ARE DRONES THE FUTURE OF LOGISTICS? INTEGRATING DRONE DELIVERY INTO A MULTIMODAL FRAMEWORK



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THE CURRENT STATE OF DRONE DELIVERY IN LOGISTICS

Modern logistics is continually evolving, driven by technological advancements that redefine efficiency and service standards. In this context, the use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) for package and parcel delivery has emerged as a disruptive innovation with the potential to fundamentally transform last-mile and mid-mile supply chains.

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Over the past decade, drones have evolved from recreational devices to essential tools across various sectors. Their value is particularly pronounced in data capture applications, utilizing various sensors to optimize decision-making and save manhours in mining, surveying, agriculture, and surveillance. These markets have reached maturity, characterized by widespread adoption and large-scale implementation projects, with key players firmly established. Despite their growing use in recreation and data capture, the general public and many industries still regard the integration of drones into logistics operations as a futuristic concept. However, this integration is already a reality in several parts of the world. According to the Globalia Logistics report on drone delivery operations at the end of 2023, over 2,000 deliveries were made daily worldwide, averaging 1.5 deliveries per minute throughout the year. This data underscores the tangible impact of UAS technology today and highlights its potential to revolutionize the logistics industry in the coming decade.



Drone Delivery Market Forecast Worldwide. Source: Mordor Intelligence



The ability of UAS to execute fast and efficient deliveries is increasingly attracting the attention of logistics companies and industries with complex supply chains. Major logistics players such as UPS, FedEx, Amazon, Royal Mail, Walmart, and MPA of Singapore, as well as healthcare companies like Pfizer, Merck, and Novartis, and governmental entities such as Ghana's Ministry of Health, are already leveraging these technologies. These entities aim to optimize operations and provide faster, more efficient service to consumers across various use cases, where the primary value propositions are speed. efficiency, and sustainability.

This technological shift creates new opportunities for disruption in the sector but also presents a range of challenges that must be addressed to integrate these technologies safely and effectively. The global drone delivery market is projected to close in 2024 with a valuation of approximately \$0.7 billion USD, the highest figure to date, and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 20.3% over the next decade. The growth of the drone delivery market will be driven proportionally as the existing challenges to integrating this technology are addressed. Key challenges include regulatory hurdles, safety concerns, technological limitations, public perception, and the industry efforts required for integration. Overcoming these obstacles will unlock substantial opportunities for the logistics sector. Continued technological advancements and strategic regulatory developments will be crucial for transforming supply chain logistics, enhancing efficiency, and providing a competitive edge in the market.

REGULATORY OVERLOOK AND OPERATIONAL LIMITATIONS

From a regulatory perspective, there is no single global standard for drone delivery operations, and each civil aviation authority has the autonomy to establish its own guidelines and directives. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) provides guidance through Parts 102-149, while the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in the United States has established Part 107 regulations. The European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has issued regulations 2021/664, 2021/665, 2021/666, 2019/945, and 2019/947. These frameworks set the criteria under which most drones in the open and specific categories operate, typically under Visual Line of Sight (VLOS) limitations, where most current applications are observed.

A key regulatory enabler for drone delivery flights is Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) operations, which means that the operation is conducted remotely without the requirement for the pilot or an observer to maintain visual line of sight with the UAS. However, only a few countries have fully implemented BVLOS frameworks with recurring or commercial permissions, such as Australia, Ghana, China, Colombia, Canada, Rwanda, and Japan, significantly limiting the number of locations where such operations can take place. Many other regions, such as the USA, UAE, KSA, Belgium, Italy, UK, Singapore, and Brazil, have BVLOS permissions that are often temporary, with exceptions for segregated airspace or defined corridors by Civil Aviation Authorities (CAAs). These approvals usually come with limited contingency volumes and, over time, with demonstrated operational safety, can transition to permanent permissions, albeit with very generalized operational limitations.

Common regulatory limitations for drone delivery operations include:

Range limited to 150 km per flight

Payload capacity of 3 to 10 kg per flight

Limited volume of 50 cm x 50 cm x 30 cm

Maximum Take-off Weight (MTOW) not exceeding 50 kg

Altitude restricted to 120 meters above ground level (AGL)

No flights within urban areas due to the intrinsic ground risk SORA score higher than 4

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These restrictions create significant operational challenges and limit the potential use cases for drone delivery services, especially in populated areas where applications like e-commerce and food delivery could have a larger impact. The limitations on range and payload capacity, for instance, mean that drone deliveries are primarily viable for short-distance, lightweight packages. This makes operations in rural or less densely populated areas more practical. Consequently, drone delivery is being utilized more for applications such as the delivery of medications and laboratory samples in these remote regions.





AS THESE TECHNOLOGIES AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS ARE IMPLEMENTED

UAS Technology Challenges for Entering Urban Environments. Source: ALG

As operational safety for fully remote operations improves, drones will gradually be able to move closer to urban environments. The implementation of Unmanned Traffic Management (UTM) systems, particularly the concept adopted by U-Space, introduced by EASA, will be pivotal in this transition. U-Space is designed to ensure the safe and efficient integration of drones into airspace, focusing on various levels of svervices and procedures to support these operations. Levels U1 and U2 of U-Space are particularly critical as they address key elements necessary for safe drone operations:

Identification of operators	Approval processes for flight plans:
and aircraft: Ensuring that all drones	Establishing streamlined processes
and their operators are properly	for the submission and approval of
identified and registered to maintain	drone flight plans, which is crucial
accountability and safety with respect	for managing airspace usage and
to the regulator	preventing conflicts
Enhanced tracking and control mechanisms: Implementing advanced tracking systems to monitor drone movements in real-time, allowing for better control and coordination	Dynamic airspace management: Developing flexible airspace management strategies that can adapt to changing conditions and demands, facilitating the safe coexistence of manned and unmanned aircraft
Improved emergency management	Robust communication systems:
protocols: Establishing robust	Ensuring that reliable communication
protocols for handling emergencies,	channels (C2 links) are in place
ensuring that drone operations can be	between drones, operators, and UTM
safely halted or redirected in case of	traffic control to support coordinated
unforeseen events	and safe operations

These advancements in UTM integration will provide regulatory bodies with greater confidence in the safety and reliability of remote drone operations. Consequently, the integration of drones into urban airspace will become feasible, transitioning from temporary to permanent operations and expanding their use cases. This progress will broaden the potential applications of drone delivery services, paving the way for innovative and efficient logistics solutions within densely populated environments.

DRONE DELIVERY USES CASES

Given the generalized operational limitations in most countries where BVLOS flights are permitted, drones have established a niche in specific logistics applications, particularly in the distribution of medical supplies and emergency response. These use cases have seen substantial adoption and significant evolution in recent years, highlighting the potential benefits within the logistics supply chain. The primary driver for integrating drones into logistics is the time-sensitive nature of the cargo and the unique geographic or environmental conditions between pickup and delivery points.

Medical use cases have demonstrated significant growth, especially for remote communities and areas. Nonetheless, drone delivery is also being applied across various industries facing logistical challenges:

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- Rural and semi-urban schemes
- Move cargo within supply chain hubs
- Secure delivery of high-value cargo
- Where ground-based transportation is poor
- Time-sensitive cargo
- Faster, cheaper, on-demand

OFFSHORE

- Delivery of essential cargo to offshore energy assets
- Serving oil and gas and wind farm infrastructure
- Operating even when helicopters cannot
- Increased asset uptime through justin-time maintenance
- Removing people from dangerous
 environments

- Transport of critical healthcare cargo between medical facilities
- Pathology samples, medicines, medical equipment, vaccines
- Cold chain capability for "dangerous goods"
- On-demand or routine frequency as needed
- Optimized patient outcomes through rapid turnaround

▲ 拍 SHIP TO SHORE

- Delivery of high value cargo to and from ships
- Cash to master, bunker samples, telemedicine, component delivery
- Cargo when it is needed
- Minimises wait time at anchorage, saving time and money
- Reduces risk to staff boarding and disembarking ships

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE DRONE DELIVERY USE CASES

Drone delivery – Medical logistics in remote areas

The use of drones to connect remote areas without road infrastructure has found significant success in Africa, revolutionizing medical logistics since 2016. In Ghana, for example, over 292,000 deliveries were made in 2023 alone, averaging 800 flights daily. These drones transport critical supplies such as blood bags, COVID-19 samples, vaccines, basic goods, and water filters, covering 85% of the country's territory and benefiting over 12 million people. The efficiency and speed of this technology enable flights every 1.8 minutes around the clock, moving 4 tons of cargo daily and reducing delivery times by 70-80% compared to ground transportation.

Similarly, in Rwanda, drones have delivered over 2 million units of blood and vaccines to hospitals and health centers, cutting wait times from several hours to mere minutes and significantly improving patient outcomes. The ability to maintain the cold chain during the transport of hazardous materials, such as vaccines and biological samples, has increased logistical efficiency by 50% and reduced transport costs by 30%. These advancements are crucial for ensuring the availability and quality of medical supplies in remote communities, demonstrating the transformative impact of drone delivery in healthcare logistics.



Drone delivery – Urban logistics

In the realm of urban flights for last-mile delivery schemes, the United States and Australia have led the way in adopting drones for fast and efficient deliveries. Companies like Wing from Google and Zipline, which is rapidly expanding a program for Walmart, have conducted numerous tests and launched pilot programs in semi-urban areas such as North Carolina under temporary EVLOS and BVLOS permits. These initiatives have demonstrated the viability of using drones for small, high-demand packages, reducing delivery times by 50%, improving customer satisfaction, and lowering logistics costs by 30%, according to 2023 reports.

In Europe, isolated initiatives are emerging. In the UK, Royal Mail is interconnecting islands for light courier services. In Ireland, Manna is establishing drone delivery schemes for e-commerce and food in cities far from urban centers. In Brazil, Speedbird is developing last-mile models, interconnecting shopping centers with surrounding neighborhoods and offering premium on-demand services through applications like iFood, which promises delivery in less than 10 minutes.



Drone delivery – Offshore infrastructure

The use of drones to deliver essential cargo to offshore energy assets is on the rise. In the oil, gas, and wind energy industries, drones are replacing helicopters in situations where adverse weather conditions make flying difficult. For example, in the North Sea, drones are used to transport tools, spare parts, and other critical supplies to oil platforms and wind farms, reducing operational costs by 40% and labor risks by 60%. This approach not only increases asset uptime through just-in-time maintenance but also reduces human exposure to dangerous environments, enhancing overall safety in offshore operations.

There are still challenges to be addressed, such as integrating drones with higher payload capacities—above 100 kg—to adequately supply offshore platforms and expand the types of supplies that can be sent in a single flight. Additionally, there is potential for expanding use cases to include emergency situations and personnel extraction.



Drone delivery – Ship to shore

Drones are also being used to deliver cargo between ships and shore, improving the efficiency and safety of maritime operations. In congested ports where anchorage times can span several hours or even days, different types of on-demand needs arise. Across Asia and Europe, drones have been employed to transport documents, spare parts, cash to master, and urgent supplies, either on-demand or on a weekly basis, reducing delivery times by 70% and transport costs by 50%. This method of delivery not only streamlines port operations but also minimizes the risk of accidents and enhances worker safety by avoiding unnecessary small boat transfers.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist, such as the need for drones with higher payload capacities and the infrastructure required for drone landings on ships. Landing a drone on a moving ship is a significant challenge due to deviations caused by the ship's movement and the precision required by GPS systems. Technologies like winch systems for controlled cargo release are becoming more relevant, as they can address these challenges and improve the efficiency and safety of drone deliveries in maritime operations.

Source: Skyports Drone Delivery Services

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORTING DRONE DELIVERY OPERATIONS

The technology supporting drone delivery operations encompasses aircraft in three primary configurations, predominantly 100% electric, each tailored to meet specific mission requirements and advantages. Leading companies in this space include Speedbird, Flytrex, Manna, Matternet, Rigitech, Swoop Aero, Wing, and Zipline. Many of these companies serve as both Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) and operators, often opting for Vertical Take-Off and Landing (VTOL) aircraft configurations. VTOL aircraft combine the benefits of vertical take-off and landing capabilities with the efficiency of fixed-wing flight. This hybrid motor configuration eliminates the need for runways or additional infrastructure, enhancing scalability for deployment in various scenarios and locations. Additionally, VTOL aircraft leverage aerodynamic surfaces for improved range and performance.

To determine the appropriate aircraft for each mission type, it is essential to review the general specifications and relevant features of each configuration used in drone delivery worldwide:

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	Fixed Wing	Multirrotor	VTOL
Infrastructure Requirements	Yes	No	No
Range	<100 km	<30 km	>100
Speed	100 – 150 km/h	40 – 60 km/h	100 – 150 km/h
Payload Capacity	<3kg	<10 Kg	<5 kg
Wind Resistance	35 knots	20 knots	35 knots
Details	These offer superior range and speed, making them suitable for longer-distance deliveries but require runways or catapult launch systems for take-off and landing.	Known for their simplicity and ability to hover, they are ideal for short-range, precise deliveries but have limited range and payload capacity.	VTOL drones offer vertical take-off and landing flexibility with fixed- wing efficiency, suitable for various missions without extensive infrastructure.

The key technology enabling drone delivery applications across different models primarily involves advanced avionics and communication systems. These technologies facilitate the autonomy of the aircraft during its journey and ensure constant communication with the Ground Control Station (GCS). Other essential technological components for these operations include:

Electric power source

Autonomous GPS navigation

C2 Link (4G LTE / 5G - SATCOM)

Remote operations centers – Enabling one-to-many operations

Winch release systems or precise landing with QR codes

ADS-B In/Out with SAA/DAA capabilities

Emergency and recovery systems (Parachute)

Unmanned Traffic Management System (UTM)

While these technologies currently enable drone delivery, they are continuously being refined to meet the operational safety requirements set by regulators. This ongoing advancement is crucial for expanding the operational zones and airspaces available for drone delivery, making it an increasingly common aspect of our daily lives.



ADVANTAGES OF DRONE DELIVERY FOR VARIOUS INDUSTRIES

Drone delivery offers a range of advantages for various industries and use cases, providing significant benefits to companies and industries that have embraced this technology. As drone delivery becomes more integrated into logistics operations, its impact on efficiency, cost savings, and customer satisfaction continues to grow. The following advantages highlight the transformative potential of drone delivery across different sectors:

Faster delivery: Drones provide	Efficiency: Autonomous operation			
significantly quicker delivery times	allows drones to bypass traffic			
compared to traditional ground or air	congestion and logistical challenges,			
methods, meeting consumer demand	resulting in more efficient delivery			
for faster order fulfilment	routes and shorter delivery times			
Cost savings: The use of drones has the potential for long-term cost savings by reducing the need for human delivery drivers and associated labor expenses. Drones can operate continuously without breaks, enhancing operational efficiency	Reduced environmental impact: Electric drones produce fewer emissions than traditional delivery methods, making them a greener option for last-mile deliveries and contributing to sustainability goals			
Increased accessibility: Drones can	Improved customer /			
reach remote or hard-to-access	End user experience: Faster and more			
locations, including rural areas and	efficient deliveries enhance customer			
challenging terrains, where traditional	satisfaction by meeting expectations			
delivery vehicles may struggle	for quick and reliable service			
Brand differentiation: The adoption of	Versatility: Drones are adaptable to			
drone delivery can set companies apart	various delivery scenarios and are suitable			
from their competition, showcasing	for a wide range of industries beyond			
innovation and forward-thinking	medical, food and logistics delivery			

By leveraging these advantages, companies can optimize their logistics operations, improve service delivery, and gain a competitive edge in the market. As regulatory frameworks and technological advancements continue to evolve, the potential applications and benefits of drone delivery will expand, further transforming the logistics landscape.

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INTEGRATING DRONES INTO MULTIMODAL LOGISTICS CHAINS

Drones do not entirely replace traditional modes of transportation. Trucks, airplanes, boats, and motorcycles still play crucial roles in enabling efficient and highperformance supply chains. Drones become most useful in scenarios where land-based or maritime transportation fails to support supply chains due to environmental context or specific transport needs. On-demand drone transport allows for a more adaptive delivery system based on both product and facility characteristics.

For instance, low-cost, bulky, or heavy items with predictable demand that do not require special storage conditions can be transported less frequently (e.g., quarterly or bimonthly) using traditional land-based transportation. Conversely, resupplying items that are small and lightweight, time-sensitive, expensive to store at health facilities, or have unpredictable demand and special storage requirements is more suitable for an on-demand drone transport model.





The integration of drones into multimodal logistics chains provides significant advantages, particularly in the last-mile delivery stage. The following diagram illustrates how drones often complement traditional transportation methods, enhancing the overall efficiency and responsiveness of supply chains.



Drone delivery integration into a logistics chain. Source: ALG

The image illustrates a supply chain and inventory management system, crucial for drone delivery logistics. The icons represent key functions of the system:



Drone delivery integration into a logistics chain. Source: ALG

By leveraging the strengths of both traditional and drone-based transportation, companies can create more resilient and flexible logistics networks. This hybrid approach ensures that each mode of transport is used where it is most effective, optimizing delivery times, reducing costs, and improving service levels. As drone technology continues to advance and regulatory frameworks evolve, the role of drones in multimodal logistics chains is expected to grow, further enhancing supply chain performance.

ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF DRONE DELIVERY

While drone delivery offers various benefits across industries and can be implemented in effective logistics schemes, its financial sustainability is a crucial aspect to consider when integrating it into multimodal logistics chains. Well-established logistics chains already operate within very specific operational margin constraints, and integrating a new link into this chain would require the associated costs to be absorbed either by the provider or the end customer. This means that customers would need to be willing to pay a premium fee for a faster and more efficient service. Currently, the direct operational costs of a drone delivery service range between \$11 and \$13 USD per kilometer. These costs are not yet competitive with other delivery methods, such as electric cars, vans, motorcycles, and bicycles, or any type of vehicle conducting multiple deliveries in a single run, all of which maintain lower operational costs compared to drones.







Current costs of drone delivery services vs. existing urban transport methods¹. Source: ALG

The high costs of drone delivery stem from several factors, including the cost of the technology and the expensive components required for autonomous operation, regulatory compliance, the infrastructure needed to support drone operations, higher insurance costs, 1:1 operator-todrone ratios, and ground support personnel for loading and unloading cargo and charging batteries. As drone technology continues to evolve and economies of scale are realized, these costs may decrease. For drone delivery to become financially viable on a large scale, it must demonstrate not only cost-effectiveness but also the ability to seamlessly integrate into existing logistics networks. This integration involves overcoming regulatory hurdles, ensuring reliable and safe operations, and convincing both businesses and consumers of the added value of drone delivery. Achieving financial sustainability will be essential for the widespread adoption and long-term success of drone delivery within multimodal logistics chains.

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CHALLENGES TO THE ADOPTION OF DRONE DELIVERY

Despite its potential, drone delivery faces several significant challenges that need to be addressed for broader adoption.

REGULATORY HURDLES

- Urban airspace integration: Ensuring drones can safely share airspace with manned aircraft is a major regulatory challenge, particularly in the design of low-altitude airspace
- **Compliance:** Meeting stringent drone delivery regulations from aviation authorities such as the FAA, EASA, and others around the world is complex and varies by region
- Fully BVLOS operations: Establishing regulations and safety measures for fully Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) operations
- **UTM integration:** Integrating Unmanned Traffic Management (UTM) systems to coordinate drone flights with other airspace users, especially in urban areas

TECHNICAL AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

- Autonomy: Achieving reliable autonomous flight in diverse and unpredictable environments with robust obstacle avoidance capabilities
- **Payload capacity:** Increasing existing limited payload capacities, which currently restrict the types of goods drones can transport, aiming for capacities of 100 kg and above
- **Range:** Enhancing battery life or developing hybrid power options to extend range and enable long-distance deliveries of over 200 km
- C2 link reliability: Ensuring low latency and high reliability in Command and Control (C2) communication systems based on 4G/5G and SATCOM
- Recovery systems: Implementing effective emergency systems, such as automatic parachutes integrated with flight controllers, especially in populated areas
- Collision avoidance: Developing robust systems to prevent collisions with obstacles, other drones, and aircrafts

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SAFETY CONCERNS

- Reliability: Ensuring drones can operate safely in various weather conditions and environments, including heavy rain and urban settings
- **Privacy:** Guaranteeing that data captured by drones does not infringe on personal privacy or cause legal issues
- **Cybersecurity:** Ensuring drones and their communication systems are protected against hacking and other cyber threats

INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS

- Landing sites: Identifying and establishing safe landing sites, especially in urban areas
- **Support facilities:** Setting up necessary infrastructure for charging, maintenance, and operations

OPERATIONAL COST

- **High initial investment:** The cost of technology, infrastructure, and compliance can be prohibitive
- **Operational costs:** Current operational costs for drone delivery are higher compared to traditional methods due to low-scale operations

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- Noise pollution: Drones can contribute to noise pollution, particularly in urban areas
- Wildlife disturbance: Ensuring that drones do not disturb wildlife or natural habitats

PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE

- Perception: Gaining public trust and acceptance of drones operating in everyday life
- Awareness: Educating the public about the benefits and safety of drone delivery systems







Source: Speedbird Aero

THE FUTURE OF DRONE DELIVERY

To fully capitalize on the potential of drone delivery, it is essential to address several challenges that require concerted efforts from industry stakeholders, including OEMs, systems providers, operators, regulatory bodies, and the public. Overcoming regulatory, financial, and technical obstacles is crucial for effectively integrating drone delivery into existing logistics frameworks, paving the way for widespread adoption and realizing the transformative impact of drone delivery in the logistics industry.

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Challenges such as establishing comprehensive Beyond Visual Line of Sight (BVLOS) and fully remote operation regulations, designing and managing low-altitude urban airspace with the incorporation of advanced UTM services, obtaining approvals from relevant public entities, and ensuring financial sustainability through key technological advancements are critical. One of these evolving factors is increasing the load capacity with aircraft designed to carry over 200 kg within a range of 400 km, which will significantly reduce operating costs per kilometer and expand use cases beyond last-mile to middle-mile logistics, making drone delivery more competitive with traditional logistics methods and allowing for service scalability.





Various comprehensive programs, initiatives, and trials involving larger aircraft and fully integrated UTM systems are already underway, primarily in the UK, Europe, and the USA. These trials, conducted within limited BVLOS operational schemes or EVLOS corridors, aim to demonstrate to regulators and the market the viability and adaptability of drone delivery to meet the logistics industry's needs. Proving the reliability of these platforms for large-scale operations represents a significant advancement toward integrating drone delivery into broader industrial applications. This progress also lays the groundwork for the commercial operation of eVTOL passenger services by 2026 - 2027, presenting new opportunities for efficiency and innovation across the market.

The future of drone delivery will hinge on the UAS sector's ability to adapt and the market's capacity to rapidly adopt and successfully implement these technologies. Drones are expected to become a pivotal element in multimodal logistics supply chains, offering faster, more efficient, environmentally sustainable, and cost-effective delivery solutions across diverse sectors. The full integration of drone delivery into logistics chains will streamline operations and enhance the scalability of this technology. Continuous support from cross-sector initiatives will be essential in establishing drone delivery as a mainstream component of logistics, fostering innovation and efficiency throughout the supply chain.

The Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) division of ALG plays a crucial role in providing cross-sector support to address these challenges. The AAM experts assist in developing specific strategies and business support, operations and logistics, policy and regulation, technical systems, and end-to-end solutions for UTM systems, ensuring the safe integration of drones into existing logistics frameworks. This support is vital for making the future of drone delivery increasingly viable, promising significant benefits across various industries and applications.



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