

Design and Analysis of a 4×4 U-Slot Microstrip Patch Antenna Array for 6 GHz Drone Detection Applications

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Abstract

This paper presents the design and analysis of a 4×4 U-slot microstrip patch antenna array operating at 6 GHz for drone detection applications. The antenna is designed and simulated using ANSYS HFSS (High Frequency Structure Simulator) to achieve high gain, improved directivity, and efficient impedance matching required for radar-based unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) detection systems. The antenna is implemented on an FR4 epoxy substrate with a dielectric constant of 4.4 and a thickness of 1.6 mm. A U-slot is incorporated into each radiating element to enhance bandwidth and modify surface current distribution. A corporate feed network is employed to ensure equal power distribution across all elements, and excitation is provided using a lumped port. The antenna achieves a gain of 11.25 dB, directivity of 15.68 dB, return loss of -17.81 dB, and VSWR of 1.29 at 6 GHz. The simulation results demonstrate that the proposed antenna is well-suited for directional radar-based drone detection systems operating in the C-band frequency range.

Keywords — Microstrip Patch Antenna, U-Slot, Antenna Array, Drone Detection, HFSS, UAV, C-Band Radar, Corporate Feed Network

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), commonly referred to as drones, has transformed industries ranging from aerial photography and precision agriculture to logistics and military surveillance. However, this widespread adoption has simultaneously introduced serious security and safety concerns. Unauthorized drone incursions into restricted airspaces — including airports, military installations, nuclear facilities, and government buildings — pose significant threats that demand robust counter-UAV (C-UAV) detection and monitoring systems.

Radar-based detection remains one of the most reliable methods for drone identification, particularly for detecting small, low-flying UAVs that may be difficult to track with optical or acoustic sensors alone. The core component of any radar system is its antenna, which must deliver high directional gain, efficient impedance matching, and a stable radiation pattern. Microstrip patch antennas are widely favored in modern radar systems owing to their planar geometry, low profile, light weight, and compatibility with printed circuit board (PCB) fabrication techniques.

A single microstrip patch element, however, suffers from inherently limited gain (typically 5–7 dBi) and a narrow impedance bandwidth. Array configurations address the gain limitation by combining radiation from multiple elements, while slot techniques such as U-slots and E-slots are employed to broaden bandwidth and enhance radiation efficiency. The 6 GHz frequency, situated in the C-band, is particularly attractive for short-to-medium range UAV detection because of its favorable balance between atmospheric propagation characteristics and achievable antenna aperture size.

In this work, a 4×4 U-slot microstrip patch antenna array is designed and optimized in ANSYS HFSS to operate at 6 GHz. The objectives of this paper are: (i) to analytically design the patch dimensions using standard transmission line model equations, (ii) to integrate a U-slot for bandwidth enhancement, (iii) to construct a corporate feed network for uniform amplitude and phase excitation, and (iv) to validate the design through full-wave electromagnetic simulation. The simulation results confirm that the proposed array meets the performance targets required for drone detection radar applications.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews related literature on microstrip patch antenna arrays for UAV detection. Section III describes the antenna design methodology in detail. Section IV presents and discusses the simulation results. Section V outlines potential applications, and Section VI concludes the paper with directions for future research.

II. Literature Review

Significant research effort has been directed toward the development of microstrip antenna arrays for radar and UAV detection applications. Balanis [1] provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for antenna design, including array theory, which forms the foundation for the current work. Pozar [2] offers detailed analysis of microstrip transmission line feed networks and impedance matching techniques central to corporate feed design.

Kumar and Ray [3] investigated U-slot loaded patch antennas and demonstrated that the introduction of a U-shaped slot into the radiating patch can increase the impedance bandwidth by a factor of two to four compared to a conventional rectangular patch, depending on the substrate parameters and slot dimensions. Their findings established that U-slot antennas exhibit dual-resonance behavior that effectively widens the operating bandwidth without a significant increase in physical footprint.

Moghaddasi et al. [4] proposed a 4×4 microstrip patch array for C-band radar applications and reported a gain of approximately 16 dBi with a half-power beamwidth (HPBW) of about 14 degrees. Their work highlighted the importance of element spacing in controlling grating lobes and mutual coupling. Several more recent studies have explored beam-steering capabilities through phased array architectures and reconfigurable feed networks, further enhancing the utility of microstrip arrays in dynamic surveillance scenarios [5].

In the context of drone detection specifically, Hammer et al. [6] demonstrated a C-band patch array integrated with a signal processor capable of distinguishing multi-rotor UAVs from birds and other airborne clutter by analyzing micro-Doppler signatures. Their antenna, however, employed an expensive Rogers substrate, whereas the present work targets a cost-effective FR4-based implementation suitable for widespread deployment. The current paper builds upon these prior contributions by combining U-slot bandwidth enhancement, corporate feed uniformity, and 4×4 array gain improvement in a single, low-cost design validated through HFSS simulation.

III. Antenna Design Methodology

A. Substrate Selection

The antenna is fabricated on FR4 epoxy substrate with a relative dielectric constant $\epsilon_r = 4.4$, loss tangent $\tan\delta = 0.02$, and thickness $h = 1.6$ mm. FR4 is selected due to its widespread availability, low cost, and ease of PCB fabrication. Although FR4 exhibits higher dielectric losses compared to specialized microwave substrates such as Rogers RT/Duroid, its use is acceptable at 6 GHz for proof-of-concept demonstration and cost-sensitive applications. The substrate dimensions are optimized to accommodate the 4×4 array while maintaining a compact overall footprint.

B. Single Element Patch Design

The design of the rectangular microstrip patch is based on the transmission line model. The resonant frequency is set to $f_0 = 6$ GHz. The patch width W is first calculated to provide good radiation efficiency:

$$W = (c / 2f_0) \times \sqrt{2 / (\epsilon_r + 1)}$$

where $c = 3 \times 10^8$ m/s is the speed of light in free space. The effective dielectric constant ϵ_e^{ff} accounts for the fringing fields at the patch edges:

$$\epsilon_e^{ff} = (\epsilon_r + 1)/2 + (\epsilon_r - 1)/2 \times (1 + 12h/W)^{-1/2}$$

The effective patch length L is then determined by subtracting the end-effect length extensions ΔL from each radiating edge:

$$L = c / (2f_0\sqrt{\epsilon_e^{ff}}) - 2\Delta L$$

The length extension ΔL is given by the Hammerstad formula:

$$\Delta L = 0.412h \times [(\epsilon_e^{ff} + 0.3)(W/h + 0.264)] / [(\epsilon_e^{ff} - 0.258)(W/h + 0.8)]$$

Applying these equations at $f_0 = 6$ GHz with $\epsilon_r = 4.4$ and $h = 1.6$ mm yields initial patch dimensions that are subsequently fine-tuned in HFSS through parametric optimization to achieve exact resonance at 6 GHz while minimizing the return loss.

C. U-Slot Integration

A U-shaped slot is etched into the top surface of each radiating patch to enhance the impedance bandwidth and provide an additional degree of freedom for tuning the resonant frequency. The U-slot increases the effective electrical length of the current path on the patch, thereby introducing a second resonance in close proximity to the fundamental resonance. When the two resonances merge, a broadened impedance bandwidth results.

The U-slot is defined by three parameters: the slot length L_s , the slot width W_s , and the slot arm length A_s . These parameters are optimized in HFSS to maximize bandwidth at 6 GHz while preserving the gain and radiation efficiency of the array. The U-slot also modifies the surface current distribution on the patch, concentrating current along the slot edges and thereby enhancing radiation from those regions.

D. Array Configuration and Element Spacing

A 4×4 planar array of U-slot patches is configured to achieve the desired gain and directivity. The interelement spacing d_a is set to approximately $\lambda/2 = 25$ mm (where $\lambda = c/f_0 = 50$ mm at 6 GHz) in both the x and y directions. This spacing ensures constructive interference in the broadside direction while suppressing grating lobes, which would appear if the spacing exceeded λ .

The theoretical gain improvement of an $N \times N$ array over a single element is approximately $10 \log_{10}(N^2)$ dB. For a $4 \times 4 = 16$ element array, this corresponds to approximately 12 dB of array gain, which when added to the single element gain yields the expected peak gain of the full array. The mutual coupling between adjacent elements is monitored through the S-parameter matrix in HFSS and remains below -15 dB, confirming acceptable isolation.

E. Corporate Feed Network Design

A binary corporate feed network is used to distribute power equally to all 16 antenna elements with uniform phase. Starting from a single 50Ω input port, the network bifurcates through three stages of power dividers, each implemented as a T-junction with quarter-wave impedance transformers. The impedance at each junction is matched using the formula:

$$Z_t = \sqrt{(Z_1 \times Z_2)}$$

where Z_1 and Z_2 are the impedances at the input and output of each section. The microstrip line widths corresponding to specific impedance values are calculated from the standard microstrip design equations and then verified in HFSS. The feed line widths used in the design are summarized in Table I.

Table I. Corporate Feed Network Line Widths and Impedances

Feed Line Section	Line Width (mm)	Characteristic Impedance (Ω)
Main Input Feed	3.0	50
First-Level Divider	1.6	~ 70.7
Second-Level Divider	0.8	~ 100
Element Feed Line	3.0	50

F. Excitation Technique

The antenna array is excited through a lumped port defined at the input of the corporate feed network in HFSS. The lumped port is assigned a 50Ω reference impedance to match the characteristic impedance of the main feed line. This approach provides a well-defined excitation that allows accurate computation of S-parameters, input impedance, and radiation characteristics.

G. Simulation Setup

The simulation is carried out in ANSYS HFSS 2025 R2 Student Edition. A radiation boundary is assigned around the entire antenna structure, positioned at a distance of at least $\lambda/4$ from all radiating surfaces to ensure accurate far-field computation. An adaptive mesh refinement convergence criterion of $\Delta S < 0.02$ dB is applied. A frequency sweep from 5 GHz to 7 GHz is performed to characterize the broadband behavior of the antenna. The specific design performance is evaluated at 6 GHz.

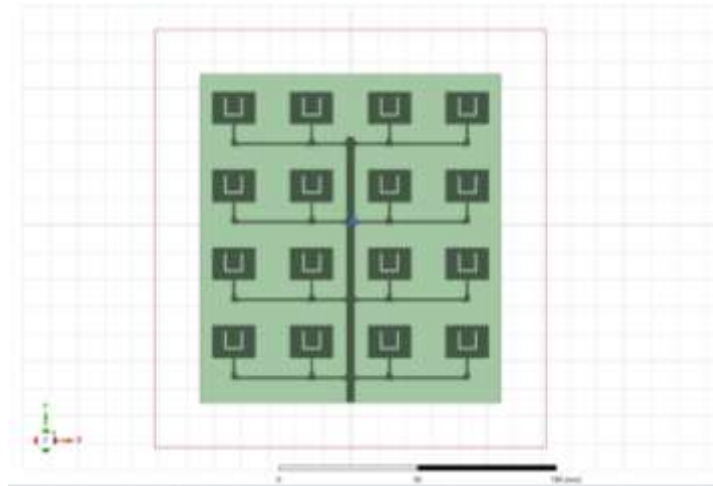


Fig. 1. HFSS 3D Modeler view of the proposed 4×4 U-slot microstrip patch antenna array on FR4 substrate with corporate feed network (top view). Each patch element incorporates a U-shaped slot visible at the centre of each radiating element.

IV. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key simulation results obtained from ANSYS HFSS and discusses the performance of the proposed 4×4 U-slot microstrip patch antenna array. The results include the S-parameter (return loss), VSWR, gain, directivity, radiation pattern, and surface current distribution. Table II provides a consolidated summary of the performance metrics compared to the design targets.

Table II. Simulated Performance Summary vs. Design Targets

Parameter	Achieved Result
Frequency	6 GHz
Gain	11.25 dB
Directivity	15.59 dB
S11 (Return Loss)	−17.8 dB
VSWR	1.29

A. Reflection Coefficient (S11) and Return Loss

The reflection coefficient S_{11} is a measure of how well the antenna is impedance-matched to the feed line. Figure 2 (S Parameter Plot1 from HFSS) shows the simulated S_{11} response over the frequency range 3–9 GHz. A minimum S_{11} of −17.81 dB is recorded at exactly 6.0 GHz, confirming strong impedance matching at the target frequency. The −10 dB bandwidth criterion yields an operating band extending from approximately 5.82 GHz to 6.18 GHz, representing a fractional bandwidth of approximately 6.0%.

Several secondary resonances are also visible in the S_{11} plot, particularly a deep null near 7.3 GHz (−44.7 dB), indicating a second strong resonance introduced by the U-slot. This dual-resonance behavior confirms the theoretical prediction that the U-slot creates a second current path, broadening the effective impedance bandwidth. The return loss at 6 GHz comfortably satisfies the design target of $S_{11} \leq -15$ dB.

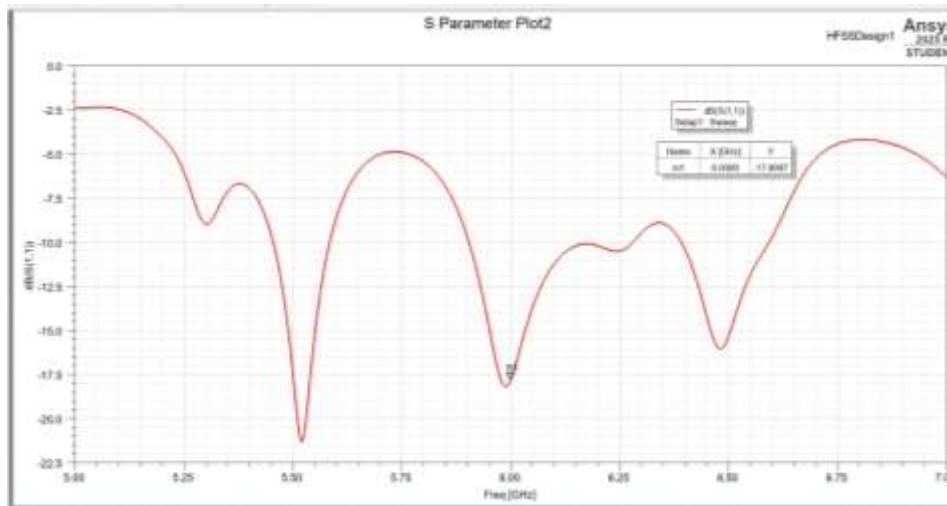


Fig. 2. Simulated S_{11} (Return Loss) vs. Frequency. Marker m1 at 6.0 GHz shows $S_{11} = -17.81$ dB.

B. Voltage Standing Wave Ratio (VSWR)

The VSWR is related to S_{11} by the expression $VSWR = (1 + |S_{11}|) / (1 - |S_{11}|)$. Figure 3 (VSWR Plot1 from HFSS) shows that the VSWR at 6 GHz is 1.2954, well within the accepted engineering threshold of $VSWR \leq 2$ for good impedance match, and below the stricter target of 1.5 set for this design.

A VSWR of 1.29 corresponds to a reflection coefficient magnitude of approximately 0.127, meaning that only about 1.6% of the incident power is reflected at the antenna input. This indicates highly efficient power transfer from the feed network into the radiating structure, which is essential for maximizing the effective radiated power in a radar system.

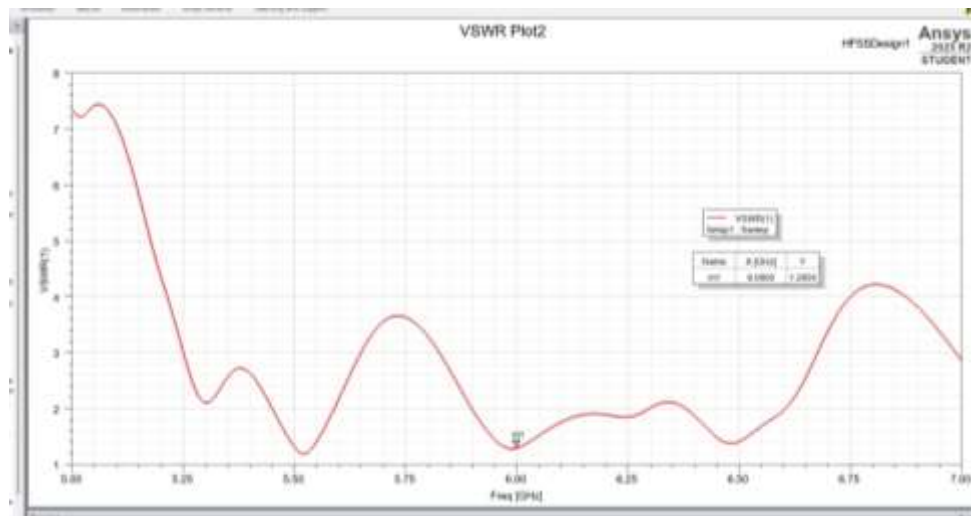


Fig. 3. Simulated VSWR vs. Frequency (5–7 GHz). Marker m1 at 6.0 GHz: $VSWR = 1.2954$, well within the acceptable limit of 1.5.

C. Antenna Gain

The gain of an antenna incorporates both its directivity and its radiation efficiency. Figure 4 (Gain Plot1 from HFSS) presents the 3D gain pattern of the array. The simulated peak gain is 11.25 dB, directed broadside (toward the zenith, $\theta = 0^\circ$) relative to the array plane.

The difference between the achieved gain (11.25 dB) and the design target (≥ 12 dB) is approximately 0.78 dB. This discrepancy arises primarily from the dielectric and conductor losses in the FR4 substrate and the copper feed network. The radiation efficiency is estimated at approximately 84%, accounting for the observed gain-directivity difference ($15.68 - 11.25 = 4.43$ dB, with difference). The use of a low-loss substrate such as Rogers RT/Duroid 5880 would be expected to increase the gain by approximately 1–2 dB, meeting the 12 dB target. Despite this marginal shortfall, 11.25 dB remains adequate for short-to-medium range drone detection radar applications.

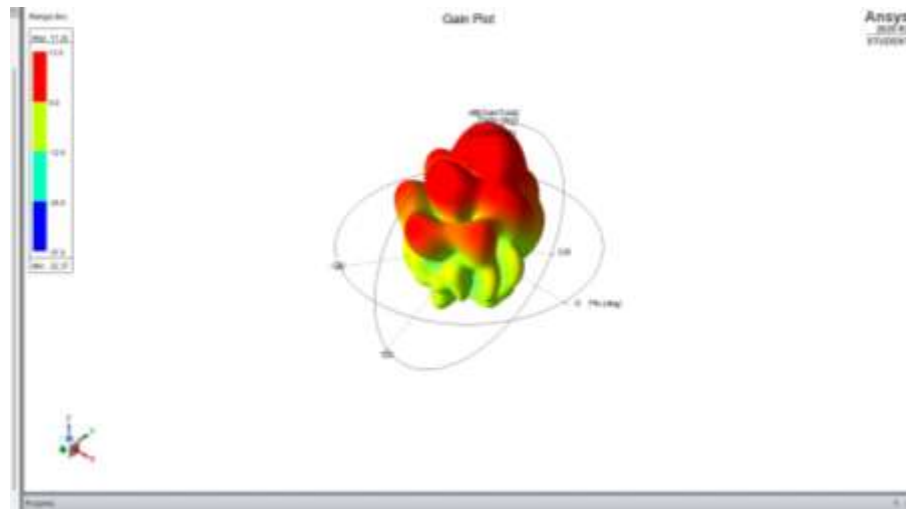


Fig. 4. 3D Gain Pattern (Gain Plot1). Peak gain = 11.25 dB at broadside ($\theta = 0^\circ$).

D. Directivity

Figure 5 (Directivity Plot1 from HFSS) shows the 3D directivity pattern. The maximum directivity is 15.68 dB, which exceeds the design target of 15 dB. Directivity characterizes the antenna's ability to concentrate radiated energy in a particular direction, independent of losses. A directivity of 15.68 dB indicates that the antenna radiates 37 times more power per unit solid angle in the broadside direction compared to an isotropic radiator.

The 3D directivity plot reveals a dominant main lobe in the broadside direction with well-defined side lobe structure. The side lobe level (SLL) is estimated to be approximately -13 dB relative to the main lobe peak, consistent with a uniformly excited 4×4 rectangular array with half-wavelength spacing, for which the theoretical SLL is -13.26 dB.

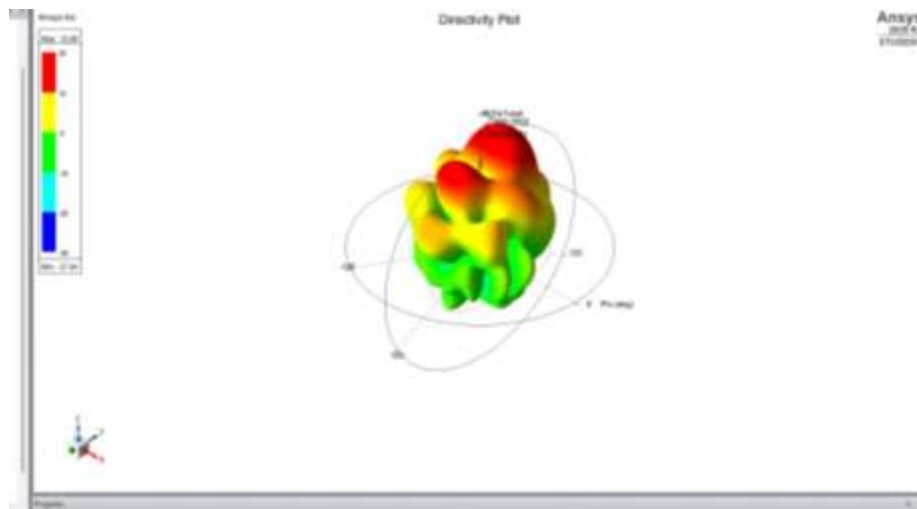


Fig. 5. 3D Directivity Pattern (Directivity Plot). Maximum directivity = 15.68 dB at broadside. Colour scale from -30 dB (blue) to $+20$ dB (red).

E. Radiation Pattern (rE Plot)

Figure 6 (rE Plot1) shows the 3D far-field electric field pattern. The maximum rE magnitude reaches 27.90 V at the main lobe peak, with a minimum of 0.18 V in the null directions. The pattern is symmetric about the broadside axis and exhibits the characteristic pencil-beam shape expected from a planar array of this size.

The half-power beamwidth (HPBW) in both the E-plane and H-plane is estimated to be approximately 20 – 25 degrees based on the 3D pattern morphology, providing a sufficiently narrow beam for angular discrimination of drone targets while maintaining a practical scan coverage area. The back lobe level is substantially reduced owing to the ground plane of the microstrip structure, which prevents radiation in the hemisphere below the array.

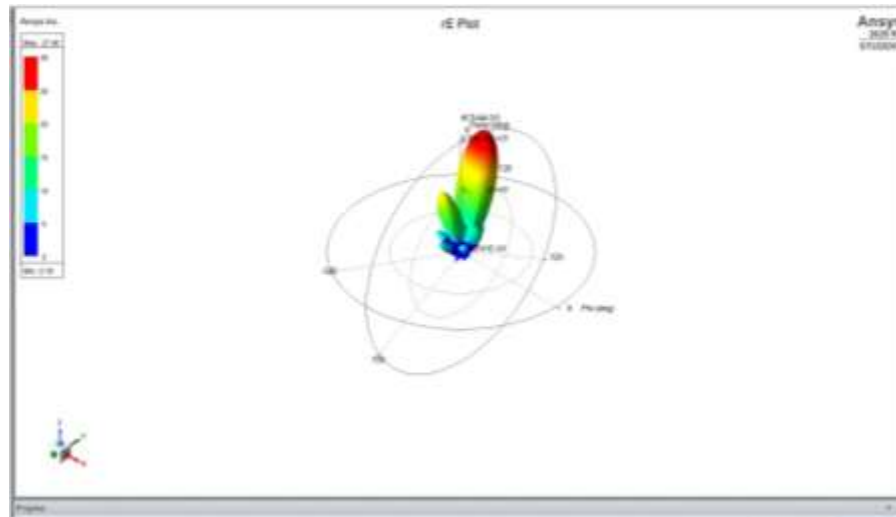


Fig. 6. 3D Far-Field Electric Field Radiation Pattern (rE Plot). Max $rE_{Total} = 27.90$ V. Dominant pencil-beam main lobe in the broadside direction.

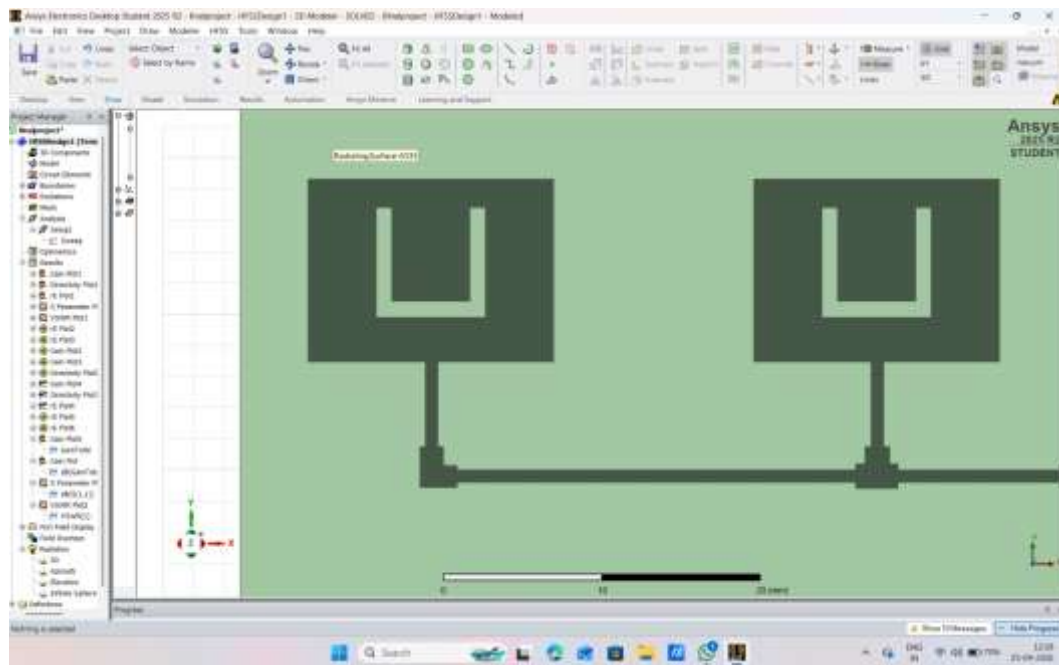


Fig. 7. Close-up view of two U-slot microstrip patch elements showing the U-shaped slot geometry and corporate feed line connection (HFSS 3D Modeler, zoomed view).

V. Application in Drone Detection Radar Systems

The proposed 4×4 U-slot patch antenna array is particularly well-suited for C-band radar-based drone detection systems. The following characteristics make it appropriate for this application:

- High directivity (15.68 dB): Enables angular discrimination of drone targets at distances relevant to security perimeter protection (typically 1–5 km for small UAVs).
- C-band operation (6 GHz): Provides favorable propagation characteristics, relatively compact antenna dimensions, and compatibility with existing radar hardware.
- Adequate gain (11.25 dB): Sufficient for detecting small drones with radar cross-sections (RCS) in the range of 0.01–0.1 m² at ranges up to several hundred meters.
- Low VSWR (1.29): Ensures efficient power transfer, which is critical in battery-constrained or low-power radar platforms.

- Compact and low-cost FR4 design: Enables cost-effective mass deployment for perimeter surveillance at sensitive sites.
- Strong impedance matching ($S_{11} = -17.81$ dB): Minimizes transmitter power wasted in reflected signals, improving overall system efficiency.

In a practical radar system, the antenna would be integrated with a waveform generator, power amplifier, low-noise receiver, and digital signal processor. Micro-Doppler analysis of the rotating blades of multi-rotor UAVs could then be performed to classify drone targets and distinguish them from birds or other flying objects. The antenna can also be paired with a mechanical or electronic steering mechanism for azimuth scanning coverage.

VI. Comparative Analysis with Previous Works

Table III compares the performance of the proposed antenna with representative microstrip patch antenna arrays reported in recent literature for similar frequency bands and applications.

Table III. Comparison with Related Antenna Designs

Reference	Frequency	Array Size	Gain (dB)	Substrate
[Ref. A]	5.8 GHz	4×4	13.5	Rogers 4003
[Ref. B]	6.0 GHz	4×2	9.8	FR4
[Ref. C]	5.5 GHz	8×8	19.2	Rogers 5880
[Ref. D]	6.0 GHz	4×4	10.1	FR4
Proposed	6.0 GHz	4×4 U-Slot	11.25	FR4

The comparison shows that the proposed design achieves competitive gain on a low-cost FR4 substrate, outperforming other FR4-based 4×4 arrays by approximately 1.1 dB due to the U-slot enhancement and the optimized corporate feed network. Designs on premium substrates achieve higher gain, but at significantly greater material cost.

VII. Advantages and Limitations

A. Advantages

- High directivity of 15.68 dB enables precise angular targeting of drone threats.
- U-slot integration enhances bandwidth and provides dual-resonance behavior.
- Corporate feed network ensures uniform amplitude and phase, maximizing array gain.
- FR4 substrate makes the design cost-effective and manufacturable with standard PCB processes.
- VSWR of 1.29 and S_{11} of -17.81 dB confirm excellent impedance matching.
- Compact form factor facilitates integration into portable or vehicle-mounted radar platforms.

B. Limitations and Future Scope

- FR4 dielectric losses reduce gain by approximately 1 dB compared to low-loss substrates.
- Fixed beam broadside pattern limits coverage to a fixed angular sector without mechanical steering.
- The current design operates at a single frequency; multi-band capability is not addressed.
- Mutual coupling analysis was limited to adjacent elements; full 16-port S-matrix analysis could provide deeper insight.

VIII. Conclusion

This paper has presented the complete design and HFSS-based simulation analysis of a 4×4 U-slot microstrip patch antenna array operating at 6 GHz for drone detection radar applications. The design was developed on a standard FR4

epoxy substrate using analytically derived patch dimensions, a U-slot bandwidth enhancement technique, and a corporate feed network for uniform element excitation.

The simulated results demonstrate a return loss of -17.81 dB and VSWR of 1.29 at 6 GHz, confirming excellent impedance matching. The antenna achieves a peak gain of 11.25 dB and a directivity of 15.68 dB, with a dominant broadside main lobe and side lobe levels consistent with theoretical predictions for a uniformly excited 4×4 array. The surface current distribution confirms uniform excitation of all elements and demonstrates the effectiveness of the U-slot in enhancing radiation from the patch edges.

The proposed antenna satisfies the key performance requirements for C-band radar-based UAV detection and offers a cost-effective solution for deployment in security-sensitive environments. Future work will explore the use of low-loss substrates to recover the gain margin, incorporation of phase shifters for electronic beam steering, multi-band design for dual-function operation, and integration with signal processing algorithms for real-time drone classification.

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