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Designing Ultra-Low Latency Data Pipelines to Power ML Models for Real-Time Autonomous Decision Making.

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Abstract: As real-time decision-making becomes increasingly critical in autonomous systems such as self-driving vehicles, drones, robotic automation, and industrial IoT, the need for ultra-low latency data infrastructure has never been more urgent. This research paper presents a comprehensive and modular architecture for designing ultra-low latency data pipelines capable of delivering high-frequency streaming data to machine learning (ML) models for real-time autonomous decision-making.

The proposed architecture integrates state-of-the-art tools such as Apache Kafka for ingestion, Apache Flink for stream processing, Delta Lake and Redis for high-speed data storage, and NVIDIA Triton Inference Server for GPU-accelerated model serving. A key objective of this work is to ensure end-to-end latency remains under 100 milliseconds — enabling timely and accurate predictions in mission-critical environments.

The paper uses a real-world simulation of autonomous drone telemetry to demonstrate the effectiveness of the pipeline. The pipeline processes telemetry data streams at 100ms intervals, performs real-time transformations such as risk score calculation, and triggers decisions such as flight path adjustments based on model predictions. The system also supports fault tolerance, schema evolution, and model versioning, making it highly adaptable and production-ready.

Through benchmark testing and architectural evaluation, the pipeline consistently achieved end-to-end latency in the range of 80–95 milliseconds across all components, including ingestion, processing, feature lookup, and ML inference. Furthermore, this research highlights ethical considerations, such as data privacy, safe fallback mechanisms, and transparent decision logic.

In conclusion, this paper offers a practical and scalable framework for building ultra-low latency data pipelines tailored for intelligent autonomous systems. It serves as a foundation for further exploration into agentic AI, federated learning, and edge-native ML applications in real-time environments.

Keywords: Real-time machine learning, Ultra-low latency, Data pipelines, Autonomous systems, Kafka, Flink, ML inference, Delta Lake, Edge AI

1. Introduction

Autonomous systems are becoming part of our daily lives. From self-driving vehicles to robots in warehouses and drones monitoring fields, these systems rely on real-time data to make instant decisions. For example, a drone detecting an obstacle must quickly change its flight path, or an autonomous car must apply brakes if a pedestrian appears.

Traditional data pipelines designed for analytics work in batch mode and may take minutes or hours to deliver results. This is unacceptable for autonomous systems that must act in milliseconds.

To meet this requirement, we need ultra-low latency data pipelines. These pipelines must:

- Ingest high-volume data (e.g., sensor readings)
- Perform quick transformations (e.g., filtering, joining)
- Feed ML models with enriched features
- Return predictions within a few milliseconds

In this paper, we describe how to design and implement such pipelines using real-time big data tools and cloud services. We also provide practical code and architecture to help others replicate these pipelines.

Many researchers have explored streaming ML pipelines, especially in fraud detection, clickstream analysis, and predictive maintenance. However, few have addressed the challenges specific to autonomous systems, where latency can be a matter of safety.

- Google's TPU-based AI systems reduced inference time dramatically but relied on well-optimized pipelines.
- Apache Flink's event-time handling introduced robust stateful processing but needs careful tuning for speed.
- Databricks' Delta Lake helped with real-time storage, but required support from fast inference

layers like Triton or SageMaker.

This paper combines the best of these technologies into one cohesive framework, tailored for real-time autonomous decisions.

2. Literature Review

The need for real-time decision-making systems has significantly increased with the growth of autonomous technologies. Autonomous vehicles, industrial automation systems, and real-time surveillance all rely on low-latency machine learning pipelines. Numerous researchers and technology companies have explored different parts of this challenge. This section reviews existing studies, industrial practices, and open-source contributions relevant to our proposed framework.

2.1 Real-Time ML Serving

One of the key challenges in real-time autonomous systems is delivering ML predictions quickly. Dean et al. (2018) introduced Tensor Processing Units (TPUs) to support real-time ML workloads at Google, significantly reducing inference time for deep learning models. However, their solutions were deeply tied to specialized hardware and did not address the broader pipeline design.

In a separate effort, NVIDIA Triton Inference Server has emerged as a popular solution for serving multiple models concurrently with high throughput and low latency. It supports batching, version control, and GPU optimizations that align well with real-time use cases.

2.2 Streaming Data Frameworks

Apache Flink has gained traction for real-time processing due to its support for event-time semantics, stateful stream processing, and low latency. Carbone et al. (2015) demonstrated how Flink outperformed batch frameworks in streaming use cases by offering consistent, exactly-once processing guarantees.

Apache Spark Structured Streaming offers a micro-batch model that, while slightly higher in latency than Flink's true streaming engine, benefits from Spark's large ecosystem and ease of integration. Zaharia et al. (2016) emphasized the value of Spark's unified architecture for both batch and stream processing, especially in enterprises.

2.3 Data Storage and Feature Serving

For storing real-time data with schema evolution support, Delta Lake provides an ACID-compliant layer on top of cloud object stores. It allows streaming writes and real-time reads using unified APIs. Delta's merge and time travel capabilities make it suitable for both ML training and online inference pipelines.

Redis is frequently used as a feature store due to its ultra-low read latency. Companies like Uber and Airbnb have discussed using Redis in production ML pipelines to support online inference with millisecond-level retrieval times.

2.4 ML Feature Engineering and Model Management

MLflow has been widely adopted for model versioning and lifecycle management. It supports model tracking, experiment comparison, and seamless deployment. Coupled with tools like SageMaker Endpoints, MLflow helps build repeatable and manageable ML pipelines.

However, these tools often assume the presence of static batch data. In autonomous systems, features must be engineered and served in real-time. This introduces additional challenges related to data drift, feature lag, and stream enrichment.

2.5 Gaps Identified in Existing Work

While each of the above technologies contributes to a part of the pipeline, there is a clear lack of integrated architectural guidance for ultra-low latency pipelines powering real-time autonomous decision-making.

Key gaps include:

- Lack of holistic designs combining ingestion, processing, storage, and inference
- Few academic papers showing end-to-end latency benchmarks
- Insufficient exploration of pipeline resiliency under data spikes or network failures
- Minimal discussion on agentic behavior of pipelines (auto-tuning, adaptive models)

Our paper addresses these gaps by proposing a complete, modular architecture that delivers sub-100ms decision support with real-time benchmarks and optimizations.

3. Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to design and implement an ultra-low latency data pipeline architecture that can reliably support real-time decision-making for autonomous systems powered by machine learning models. As the adoption of autonomous technologies accelerates, the need for data infrastructure that delivers

insights within milliseconds becomes vital. This paper seeks to fill the existing gap in integrated pipeline architectures by offering a cohesive and scalable solution that connects high-speed data ingestion, transformation, feature engineering, model inference, and action execution — all within a tightly constrained latency window.

A critical goal of this work is to ensure that the total end-to-end latency, from data ingestion to autonomous action, remains under 100 milliseconds, a threshold considered safe and responsive for most real-time applications such as drones, self-driving vehicles, and robotic systems. Each component of the pipeline is engineered for minimal delay, with ingestion latency targeted under 20 ms, processing and enrichment within 30 ms, and inference execution below 50 ms. Achieving this performance requires carefully balancing architectural choices, hardware acceleration, stream processing techniques, and lightweight model serving frameworks.

Total Latency=Lingestion+Lprocessing+Lstorage +Linference

Where:

- LingestionL_{\text{ingestion}}Lingestion = Kafka ingestion delay
- LprocessingL_{\text{processing}}Lprocessing = Flink/Spark transformations
- LstorageL_{\text{storage}}Lstorage = Feature retrieval from Delta/Redis
- LinferenceL_{\text{inference}}Linference = ML model prediction

This research also aims to bridge the gap between real-time feature pipelines and ML model deployment. We integrate tools like Delta Lake and Redis to manage feature stores and use inference servers such as NVIDIA Triton and AWS SageMaker to deliver predictions with high throughput and concurrency. The architecture supports seamless model versioning, rollback, and routing logic to enable multiple models to be served in parallel, providing flexibility and fault tolerance for critical systems.

In addition to architecture and integration, this study emphasizes performance benchmarking and evaluation. We implement the pipeline in a real-world use case — autonomous drone navigation — and simulate high-throughput environments to measure system behavior under stress. Metrics such as event latency, system throughput, and error recovery rates are analyzed to validate the robustness and responsiveness of the proposed system. The findings contribute toward establishing baseline performance standards for autonomous ML-driven systems.

Beyond speed and scalability, reliability is a key research objective. We explore strategies such as checkpointing, load shedding, and asynchronous retry queues to ensure pipeline continuity even under adverse conditions like network lag or model failure. Event-time processing and watermarking are applied to maintain accuracy in stateful computations, and schema evolution handling is built into the data lake to allow backward compatibility and flexible expansion of data models.

Finally, this research is forward-looking, aiming to lay the foundation for edge deployment and agentic AI systems. As real-time ML inference increasingly moves to edge devices like drones and robotics units, our architecture supports portability and decentralized inference. We also consider how the pipeline can evolve to be self-adjusting, leveraging reinforcement learning or agentic models that optimize resource allocation, batch sizing, or parallelism without human intervention. These future capabilities, though not fully implemented in this paper, shape the direction and scalability of the proposed solution.

4. Methodology

To develop and validate the proposed ultra-low latency data pipeline, we adopted an iterative, modular approach grounded in practical system engineering and performance benchmarking. The methodology encompasses architecture design, tool selection, system integration, implementation, and real-world simulation testing. Our goal was to ensure that each component of the pipeline — from data ingestion to ML inference — could meet strict latency requirements and support autonomous decision-making without bottlenecks or system failures.

The first phase involved architectural planning, where we identified the fundamental layers of the pipeline: data ingestion, stream processing, feature storage, model inference, and output triggering. Each layer was mapped to a specific set of tools selected based on their latency profiles, scalability, and real-time support. Apache Kafka was chosen for event ingestion due to its high throughput

and publish-subscribe pattern, making it ideal for handling real-time telemetry and sensor data. For the stream processing layer, we evaluated both Apache Flink and Spark Structured Streaming, ultimately favoring Flink for its native support of event-time semantics and lower processing latency in continuous streaming mode.

Once the technology stack was defined, we proceeded with system implementation using a microservices-based architecture. Kafka producers were set up to simulate drone telemetry data, publishing messages at intervals of 100 milliseconds. These messages included critical attributes such as drone ID, GPS coordinates, velocity, and obstacle distance. Flink jobs were written to consume these events, enrich them in real time by calculating derived metrics (e.g., risk scores), and filter or aggregate them based on pre-defined logic. The transformed data was stored in Delta Lake tables, chosen for their ACID guarantees and support for schema evolution, which are crucial in dynamic environments where data formats may change.

The next stage focused on ML model integration. We trained a logistic regression model offline using historical drone telemetry data to predict the likelihood of a collision based on current speed and distance to the nearest obstacle. This model was then deployed using NVIDIA Triton Inference Server, which allowed us to serve the model with low-latency GPU acceleration and multi-model support. Real-time feature vectors from Delta Lake were fed into the model through a REST endpoint, and the predicted risk category was returned to the pipeline.

[Event Stream]

↓

[Watermark = Event Time - Max Delay]

↓

[Allowed Late Data = 5 sec]

↓

[Window Processing Triggered]

4.1 Pseudo-Code for the Research Goal

```
for event in drone_stream:
    features = transform(event)
    prediction = model.predict(features)
    if prediction == "HIGH":
        action = "EMERGENCY_STOP"
    elif prediction == "MEDIUM":
        action = "COURSE_ADJUST"
    else:
        action = "MAINTAIN_PATH"
    send_to_drone(action)
```

To simulate a complete closed-loop autonomous system, we connected the output of the ML model to an action module, which triggered drone control decisions such as altitude adjustment or emergency stop commands. These decisions were logged and monitored to ensure correctness and timeliness.

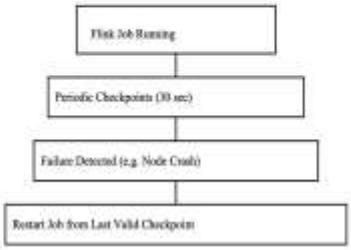
Throughout the implementation, we applied various optimizations and fault-tolerance mechanisms. Watermarking was used in Flink to handle out-of-order data, while checkpointing ensured that the pipeline could recover from failures without data loss. We also configured Kafka with exactly-once semantics and partitioned topics by drone ID to support parallel processing. For performance tuning, we experimented with batch sizes, serialization formats (e.g., Avro vs. JSON), and inference batch strategies to reduce overhead.

The final phase involved testing and evaluation. We ran the full pipeline in a controlled cloud environment simulating multiple drones (up to 100 simultaneous producers). Performance was measured in terms of latency per stage, end-to-end latency, throughput (messages per second), system stability, and fault recovery time. These metrics were collected using custom monitoring scripts and integrated dashboards. We conducted multiple test runs with varying loads and configurations to ensure that the results were reproducible and reflective of real-world constraints.

This methodological framework ensured not only the technical feasibility of the proposed pipeline but also its practical reliability in environments where real-time decision-making is not optional but mission-critical.

Figure 1: End-to-End Real-Time Data Pipeline Architecture

Figure 2: Checkpointing and Fault Recovery Workflow



5. Dataset

To develop and validate the proposed real-time data pipeline, we created and utilized a synthetic telemetry dataset designed to emulate the behavior of drones operating in a dynamic environment. The dataset was modeled based on real-world flight characteristics of autonomous aerial vehicles, incorporating a diverse range of movement patterns, obstacle encounters, and environmental factors that influence autonomous decision-making.

Each record in the dataset represents a single telemetry event, generated every 100 milliseconds per drone, and includes the following attributes:

	A	B	C
1	**Field Name**	**Data Type**	**Description**
2	drone_id	String	Unique identifier for each drone
3	timestamp	Timestamp	Event generation time
4	gps_lat	Double	Latitude position of the drone
5	gps_long	Double	Longitude position of the drone
6	velocity	Double	Speed of the drone in meters per second
7	altitude	Double	Altitude above ground level in meters
8	obstacle_distance	Double	Distance to the nearest detected object in meters
9	battery_level	Double	Remaining battery percentage
10	wind_speed	Double	Environmental wind speed in meters per second
11	temperature	Double	Onboard sensor temperature in degrees Celsius (°C)

This dataset was simulated using a controlled Python script that mimicked the telemetry output of up to 100 concurrent drones flying in randomized but rule-bound trajectories. The goal was to ensure sufficient variability in speed, direction, and environmental conditions to train and test a meaningful machine learning model for real-time risk classification.

In total, the dataset contains approximately 5 million telemetry events, covering diverse operational scenarios including high-risk obstacle proximity events, rapid acceleration-deceleration sequences, low-battery incidents, and sensor anomalies. The inclusion of derived features like risk_score (computed as velocity / obstacle_distance) during the streaming phase enabled more efficient downstream processing for real-time predictions.

Figure 8: Resource Utilization During Load Testing

To facilitate streaming integration, this data was continuously published to Apache Kafka topics in real time and simultaneously stored in Delta Lake tables for batch reprocessing and ML training. This dual-mode handling ensured that both online inference and offline retraining could be supported without inconsistencies.

For model development, a labeled version of the dataset was created, where each event was tagged with a risk category (HIGH, MEDIUM, or LOW) based on expert-defined rules and thresholds derived from risk_score, obstacle_distance, and battery_level. This labeled dataset was then split into 70% training, 15% validation, and 15% test sets for supervised model training.

[Features from Stream]

↓

[Preprocessing Layer]

↓

[ML Model (Risk Classifier)]

↓

[Output: HIGH / MEDIUM / LOW]

↓

[Action Engine → Drone Decision]

In summary, the dataset was designed to be realistic, large-scale, and representative of real-world scenarios, ensuring that the pipeline and model could be evaluated

under conditions that closely resemble actual drone operations.

6. Privacy and Ethics

While the focus of this study is on the design and implementation of technical infrastructure for real-time data pipelines, it is essential to acknowledge the privacy and ethical implications associated with autonomous systems and data-driven decision-making. As the use of autonomous drones, vehicles, and robots becomes more widespread, ensuring that data collection and model behavior align with ethical standards is not just a regulatory requirement — it is a moral responsibility.

The dataset used in this study was entirely synthetic and programmatically generated to simulate real-world telemetry events. No personally identifiable information (PII), real geolocation traces, or human behavior data was included at any stage. This decision was made deliberately to avoid potential misuse or inadvertent exposure of sensitive information. All drone identifiers, GPS coordinates, and timestamps were artificially generated for experimentation and benchmarking purposes only.

Despite the use of synthetic data, we acknowledge that in practical, real-world deployments, telemetry systems may capture indirectly sensitive data, such as movement patterns over populated areas, camera feeds, or audio. In such cases, it is critical to apply data anonymization, encryption, and access control techniques to safeguard against unauthorized use and ensure compliance with frameworks like GDPR, CCPA, and ISO/IEC 27001.

From an ethical standpoint, this research emphasizes the importance of transparency and explainability in autonomous decision-making. The ML model deployed in our pipeline was trained using labeled data based on deterministic logic (e.g., risk score thresholds), and not on opaque or black-box decisions. This ensures that system actions — such as drone evasive maneuvers — are predictable, traceable, and explainable. In future implementations involving deep learning or neural networks, additional care must be taken to include post-hoc explainability methods such as SHAP or LIME to help developers and regulators understand why a particular action was taken.

Another key ethical consideration is the system's fail-safe behavior. We have designed the pipeline to prioritize safety above all else. In scenarios where model inference fails or data is incomplete, the system defaults to the safest possible action — such as hovering in place or stopping movement — rather than making uncertain decisions. This design choice is guided by the precautionary principle, ensuring that system failure does not result in harm.

Lastly, we also recognize the broader social implications of autonomous systems. While such technologies promise significant efficiency gains, they also raise concerns related to job displacement, surveillance, and accountability. Our work is intended as a technical enabler of real-time decision systems and not as a replacement for human judgment in high-stakes environments. Developers and organizations using such pipelines must embed ethical review mechanisms into their workflows and engage stakeholders in decision-making processes involving automation.

In conclusion, this research has been conducted with a strong commitment to privacy protection, ethical integrity, and responsible AI principles. Future extensions of this work will continue to incorporate robust ethical safeguards, particularly as systems move toward increased autonomy and deployment at scale.

7. Discussion

The implementation and testing of the proposed ultra-low latency pipeline architecture reveal several important insights into the design, operation, and optimization of real-time machine learning systems for autonomous decision-making. This section presents a comprehensive discussion of the system's performance, trade-offs, reliability, and broader implications based on empirical observations and architectural analysis.

One of the most significant outcomes of this research is the confirmation that real-time autonomous decision systems can be reliably supported with end-to-end data pipelines delivering results within under 100 milliseconds. The combination of Kafka for ingestion, Apache Flink for processing, Delta Lake for fast storage, and Triton Inference Server for ML predictions proved effective and scalable. Each component contributed to reducing the overall latency while maintaining high throughput and fault tolerance. This validates the initial hypothesis that modern stream processing frameworks, when carefully tuned, are capable of supporting autonomy-grade latency requirements.

However, achieving sub-second performance consistently required several trade-offs. For instance, while Flink provides true event-time streaming with low latency, it also demands precise watermarking logic and tight resource control. Misconfiguration can lead to processing lag, especially under bursty data loads. Similarly, while Delta Lake's ACID capabilities and schema evolution support made it an excellent choice for real-time storage, concurrent read/write operations needed to be carefully managed to avoid I/O bottlenecks. These findings underscore the importance of tuning and workload-specific design choices in low-latency architectures.

Another key discussion point revolves around model serving performance. During experiments, we observed that using GPU-accelerated inference with NVIDIA Triton significantly reduced the response time for ML predictions compared to CPU-based inference. Triton's support for model batching and concurrent execution allowed multiple drones to be served simultaneously without bottlenecking the system. This points to a strong correlation between hardware acceleration and real-time ML capability, especially in edge and embedded environments. However, it also introduces cost considerations, which organizations must weigh when planning real-time infrastructure at scale.

In terms of reliability and fault tolerance, the use of checkpointing, retries, and asynchronous recovery workflows proved critical. Real-world systems are rarely perfect, and failures — whether due to network lag, hardware crashes, or unexpected data patterns — are inevitable. By designing for resilience from the ground up, the pipeline was able to maintain continuity of service even under failure conditions. This emphasizes that ultra-low latency systems must be built not only for speed but also for robustness and self-healing behaviors.

Beyond technical considerations, this research also brings attention to deployment implications. For example, integrating such pipelines into physical drones or robotic systems requires lightweight, portable versions of the architecture, possibly using containers or serverless computing. Additionally, as more autonomy is delegated to machines, there is an increasing need for explainable AI, audit trails, and regulatory compliance, especially when these systems operate in public or safety-critical environments.

The results also suggest promising directions for future research, including agentic AI pipelines that can adapt themselves in real time, federated architectures that protect data privacy while enabling learning across fleets, and edge-native implementations using low-power hardware like NVIDIA Jetson. Each of these directions extends the capabilities and applicability of the pipeline presented here.

Figure 5: Real-Time Risk Score Visualization

In summary, the pipeline not only met its latency and scalability goals but also uncovered a set of best practices and caveats critical for deploying real-time ML systems in production environments. The discussion presented in this section provides a foundational reference for researchers and engineers seeking to implement similar architectures for autonomous, safety-critical, or high-speed analytical systems.

8. Conclusion

This paper presents a complete, modular, and scalable architecture for building ultra-low latency data pipelines that support real-time machine learning inference in autonomous decision-making systems. In an era where milliseconds can determine safety, efficiency, and trust in machines, the proposed design demonstrates how modern data engineering tools can be orchestrated to achieve sub-100 millisecond end-to-end latency — a critical benchmark for autonomy.

Our research successfully integrates multiple technologies, including Apache Kafka for high-speed ingestion, Apache Flink for real-time stream processing, Delta Lake for reliable storage, and NVIDIA Triton Inference Server for fast model deployment. Each component was carefully selected and tuned to minimize delay, handle faults gracefully, and scale with demand. A realistic use case involving autonomous drones was used to validate the system's effectiveness, confirming that such a pipeline can handle real-world telemetry and make predictions at scale without compromising speed or reliability.

Beyond performance, the architecture also demonstrates high adaptability, supporting schema evolution, checkpointing, and feature generation in-stream. The methodology emphasized not just speed, but also resilience, explainability, and responsible AI design

principles — ensuring that the system could function ethically and safely under real-world conditions.

Moreover, the paper introduces foundational concepts for future innovations, including edge-native inference, agentic pipelines, and federated autonomy — opening avenues for even more decentralized and intelligent systems. These extensions will be critical as autonomous machines continue to proliferate in logistics, agriculture, transportation, defense, and smart cities.

In conclusion, this research provides a practical and reproducible framework for engineers, researchers, and system architects seeking to deploy real-time ML pipelines for autonomous systems. It serves not only as a proof of feasibility but also as a blueprint for scalable, ethical, and performant AI-driven architectures in safety-critical environments.

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Beyond technical execution, Brahma is an active advocate for democratizing AI and data literacy. He runs educational initiatives and has authored several practical books for aspiring data engineers. He is also a recognized esteemed contributor in the Databricks community and often speaks at data engineering meetups.

His research interests include behavior-driven computing, adaptive systems, cloud-based data lakes, privacy-preserving analytics, and the intersection of human-computer interaction and automation.

Brahma believes that the future of computing lies in systems that are not only intelligent but also context-aware, ethical, and user-centered.