UAV is also a model among medium and large-sized cargo UAVs. This model has a fuselage length of 16.35

meters, a wingspan of 25 meters, and a maximum payload capacity of 6 tons. Its maximum delivery range when fully loaded is 7,000 kilometers, and its flight duration exceeds 12 hours ^[10]. It is evident that the SS-UAV possesses platform advantages such as high payload capacity, high service ceiling, and short takeoff and landing distances. It also has cost advantages from large-scale distributed production that fully utilizes military and civilian production capacity, as well as user support advantages from integrated maintenance.

The TP1000 unmanned transport aircraft, as a type of consumer-grade logistics UAV, is the first large unmanned transport aircraft in China to be developed in accordance with airworthiness procedures with a payload capacity of one ton. On March 15, 2025, the TP1000 large unmanned transport aircraft successfully completed its maiden flight. Its cargo hold has a volume of 7 cubic meters and a payload capacity of 1 ton. When fully loaded, its maximum delivery distance is 1,000 kilometers ^[11]. Besides transporting goods, the TP1000 unmanned transport aircraft can also be used for disaster monitoring, anti-smuggling and drug detection, pesticide spraying, etc., according to customer requirements. It can be widely applied in civilian and scientific research fields.

As can be seen from above, the application of UAVs in the transportation sector is gradually becoming more large-scale and practical. The medium and large-sized cargo UAVs and consumer logistics UAVs that are currently being focused on are not only constantly breaking through in terms of payload capacity, range and adaptability, but also continuously improving in terms of airworthiness safety and infrastructure coordination.

2.4 The field of fire rescue and disaster relief

In the field of fire rescue and disaster relief, the core requirements for UAVs are the abilities to respond to emergencies and adapt to unstructured environments. Due to diverse tasks in this field, the reliability requirements for various models of UAVs are extremely high.

The EHM-2600 has a wingspan of 2.6 meters, an axle distance of 2.6 meters, a payload capacity of 80 kilograms and a maximum flight time of 20 minutes when fully loaded. This model of UAV is based on the Electric Eagle's self-developed medium-sized multi-rotor platform and has been upgraded to meet the demands of emergency rescue, high-rise urban fire fighting, forest fire prevention, rescue in complex terrains, heavy-load material delivery and military applications (with integrated reconnaissance and strike capabilities and the ability to carry air-to-ground simulation combat terminals). The entire aircraft is powered by a six-rotor system and made of carbon fiber composite materials. The arm and landing gear can be folded, and the arm beams can be quickly retracted into the fuselage, making it compact and easy to carry. This significantly reduces the volume during relocation and enhances the efficiency of field deployment. The EHM-2600 features rapid deployment, precise control and the ability to withstand winds up to level 6 ^[12].

The DJI FlyCart 30 (hereinafter referred to as FC 30) measures 2800mm in length, 3085mm in width and 947mm in height when its arms and propellers are fully extended. It has a payload capacity of 30 kilograms and can deliver goods over a maximum distance of 16 kilometers when fully loaded. This model of UAV is capable of operating in all weather conditions and across different altitudes, meeting the operational requirements of various scenarios. The FC30 is powered by a dual-battery system, which means that if one battery fails during flight, the other can keep the UAV running normally and ensure a safe return. Additionally, the UAV supports both cargo box and sling load modes, flexibly catering to different transportation scenarios ^[13].

It is evident that in the field of fire rescue and disaster relief, UAVs are gradually becoming important tools for enhancing response speed, ensuring rescue efficiency and personnel safety. UAVs of various models not only complement each other in functionality but also promote the development of emergency rescue equipment towards intelligence and multi-functionality as a whole.

Simultaneously, based on the data above, tables are presented as follows.

Table 1

Model Name		Size	Load Capacity	Battery Life
Meituan UAV	the Fourth-generation of Meituan UAV	adopting a foldable design, and its size after folding is 49% smaller than that of the previous generation	2.5kg	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 10 kilometers when fully loaded

Table 2

Model Name	Size	Load Capacity	Battery Life
SF Express UAV	ARK 80 owning a cargo hold volume of 144 liters	30kg	supporting a 20-kilogram payload for a flight of 60 kilometers or a 30-kilogram payload for a flight of 30 kilometers
	FY.Whale owning a wingspan of 9.8 meters	300kg	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 300 kilometers when fully loaded
	ES1000 owning a cargo hold volume of 12 cubic meters	1.5t	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 1,200 kilometers when fully loaded

Table 3

	Model Name	Size	Load Capacity	Battery Life
Medium and Large-sized Cargo UAVs	Rainbow-YH1000	/	1200kg(some resources indicating that it is over 1,000 kilograms)	supporting a flight duration of 10 hours when fully loaded
	SS-UAV	owning a fuselage length of 16.35 meters, a wingspan of 25 meters	6t	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 7,000 kilometers when fully loaded, and its flight duration exceeds 12 hours

Table 4

	Model Name	Size	Load Capacity	Battery Life
Consumer-grade Logistics UAVs	TP1000	owning a cargo hold volume of 7 cubic meters	1t	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 1,000 kilometers when fully loaded

Table 5

	Model Name	Size	Load Capacity	Battery Life
Fire-fighting UAV	EHM-2600	owning a wingspan of 2.6 meters, an axle distance of 2.6 meters	80kg	supporting a maximum flight time of 20 minutes when fully loaded
	DJI Fly-Cart 30	measuring 2800mm in length, 3085mm in width and 947mm in height when its arms and propellers are fully extended	30kg	supporting a maximum delivery distance of 16 kilometers when fully loaded

Through the tables, the application trends of UAV technology in various fields can be observed from three dimensions: size, load capacity and endurance, as well as the performance trade-offs behind different technical routes.

UAVs have gradually differentiated from the initial general-purpose type into various categories such as consumer-grade, logistics-grade, industrial-grade and heavy-cargo grade, each with distinct design features. For consumer-grade and light logistics UAVs (such as Meituan's Fourth-generation UAV), these UAVs emphasize portability, with limited payload and range, suitable for the last kilometer urban delivery. For medium logistics UAVs (such as ARK 80 and FY. Whale), these UAVs strike a balance between payload and range, supporting a payload -range swap mode to meet diverse scene requirements. For heavy-cargo UAVs (such as ES1000 and SS-UAV), these UAVs focus on combining large payload and long range, with large cargo holds, suitable for cross-regional and cross-provincial trunk logistics transportation. For special operation UAVs (such as EHM-2600), these UAVs are extremely specialized in a certain performance (such as the hovering and payload capacity of fire-fighting UAVs) but have very short endurance, belonging to mission-specific types.

Meanwhile, in terms of endurance, lightweight UAVs mostly use electric batteries, which have short endurance but are easy to maintain. Medium and heavy UAVs are beginning to adopt hybrid power (such as a combination of fuel and electric), to support long flight times and large payloads. Super heavy UAVs may use turbine engines or hydrogen fuel systems. In terms of cargo hold design and volume, logistics UAVs generally indicate the volume of the cargo hold and emphasize compatibility with standardized logistics boxes. Firefighting UAVs, on the other hand, place more emphasis on external carrying capacity, such as the EHM-2600 which can carry fire extinguishing bombs and rescue equipment.

3 Operational plan for the application of uav in the low-altitude economy

3.1 Urban last-kilometer distribution network

As of the end of June 2024, Meituan UAV has launched 31 routes in cities such as Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, completing over 300,000 user orders. Its services cover various scenarios including offices, communities, scenic spots, medical facilities and campuses, offering a selection of over 90,000 products^[14]. With the release of Meituan's Fourth-generation UAVs, its urban low-altitude logistics solution has been detailed. This solution consists of UAVs, an intelligent dispatching system, and an efficient operation system, providing a service standard of delivering retail items within a 3-kilometer radius in 15 minutes. Additionally, this solution has been approved by the Civil Aviation Administration of China and has received the "Approval Letter for Specific Category Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Trial Operations" and the "General Aviation Enterprise Operating License".

It can be seen from this that Meituan's UAV business is a new generation of logistics solution centered on ToC and supplemented by ToB cooperation, aiming to solve the pain points of instant retail by improving delivery efficiency and expanding coverage scenarios. Currently, Meituan's UAVs have verified their feasibility through operational data and compliance qualifications, but they are still in the transition stage from pilot to large-scale operation. In the future, the profitability of such UAVs will rely on large-scale cost reduction, technology reuse and ecosystem cooperation.

3.2 Construction of the trunk and branch logistics network

ARK 80 is a model with a larger load capacity than the previous generation ARK 40. It is mainly used in the "air-rail-road transport" logistics network in Shenzhen and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, such as the UAV-metro connection from Futian Hub to Bihai Bay Metro Station, reducing ground transportation time by 50%^[15].

In March 2025, SF Express Group signed a strategic cooperation agreement with Yifei Aviation Technology, ordering the first batch of 100 ES1000 aircraft and initiating a pilot program for air logistics in regional and sinking markets. The two sides will explore a large-scale operation model for UAV freight transportation, connecting trunk cargo aircraft with the last-kilometer delivery network to form a "regional-trunk integrated" logistics system. SF Express plans to address the pain points of logistics in the western region through the application of ES1000, such as reducing the transportation time of fruits from Korla to Urumqi in Xinjiang from 8 hours to 1 hour, improving the timeliness of fresh produce; it also plans to promote the "Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Routes" plan in the next five years, covering the national low-altitude logistics backbone network^[16].

The Rainbow-YH1000 UAV has collaborated with logistics enterprises such as SF Express and JD. It is planned to build a UAV feeder logistics network covering 80% of county-level nodes by 2026, addressing the logistics challenges in remote areas^[17].

As can be seen above, all the above-mentioned UAV projects fall under ToB logistics infrastructure solutions. Their core profit model is to achieve indirect value by reducing costs and increasing efficiency for logistics enterprises and expanding their markets. They mainly address the pain points of long-distance, high-timeliness, and wide-coverage transportation in feeder and trunk lines. In terms of operational status, all these projects are still in the early stages of pilot or large-scale pilot programs, and are verifying the feasibility of their technical and economic models and business models through specific routes and cooperation, in preparation for large-scale networked operations in the future.

3.3 Commercialization exploration in special scenarios

The TP1000 is scheduled to enter the market in 2026 and has already received 30 orders from companies such as ZTO Express and Jiangsu Yajie. It is mainly used in scenarios like low-altitude cargo transportation, emergency rescue, and intelligent airdrop^[18]. The EHM-2600 has obtained a special airworthiness certificate from the Civil Aviation Administration of China in December 2024, marking its legal operation in commercial scenarios. It has launched five low-altitude logistics routes in Wuhan Optics Valley, covering areas from Sam's Club to the Digital Economy Industrial Park of Wuhan Optics Valley, for the delivery of takeout and duty-free goods. It has completed over 300 safe operations and plans to expand to more communities to achieve regular "UAV delivery" operations^[19]. The DJI FC 30 has been put into use in the Huangshan Scenic Area with two units, with a daily carrying capacity of 4,000 pounds. It is mainly used for transporting supplies to mountain-top hotels and handling garbage disposal. As of October 2023, it has transported a total of 190,000 pounds and flown safely for 106 days. It has also been applied in the transportation of building materials for mountain photovoltaic power stations, replacing the traditional method of mules and winches, significantly reducing the construction period^[20].

For these three types of UAVs, there are significant differences in their operational plans. The TP1000 and FC 30 are both fully ToB businesses. The former provides enterprises with a new and efficient aerial cargo transportation tool, supplementing the existing logistics network and addressing the pain point of traditional transportation methods being unable to deliver supplies to the core areas of disaster zones. It is still in the market preparation stage before the pilot. The latter solves the pain point of transportation efficiency in extreme terrains and also helps address some environmental and safety issues. Its operational data fully prove its commercial feasibility and value, and it has entered the stage of regular operation. The business model of the EHM-2600 is ToB2C, aiming to make profits through instant delivery services. It addresses the pain points of efficiency and cost in instant delivery and can support the delivery of high-end goods. Its operational data have initially proven its single-point feasibility, and it is currently in the pilot stage of large-scale expansion.

4 Policy restrictions on UAV operations in the low-altitude economy

At present, the application of UAVs in the low-altitude economy is subject to policy restrictions. In terms of airspace management, cities like Shenzhen have opened up 306 UAV routes, but new routes still need approval. The "Low-altitude Economy Regulatory Sandbox" pilot project in Hong Kong clearly defines no-fly zones, and entry without permission is prohibited. In terms of operational norms, the "Technical Requirements for Flight Data Evidence Storage of Civil Unmanned Aerial Vehicles" stipulates that all flight data must be encrypted and stored, and uploaded to the Civil Aviation Administration system on a regular basis. The "Civil Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Pilot Management Regulations (2025 Edition)" requires that all UAV operations be insured with liability insurance, and those who do not take out insurance will be restricted from flying. Due to the low approval rate for cross-regional applications (33%), SF Express's "Thousand Counties and Ten Thousand Routes" plan must be advanced gradually rather than rapidly expanded. There are regional

policy differences in various regions, and enterprises need to dynamically track local legislation during operation and formulate response strategies.

5 Future development trends of UAV applications in the low-altitude economy

At present, the application of UAVs in the low-altitude economy is mostly limited to the logistics industry. However, several of the aforementioned UAV models have the capability to support large-scale tasks such as fire-fighting and disaster relief, but their advantages have not been fully utilized in practical applications. Most of the aforementioned UAV models are in the transition stage from pilot projects to large-scale operations and have not yet formed a complete operational plan. The application of UAVs in the low-altitude economy is shifting from technical verification to commercial implementation, and its development is characterized by three major features: "verticalization of scenarios", "specialization of models", and "ecologization of operations".

In the next 3 to 5 years, with the improvement of airworthiness standards and policy relaxation, enterprises like Meituan will focus on the full-scale popularization of end-to-end delivery. Meanwhile, for companies like SF Express, the regional and trunk transportation will be scaled up first in high-value scenarios such as emergency, cross-border and remote logistics, ultimately leading to a structural decline in costs. In the future, UAVs will also integrate with other fields at the technical level, such as AI, 5G and the Internet of Things, to achieve intelligent scheduling and autonomous decision-making of UAV fleets through deep integration. Besides, UAVs will also be applied and developed in multiple fields of low-altitude economy, such as tourism, agriculture and urban management, giving rise to new business forms.

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