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NUS campus to trial parcel delivery by drones

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SINGAPORE – Parcel deliveries by drones — also known as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) — are set to take off on the National University of Singapore (NUS) campus, while ships anchored at bay in Singapore could receive goods from a coastal parcel station using similar means.

These are two UAS trials made possible by a Memorandum of Understanding signed yesterday on the sidelines of the Singapore Airshow between Airbus Helicopters and the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS).

The NUS trial will see the university join hands with Airbus Helicopters to develop a trial network of parcel stations within its campus. Suppliers across Singapore will also be able to use the network to deliver their goods via UAS to customers across the NUS campus.

Should the NUS trial prove successful, the second trial — delivery of goods such as urgent medicine,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

oil samples and spare electronic parts from a parcel station located on the Singapore coast to ships anchored at bay — will be carried out.

The project aims to develop an airborne infrastructure solution to address the sustainability and efficiency of parcel delivery businesses in large urban environments.

"We need to prepare for the greater use of unmanned aircraft in our urban environment to help address the new and future needs of our society. We want to facilitate their use by industry and the public sector, and also hobbyists, but we must at the same time ensure that the regulatory regime keeps apace with these changes to enable such uses, whilst ensuring public and aviation safety and security," said CAAS director-general Kevin Shum, in a joint media release announcing the project, called the Skyways Experimentation Project.

Airbus Helicopters plans to set up a Special Purpose Company in Singapore to conduct the project and to prepare for the next steps. Commercialisation plans that might be derived from the project will be executed from Singapore, which will serve as the Asia-Pacific headquarters for this business.

No execution timeline was given for the trials, but NUS deputy president for research and technology Professor Ho Teck Hua said its researchers are currently in the early stages of developing the use case for the NUS phase.

While Airbus Helicopters noted the project could "help turn consumer services unimagined only a decade ago into a reality very soon", logistics service providers here that TODAY spoke to foresaw limitations in the use of drones for their business.

Pan Asia Logistics director Zaheer Merchant said drone solutions must be sector-specific and not "one-size-fits-all". "Drone technology is relatively new, and one has to consider whether it'll result in cluttered airspace or become a nuisance," he added.

Astro Express Logistics managing director Richard Leo noted Singapore's urban geography — like the dense clusters of public flats — and felt widespread use of drones would be difficult, compared with large countries like Australia. "It's a matter of practicality," he said.

Mr Kurt Wee, president of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, however, pointed out that drones could allow firms to become more manpower-lean and productive. For example, pest control company PestBusters is planning to use drones to check roof gutters for mosquito breeding sites and deal with hives.

"It is an avenue to adopt technology that facilitates and improves work, as long as they're adding to the process and the risk is manageable," he said.

Last year, SingPost successfully used a drone to fly a packet of letters and a T-shirt to Pulau Ubin in about five minutes, but said then it had no concrete plans for the commercialisation of drone deliveries for the time being.

Timbre Group, a popular chain of dining establishments, plans to roll out eight drones ordered for their Gillman Barracks venue in the first half of this year, which will serve diners their food and beverages.

Last December, online retail giant Amazon unveiled unmanned drones to be used for package delivery, while Google and Wal-Mart have also announced plans to develop drones to deliver packages.

Drones will also be increasingly deployed by public agencies to improve their operations.

Earlier this month, the Ministry of Transport, which is leading the inter-agency UAS committee facilitating the trials, said more than two dozen uses of such devices are undergoing conceptualisation and proof-of-concept trials.

SIA ENGINEERING, AIRBUS TO FORM JV FOR PLANE MAINTENANCE

SIA Engineering Company (SIAEC) said yesterday it is forming a joint venture with Airbus to provide airframe maintenance, cabin upgrade and modification services for A380, A350 and A330 aircraft to airlines in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

SIAEC will hold a 65 per cent equity stake in the joint venture, with Airbus holding the remaining 35 per cent. This joint venture, to be based in Singapore, marks SIAEC's first collaboration with a major aircraft manufacturer for airframe maintenance.

The joint venture, SIAEC's chief executive officer Mr Png Kim Chiang said, will be developed as Airbus' Centre of Excellence in Asia for the world's largest commercial airliner, the A380, and the latest aircraft from Airbus, the A350.

"The Asia-Pacific region is a key market for Airbus wide-body aircraft and will continue to drive demand for larger aircraft types such as the A380, A350 and A330 in the coming years. Setting up a world-class facility in this region through our joint venture with SIAEC reflects Airbus' strategy to develop a full range of support services for operators of our aircraft near to their home bases," said Airbus chief executive officer Fabrice Bregier.

Such innovation-driven investments supported by a highly skilled talent pool, said Mr Lim Kok Kiang, assistant managing director of Singapore's Economic Development Board, will bolster Singapore's position as the region's leading aftermarket services hub.

The agreement is subject to regulatory approvals from the relevant jurisdictions.

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