

Fig. 2 Scheduling cycle

Problem formulation: We introduce AoI energy aware scheduling to efficiently coordinate UAVs under contextual constraints, namely trajectory design, AoI, and energy consumption constraints. As depicted in Figure 2, it consists of five stages. The duration of each cycle is represented by $\tau(t)$.

- 1) **Information exchange cycle:** Each cycle begins with the exchange of information between UAV-BS and UAV-UE. The information exchanged includes the current position of the i th UAV-UE at time slot t , denoted as $q_{(i,t)} = (x_i, y_i, h_i)$, and the energy consumption during the previous cycle, represented as $E_{i,\tau(t-1)}^{\text{cmp}}$. The energy consumption used for flying the UAV-UE is denoted by $p_{\text{move}}(t) = \sqrt{(\Delta x + \Delta y + \Delta h)}$. Here, Δx , Δy , and Δh represent the distance travelled by the UAV in the x -, y -, and h -axis (altitude) directions, respectively. The variable $o_i(t) \in \{0, 1\}$ indicates whether there is a collision with obstacles. The energy consumption for hovering and uploading is represented by $P_h(t)$ and $\hat{P}_{(b,i)}(t)$, respectively. The AoI, calculated as $\Delta_{\text{AoI}} \tau_i^i$, is included. The total duration of five cycles is denoted by $\Delta \tau(t)$, and $U_i(t-1)$ represents the last upload time. This information forms the basis for the next cycle decisions.

$$E_{\text{cmp}} = \frac{1}{I} \sum_{i=1}^I (\hat{P}_{\text{move}}(t) \cdot o_i(t) \cdot \tau_e(t) + \hat{P}_h(t) \cdot \tau_h + \hat{P}_{(b,i)}(t) \cdot \tau_{\text{tx}}(t)) \quad (3)$$

$$\Delta \text{AoI}_i = t - U_j(t-1) \quad (4)$$

In other words, Equation (3) represents the energy consumption E_{cmp} of the i th UAV at a specific time t . It includes the total energy consumption of the i th UAV, which consists of the energy consumed for travelling, hovering, and data transmission.

- 2) **Decision cycle:** The decision cycle begins when the UAV-BS identifies the location of the requested target point, $s_k(t)$, and, considering the current position and state of each UAV-UE, selects the UAV-UE that is closest to the requested target point. The selected UAV-UE must adhere to the energy constraint equation $\epsilon_i(t) = \frac{e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t)}{e_i^{\text{max}}(t)}$, where the current energy $\Delta e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t)$ and the maximum energy capacity $e_i^{\text{max}}(t)$ must meet the condition. If the selected UAV-UE does not satisfy the condition, the UAV-BS must reselect a new UAV-UE that is the closest within its area R_b .

$$\epsilon_i(t) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } \Delta e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t) \leq e_i^{\text{max}} \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (5)$$

- 3) **Empty cycle:** An empty cycle represents the state in which the UAV-UE is en route to the target point $s_k(t)$ but has not yet arrived. During this phase, the UAV-BS continuously monitors the UAV-UE and considers the estimated flight time $\tilde{\tau}_e$. If necessary, the path of the UAV-UE can be adjusted to minimize energy consumption and ensure the AoI.
- 4) **Hovering cycle:** The hovering cycle occurs when the UAV-UE reaches the designated target point $s_k(t)$ and stops for data collection. At this time, the remaining energy of the i th UAV-UE must satisfy the energy constraint condition $\epsilon_i(t)$

- 5) **Upload cycle:** After the UAV-UE completes the hovering cycle, it starts the upload cycle. During this cycle, the UAV-UE can upload the collected data to the UAV-BS. It must transmit the data to a UAV-BS that covers the area R_b , which is within the transmission range of the UAV-UE. After the transmission is complete, the UAV-UE can record the time step U_j indicating the completion of all cycles. Subsequently, the UAV-UE flies to an area R_b within its transmission range for re-upload.

$$\zeta_i(t) = \begin{cases} \tau(t+1) = \tau_d, & \text{if } q_i \in R_b \text{ and } U_j \\ \tau(t+1) = \tau_{\text{tx}}, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (6)$$

where τ_d is the duration of the decision cycle. The UAV-UE selects a UAV-BS that covers an area R_b within the transmission distance.

$$\mu_i(t) = \begin{cases} 1, & \text{if } \sum_{j=1}^{U_j} \Delta \tau_i(t) \leq \hat{\Delta}_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}} \\ 0, & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (7)$$

To ensure the AoI for the i th UAV-UE, the scheduling total duration $\tau(T)$ must not exceed the threshold $\hat{\Delta}_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}}$ as stipulated in Equation (7). If the total scheduling duration exceeds $\hat{\Delta}_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}}$, the data will be discarded. The variable j represents the time it takes for the UAV to perform the selected task, and U_j denotes the total time until the task is completed, which is used in the calculation of AoI.

To solve the problem, we apply the DQN [16], which is a combination of deep neural networks and reinforcement learning algorithms. A DQN can be defined as an MDP represented by a tuple $\langle S, A, R, S_{t+1} \rangle$. An agent decides on an action a in a given state s . The agent receives a reward R and builds a policy π that takes into account a discount factor γ for the cumulative future reward. The proposed DQN approach consists of:

1. A deep neural network to reduce the dimensionality of the state space used to extract contextual features.
2. An experience replay memory to store the state transitions observed by the UAV-BS agent and the UAV-UE agent.
3. A reinforcement learning framework to find the optimal trajectory policy by solving constraints (9–11) to have a unique target area for each UAV-UE [17]

State: The state can be represented as $S_i(t) = [q_i(t), e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t), c_i(t)]$, which represents three key elements at time t . The position of the UAV-UE, $q_i(t) = (x_i(t), y_i(t), h_i(t))$, accurately tracks the spatial location of the UAV and is used to plan the next movement. $e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t)$ represents the current energy level of the UAV-UE, which can be expressed as the remaining operational energy $e_i^{\text{cmp}}(t) \in \mathbb{R}$. This directly impacts the sustainable operation and mission execution capability of the UAV [18]. Lastly, $c_i(t)$ indicates the current cycle in which the UAV-UE is located. The possible states include {"Decision", "Empty", "Hovering", "Transmission"}, and this information is used to determine the next action of the UAV.

Action: Action is defined by Equation (8), which describes the mobility of the UAV-UE in a given state. If it is hovering, it does not move.

$$A_i(t) = \begin{cases} q_i(t+1) = (x_i(t) + \Delta x, y_i(t) + \Delta y, h_i(t) + \Delta h), & \text{Moving} \\ q_i(t+1) = (x_i(t), y_i(t), h_i(t)), & \text{Hovering} \end{cases} \quad (8)$$

Reward: When the learning agent, namely the UAV-UE, executes action $a_i(t)$, it transitions to a new state $s_i(t+1)$ and receives an immediate reward $r_i(t)$ associated with the state transition $s_i(t), a_i(t), s_i(t+1)$. The reward can be defined as follows in Equation (9), where ϵ_i represents the energy constraint, and $r_{\text{cmp}}(t)$ signifies the reward for saving energy. The energy reward $r_{\text{energy}}^j = \Delta e_i(t)$ is defined by $\Delta e_i(t) = e_i(t) - e_i(t-1)$, which represents the energy consumed due to action a_i^j . $\mu_i(t)$ indicates the AoI constraint, and $r_{\text{AoI}}(t) = \Delta U_i(t)$ is expressed as $\Delta U_i(t) = U_i(t) - U_i(t-1)$. This provides a higher reward

Table 1. Simulation hyperparameter values

Hyperparameter	Value
The number of UAV-BS	2
The number of UAV-UE	1–10
Episode	1000
Learning rate (α)	0.0005
Discount factor (γ)	0.99
Mini-batch size	32
Size of memory (\mathcal{M})	10,000

for the UAV-UE's continuous upload of fresh data. Lastly, $o_i(t)$ indicates whether there is a collision with obstacles.

$$R_i(t) = \epsilon_i(t) \times r_{\text{cmp}}(t) + \mu_i(t) \times r_{\text{AoI}}(t) + o_i(t) \quad (9)$$

The learning agent, UAV-UE, aims to maximize future rewards over T time slots as defined in Equation (10). $\gamma = [0, 1]$ reflects the balance between the importance of immediate and future rewards, allowing convergence to the optimal policy π^{opt} , which is a strategy that enables the UAV-UE to choose the optimal behaviour given a set of conditions to minimise energy consumption, maintain the freshness of information (AoI), and avoid obstacles.

$$\hat{R}(s, a, t) = \sum_{t_0=0}^T \gamma^{t_0} \times r_i(t - t_0) \quad (10)$$

Therefore, we can update the Q-function to derive the optimal policy π^{opt} as follows (11).

$$Q_{t'}(s, a) = Q_t(s, a) + \alpha \left[R + \gamma \max_{a'} q(s', a') - Q_t(s, a) \right] \quad (11)$$

Here, α is the learning rate that regulates the speed of the Q-function update. Additionally, $t' = t + 1$, and a' represents all actions considered during the maximization process.

Simulation results: We propose a replay memory-based approach to find the appropriate AoI $\Delta_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}}$ within the proposed method, ensuring AoI through the use of replay memory. Initially, replay memory represents the (s, a, r, s_{t+1}) obtained by the agent interacting with the environment during the learning process. We addressed the memory limitations of UAVs by placing the replay memory in a central node, which manages the history of all UAVs and uses it to plan the optimal route. It exists in the following types:

- **Replay history:** Stores all past experiences and randomly selects them for learning, contributing to the learning process.
- **Online history:** Stores real-time or the most recent experiences, contributing to immediate learning.
- **Prioritized history:** Selects experiences for learning based on their importance, contributing to the learning process by choosing specific experiences.

We conducted experiments in two distinct scenarios to test UAVs in various environments. The first was a rural environment with a large area ($1600 \times 1600 \text{ m}^2$) and four obstacles, with UAVs initially positioned at (800, 800). The second was an urban environment with a smaller area ($800 \times 800 \text{ m}^2$) and eight obstacles, with UAVs initially positioned at (400, 400) (see Table 1).

Figure 3 presents an analysis of the reward acquisition and the learning performance of the memory approach in reinforcement learning. The findings demonstrate that the online history memory approach exhibits consistent and stable learning performance, ultimately achieving the most effective reduction in energy consumption and AoI.

We conducted experiments in a rural scenario characterized by few obstacles and a relatively large area, and an urban scenario with many

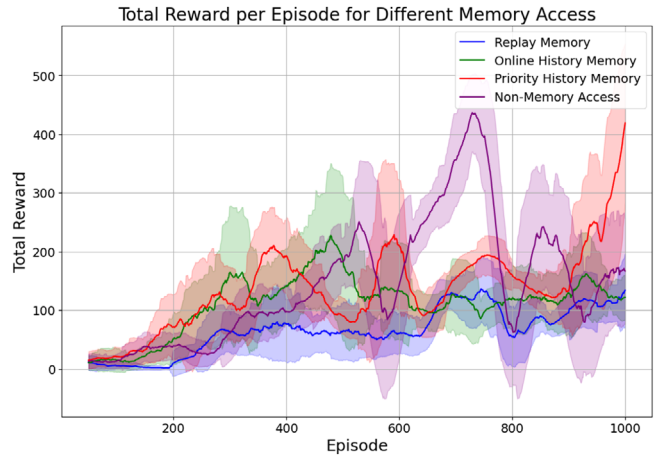


Fig. 3 Reward per episode for different memory

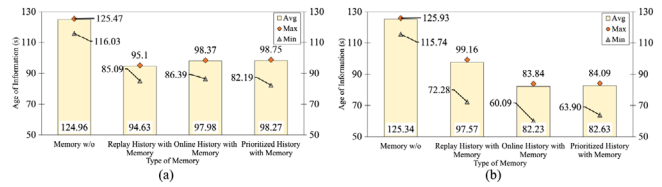


Fig. 4 Age of information in (a) rural scenario and (b) urban scenario

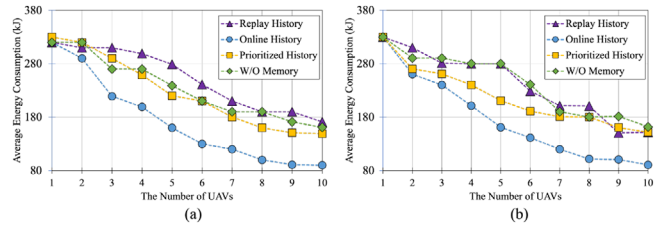


Fig. 5 Energy consumption in (a) rural scenario and (b) urban scenario

obstacles and a relatively small area, in order to test UAVs in various environments. Figure 4a,b represents the AoI results according to each memory access approach, facilitating the search for the appropriate $\Delta_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}}$. In the rural scenario of Figure 4a, the lowest average AoI was observed to be 94.63 s when applying the priority history memory access approach, which was 30.33 s shorter than the approach without memory usage. In the urban scenario of Figure 4b, the application of the online history memory access approach resulted in the lowest average AoI of 82.23 s, which was a reduction of 43.11 s compared to the non-memory approach.

After setting the average AoI to $\Delta_{\text{AoI}}^{\text{th}}$ in each scenario, we proceeded with energy consumption experiments. Figure 5a indicates that, in the rural scenario with five UAVs deployed, the online history memory access approach shows the lowest energy consumption, which is up to 33.25% lower compared to the non-memory approach. Similarly, Figure 5b shows that in the urban scenario, also with five UAVs, the online history approach results in the lowest energy consumption, showing up to a 74.20% reduction compared to the non-memory approach. These results suggest that the online history approach can adapt in real time to relatively dynamic environments. On the other hand, both the replay history memory access method and the non-memory approach show comparatively higher energy consumption.

To examine the energy consumption of UAVs based on different memory access approaches, we visualized the trajectories of two UAVs as shown in Figures 6 and 7. Figure 6 illustrates that in the rural scenario with the online history memory access approach applied, the UAVs fly in divided areas, suggesting that they reach the target points and collect data. In contrast, without the memory access approach, the UAVs overlap in their flight paths and fail to reach the target points. Therefore, the results indicate that the absence of a memory access approach leads to increased energy consumption due to overlapping flight paths and a failure to occupy distinct flying zones.

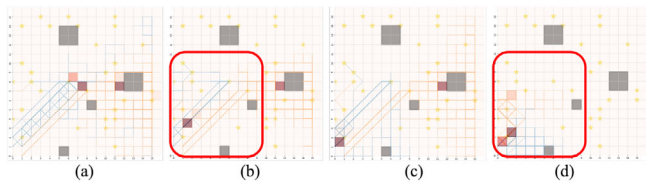


Fig. 6 Comparison trajectory in rural scenario using different memory access approaches. (a) Replay history. (b) Online history. (c) Prioritised history. (d) Non-memory

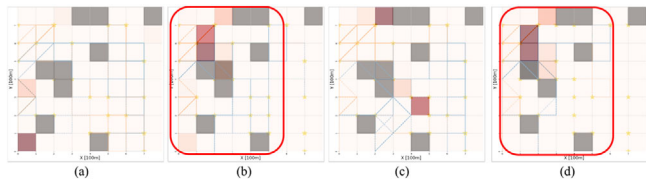


Fig. 7 Comparison trajectory in urban scenario using different memory access approaches. (a) Replay history. (b) Online history. (c) Prioritised history. (d) Non-memory

Conclusion: Here, we proposed a hierarchical deployment structure and an energy consumption minimization scheduling method centered around the AoI for efficient UAV operations. The results of applying a memory access approach-based DQN demonstrated significant reductions in energy consumption, up to 33.25% in rural scenarios and up to 74.20% in urban scenarios, while maintaining data freshness. However, the applicability of our approach in real-world scenarios and its potential challenges, such as computational overhead and integration with existing systems, require further investigation.

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Conflict of interest statement: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement: To access the data supporting the findings of this study, please contact the corresponding author directly. Specific requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

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