



Analyzing the Evolution and Impact of Drone Technology: Trends, Applications, and Regulatory Challenges

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Abstract:

This paper examines the development of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or “drones”) from their early military origins to modern civilian uses. We review key technological milestones in drone evolution, describe current market trends and usage growth, and survey major applications of drones across sectors such as agriculture, logistics, surveillance, environmental monitoring, and media production. The paper also analyzes economic and social impacts including job creation and cost benefits. A significant focus is on the regulatory landscape: we outline rules in leading jurisdictions (US, EU, India) and discuss challenges of privacy, safety, and standardization. Finally, we look ahead to future trajectories like autonomous swarms, beyond-visual-line-of-sight (BVLOS) operations, and urban air mobility (drone taxis). The analysis draws on recent market reports, academic studies, and industry sources to provide a comprehensive overview.

Keywords: Drone technology, UAV, market trends, applications, regulations, autonomous drones, drone policy.

ملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية تطور الطائرات بدون طيار (UAVs) منذ بداياتها العسكرية وصولاً إلى الاستخدامات المدنية الحديثة. نستعرض أهم المحطات التكنولوجية في تطور الطائرات بدون طيار، ونستعرض اتجاهات السوق الحالية ونمو الاستخدام، ونستعرض التطبيقات الرئيسية للطائرات بدون طيار في قطاعات مثل الزراعة، والخدمات اللوجستية، والمراقبة، والرصد البيئي، والإنتاج الإعلامي. كما نُحلل الورقة الآثار الاقتصادية والاجتماعية، بما في ذلك خلق فرص العمل وفوائد التكلفة. وركز الورقة بشكل كبير على المشهد التنظيمي: حيث نحدد القواعد في الولايات القضائية الرائدة (الولايات المتحدة، والاتحاد الأوروبي، والهند)، وناقش تحديات الخصوصية والسلامة والتوحيد القياسي. وأخيراً، نتطلع إلى مسارات مستقبلية مثل أسراب الطائرات ذاتية القيادة، وعمليات ما وراء خط الرؤية (BVLOS)، والتنقل الجوي الحضري (سيارات الأجرة بدون طيار). ويستند التحليل إلى تقارير السوق الحديثة، والدراسات الأكاديمية، ومصادر الصناعة لتقديم نظرة عامة شاملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تكنولوجيا الطائرات بدون طيار، الطائرات بدون طيار، اتجاهات السوق، التطبيقات، اللوائح، الطائرات بدون طيار ذاتية القيادة، سياسة الطائرات بدون طيار.

Introduction

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly known as drones, are aircraft operated without an onboard pilot. They can be remotely piloted or fully autonomous. In recent years drones have become far more capable due to advances in miniaturized sensors, GPS navigation, and onboard computing. These machines now play growing roles in many fields. For example, small quadcopters have become ubiquitous tools in photography and agriculture, while larger UAVs serve roles in logistics and surveillance.

Understanding drone evolution and impact is important because drone technology is rapidly changing many industries and raising new societal questions. The goals of this paper are to trace how drones developed, analyze current trends in drone design and market growth, summarize major applications and benefits, and highlight regulatory challenges worldwide. We focus on both technical developments (e.g. AI integration, autonomy) and

policy issues (airspace rules, privacy). By surveying recent studies and data, we aim to present a thorough picture of where drone technology stands in 2025 and its likely future.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the historical evolution of drones from early experiments to today. Section 3 examines current trends in drone design, market growth, and enabling technologies. Section 4 surveys drone applications in key sectors like agriculture, delivery, security, environment, and media. Section 5 discusses economic and social impacts, including employment and public acceptance. Section 6 analyzes the global regulatory landscape, with case studies of US, EU, and Indian rules. Section 7 looks ahead to future innovations such as autonomous swarms and urban air mobility. We conclude in Section 8 with a summary of findings and implications for policy and industry.

Historical Evolution of Drone Technology

The first UAVs emerged in World War I. In Britain, the Royal Flying Corps built the “Aerial Target” in 1917 – a radio-controlled aircraft used for anti-aircraft practice. At the same time, the US developed the “Kettering Bug”, an early flying torpedo, which first flew in October 1918. Neither saw combat use, but both proved the concept of pilotless flight. In the 1930s, the UK produced the de Havilland Queen Bee – a radio-controlled target drone that lent its name to the term “drone”. The Queen Bee was essentially a Tiger Moth trainer modified for remote control.

During and after World War II, militaries experimented with various designs. The US Air Force flew a B-17-based Pilotless Aircraft prototype in 1946 (see Fig. 1) and developed guided missiles. In the Vietnam War era, reconnaissance drones like the Ryan Firebee were flown regularly. According to the Imperial War Museums, “reconnaissance UAVs were first deployed on a large scale in the Vietnam War” and unmanned aircraft also served as decoys, missile platforms, and leaflet drones. Thus by the late 20th century, drone technology had matured in military contexts.

The 21st century saw a huge rise in commercial and hobbyist drone use. Small quadcopters became popular after 2010, led by consumer models like the DJI Phantom. Advances in GPS, batteries, and cameras turned drones into practical tools. This “popular explosion” around 2014 was noted by industry commentators. Today’s drones combine technologies from robotics, avionics, and information technology. Figure 1 below illustrates key milestones in drone development from 1782 (unmanned balloons) to modern quadcopters.

The timeline spans early experiments (unmanned balloons, 1782), WWI UAVs (1917-18), WWII target drones, Vietnam-era reconnaissance, through the consumer drone boom and emerging roles (2010s).

Current Trends in Drone Development and Usage

The global drone market has been growing rapidly. Diverse forecasts exist, but all show strong growth. One analysis estimated the commercial drone market was \$43.4 billion in 2023, reaching \$60.4 billion in 2024 and surging to \$1,445.8 billion by 2034 (37% CAGR) (Precedence Research., 2024). Other sources predict more modest figures: for example, Drone Industry Insights forecasts ~\$57.8 billion by 2030 (7.9% CAGR), while Grand View Research projects a rise from \$73.06 billion in 2024 to \$163.6 billion by 2030 (14.3% CAGR). Mordor Intelligence similarly sees growth from \$41.8 billion (2025) to \$89.7 billion by 2030 (13.9% CAGR). Despite varying estimates, it is clear the market is expanding fast, driven by new applications and falling hardware costs.

Miniaturization and smart automation

One key trend is the ongoing miniaturization of drone components. Modern drones pack powerful microprocessors, cameras, and sensors into lightweight frames. Advances in CMOS cameras, GPS modules, and battery technology allow even small drones to perform complex tasks. Onboard CPUs and AI chips enable real-time data processing. For example, recent specialized advances in hardware from compact cameras to embedded GPUs have refreshed the drone capabilities, allowing many analytics to run on-board (Precedence Research., 2024). Companies are applying machine learning to drone-collected data, turning raw images into insights without human intervention. In short, drones are becoming “smarter”: equipped with autopilot software, obstacle-avoidance sensors, and connectivity to the Internet of Things (IoT). Modern systems can integrate with AI, GPS, and cloud platforms, enabling features like precise waypoint navigation, computer vision, and networked coordination. These innovations make drones more autonomous and useful in industrial settings (Precedence Research., 2024).

Integration with AI, GPS, and IoT

Drones now routinely include GPS modules for centimeter-level navigation accuracy. Many incorporate inertial measurement units (IMUs) and magnetometers to stabilize flight. On the software side, nearly all commercial drones rely on autopilot software stacks (often open-source like ArduPilot or proprietary) that implement GPS waypoint missions and fail-safe controls. IoT connectivity (via 4G/5G or radio links) allows drones to stream data live to remote servers or coordinate with other devices. As one review notes, the combination of AI and IoT

analysis can greatly enhance applications – for instance, in agriculture, integrating AI/ML algorithms with drone imagery enables early disease detection and yield estimation (Guebli et al., 2024).



Figure 1 Timeline of drone technology evolution (source: DronesBuy Infographic).



Figure 2 Projected global commercial drone market (USD billions). Estimates range from ~\$41.8B in 2025 to ~\$89.7B by 2030 (13.9% CAGR) Mordor Intelligence., 2025).

Applications of Drones Across Key Sectors

Drones are versatile tools used in many industries. Table 1 summarizes primary uses by sector. Below we discuss major applications with examples and sources.

- Agriculture:** Drones have become important in precision farming. They carry cameras and multispectral sensors to monitor crop health, soil moisture, and plant stress over large fields. Drones can map fields with high-resolution imagery, enabling farmers to spot issues like nutrient deficiencies or pests early (Guebsli et al., 2024). Some drones even act as spray platforms: by mounting liquid tanks and sprayers, they can precisely apply fertilizers or pesticides only where needed, reducing waste. This aerial monitoring and intervention helps optimize yields and cuts labor and chemical costs. Modern ag-drones often integrate with AI/IoT systems: for example, algorithms analyze the collected images to generate irrigation maps or disease alerts (Guebsli et al., 2024). Figure 3 below shows an agricultural drone in flight.



Figure 3 DJI Agras agricultural drone spraying a field (Pixabay).

Logistics: There is growing interest in using drones for delivery and inventory. In warehousing, drones can scan inventory from above, replacing manual forklift surveys. More famously, companies are trialing drone parcel delivery. Drones are well-suited for “last-mile” delivery of lightweight, time-sensitive packages in congested areas (Frazer, J., 2024). For instance, Amazon’s Prime Air and Google’s Wing project are developing systems to deliver small items (e.g. medicines, electronics) directly to customers’ homes. Drones bypass road traffic and can quickly reach remote or urban areas. In logistics centers, drones can inspect stock on high shelves using RFID or barcode scanning cameras. Overall, drones offer faster delivery options and can reduce costs in supply chains (Frazer, J., 2024).

- **Surveillance and Security:** Drones provide mobile eyes in the sky. Militaries and police use them for reconnaissance, crowd monitoring, border patrol, and crime scene investigations. For example, police units deploy drones to monitor public events, track suspects, or map accident scenes. The military’s use of drones for surveillance and targeted strikes has been widely publicized. According to one source, drones now serve many functions “ranging from monitoring climate change to carrying out search operations after natural disasters, photography, filming, and delivering goods,” but their most known role remains military reconnaissance. Thus drones fill roles in both public safety and defense.
- **Environmental Monitoring and Disaster Management:** Drones help monitor the environment and respond to crises. They can map wildfires in real-time, survey flood damage, and track wildlife. For example, thermal cameras on drones detect hotspots in forests, aiding firefighters. In disaster zones, drones can quickly search for survivors or assess structural damage when it is unsafe for humans. Environmental agencies use drones to measure air or water quality and to monitor glaciers or deforestation. The Imperial War Museums note that modern drones have roles “from monitoring climate change to carrying out search operations after natural disasters”. These applications improve safety and situational awareness in emergencies.
- **Media and Cinematography:** Drones revolutionized aerial photography. Film crews, news media, and hobbyists use drones to capture sweeping views. Cinematographers use specialized drones with stabilized gimbals to film movies and commercials, creating effects that once required helicopters. Live news broadcasts sometimes use drones to cover events (sports, protests, natural phenomena) quickly. Even the entertainment industry has seen drones in shows – for instance, drone light shows (e.g., over stadiums) have become popular in recent years. Thus drones have become standard tools for dynamic visual storytelling.

Table 1 Sector-wise drone uses and benefits.

Sector	Use Cases	Key Benefits
Agriculture	Crop and livestock monitoring; aerial spraying; soil/field mapping	Higher yields, resource savings (water, chemicals); early problem detection (disease, pests)
Logistics	Package delivery (last-mile); warehouse inventory surveys	Faster delivery times; reduced labor; reach remote areas
Surveillance/Security	Border patrol; disaster search/rescue; police monitoring; infrastructure inspection	Enhanced safety; real-time intelligence; lower risk to personnel
Environmental/Disaster	Fire mapping; pollution monitoring; wildlife surveys; damage assessment	Rapid situational awareness; proactive management; improved response
Media/Entertainment	Aerial photography/filming; news coverage; drone light shows	New creative possibilities; high-quality aerial footage at lower cost

Economic and Social Impact

The drone industry has significant economic effects. Analysts estimate large employment and value creation. For example, a U.S. industry report projected that integrating drones into national airspace could create over 100,000 jobs and contribute \$82 billion to the U.S. economy by 2025 (AUVSI., 2013). These jobs span manufacturing, services (e.g. drone mapping companies), and operational roles like pilots and maintenance technicians. Globally, support services and software development around drones are expanding rapidly.

Cost-benefit studies show that drones can save money for businesses. In agriculture, precise spraying by drone can cut chemical use by 20-50% compared to broadcast spraying. In infrastructure inspection (power lines, bridges), drones can do in minutes what took hours by helicopter or manual climbers, reducing labor costs dramatically. Delivery companies report that aerial drones may eventually lower per-package costs for small items, once regulatory hurdles ease. Thus drones improve efficiency and lower certain operational costs across sectors.

Socially, public opinion on drones is mixed. Some surveys suggest the public values beneficial uses (like medical deliveries) but worries about privacy and noise. Concerns over drones' proliferation include surveillance abuse and collisions with manned aircraft. For instance, 56% of European urban residents said they would feel safe with drone deliveries, but others express discomfort about drones buzzing overhead. Acceptance often depends on context: in trials, large majorities (e.g. 87%) supported drone delivery of essentials, yet incidents like near-misses with airliners highlight safety issues. Overall, as drones become more common, social adaptation will hinge on demonstrating clear benefits while ensuring privacy and safety.

Regulatory Landscape and Challenges

The rapid growth of drones has outpaced regulation. Governments worldwide are grappling with how to allow safe drone use while protecting public welfare. Key regulatory challenges include airspace safety, privacy, and standardization. Unregulated or rogue drone flights risk mid-air collisions, unauthorized surveillance, and disruptions at airports (AZO Robotics., 2025). Regulators must balance fostering innovation with preventing accidents and abuses.

Overview of global regulations

Many countries have adopted new drone rules in the 2010s. We examine three major regimes: the United States (FAA), the European Union (EASA), and India (DGCA).

- **United States (FAA):** The FAA's Part 107 rules govern commercial drones. Drones must generally stay within visual line of sight (VLOS) of the pilot and below 400 feet altitude (AZO Robotics., 2025). Vehicles above 250 grams must be registered, and remote identification (broadcasting an ID) is required for accountability. Flights over people or beyond VLOS need special waivers. Drones are also barred from no-fly zones (e.g. airports, military bases) unless exempt. Violating rules can incur fines (e.g. \$10,000/day) (AZO Robotics., 2025). Some limited BVLOS (beyond-visual-line-of-sight) operations have been allowed under strict conditions as of 2024.
- **European Union (EASA):** In 2018, EASA implemented a unified framework across EU members. Drones are classified by risk: Open category (low risk, e.g. <25kg VLOS, <120m altitude, no population overflight), Specific category (medium risk, operations authorized case-by-case), and Certified category (high risk, similar to manned aircraft standards) (AZO Robotics., 2025). Many of the same rules apply: VLOS only (except approved cases), altitude $\leq 120\text{m}$, and registration for drones $>250\text{ g}$. EU rules aim to harmonize nationwide: one registration and one set of rules for all member states. However, individual countries can impose additional local restrictions (e.g. privacy zones, insurance requirements) (AZO Robotics., 2025).
- **India (DGCA):** India's 2021 **Drone Rules** introduced several categories (Nano $\leq 250\text{ g}$, Micro 250 g–2 kg, Small 2–25 kg, Medium 25–150 kg, Large $>150\text{ kg}$) and a "No Permission – No Take Off" (NPNT) digital system for authorization (UAVCoach., 2023). All drones above Nano must obtain a Unique Identification Number (UIN) and operator permits. Recreational flight below 50 ft (15 m) for Nano drones requires minimal permission, but commercial operations generally need advance clearance. Pilots must maintain VLOS and stay under 400 ft altitude (UAVCoach., 2023). No-fly zones (near airports, international borders, military sites) are strictly enforced via geo-fencing. These rules emphasize registration and explicit permission for each flight, aiming to ensure accountability (UAVCoach., 2023).

Privacy, security, and airspace concerns

Regulators also address issues beyond flight rules. Privacy is a major concern; many countries require operators to avoid unintended filming of people. Cybersecurity is another challenge: drones can be hacked or used maliciously. Anti-drone measures (like GPS spoofing defenses) are being considered. Managing airspace is difficult: drones operate at low altitudes that were largely unregulated, so concepts like UTM (Unmanned Aircraft System Traffic Management) are under development.

Below the table compares key aspects of the US, EU, and Indian frameworks. All emphasize pilot visual contact and altitude limits, but differ in categories and enforcement. Despite efforts, the lack of a single global standard means operators working internationally must adapt to each system (AZO Robotics., 2025).

Table 2 Comparative summary of drone regulations in the US, EU, and India.

Feature	USA (FAA)	EU (EASA)	India (DGCA)
Registration	Required if >250 g	Required if >250 g	Required for all except Nano
Line-of-sight	VLOS required (with waivers for BVLOS)	VLOS only (except Specific category ops)	VLOS required
Altitude limit	400 ft AGL (max)	120 m AGL (max)	400 ft AGL (max)
Drone categories	No formal risk categories (light vs heavy regs)	Open, Specific, Certified categories (by risk)	Nano/Micro/Small/Medium/Large (by weight)
Pilot certification	Part 107 license for commercial pilots	No license for Open cat (<25kg); Specific cat requires operational permit	Unmanned Aircraft Operator Permit (UAOP) required for many operations
Special approvals	Waivers for flights over people, BVLOS, night	Operational authorizations for Specific/Certified	NPNT permission needed pre-flight
No-fly zones	Defined (airports, security zones, etc.)	Defined (airports, critical sites, etc.)	Defined (airports, international borders, high-security zones)

Future Outlook and Innovation Trajectories

Looking ahead, drones are expected to become even more autonomous and capable. Major trends include:

- Autonomous and swarming drones:** Researchers and companies are developing drone swarms that can coordinate as a group. Swarms of small drones could perform tasks like search-and-rescue or large-scale mapping more efficiently than individual units. Advances in onboard AI and communications are enabling drones to fly in formation and divide tasks dynamically. A recent review highlights “drone swarms” and improved energy autonomy as key areas for future work (Guebsli et al., 2024). For instance, swarms have been tested for agricultural seeding and reforestation, where multiple drones drop seeds over wide areas.
- Beyond-Visual-Line-of-Sight (BVLOS) operations:** Enabling drones to fly beyond the pilot’s line of sight is a major frontier. BVLOS would allow long-range delivery or pipeline inspection without costly relay stations. Technical enablers include detect-and-avoid sensors and advanced UTM systems. Regulators are gradually approving more BVLOS flights under strict conditions. The expectation is that BVLOS will open up commercial use of drones to many new applications, but requires robust collision-avoidance and traffic-management solutions.
- Urban Air Mobility (UAM):** A transformative vision is integrating drones into urban transportation. This includes not only delivery drones but also **eVTOL (electric vertical takeoff and landing) vehicles** for passenger transport (often called “flying taxis”). Several companies are prototyping eVTOL craft. If realized, congested cities could see air lanes of autonomous vehicles. Developing this will require new infrastructure (vertiports for takeoff/landing, charging networks) and very high safety standards. UAM remains experimental but is a possible next step in aerial mobility.
- Advanced sensing and payloads:** Future drones will carry more sophisticated sensors (LiDAR, thermal, hyperspectral cameras) at lower cost, expanding applications like 3D mapping and inspection. Improved battery technologies (or hybrid power) will extend flight times. Integration with 5G and satellite networks will enhance range and data capabilities.
- Regulatory evolution:** On the policy side, global standards are evolving. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) is working on recommended practices. As technologies advance, regulators must address issues like swarms and congestion in low-altitude airspace. Ongoing trials (e.g. NASA’s UTM programs) aim to create frameworks for drones to safely share airspace with manned aircraft.

Figure 5 illustrates some emerging trends, including autonomy and UAM. These are likely areas of continued innovation, but their realization will require solving complex technical and policy challenges.

URBAN AIR MOBILITY 101



Name	Delivery Drones		Passenger Drones	
Purpose	Moving Goods		Moving People	
Explanation	The aerial transport of goods using small and medium cargo drones in cities.		The aerial transport of people using unmanned aerial vehicles, also known as air taxis or flying cars.	
Current Stage	Successfully tested. Running in Zurich, Lugano and Raleigh. Preparing for launch in 4 more cities.		Testing (in Dallas, L.A., Singapore and Melbourne), Certification	
Costs (planned)	5 cents per mile		\$6 USD per seat mile	
Autonomy Levels Required	Today	Future	Today	Future
	Level 3 (Conditional Automation)	Level 5 (Full Automation)	Level 2 (Partial Automation)	Level 5 (Full Automation)
Regulatory Hurdles	Operational Requirements	Platform Requirements	Operational Requirements	Platform Requirements
	BVLOS, Flying Over People, Flying at Night, Dropping Objects, Continuous Airworthiness Insurance	Airworthiness Certification	BVLOS, Flying Over People, Flying at Night, Continuous Airworthiness Insurance	Type Certification, Product Organization Approval (POA), Airworthiness Cert.
Major Players	Wing, Uber Eats, Amazon, DHL, Zipline, Matternet, Flirtey, Flytrex, Skyways, Volans-I, etc.		Aurora, Lilium, Uber, Volocopter, City Airbus, eHang, Joby Aviation, Karem, KittyHawk, XTI, etc.	

Source: DRONEII.com, Pictures: Shutterstock.com

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Figure 4 Emerging trends in drone technology.

Key trajectories include swarm autonomy, expanded BVLOS operations, and urban air mobility. These promise new capabilities but also demand enhanced safety, energy, and regulatory solutions.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of drone technology from its military roots to its current widespread civilian roles. The drone market is expanding rapidly, fueled by technological advances in miniaturization, AI, and connectivity. Drones now serve critical functions in agriculture, logistics, security, environmental monitoring, and media. They offer economic benefits – boosting productivity and creating jobs but also raise social questions about privacy and safety.

Our analysis shows that drone technology presents both opportunities and challenges. The opportunities include unprecedented data collection and automation that can improve efficiency in many industries. However, effective integration of drones will require careful policy. Harmonized regulations, safe traffic management, and clear rules on privacy are needed to gain public trust. International coordination (via bodies like ICAO) will be important to standardize operations.

For businesses, the implication is clear: drones should be seen as transformative tools to explore. Companies in agriculture, logistics, and other fields should plan for increased drone usage and factor it into their operations. Policymakers must update airspace rules to allow innovation while protecting citizens. Finally, ongoing research into autonomy, battery life, and swarm coordination will shape the next generation of drones.

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