Informative Briefing Transcript

“Return of the Airship”

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Imagine yourself on a flight to visit your relatives for the holidays. Only on this flight, there is no uncomfortable seat to sit in for hours. There is no loudly snoring co-passenger next to you, and your ears don’t constantly hurt from pressure. Instead, you are having a refreshing drink in the lounge of a spacious, luxurious, and reliable airship. While what I just described may sound like a scene from the distant past, this scenario could be a reality in the very near future. Airships, also known as zeppelins, were considered the future of transportation in the period between the two world wars. But in 1937, the German airship *Hindenburg* burst into flames and exploded over New Jersey, killing 36 people. While a clear cause was never found, the fact that rigid airships like the Hindenburg were being filled with highly flammable hydrogen significantly damaged customer trust, and was a major blow to the industry. In the next few years, after a series of advances in heavier-than-air aircraft, the zeppelin became obsolete altogether, being too slow and too expensive to operate. Today, however, it looks like airships may be getting their second chance. One of the biggest reasons for this is that they have proven themselves major allies in humanity’s fight against global warming. According to Linnea Ahlgren of Simply Flying, an airship produces between 80 and 90% fewer emissions than conventional aircraft (Ahlgren, 2021). Despite being lighter-than-air, it also has significant space for cargo, which prompted the International Air Transport Association (IATA) to recommend that cargo firms use dirigibles to lessen their environmental impact (Ahlgren, 2021). But the return of airships is far from a mere optimistic proposal. The British company Hybrid Air Vehicles, Limited (HAV), has developed and constructed the Airlander 10, a helium-filled hybrid airship that could become emissions-free by the year 2030 (Ahlgren, 2021). In 2022, HAV got its first commercial order, from airline Air Nostrum, for ten of their vehicles. The order was doubled the following year. They are expected to enter commercial service in 2027, each carrying 100 passengers (Ross, September 2023). Another company, a startup called LTA Research, plans to use their Pathfinder 1 airship to revolutionize cargo transport. Their goal is to optimize delivery of cargo and emergency supplies to countries that don’t have enough ground infrastructure. This could have a significant impact on world economy, as well as international relations. The Pathfinder 1 is also powered by helium, and contains many innovative elements, such as electric motors, various sensors, and fly-by-wire controls (Ross, November 2023). Since helium is a non-flammable gas, it greatly reduces the chances of a Hindenburg-like accident. The Pathfinder 1 is currently undergoing testing, with its creator, Google co-founder Sergey Brin, looking to expand its use to passenger flights in the future (Ross, November 2023). Yet another aeronautics firm, the French company Flying Whales, is working on a 200 meter, or 656-foot-long cargo airship with a crew of at least two people, and a cargo capacity of 60 tons. The vessel will be powered by 14 helium-filled cells, and use sustainable aviation fuel through a hybrid-electric propulsion system (Cairns, 2023). Flying Whales says its airship could not only simplify cargo delivery to isolated regions, but also help carry emergency supplies and disaster relief aid to places inaccessible by other means. On top of this, the emissions it produces will be less than 10% of those produced by helicopters usually used for such deliveries, while local nature and wildlife will remain undisturbed (Cairns, 2023).

Decades of research and testing have proved airships to be a much cleaner and feasible alternative to the traditional airliner. With helium having totally replaced flammable hydrogen in providing lift, and with several next generation airships already on order, we are on the brink of a true revolution in the aviation industry.

References

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