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(54) **VERTICAL TAKEOFF AND LANDING (VTOL) UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLE (UAV)**

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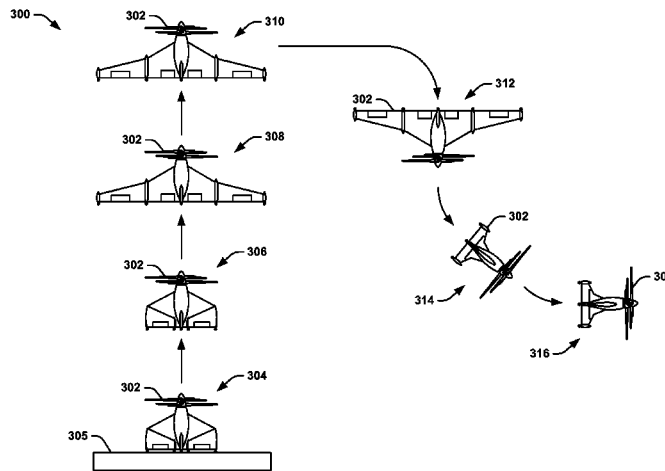
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(57) **ABSTRACT**
One example embodiment includes a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The VTOL UAV includes a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode and in a level-flight mode. The VTOL UAV also includes a body encapsulating an engine and the flight control system. The VTOL UAV further includes a rotor disk coupled to the engine and configured to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust for flight during the level-flight mode.

17 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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B64C 39/02 (2006.01)
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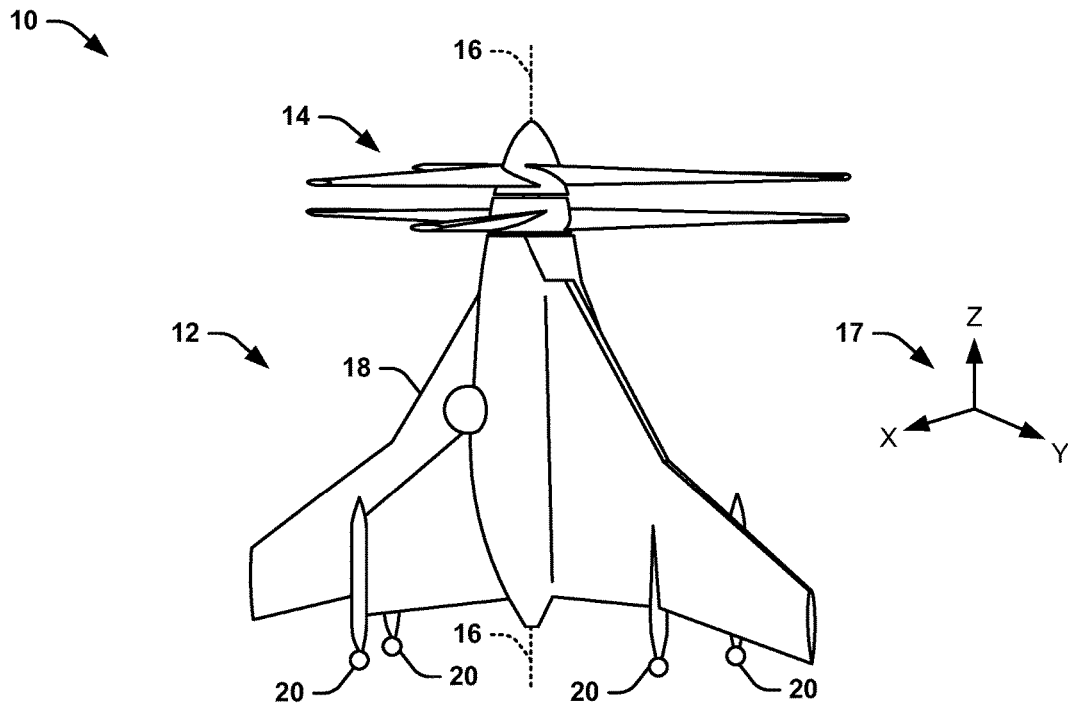


FIG. 1

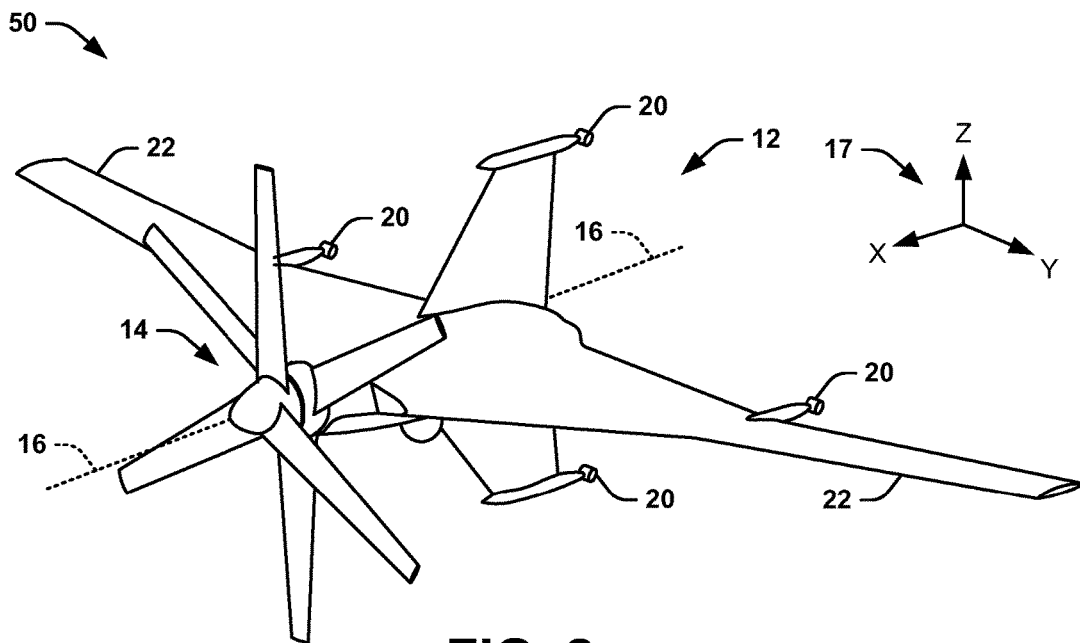


FIG. 2

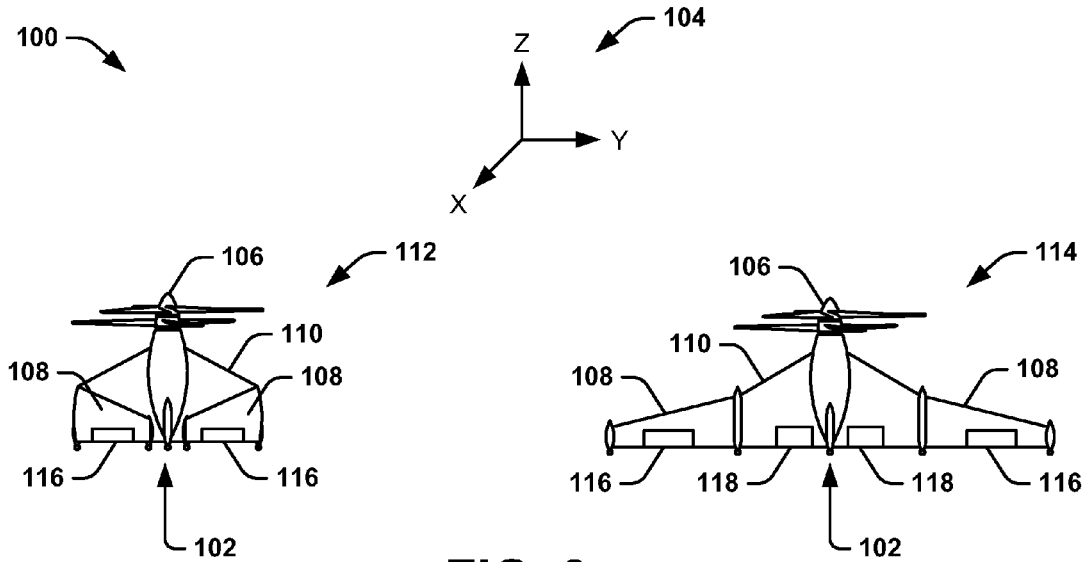


FIG. 3

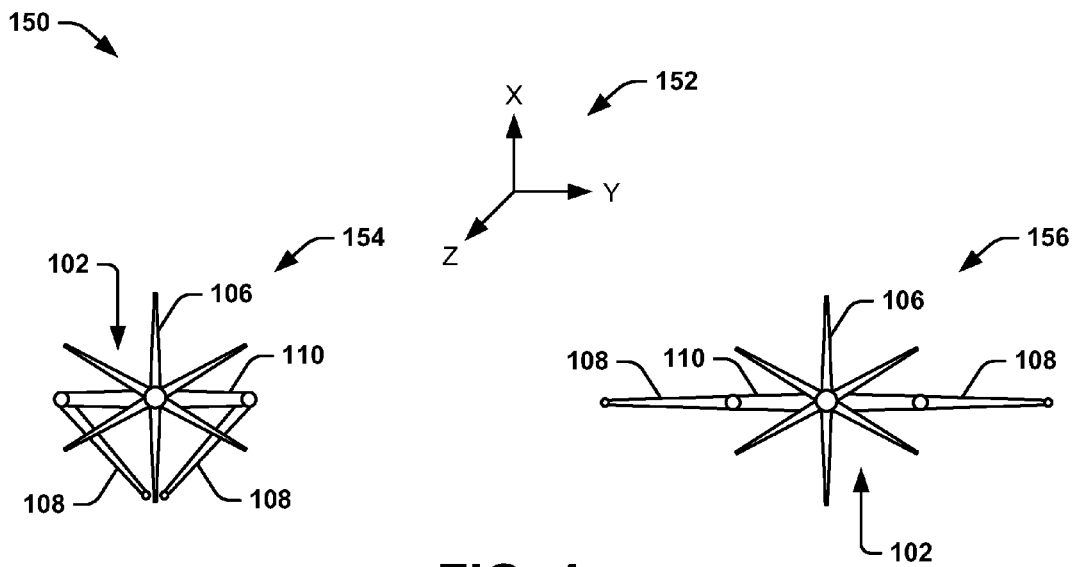


FIG. 4

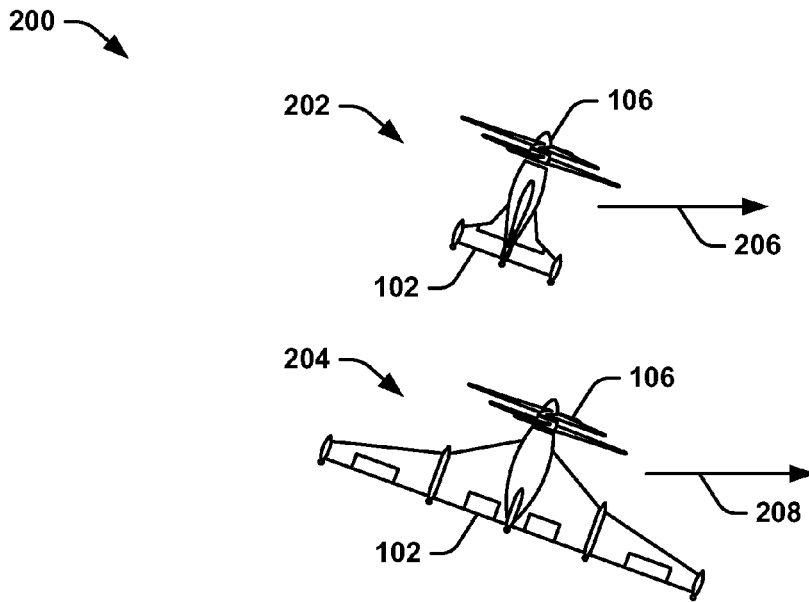


FIG. 5

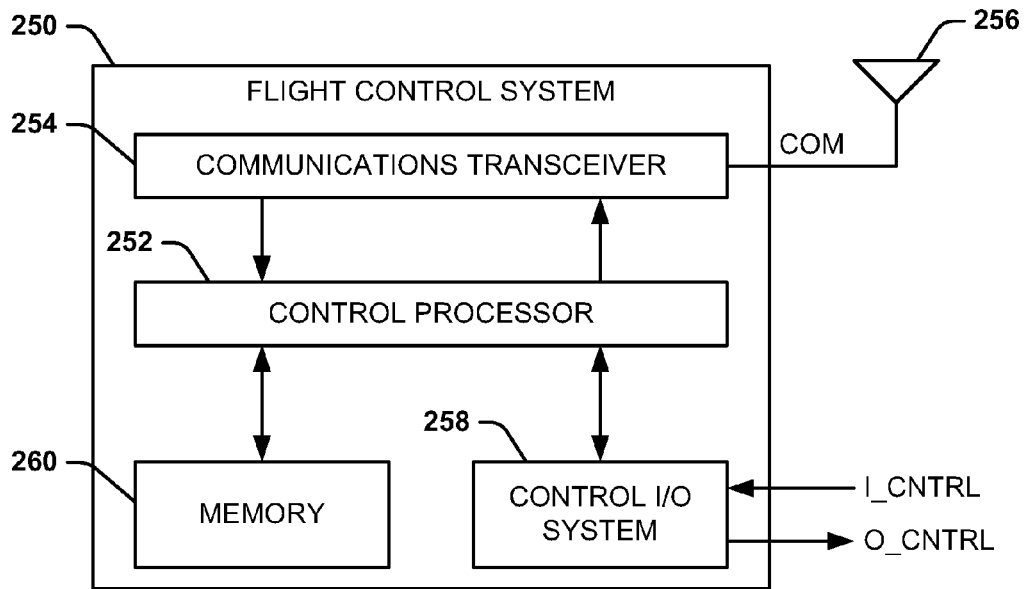


FIG. 6

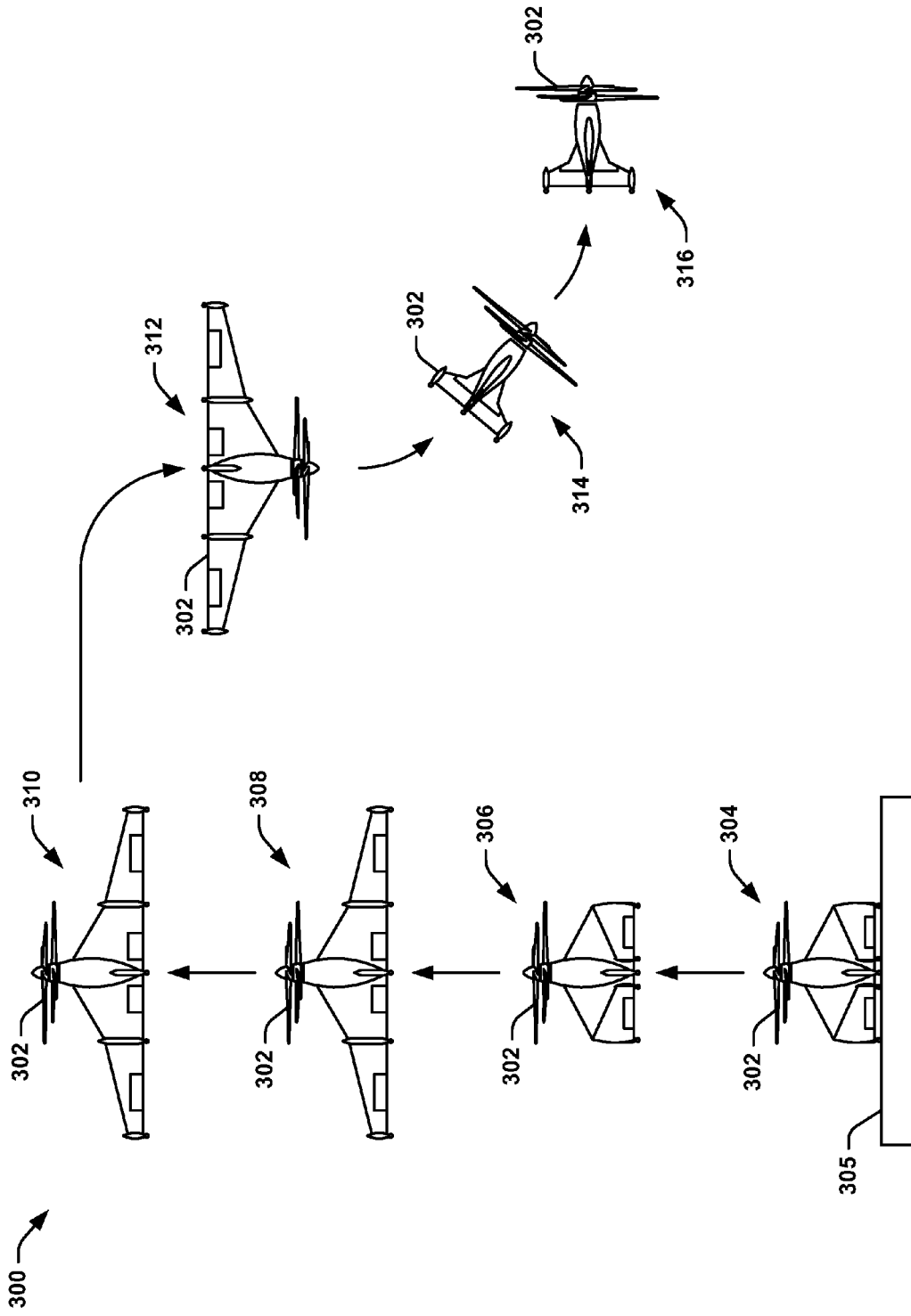


FIG. 7

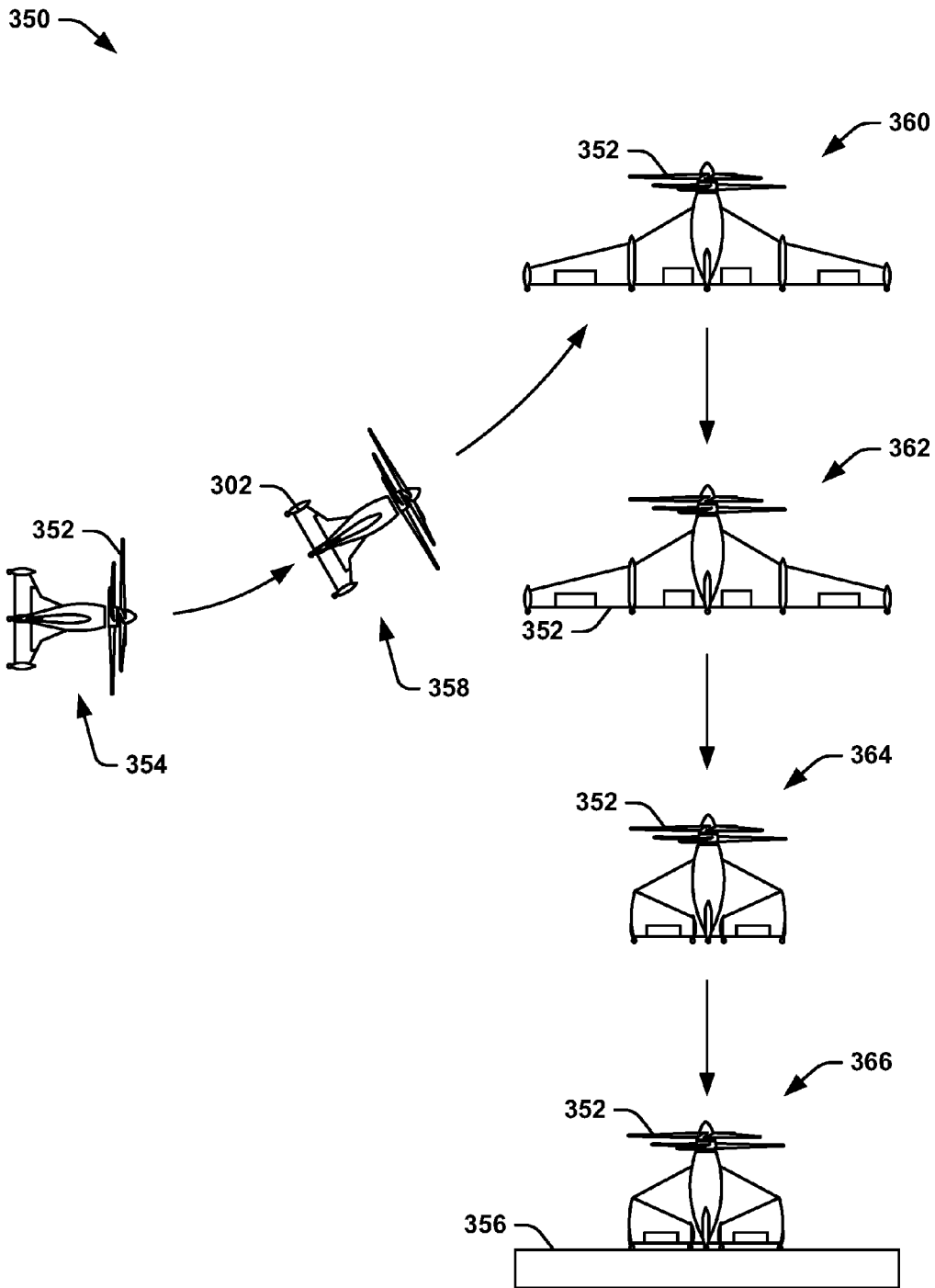


FIG. 8

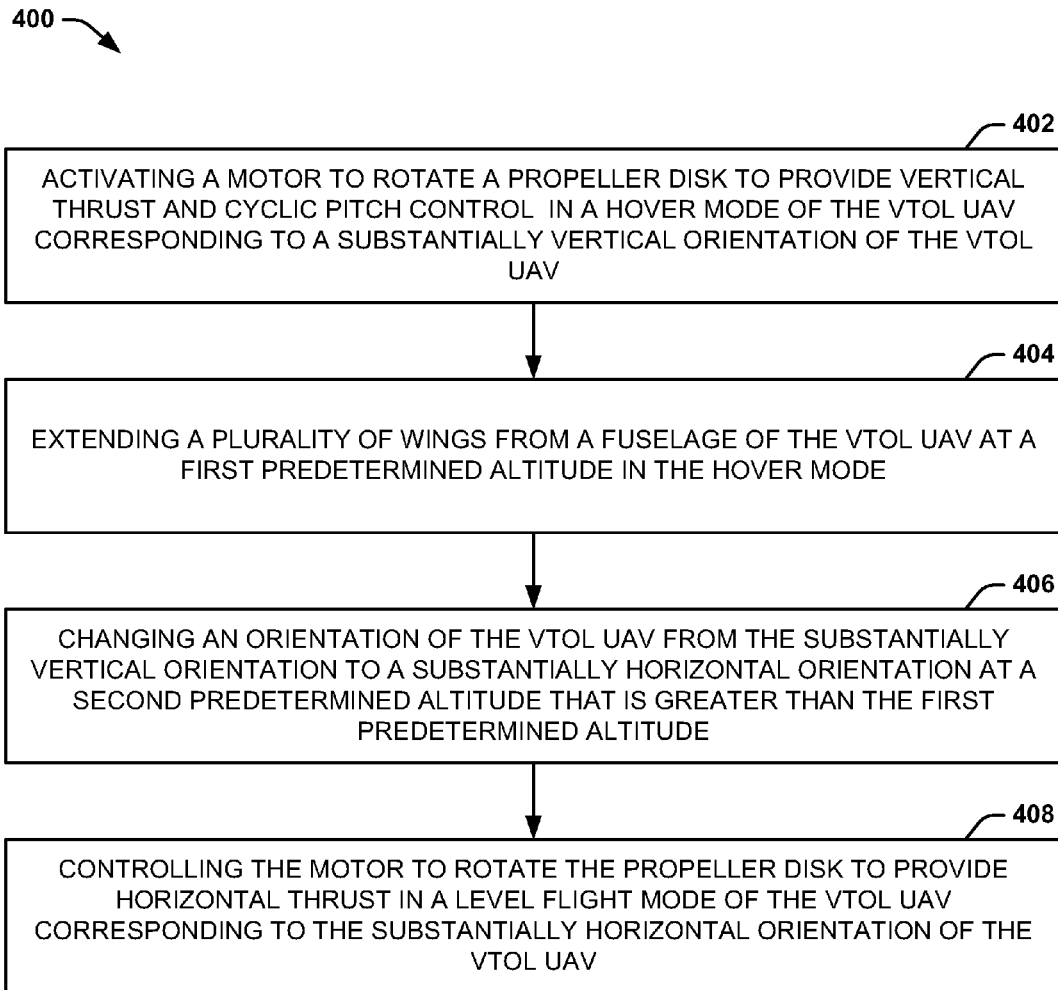


FIG. 9

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**VERTICAL TAKEOFF AND LANDING
(VTOL) UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLE
(UAV)**

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims priority from U.S. Patent Application Ser. No. 62/217,446, filed 11 Sep. 2015, which is incorporated herein in its entirety.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates generally to aviation, and specifically to a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV).

BACKGROUND

For many decades, aircraft have been implemented for a variety of uses as means of transportation, reconnaissance, and warfare. Different types of aircraft have been historically implemented for different purposes. Traditional airplanes implement wings for aerodynamic lift and can typically fly faster and in an aerodynamically efficient manner. However, vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) aircraft are typically used for operations where speed is not necessarily required. Additionally, VTOL aircraft allow for more space efficient takeoff and landing procedures by not requiring a runway that allows the aircraft to accelerate during takeoff and decelerate during landing. As some flight operations became increasingly more dangerous or tedious, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) have been developed as a means for replacing pilots in the aircraft for controlling the aircraft.

SUMMARY

One example embodiment includes a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The VTOL UAV includes a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode and in a level-flight mode. The VTOL UAV also includes a body encapsulating an engine and the flight control system. The VTOL UAV further includes a rotor disk coupled to the engine and configured to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust for flight during the level-flight mode.

Another example embodiment includes a method for controlling a VTOL UAV. The method includes activating an engine to rotate a rotor disk to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in a hover mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to a substantially vertical orientation of the VTOL UAV. The method also includes extending a plurality of wings from a body of the VTOL UAV at a first predetermined altitude in the hover mode. The method also includes changing an orientation of the VTOL UAV from the substantially vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation at a second predetermined altitude that is greater than the first predetermined altitude via at least one of engine speed and control flaps that are coupled to the body and respectively offset equally and oppositely with respect to a central axis of the body substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the rotor disk that is defined by a diameter of the rotor disk. The method further includes controlling the engine to rotate the rotor disk to provide horizontal thrust in a level-flight mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to the substantially vertical orientation of the VTOL UAV.

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Another example embodiment includes a VTOL UAV. The VTOL UAV a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode for takeoff and landing procedures of the VTOL UAV and in a level-flight mode for a mission procedure of the VTOL UAV. The VTOL UAV also includes a body encapsulating an engine and the flight control system and comprising a plurality of retractable wings being configured in a flying-wing configuration, the plurality of retractable wings being in a retracted state in the hover mode and in an extended state in the level-flight mode to provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode. The VTOL UAV further includes a rotor disk comprising a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades coupled to the engine and being axially-fixed along a central axis of the body, the pair of contra-rotating rotor blades being configured to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust for flight during the level-flight mode.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 illustrates an example of a first isometric view of a VTOL UAV.

FIG. 2 illustrates an example of a second isometric view of the VTOL UAV.

FIG. 3 illustrates an example diagram of a VTOL UAV in a first view.

FIG. 4 illustrates an example diagram of a VTOL UAV in a second view.

FIG. 5 illustrates an example of lateral flight of a VTOL UAV.

FIG. 6 illustrates an example of a flight control system.

FIG. 7 illustrates an example diagram of a takeoff procedure of a VTOL UAV.

FIG. 8 illustrates an example diagram of a landing procedure of a VTOL UAV.

FIG. 9 illustrates an example of a method for controlling a VTOL UAV.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The present invention relates generally to aviation, and specifically to a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The VTOL UAV can include a rotor disk configured to provide thrust and a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode and in a level-flight mode. The hover mode can correspond to a substantially vertical orientation of the VTOL UAV with respect to a central axis of the VTOL UAV, and the level-flight mode can correspond to a substantially horizontal orientation of the VTOL UAV. Therefore, as an example, the VTOL UAV can perform takeoff and landing procedures in the hover mode, and can perform mission operations in the level-flight mode. As an example, the rotor disk can be configured as a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades to provide vertical thrust with substantially zero torque in the hover mode, and the rotor can provide horizontal thrust in the level-flight mode while wings coupled to the body of the VTOL UAV can provide aerodynamic lift.

FIG. 1 illustrates an example of a first isometric plan view 10 of a VTOL UAV 12, and FIG. 2 illustrates an example of a second isometric plan view 50 of the VTOL UAV 12. The VTOL UAV 12 is demonstrated in the example of FIG. 1 in a hover mode, such that the VTOL UAV 12 is provided in a substantially vertical orientation, and the VTOL UAV 12 is demonstrated in the example of FIG. 2 in a level-flight

mode, such that the VTOL UAV 12 is provided in a substantially horizontal orientation. The VTOL UAV 12 includes a rotor disk 14, demonstrated as a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades, at a fore-section of the VTOL UAV 12 that is substantially aligned with a central axis 16 of the VTOL UAV 12. The central axis 16 can extend through an approximate center of the VTOL UAV 12, such that the VTOL UAV 12 can be approximately symmetrical about the central axis 16 in two orthogonal planes, as dictated by the Cartesian coordinate system 17 (e.g., the XZ-plane and YZ-plane in the example of FIG. 1 and the XY-plane and XZ-plane in the example of FIG. 2). As described herein, a “rotor disk” is defined as a rotor portion that includes rotating rotor blades that are configured to provide circular motion to rapidly move atmospheric air to provide thrust. The rotor disk 14 is configured to provide vertical thrust (e.g., along the Z-axis in the example of FIG. 1) in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust (e.g., along the X-axis in the example of FIG. 2) in the level-flight mode. In addition, as described in greater detail herein, the rotor disk 14 can include a swashplate assembly to implement cyclic pitch control to provide pitch control of one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades, thus enabling lateral motion of the VTOL UAV 12 in the hover mode in a manner similar to a helicopter. As described herein, the substantially vertical orientation and the substantially horizontal orientation of the VTOL UAV 12 are defined with respect to the orientation of the central axis 16 relative to the surface of the Earth.

The VTOL UAV 12 can include a body 18 that encloses a variety of internal components of the VTOL UAV 12, including a flight control system, an engine to control the rotor disk 14, fuel, and/or a variety of input/output (I/O) devices (e.g., sensors, actuators, etc.). As an example, the flight control system encapsulated in the body 18 can include one or more sensors configured to determine the orientation of the VTOL UAV 12 (e.g., gyroscope(s), magnetometer(s), artificial horizon, etc.). The rotor disk 14 is demonstrated as being coupled to the body 18 in a fixed arrangement, such that the rotor disk 14 is substantially constantly aligned with the central axis 16. In the examples of FIGS. 1 and 2, the rotor disk 14 provides approximately zero torque about the central axis 16 based on the contra-rotation of the rotor blades of the rotor disk 14. Additionally, the contra-rotating rotor blades of the rotor disk 14 can provide for a much more simplified design for providing lift than multiple separate-axis rotor or propeller blades that have to be constantly adjusted to provide substantially equal lift in all atmospheric conditions (e.g., in the presence of wind or varying air-pressure profiles). While the rotor disk 14 is demonstrated as including three rotor-blades on each of the pair of contra-rotating rotor blades, it is to be understood that the rotor disk 14 can include any number of rotor-blades on each of the contra-rotating rotor blades. The VTOL UAV 12 also includes landing posts 20 that are fixed to the body 18 in an aft-section of the VTOL UAV 12 opposite the rotor disk 14 in the fore-section. Therefore, the VTOL UAV 12 can be configured to land on the landing posts 20 in a “tail-sitting” arrangement in the hover mode.

As an example, the body 18 can be configured as a flying-wing arrangement, and thus has no definitive fuselage and tail. The flying-wing arrangement of the body 18 includes a pair of wings 22 that can be, for example, retractable (e.g., folding). In the example of FIG. 2, the wings 22 are demonstrated as extended in the level-flight mode, and in the example of FIG. 1, the wings 22 are demonstrated as retracted (e.g., folded) in the hover mode, and are thus omitted in the first isometric view 10. The wings

22 can be extended and retracted in the hover mode (e.g., at predetermined altitudes), such as prior to and subsequent to the level-flight mode, respectively. For example, the wings 22 can be retracted during the hover mode (e.g., throughout most of the takeoff and landing procedures) to substantially mitigate the effects of wind acting on the position of the VTOL UAV 12, and can be extended in the level-flight mode to provide aerodynamic lift of the VTOL UAV 12 for more efficient aerodynamic flight and greater speeds. Therefore, the flight control system encapsulated in the body 18 can be configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV 12 in each of the hover mode and the level-flight mode.

FIG. 3 illustrates an example diagram 100 of a VTOL UAV 102 in a first view. FIG. 4 illustrates an example diagram of the VTOL UAV 150 in a second view. The VTOL UAV 102 can correspond to the VTOL UAV 12 in the examples of FIGS. 1 and 2. The first view of the VTOL UAV 102 is a two-dimensional view in a YZ-plane, as dictated by the Cartesian coordinate system 104. Similarly, the second view of the VTOL UAV 102 is a two-dimensional view in an XY-plane, as dictated by the Cartesian coordinate system 152. In the examples of FIGS. 3 and 4, like reference numbers are used to describe the physical portions of the VTOL UAV 102.

Similar to as described previously, the VTOL UAV 102 includes a rotor disk 106 that is arranged as a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades. In addition, the VTOL UAV 102 includes a pair of folding wings 108 that are coupled to a fixed body portion 110 in a collapsible flying-wing configuration. In the first view 100 in the example of FIG. 3, the VTOL UAV 102 is demonstrated at 112 in a folded-wings configuration and at 114 in an extended-wings configuration. Similarly, in the second view 150 in the example of FIG. 4, the VTOL UAV 102 is demonstrated at 154 in a folded-wings configuration and at 156 in an extended-wings configuration. As described previously, the folded-wings configuration 112 and 154 can be implemented in the hover mode, such as during at least a portion of a takeoff procedure and/or a landing procedure, and the extended-wings configuration can be implemented in the level-flight mode, such as during completion of mission objectives.

In the example of FIG. 3, the VTOL UAV 102 includes a first pair of control flaps 116 coupled to the folding wings 108 and a second pair of control flaps 118 coupled to the fixed body portion 110. The first pair of control flaps 116 can be configured to provide avionic direction control in the level-flight mode (e.g., when the folding wings 108 are extended). The second pair of control flaps 118 can be located approximately equal and opposite a central axis (e.g., the central axis 16) on the fixed body portion 110, such as substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the VTOL UAV 102. As described herein, the term “rotor wash” is defined as the region corresponding approximately to a diameter of the rotor disk 106 along which the thrust is provided based on the rotation (e.g., contra-rotation) of the rotor disk 106, such as similar to a propeller wash of propeller-driven vehicles. Therefore, the second pair of control flaps 118 can be implemented to provide avionic control authority for the VTOL UAV 102 during the hover mode. For example, tilting both of the second pair of control flaps 118 to one side of the fixed body portion 110 can provide a lateral directional movement of the VTOL UAV 102 in the direction to which the respective side of the fixed body portion 110 faces during the hover mode. As another example, tilting the second pair of control flaps 118 to opposite sides of the fixed body portion 110 can provide rotation of the VTOL UAV 102, such as in a stationary

position in three-dimensional space, during the hover mode. Therefore, the second pair of control flaps **118** can be implemented to provide accurate positioning of the VTOL UAV **102** in three-dimensional space in the hover mode, such as during takeoff and landing procedures. Additionally, the second pair of control flaps **118** can cooperate with the first pair of control flaps **116** to provide avionic direction control of the VTOL UAV **102** in the level-flight mode.

In the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4**, the folding wings **108** are demonstrated as being folded toward a first side of the fixed body portion **110** in the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154**. As described previously, the folding wings **108** can be provided in the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** during the hover mode to substantially mitigate the effects of wind acting upon the VTOL UAV **102**, such as during takeoff and landing procedures. Additionally, the first side of the fixed body portion **110** toward which the folding wings **108** are retracted (e.g., folded) can correspond to a top surface of the VTOL UAV **102** in the level-flight mode. Therefore, the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** can be provided to accommodate placement of a payload on the second side of the fixed body portion **110** that is opposite the first side of the fixed body portion **110**. In other words, the side of the fixed body portion **110** opposite the location of the folding wings **108** in the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** can correspond to a bottom surface of the VTOL UAV **102** in the level-flight mode, and can thus be fitted with a payload (e.g., communications equipment, optical equipment, and/or ordnance). Accordingly, by retracting the folding wings **108** to one side of the fixed body portion **110** (e.g., corresponding to the top surface in the level-flight mode), the folding wings **108** do not spatially interfere with the placement of the payload on the opposite surface of the fixed body portion **110**.

As described previously, in the hover mode, such as during takeoff and landing procedures, the VTOL UAV **102** can implement the second pair of control flaps **118** to provide lateral motion. In addition, because the rotor disk **106** is configured as a rotor disk that includes a swashplate, the rotor disk **106** can implement pitch control of one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades of the rotor disk **106**, thus enabling lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** in the hover mode in a manner similar to a helicopter. FIG. **5** illustrates an example diagram **200** of lateral flight of a VTOL UAV. The diagram **200** demonstrates the lateral flight of the VTOL UAV **102** in a first manner **202** and in a second manner **204**. Therefore, because the diagram **200** demonstrates the VTOL UAV **102**, reference is to be made to the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4** in the following description of the example of FIG. **5**.

The first manner **202** of lateral flight of the VTOL UAV **102** demonstrates that the VTOL UAV **102** is laterally moving along the X-axis defined by the Cartesian coordinate system **104**, demonstrated in the example of FIG. **5** by an arrow **206**. In the first manner **202**, the VTOL UAV **102** can move in the direction indicated by the arrow **206** based on cyclic pitch control of one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades of the rotor disk **106** in a portion of the 360° of rotation of the one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades. Therefore, the cyclic pitch control of the rotor disk **106** can change the pitch of the VTOL UAV **102**, and thus the orientation of the central axis **16** relative to the surface of the Earth. As a result, the rotor disk **106** can provide thrust along the X-axis as well as the Z-axis to provide the lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** in the direction indicated by the arrow **206**. In addition, to provide even greater control of the lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102**, the VTOL UAV **102**

can also implement the second pair of control flaps **118**, similar to as described previously. The first manner **206** of the lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** can be in the folded-wings configuration or the extended-wings configuration. Therefore, in addition to the cyclic pitch control, the VTOL UAV **102** can tilt both of the second pair of control flaps **118** to one side of the fixed body portion **110** (e.g., to the respective side of the fixed body portion **110** opposite the direction indicated by the arrow **206**) to provide the lateral directional movement of the VTOL UAV **102** in the direction indicated by the arrow **206**. Therefore, the VTOL UAV **102** can implement cyclic pitch control of the rotor disk **106** and/or the second pair of control flaps **118** to provide greater speed and/or control of the lateral motion, such as in windy environments and/or to land on moving platforms (e.g., a ship at sea).

The second manner **204** of lateral flight of the VTOL UAV **102** demonstrates that the VTOL UAV **102** is laterally moving along the Y-axis defined by the Cartesian coordinate system **104**, demonstrated in the example of FIG. **5** by an arrow **208**. In the second manner **204**, the VTOL UAV **102** can move in the direction indicated by the arrow **208** based on cyclic pitch control of one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades of the rotor disk **106** in a portion of the 360° of rotation of the one or both of the contra-rotating rotor blades. Therefore, the cyclic pitch control of the rotor disk **106** can change the pitch of the VTOL UAV **102**, and thus the orientation of the central axis **16** relative to the surface of the Earth. As a result, the rotor disk **106** can provide thrust along the Y-axis as well as the Z-axis to provide the lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** in the direction indicated by the arrow **208**. The second manner **208** of lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** can also implement the second pair of control flaps **118**, similar to as described previously, and can be in the folded-wings configuration or the extended-wings configuration. As an example, the second manner **208** of lateral motion of the VTOL UAV **102** in the extended-wing configuration can be useful to provide “sideways” motion of the VTOL UAV **102**, such as in the presence of wind, without having to rotate the body portion **110** first. Therefore, the VTOL UAV **102** can implement cyclic pitch control of the rotor disk **106** and/or the second pair of control flaps **118** to provide greater speed and/or control of the lateral motion, such as in windy environments and/or to land on moving platforms (e.g., a ship at sea).

While the cyclic pitch control is described as implemented herein only in the hover mode, it is to be understood that the cyclic pitch control can be implemented in a number of different ways or for a number of different implementations. For example, the cyclic pitch control can be implemented in the level-flight mode in addition to being implemented in the hover mode, such as to provide greater flexibility of motion and/or orientation of the VTOL UAV **102** in the level-flight mode. In addition, as another example, the cyclic pitch control can be implemented on both of the contra-rotating rotor blades of the rotor disk **106**. However, as another example, the cyclic pitch control can be implemented on just one of the rotor blades of the rotor disk **106**, such that the other rotor blade can be implemented as a propeller and the VTOL UAV **102** can implement independent rotational velocity of the contra-rotating rotor blades for thrust and rotation of the body portion of the VTOL UAV **102**. Therefore, the rotor disk **106** can be configured in a variety of ways to provide cyclic pitch control and avionic control of the VTOL UAV **102**.

FIG. **6** illustrates an example of a flight control system **250**. The flight control system **250** can be encapsulated

within the body **18** of the VTOL UAV **12** (e.g., within the fixed body portion **110** of the VTOL **102**). Thus, the flight control system **250** can be configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV **12** in both the hover mode (e.g., via cyclic pitch control) and the level-flight mode. Thus, reference is to be made to the example of FIGS. **1-4** in the following description of the example of FIG. **6**.

The flight control system **250** includes a processor **252** and a communications transceiver **254** that is configured to transmit and receive communications signals COM via an antenna **256**. As an example, the communications signals COM can be provided to and from one or more external control stations, such as a stationary control center, a ship, a satellite, and/or another aircraft. For example, the communications signals COM can include signals transmitted from the VTOL UAV **12** that can correspond to video, location, status updates, and/or a variety of other signals to be communicated to the external control station. As another example, the communications signals COM can include signals received by the VTOL UAV **12**, such as global positioning satellite (GPS) signals, command signals, status signals, and/or mission objective signals. For example, the VTOL UAV **12** can be configured as a remotely controlled drone, such that at least a portion of the communications signals COM received by the VTOL UAV **102** can correspond to flight control signals to remotely pilot the VTOL UAV **102**. The processor **252** can thus be configured to interpret the received communications signals COM and to facilitate creation of and transmission of the transmitted communication signals COM.

The flight control system **250** also includes a control input/output (I/O) system **258** configured to receive input signals I_CNTRL and to transmit output signals O_CNTRL to control input and output components, respectively, associated with the VTOL UAV **12**. As an example, the signals O_CNTRL can correspond to output signals to control substantially all of the components of the VTOL UAV **12**, such as the engine, the payload, the control flaps **116** and **118**, and any of a variety of other components (e.g., motors for retraction and extension of the folding wings **108**). Additionally, as another example, the signals I_CNTRL can correspond to sensor input signals provided from a variety of sensor systems of the VTOL UAV **12**, such as optical sensors, flight sensors, and any of a variety of other sensor components. Additionally, the control I/O system **258** can include one or more sensors configured to determine the orientation of the VTOL UAV **12** (e.g., gyroscope(s), magnetometer(s), artificial horizon, etc.). The control I/O system **258** is communicatively coupled to the processor **252**, such that the processor is configured to interpret the received signals I_CNTRL and to output the signals O_CNTRL for control of the VTOL UAV **12**. Accordingly, the processor **252** is configured to implement the mission objectives of the VTOL UAV **12** based on the communications signals COM and the signals I_CNTRL and O_CNTRL.

Additionally, the flight control system **250** includes a memory **260**. The memory **260** can be configured to store a variety of data that can be associated with operation of the VTOL UAV **12**. As an example, the memory **260** can be configured to store a mission protocol that can correspond to predetermined operations that can be performed by the processor **252** to complete mission objectives. As described previously, the VTOL UAV **12** can be configured as a remotely controlled drone, such that at least a portion of the communications signals COM received by the VTOL UAV **102** can correspond to flight control signals to remotely pilot the VTOL UAV **102**. However, as another example, the

VTOL UAV **12** can be configured as a robot that is configured to autonomously complete the mission objectives based on the mission protocol stored in the memory **260** and/or based on predetermined control parameters stored in the memory **260**, such as can define autonomous control of the VTOL UAV **12**. Therefore, the VTOL UAV **12** can be locally or remotely activated (e.g., via a communications signals COM received by the VTOL UAV **102**) to autonomously takeoff, perform the mission objectives, and land without any remote piloting. As another example, the VTOL UAV **12** can be configured to include a piloting override and/or to perform aspects of the mission objectives autonomously, while other aspects of the mission objectives are performed via a remote pilot.

FIG. **7** illustrates an example diagram **300** of a takeoff procedure of a VTOL UAV **302**. As an example, the VTOL UAV **302** can correspond to the VTOL UAV **12** and/or **102** in the examples of FIGS. **1** and **2** and FIGS. **3** and **4**, respectively. Therefore, reference is to be made to the examples of FIGS. **1-4** in the following description of the example of FIG. **7**.

At **304**, the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated as being at rest on a landing pad **305**. As an example, the landing pad **305** can be ground-based, or can be located on a nautical ship, and can include an external control station configured to communicate with the VTOL UAV **302** via the communication signals COM. The VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated at **304** as being in a folded-wings configuration (e.g., the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** in the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4**), and can initiate the takeoff procedure from the location at **304**. At **306**, the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated in the hover mode, and thus providing thrust in the vertical direction via a rotor (e.g., the rotor disk **14**). The rotor can be controlled at a power that is sufficient to create lift, and thus to proceed with the takeoff procedure to increase altitude of the VTOL UAV **302** in the hover mode. The VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated at **306** as maintaining the folded-wings configuration (e.g., the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** in the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4**), such as to mitigate the effects of wind forces acting upon the VTOL UAV **302**.

At **308**, the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated as maintaining the hover mode, and continues to ascend in altitude via thrust in the vertical direction provided by the rotor (e.g., the rotor disk **14**). Upon reaching a first predetermined altitude at **308**, the VTOL UAV **302** extends (e.g., unfolds) wings from a fixed body (e.g., the fixed body portion **110**) in an extended-wings configuration (e.g., the extended-wings configuration **114** and **156** in the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4**). The VTOL UAV **302** maintains the power of the rotor that is sufficient to create lift to continue to increase altitude of the VTOL UAV **302** in the hover mode. At **310**, the VTOL UAV **302** achieves a second predetermined altitude corresponding to a transition from the hover mode to the level-flight mode. At **310**, the power of the rotor of the VTOL UAV **302** can be decreased and/or control flaps (e.g., the second pair of control flaps **118**) can be controlled to pitch the VTOL UAV **302** to one side. Thus, the VTOL UAV **302** can change from a substantially vertical orientation in the hover mode to a substantial horizontal orientation.

At **312**, the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated as beginning a dive in the level-flight mode. Thus, at **312**, the VTOL UAV **302** can increase speed based on the dive, and can begin to increase rotor power again to achieve a power sufficient to maintain flight of the VTOL UAV **302**. At **314**, the VTOL UAV **302** begins to level off, and thus begins to experience aerodynamic lift via the wings in the level-flight mode. At

316, the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated fully in the substantially horizontal orientation in the level-flight mode. Thus, the rotor is providing thrust in the horizontal direction to achieve a substantially rapid flight speed, and the wings provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode to maintain aerial flight of the VTOL UAV **302**. Accordingly, at **316**, the takeoff procedure is complete, and subsequent to **316**, the VTOL UAV **302** can perform mission objectives. While the VTOL UAV **302** is demonstrated as climbing in altitude to the second predetermined altitude at **310** in the hover mode then diving down to achieve level flight in the level-flight mode at **316**, it is to be understood that the VTOL UAV **302** can be configured instead to maintain sufficiently high rotor power at **310** and level off to the level-flight mode via the control flaps (e.g., the second pair of control flaps **118**) instead of diving to achieve the level-flight mode.

FIG. **8** illustrates an example diagram **350** of a landing procedure of a VTOL UAV **352**. At **354**, the VTOL UAV **352** is demonstrated fully in the substantially horizontal orientation in the level-flight mode. Thus, the rotor is providing thrust in the horizontal direction to provide a substantially rapid flight speed while the wings provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode to maintain aerial flight of the VTOL UAV **352**. As an example, the VTOL UAV **352** can have just completed mission objectives and is returning to an associated landing pad **356**.

At **358**, the VTOL UAV **352** begins ascending in the level-flight mode by orienting the nose (e.g., the rotor) in a substantially vertical orientation (e.g., via at least one of the first and second pairs of control flaps **116** and **118**). At **360**, the VTOL UAV **352** can achieve a substantial maximum altitude in the level-flight mode, and can thus switch to the hover mode. For example, upon achieving a substantially full vertical orientation, the VTOL UAV **352** can reduce the power of the rotor to cease climbing further in altitude, and can thus begin descending in the hover mode. As an example, the VTOL UAV **352** can achieve the maximum altitude in the level-flight mode, and thus the transition to the hover mode, at a location that is approximately above the associated landing pad **356**.

At **362**, the VTOL UAV **352** can continue descending in altitude in the hover mode based on the substantially reduced rotor power. As an example, at **362**, the VTOL UAV **352** can implement the control flaps (e.g., the second pair of control flaps **118**) to orient the tips of the wings of the VTOL UAV **352** to be approximately in-line with the path of any wind to substantially mitigate the effects of wind forces acting upon the VTOL UAV **352**. At **364**, the VTOL UAV **352** is demonstrated as maintaining the hover mode, and continues to descend in altitude via the reduced power of the rotor.

Upon reaching a predetermined altitude at **364**, the VTOL UAV **352** retracts (e.g., folds) wings (e.g., to one side) in a folded-wings configuration (e.g., the folded-wings configuration **112** and **154** in the examples of FIGS. **3** and **4**). Thus, the folded-wings configuration can continue to substantially mitigate the effects of wind forces acting upon the VTOL UAV **352**. Additionally, the VTOL UAV **352** can implement cyclic pitch control and/or the control flaps (e.g., the second pair of control flaps **118**) to provide directional control and lateral movement of the VTOL UAV **352** to move and/or maintain the VTOL UAV **352** substantially directly over the landing pad **356**. Therefore, at **366**, the VTOL UAV **352** can land on the associated landing pad **366**, such as via the landing posts **20**. Thus, at **366**, the landing procedure is complete.

In view of the foregoing structural and functional features described above, a methodology in accordance with various aspects of the present invention will be better appreciated with reference to FIG. **9**. While, for purposes of simplicity of explanation, the methodology of FIG. **9** is shown and described as executing serially, it is to be understood and appreciated that the present invention is not limited by the illustrated order, as some aspects could, in accordance with the present invention, occur in different orders and/or concurrently with other aspects from that shown and described herein. Moreover, not all illustrated features may be required to implement a methodology in accordance with an aspect of the present invention.

FIG. **9** illustrates an example of a method **400** for controlling a VTOL UAV (e.g., the VTOL UAV **10**). At **402**, an engine is activated to rotate a rotor (e.g., the rotor disk **14**) to provide vertical thrust in a hover mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to a substantially vertical orientation of the VTOL UAV. At **404**, a plurality of wings (e.g., the wings **22**) are extended from a body (e.g., the body **18**) of the VTOL UAV at a first predetermined altitude in the hover mode (e.g., demonstrated at **308** in the example of FIG. **7**). At **406**, an orientation of the VTOL UAV is changed from the substantially vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation at a second predetermined altitude that is greater than the first predetermined altitude. The change in orientation can occur based on at least one of engine speed and control flaps (e.g., the second pair of control flaps **118**) that are coupled to the body and respectively offset equally and oppositely with respect to a central axis (e.g., the central axis **16**) of the body substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the rotor (e.g., demonstrated at **310** in the example of FIG. **7**). At **408**, the engine is controlled to rotate the rotor to provide horizontal thrust in a level-flight mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to the substantially horizontal orientation of the VTOL UAV.

What have been described above are examples of the invention. It is, of course, not possible to describe every conceivable combination of components or method for purposes of describing the invention, but one of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that many further combinations and permutations of the invention are possible. Accordingly, the invention is intended to embrace all such alterations, modifications, and variations that fall within the scope of this application, including the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) comprising:

- a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode and in a level-flight mode, wherein the flight control system is configured to takeoff and land the VTOL UAV in the hover mode and to implement mission objectives in the level-flight mode;
- a body encapsulating an engine and the flight control system, the body being configured as a collapsible flying-wing and comprising landing posts on an aft-section of the body;
- a plurality of retractable wings coupled to the body, wherein the plurality of retractable wings are each configured to fold toward a first side of the body to accommodate placement of a payload on a second side of the body that is opposite the first side of the body; and
- a rotor disk located on a fore-section of the body and being coupled to the engine and configured to provide

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vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust for flight during the level-flight mode.

2. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the rotor disk comprises a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades axially-fixed along a central axis of the body, wherein the flight control system can implement cyclic pitch control of at least one of the contra-rotating rotor blades.

3. The vehicle of claim 1, further comprising a first control flap and a second control flap that are each coupled to the body and are respectively offset equally and oppositely with respect to a central axis of the body and substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the rotor disk that is defined by a diameter of the rotor disk, the first and second control flaps being controlled by the flight control system to provide rotation and lateral motion control of the VTOL UAV during the hover mode.

4. The vehicle of claim 1, the plurality of retractable wings being in a retracted state in at least a portion of the hover mode and in an extended state in the level-flight mode to provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode.

5. The vehicle of claim 4, wherein the plurality of retractable wings each comprise a control flap configured to provide avionic directional control in the level-flight mode.

6. The vehicle of claim 1, wherein the flight control system comprises:

- a communications transceiver configured to transmit and receive communications signals via an antenna;
- a control input/output (I/O) system configured to transmit and receive I/O signals to control input and output components associated with the VTOL UAV; and
- a processor configured to implement mission objectives based on the communications signals and the I/O signals.

7. The vehicle of claim 6, further comprising a memory configured to store at least one of a mission protocol and autonomous control parameters, such that the VTOL UAV is activated to takeoff, perform the mission objectives, and land, respectively, in an autonomous manner based on the at least one of the stored mission protocol and the autonomous control parameters.

8. The vehicle of claim 6, wherein the communications signals comprise flight control signals that are transmitted from an external control station and are received by the communication transceiver, such that the VTOL UAV is configured to takeoff, perform the mission objectives, and land, respectively, based on the received flight control signals.

9. A method for controlling a vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the method comprising:

- activating an engine to rotate a rotor disk to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in a hover mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to a substantially vertical orientation of the VTOL UAV;
- extending a plurality of wings from a first side of a body configured as a collapsible flying wing to accommodate placement of a payload on a second side of the body that is opposite the first side of the body of the VTOL UAV at a first predetermined altitude in the hover mode;
- changing an orientation of the VTOL UAV from the substantially vertical orientation to a substantially horizontal orientation at a second predetermined altitude that is greater than the first predetermined altitude via at least one of engine speed and control flaps that are

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coupled to the body and respectively offset equally and oppositely with respect to a central axis of the body substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the rotor disk that is defined by a diameter of the rotor disk; and controlling the engine to rotate the rotor disk to provide horizontal thrust in a level-flight mode of the VTOL UAV corresponding to the substantially horizontal orientation of the VTOL UAV.

10. The method of claim 9, wherein the rotor disk comprises a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades axially-fixed to a fore-section of and along a central axis of the body.

11. The method of claim 9, further comprising accessing at least one of mission protocol and autonomous control parameters from a memory, such that the VTOL UAV is activated to perform the takeoff procedure, to perform mission objectives, and to land, respectively, in an autonomous manner based on the accessed at least one of the mission protocol and the autonomous control parameters.

12. The method of claim 9, further comprising receiving flight control signals via a communications transceiver, the flight control signals being transmitted from an external control station, such that the VTOL UAV is configured to perform the takeoff procedure, to perform mission objectives, and to land, respectively, based on the received flight control signals.

13. The method of claim 9, further comprising:

- changing an orientation of the VTOL UAV from the substantially horizontal orientation to the substantially vertical orientation;
- decreasing the engine speed to switch from the level-flight mode to the hover mode with a decreasing altitude;
- retracting the plurality of wings to the body at the first predetermined altitude in the hover mode; and
- landing the VTOL UAV on a landing pad via landing posts on an aft-section of the body opposite the rotor disk.

14. The method of claim 9, further comprising controlling the control flaps to provide at least one of rotation about a central axis of the body of the VTOL UAV and lateral motion of the body of the unmanned VTOL in a direction that is orthogonal with respect to the central axis.

15. A vertical takeoff and landing (VTOL) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) comprising:

- a flight control system configured to provide avionic control of the VTOL UAV in a hover mode for takeoff and landing procedures of the VTOL UAV and in a level-flight mode for a mission procedure of the VTOL UAV;
- a body encapsulating an engine and the flight control system and comprising a plurality of retractable wings being configured in a flying-wing configuration, the plurality of retractable wings being in a retracted state in the hover mode and in an extended state in the level-flight mode to provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode, wherein the plurality of retractable wings are each configured to fold toward a first side of the body to accommodate placement of a payload on a second side of the body that is opposite the first side of the body; and
- a rotor disk comprising a pair of contra-rotating rotor blades coupled to the engine and being axially-fixed along a central axis of the body, the pair of contra-rotating rotor blades being configured to provide vertical thrust and cyclic pitch control in the hover mode and to provide horizontal thrust for flight during the level-flight mode.

16. The vehicle of claim 15, further comprising a first control flap and a second control flap that are each coupled

to the body and are respectively offset equally and oppositely with respect to a central axis of the body and substantially entirely within a rotor wash of the rotor disk that is defined by a diameter of the rotor disk, the first and second control flaps being controlled by the flight control system to provide rotation and lateral motion control of the VTOL UAV during the hover mode.

17. The vehicle of claim 15, wherein the plurality of retractable wings are provided in a retracted state in at least a portion of the hover mode and in an extended state in the level-flight mode to provide aerodynamic lift in the level-flight mode, wherein the body comprises landing posts on an aft-section of the body.

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