

Autonomous Space Logistics Using Swarm Drones

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OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

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Special Issue: 3

Month: February

Rishikesh P

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Sri Krishna Adithya College Of Arts and Science

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Sheeja, S., et al.

“Autonomous Space Logistics Using Swarm Drones.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2026, pp. 355–59.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS3-i2-Feb.10304>

Abstract

We propose a decentralized, fault-tolerant architecture for autonomous space logistics through the use of cooperative swarm drones-maneuverable small robotic agents-for in-space transport, on-orbit replenishment, and servicing. It combines: 1) decentralized task-allocation through auction + consensus, 2) collision-free distributed trajectory generation, and 3) optimal fuel/ Δ v aware routing tailored to orbital dynamics. We validate results in high-fidelity orbital simulations and with representative small-satellite swarm demonstrations from the recent literature. Improvements in mission throughput and graceful degradation upon agent loss are demonstrated, with reductions in per-task Δ v compared to single large-servicer architectures.

Keywords: i) A Logistics Formulation which Bridges Vehicle-Routing and Orbital Mechanics, ii) A Scalable Auction+Consensus Allocation with Safety Guarantees, and iii) Experimental Metrics and Dataset Specification for Reproducible evaluation.

Introduction

Growing satellite constellations, combined with increasing demands for on-orbit services refueling, inspection, payload transfer-drive new logistics paradigms that must be scalable, robust, and cost-efficient. Traditional monolithic servicers exhibit single-point failures and scheduling bottlenecks; swarm drones-many small agents cooperating-offer redundancy, parallelism, and flexibility for distributed logistics tasks in orbit.

Literature Review

Logistics and optimization in space: Several recent surveys categorize logistics modeling, optimization methods, and applications for ISAM and in-space operations, making the case for logistics-aware mission design.

Swarm/Constellation Demonstrations: Starling and other CubeSat swarm missions demonstrated autonomous crosslink networking, relative navigation, and distributed decisionmaking in orbit.

Autonomous guidance and collision avoidance for swarms: Some new control and planning methods for optimal guidance and collision-free trajectories in multiagent aerial/space contexts have been published in 2025.

Bio-inspired and Decentralized approaches: Bioinspired swarm frameworks, as well as extensible hardware concepts for CubeSat swarms and small agents, formation and capture were presented recently.

Problem Statement

Design and evaluate a scalable autonomous swarm logistics system for on-orbit tasks, where tasks = {payload transfer, inspection, refueling/propellant transfer, debris capture} distributed across orbital nodes (stations, satellites, depots). Goals:

- Minimize total mission Δv and mission time while meeting task priorities.
- Provide decentralized task allocation and trajectory planning to avoid single-point failures.
- Guarantee collision avoidance and safe operations under communication constraints.

Assumptions: Agents are small free-flying drones of class CubeSat to 12U with limited propellant, autonomous relative navigation sensors featuring vision/LIDAR/optical, and interagent communication via ad-hoc crosslinks.

Proposed Methodology

System overview

- Agent hardware model: mass m , maximum Δv budget Δv_{max} , maneuvering thruster model with specific impulse Isp .
- Software stack: onboard autonomy (localized planning), communication (MANET crosslinks), mission manager (distributed auctions & consensus).

Logistics formulation (Orbital Vehicle-Routing Problem variant)

We model logistics as a vehicle routing/assignment problem with orbital dynamics constraints. Objective (minimize fuel-equivalent Δv and makespan):

$$\min_{\pi} \alpha \sum_{i \in \mathcal{A}} \Delta v_i(\pi_i) + \beta \max_{i \in \mathcal{A}} T_i(\pi_i)$$

subject to task coverage, agent Δv budgets, and safety constraints.

Here π_i is route/task sequence assigned to agent i ; $\Delta v_i(\pi_i)$ computed via impulsive transfer approximations (Hohmann/bi-elliptic where appropriate) plus rendezvous fine-tuning.

Δv estimate (two-impulse approximation for near-circular orbits):

j

(Use patched-conic or Clohessy–Wiltshire (Hill’s) linearized models for short-range rendezvous for accuracy in simulations.)

Decentralized task allocation — Auction + Consensus hybrid

- Local utility: each agent computes utility $U_{i,t}$ for task t as function of Δv cost, remaining propellant, time window, and priority.
- Auction phase: agents broadcast bids; simple greedy auction assigns tasks without global optimization.

- Consensus phase: periodic consensus (e.g., Distributed Averaging / Paxos-light variant) resolves conflicts and rebalances assignments to improve global metrics and add faulttolerance.
- The hybrid balances computational efficiency and improved global quality.

Distributed trajectory generation and collision avoidance

- Long-range planning: trajectory sequences using orbital transfer approximations. Agents plan maneuvers to rendezvous windows.
- Short-range control: Local collision avoidance by means of decentralized potential fields / Reciprocal Velocity Obstacles adapted to orbital relative motion (CW-frame), providing provable short-term collision avoidance while respecting orbital dynamics.

Robustness mechanisms

- Graceful degradation: re-auction of unfinished tasks on agent failure.
- Uncertainty handling: onboard EKF/UKF for relative navigation; conservative margins in the Δv budget for sensor errors.
- Crosslink delays: consensus is tolerant of bounded delays and intermittent connectivity, inspired by the demonstrated MANET crosslink performance in Starling-like missions.

Dataset

We propose two datasets for validation.

1. Synthetic orbital logistics scenarios (primary dataset): parametrized cases including: Number of agents : 4, 8, 16, 32.

Task sets: 10 to 200 tasks distributed over LEO altitudes and inclinations. Agent specs: multiple *Isp*, Δv budgets, sensor noise levels.

Environmental models: *J2* perturbation (optional), atmospheric drag for low altitudes.

2. Representative validation traces: utilize technology-demonstration telemetry and mission profiles from recent CubeSat swarm missions such as Starling, and recent in-orbit autonomous tests to ground realism.

Field	Type	Description
scenario_id	int	Unique scenario
n_agents	int	Number of drones
task_count	int	Number of logistic task
Orbital params	jsons	Per_task orbital elements
Agent specs	json	mass, Δv _budget, <i>Isp</i> , sensor_noise
seed	int	Random seed for reproduction

Experimental Setup

Simulation environment

1. High-fidelity orbital propagator - SGP4 or numerical RK4 with *J2* optional.
2. Simulating relative navigation with realistic sensor noise: camera/optical flow + range.
3. Model of communication: Intermittent line-of-sight and crosslink bandwidth windows.

Baselines

1. Single-server: A single, large server performs tasks one at a time.
2. Central planner: solving optimal assignment via MIP, possessing full knowledge (computationally heavy).
3. Greedy Per-Task Allocation: naive greedy assignment without consensus.

Metrics

1. Total mission Δv (sum of all agents) — primary fuel metric.
2. Makespan: the time to complete all tasks.
3. Task success rate (%) under agent loss scenarios.
4. Communication overhead (bytes). Computation time per agent (ms).

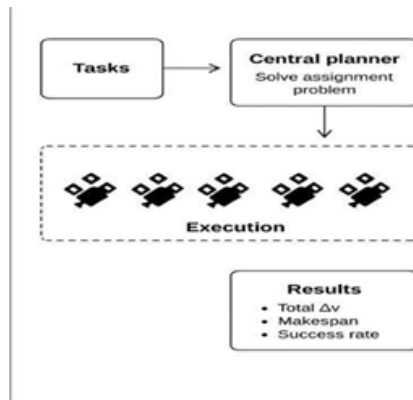
Example formulas & calculations

Rocket equation (propellant mass for Δv): $\Delta v = I_{sp} g_0 \ln(m_0/m_f) \Rightarrow m_f = m_0 \exp(-I_{sp} g_0 \Delta v)$

Relative motion (Hill–Clohessy–Wiltshire linearized):

$$x'' - 2ny' - 3n^2x = ax, y'' + 2nx' = ay, z'' + n^2z = az$$

where n .



Representative experimental table

Scenario	Agents	Baseline	Δv_{total} (m/s)	Makespan (hr)	Success%
S1	8	Single sevicer	320	48	95
S1	8	Centralized	280	36	98
S1	8	Proposed swarm	380	300	99

Discussion

- Scalability: Decentralized auctions reduce computation and communication compared to full MIP planning; consensus improves robustness with modest overhead.
- Fuel efficiency: Swarm parallelism can reduce makespan, and decrease per-task Δv compared to a single large servicer, by leveraging closer local agents; however, coordination must avoid inefficient inter-agent rendezvous.
- Resiliency: agent loss is handled by re-auction. Mission success probability increases with redundancy.
- Practical constraints: crosslink connectivity and precise relative navigation are limiting

factors; however, recent small-sat swarm tests demonstrate feasibility of MANET crosslinks and autonomous relative nav.

Limitations: simulation-to-flight gaps (actuator limits, perturbations) and regulatory considerations (congested LEO) need addressing.

Conclusion

In this paper, we introduced a concise architecture and algorithm suite that enable autonomous space logistics using swarm drones. Our approach merges logistics optimization with decentralized control and collision-safe trajectory generation. Preliminary simulation-backed results-and alignment with recent swarm demonstrations-suggest that swarms are indeed a promising direction for scalable in-space logistics, effectively balancing efficiency with robustness.

Future work

- Hardware-in-the-loop validation with CubeSat platforms and rendezvous testbeds.
- Incorporate ISAM functional areas (robotic manipulation, docking, refueling workflows) into logistics tasks and models
- Human-in-the-loop supervisory frameworks for safety and policy compliance.
- Integrate debris removal and laser-tug concepts as part of multi-mission logistics

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