

AI-BASED SMART AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL DECISION SUPPORT SYSTEM

Dr. S. Ramasubramanian*1, Issac Ken Shaji*2, HariHaran. N*3, Manikandan. S*4, Viswanath. R*5

*3,4,5 BSc Aviation, Department of Aviation, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Chennai – 600117, Tamil Nadu, India.

*1 Dr. S. Ramasubramanian, Associate Professor & Head of Department, Department of Aviation, Vels Institute of Science, Technology & Advanced Studies, Chennai – 600117, Tamil Nadu, India.

*2 Issac Ken Shaji, Assistant Professor, MH Cockpit Private Limited, Chennai – 600117, Tamil Nadu, India.

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of global air traffic has significantly increased the complexity and operational workload of Air Traffic Control (ATC) systems. Air traffic controllers are required to simultaneously manage aircraft sequencing, maintain safe separation standards, allocate runway slots, coordinate clearances, and respond dynamically to airspace congestion, adverse weather, and emergency situations. The cognitive limits inherent in such high-stakes, real-time environments create a pressing need for intelligent, automated decision-support mechanisms. This paper presents the design and conceptualization of an AI-Based Smart Air Traffic Control Decision Support System (AI-ATCDSS) that leverages Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning algorithms to augment the decision-making capabilities of human air traffic controllers. The proposed system integrates multiple intelligent sub-modules: a real-time conflict detection engine based on computational geometry and proximity analysis; a machine learning-powered congestion prediction module trained on historical and live traffic data; an adaptive runway allocation algorithm that optimises throughput while minimising delay; and a Natural Language Processing (NLP) interface for seamless human-machine communication. The system architecture ingests data from radar surveillance feeds, ADS-B transponders, METARs, and TAFs through a centralised AI inference engine. The system was validated through simulation replicating real-world operational scenarios at Chennai International Airport (VOMM) and Indira Gandhi International Airport (VIDP). Results demonstrate a 34% reduction in controller workload, a 28% improvement in on-time departure performance, a 42% decrease in conflict-related incidents, and a 49.7% improvement in emergency response time compared to conventional ATC systems. The proposed AI-ATCDSS is designed in strict adherence to ICAO Doc 4444 (PANS-ATM) standards and preserves full human controller authority at all times.

Keywords: Air Traffic Control (ATC), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), Conflict Detection, Runway Allocation, Decision Support System, Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), Deep Q-Network (DQN), ADS-B, ICAO, Congestion Prediction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Air Traffic Control (ATC) is an indispensable component of global aviation infrastructure, constituting the primary mechanism through which safe, orderly, and expeditious movement of aircraft is ensured both in the air and on the ground. Established under the regulatory framework of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), ATC services are provided by national authorities such as the Airports Authority of India (AAI), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) of the United States, and the National Air Traffic Services (NATS) of the United Kingdom.

The global civil aviation sector has experienced remarkable growth over the past two decades. IATA reported that global air passenger numbers reached 4.5 billion in 2019, with projections indicating volumes are expected to double by 2040. India's civil aviation sector has been growing at approximately 10–15% annually, making the modernisation and intelligent augmentation of its ATC infrastructure a matter of national strategic importance.

Human air traffic controllers, despite their exceptional training and professionalism, are subject to inherent cognitive and physiological constraints. Research by Eurocontrol's Human Factors Unit has established that a controller's cognitive capacity degrades significantly when managing more than approximately 12–15 aircraft simultaneously — a threshold regularly exceeded during peak traffic periods. Artificial Intelligence offers a transformative solution by providing systems capable of processing vast quantities of multi-source surveillance data at machine speeds, continuously monitoring hundreds of aircraft simultaneously without fatigue, and generating context-aware, prioritised recommendations in real time.

This paper presents the AI-Based Smart Air Traffic Control Decision Support System (AI-ATCDSS), a comprehensive framework integrating advanced AI and ML algorithms within a layered client-server architecture. The primary objectives include: developing a conflict detection algorithm with a minimum 10-minute look-ahead time; implementing an ML-based congestion prediction module; designing an optimised runway allocation algorithm; and validating the system through simulation testing at major Indian airports.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

A. Existing ATC Systems

The Single European Sky ATM Research (SESAR) programme, launched in 2004, represents the most ambitious ATC modernisation initiative in history, encompassing over 300 individual projects targeting improvements across all domains of air traffic management. The FAA's NextGen programme has replaced ageing radar-based surveillance infrastructure with satellite-based technologies leveraging GPS and ADS-B. The Airports Authority of India has deployed the GPS Aided Geo Augmented Navigation (GAGAN) system — India's first certified Satellite-Based Augmentation System (SBAS) — and has implemented RVSM in Indian airspace, increasing available cruising flight levels from 7 to 13.

B. AI Research in Aviation

Isufaj et al. (2021) demonstrated that deep reinforcement learning agents trained using Proximal Policy Optimisation (PPO) achieved conflict resolution success rates of 87.3% in simulation, outperforming rule-based algorithms in complex multi-threat scenarios. Bosson and Lauderdale (2018) at NASA Ames developed a traffic flow management algorithm using Gaussian Process Regression that predicted sector demand imbalances up to 60 minutes in advance, achieving a 22% reduction in total delay minutes. Cordero et al. (2019) explored LSTM networks for automatic speech recognition in ATC communication environments, achieving a word error rate of 4.8% on ATCo2 corpus data. Montoya et al. (2020) applied multi-agent reinforcement learning to surface traffic management at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, reducing average taxi-out times by 17%.

III. SYSTEM DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE

A. System Modules

The AI-ATCDSS comprises six integrated functional modules operating within a cohesive service-oriented architecture:

- (1) Data Ingestion and Fusion Engine: Processes real-time feeds from Secondary Surveillance Radar (SSR), ADS-B transponders, Meteorological Aerodrome Reports (METARs), Terminal Aerodrome Forecasts (TAFs), and filed flight plan data, generating a unified Common Operating Picture (COP) updated at 1-second intervals.
- (2) Conflict Detection Engine: Employs computational geometry algorithms to compute relative velocity vectors, projected positions, and closest point of approach (CPA) for all aircraft pairs within the monitored airspace. Short-Term Conflict Alerts (STCA) are generated for conflicts within a 3-minute look-ahead window, while Medium-Term Conflict Alerts (MTCA) cover the 3–15 minute planning horizon.
- (3) AI Prediction and Decision Engine: The core intelligence component incorporating three ML models — an LSTM sequence model for trajectory prediction and congestion forecasting, a Random Forest ensemble classifier for weather impact assessment, and a Deep Q-Network (DQN) reinforcement learning agent for conflict resolution recommendation.
- (4) Runway Allocation Optimiser: Formulates runway assignment as a Mixed Integer Linear Programming (MILP) problem, optimising throughput whilst respecting ICAO wake turbulence separation standards, noise abatement procedures, and taxiway capacity constraints.
- (5) Controller Interface (HMI): A transparent human-machine interface presenting AI-generated recommendations with confidence scores, predicted outcomes, and ranked alternatives. All recommendations are advisory only; the human controller retains full decision authority.
- (6) Logging and Continuous Learning Engine: Records complete event sequences and queues data for periodic ML model retraining, enabling continuous improvement from accumulated operational experience.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Collection and Processing

The system ingests data from multiple heterogeneous sources. Surveillance data is derived from Secondary Surveillance Radar (SSR) providing three-dimensional positional data at 4–12 second update rates, supplemented by ADS-B transponder broadcasts providing aircraft-derived position, altitude, speed, and identification at 1-second intervals. Meteorological data is acquired from METAR reports (30-minute updates), TAFs, and Significant Meteorological Information (SIGMET) bulletins. Flight plan data is processed from the ICAO ATC flight notification system.

B. AI-Based Decision Making

The conflict detection algorithm computes relative velocity vectors V_{rel} between all aircraft pairs. For aircraft i and j with position vectors P_i, P_j and velocity vectors V_i, V_j : $V_{rel} = V_i - V_j$; $P_{rel} = P_i - P_j$. Time to CPA = $-(P_{rel} \cdot V_{rel}) / |V_{rel}|^2$. Minimum separation at CPA = $|P_{rel} + V_{rel} \times t_{CPA}|$.

The LSTM congestion prediction model is configured with 3 stacked LSTM layers (128, 64, and 32 units respectively), followed by two fully connected layers. The model accepts 60-minute rolling windows of normalised sector count data and meteorological feature vectors, predicting sector occupancy for the subsequent 60-minute period. The DQN agent is trained via experience replay on a state space comprising aircraft count, relative separations, speed vectors, weather severity, and runway occupancy, with a reward function balancing conflict avoidance, delay minimisation, and fuel efficiency.

V. ALGORITHMS AND SYSTEM WORKING

A. Conflict Detection Logic

The conflict detection algorithm operates in a 1-second processing cycle and evaluates all possible aircraft pairs within the controlled airspace. For each pair, the algorithm: (1) computes the Euclidean distance and altitude difference; (2) calculates the time to closest point of approach (CPA); (3) projects the CPA separation against applicable ICAO minima (5 NM / 1,000 ft for standard radar separation); and (4) classifies the conflict as STCA (0–3 min), MTCA (3–15 min), or non-threatening. Aircraft separation is continuously verified against ICAO Doc 4444 separation standards including wake turbulence categories (Heavy, Medium, Light) to ensure trailing aircraft receive the mandated separation buffers.

B. Aircraft Separation Standards (ICAO)

Category	Following (Heavy)	Following (Medium)	Following (Light)
Heavy (Preceding)	4 NM	5 NM	6 NM
Medium (Preceding)	3 NM	3 NM	5 NM
Light (Preceding)	3 NM	3 NM	3 NM

Table 1: ICAO Wake Turbulence Separation Minima (NM)

VI. REAL-WORLD SCENARIOS AND CASE HANDLING

A. Scenario 1: Aircraft Conflict Resolution (Chennai TMA)

Setting: Chennai Approach Control (VOMM APP), 14:23 UTC peak traffic period. IndiGo 6E-721 (A320) descending through FL120 at 290 knots and SpiceJet SG-114 (B737-900) descending through FL110 at 280 knots were on converging STAR routes with predicted CPA of 2.1 NM at FL110 — below the 5 NM radar separation standard.

System Response: The AI-ATCDSS Conflict Detection Engine classified this as a Category 2 MTCA (8 minutes 6 seconds to CPA) and generated three ranked recommendations. The DQN advisor evaluated 47 candidate manoeuvres in 0.3 seconds. The top recommendation — reducing 6E-721's speed to 250 knots — was accepted by the controller, increasing the predicted CPA separation to 7.8 NM. The MTCA alert was cleared at 14:26:12 UTC. Resolution imposed a delay cost of only 2.1 minutes versus 3.8 minutes for alternative solutions, demonstrating the optimiser's efficiency.

B. Scenario 2: Runway Congestion — Peak Hour Management (VIDP)

At Delhi IGI Airport during a post-fog bulk ATFCM release, the Congestion Prediction Module forecast that departure demand would exceed declared runway capacity by 11 movements in the 09:00–09:30 UTC window, generating an estimated 22-minute average taxi delay. The Runway Allocation Optimiser implemented a departure metering rate reduction to 26 movements per hour and identified optimised taxi routing for 4 aircraft via Taxiway November. Average taxi delay during the event was 14 minutes — a 36% improvement versus the unmitigated forecast.

C. Scenario 3: MAYDAY Emergency Handling (VOMM)

Air India AI-564 (B787-9, 323 persons on board) declared MAYDAY at FL240 due to rapid decompression. Within 2.1 seconds of MAYDAY receipt, the AI-ATCDSS activated Emergency Priority Level 1 protocol: cleared all conflicting TMA traffic, generated direct routing to ILS final for Runway 07, alerted ARFF and medical services, and redirected 3 inbound aircraft to alternates. AI-564 landed safely 23 minutes 15 seconds after the MAYDAY declaration, with TMA operations normalising within 18 minutes.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Simulation Validation Methodology

The simulation study employed a randomised controlled experimental design with 120 independent 90-minute scenarios at the simulated VOMM terminal airspace, balanced across four traffic density categories and three meteorological condition categories. Each scenario was executed with and without AI-ATCDSS active. Controller participants were experienced VOMM approach controllers with a minimum of five years operational experience provided by the Airports Authority of India Training Institute (AATI).

B. Performance Metrics — Before vs. After AI Implementation

Performance Metric	Baseline (No AI)	With AI-ATCDSS	Improvement
Loss of Separation Events / 100 hrs	3.42	1.98	42.1% reduction
Short-Term Conflict Alerts / hr	2.87	1.23	57.1% reduction

Performance Metric	Baseline (No AI)	With AI-ATCDSS	Improvement
Average Conflict Resolution Time (sec)	124	68	45.2% reduction
Runway Incursion Risk Events / month	1.8	0.4	77.8% reduction
Emergency Response Time (sec)	187	94	49.7% reduction
On-Time Departure Performance (%)	67.3%	86.1%	28.0% improvement
Average Taxi Delay (minutes)	22.4	14.7	34.4% reduction
Runway Throughput (movements/hr)	28.7	34.3	19.4% improvement
Controller Workload Index (1–10)	7.8	5.1	34.6% reduction
Communication Errors / 100 hrs	4.1	1.7	58.5% reduction
Fuel Wastage per Conflict (kg)	342	198	42.1% reduction

Table 2: AI-ATCDSS Performance Metrics – Before vs. After Implementation

C. Controller Workload Analysis (NASA Task Load Index – TLX Scale 0–100)

TLX Dimension	Baseline Score	AI-ATCDSS Score	Change
Mental Demand	76.4	52.1	-24.3 (-31.8%)
Temporal Demand	72.8	48.6	-24.2 (-33.2%)
Performance (Self-Assessment)	61.3	74.9	+13.6 (+22.2%)
Effort	69.7	47.2	-22.5 (-32.3%)
Frustration	58.4	34.7	-23.7 (-40.6%)
OVERALL TLX	62.1	47.8	-14.3 (-23.0%)

Table 3: Controller Workload Comparison (NASA-TLX)

The simulation results demonstrate compelling evidence for the safety and efficiency benefits of the AI-ATCDSS. The 42.1% reduction in Loss of Separation events validates the effectiveness of the integrated conflict detection and resolution approach. The 28% gain in on-time departure performance is most significant at high traffic densities, confirming that AI augmentation provides its greatest benefit precisely where human cognitive capacity is most constrained. Controller feedback collected through post-simulation questionnaires was consistently positive: 87% of controllers rated the AI-ATCDSS recommendations as 'useful' or 'very useful', and 91% agreed the system increased their confidence in managing complex traffic situations.

The 23% overall reduction in NASA-TLX workload scores has profound implications for aviation safety, as research has established a strong correlation between controller workload and error rates, particularly for workload levels above TLX 65 — a threshold regularly exceeded in the baseline condition but rarely reached with AI augmentation in high-density simulated scenarios.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

This paper presented the comprehensive design, algorithmic development, and simulation-based validation of an AI-Based Smart Air Traffic Control Decision Support System (AI-ATCDSS). The system integrates six functional modules within a cohesive service-oriented architecture, operating on a 1-second processing cycle and providing controllers with conflict alerts (STCA and MTCA), congestion forecasts, emergency management support, weather impact advisories, and ranked, confidence-scored resolution recommendations.

Simulation validation across 120 experimental scenarios demonstrated: a 42.1% reduction in Loss of Separation events; a 28% improvement in departure on-time performance; a 34.4% reduction in average taxi delay; a 19.4% increase in runway throughput; a 23% reduction in overall controller workload (NASA-TLX); and a 49.7% improvement in emergency response time. These results provide strong evidence for the operational efficacy and safety value of the proposed system.

The system is designed in accordance with ICAO Doc 4444 standards and EUROCONTROL HMI design principles, preserving the human controller's absolute authority over all ATC clearances. Future development should explore federated learning for multi-airport deployment, integration with UAS Traffic Management (UTM) / U-space frameworks, digital twin airspace modelling, Explainable AI (XAI) enhancements, and natural language voice interface integration. The AI-ATCDSS represents a technically sound, operationally realistic, and regulatory-compliant framework for the next-generation intelligent air traffic management system.

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