Case study

Recent developments in the synthesis of composite materials for aerospace: case study

Abstract

Composite materials have emerged as a cornerstone of aerospace engineering due to their exceptional properties, such as high strength-to-weight ratios, corrosion resistance, and superior mechanical performance. This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of recent advancements in synthesizing composite materials tailored for aerospace applications. We review cutting-edge manufacturing techniques, explore the integration of nanomaterials and sustainable biocomposites, and highlight five recent case studies illustrating practical applications. This paper also addresses current challenges in developing and manufacturing composites. We also discuss the insight into future research directions, including the potential of AI and machine learning to revolutionize composite material design.

Keywords: composite materials, Boeing 787 Dreamliner, Airbus A350 XWB, Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, SpaceX Falcon 9 Rocket, NASA mars helicopter

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Introduction

Composite materials combine two or more different materials to create a superior product and have become indispensable in aerospace engineering. The ability to tailor composites to meet specific mechanical, thermal, and environmental requirements has led to widespread adoption in aircraft and spacecraft components. Over the past few decades, composites have progressively replaced traditional materials like aluminum and titanium for superior strength-to-weight ratios and durability in extreme conditions.

The aerospace industry's relentless pursuit of efficiency and performance has driven extensive research into advanced composite materials that can meet the rigorous demands of modern aircraft and spacecraft. This has led to the synthesis of a wide range of new composite materials, including those reinforced with carbon, ceramic, and metal fibers, as well as the advent of nanostructured and bio-based composites. These materials are lighter, stronger, and more resistant to environmental degradation, making them ideal for high-performance aerospace applications.

In this paper, we explore recent developments in composite materials, focusing on new synthesis methods, advanced manufacturing processes, and specific aerospace case studies. By providing a detailed overview of the current state of the art, we aim to inspire optimism and excitement about the potential of these materials. We highlight the ongoing innovations and challenges in composite material synthesis and their future implications for the aerospace industry.

Overview of composite materials in aerospace

Composite materials, with their remarkable adaptability, have become indispensable in the design and construction of modern aerospace vehicles. The ability to tailor their properties has reassured engineers that they can meet the exacting performance criteria demanded by aerospace applications, including lightweight structures, high strength, and resistance to extreme temperatures.

Types of composite materials

Composite materials used in aerospace engineering are generally classified based on the type of matrix material (polymer, metal, or ceramic) and the reinforcement (fibers or particles). These materials can be tailored to meet specific performance criteria, and each type offers unique advantages (Figure 1).

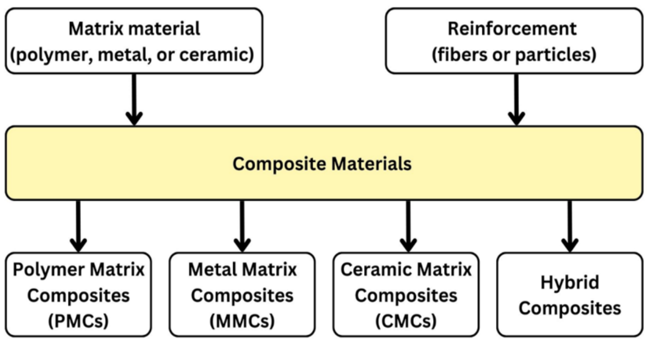

Figure 1 Types of composite materials.

Polymer matrix composites (PMCs)

These composites use a polymer resin (such as epoxy or polyester) as the matrix, with fibers like carbon or glass providing reinforcement.[1] Carbon fiber-reinforced polymers (CFRPs) are widely used in aircraft structures due to their high stiffness, strength, and low density.[2] Glass fiber-reinforced polymers (GFRPs), while used in less critical applications, are valued for their cost-effectiveness, making the users aware of their economic benefits (Figure 2).[3]

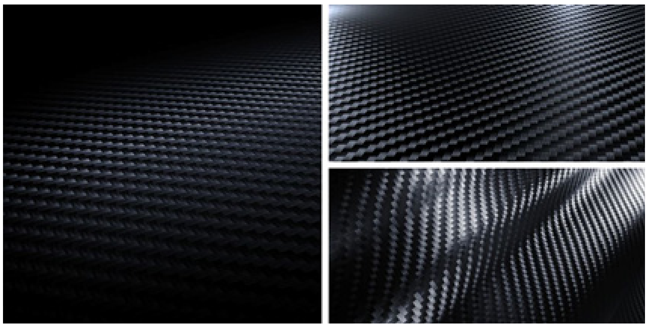

Figure 2 Example of carbon fiber-reinforced polymers (CFRPS).

Metal matrix composites (MMCs)

MMCs combine metals like aluminum or titanium with reinforcing materials such as silicon carbide or aluminum oxide, offering enhanced stiffness and thermal conductivity.[4] These composites, such as engine components, are typically used in applications with critical high-temperature performance (Figure 3).

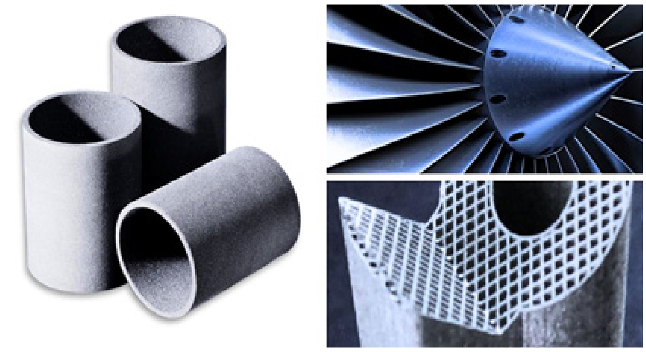

Figure 3 Example of metal matrix composites (MMCS).

Ceramic matrix composites (CMCs)

Known for their ability to withstand extremely high temperatures, CMCs are used in areas exposed to intense heat, such as turbine blades and exhaust systems.[5] Their ability to maintain strength at high temperatures makes them suitable for high-speed flight and propulsion systems (Figure 4).

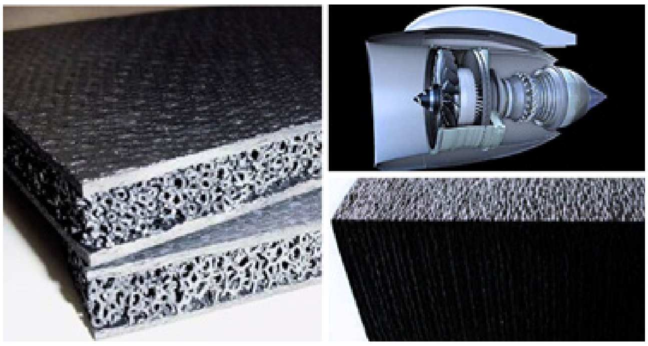

Figure 4 Example of ceramic matrix composites (CMCS).

Hybrid composites

These composites combine fibers or matrix materials to balance properties such as improved toughness, increased impact resistance, and effective vibration damping. This process allows for creating materials that can withstand mechanical stress, absorb energy from impacts, and minimize vibrations in various applications (Figure 5).[6,7]

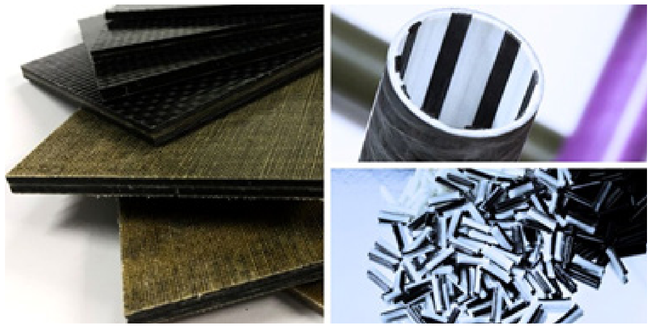

Figure 5 Example of hybrid composites.

Applications

Composite materials are used throughout the aerospace industry, from structural components like aircraft fuselages and wings to specialized applications such as engine nacelles, landing gear doors, and space vehicle heat shields. Their application extends beyond traditional fixed-wing aircraft to helicopters, rockets, and even satellites, where weight reduction and mechanical performance are crucial.

The Boeing 787 Dreamliner and Airbus A350 XWB exemplify the successful integration of composite materials in modern commercial aircraft.[8] CFRPs can reduce over 50% of structural weight, contributing to significant fuel savings and extended flight ranges. Meanwhile, in space exploration, companies like SpaceX and Blue Origin utilize advanced composites in rocket fairings and fuel tanks, allowing for lighter payloads and reusability, which are critical for lowering space travel costs.

Properties and requirements for aerospace applications

The aerospace industry imposes stringent requirements on materials due to the extreme operational conditions encountered during flight. Composite materials must offer high mechanical strength, stiffness, and resistance to thermal extremes, environmental degradation, and long-term fatigue.

Mechanical properties

Mechanical properties such as tensile strength, compressive strength, and fatigue resistance are paramount in aerospace applications.[9] Aircraft and spacecraft experience varying loads throughout their operational life, and materials must withstand these stresses without significant deformation or failure. CFRPs, for example, exhibit tensile strengths several times greater than steel ones while maintaining a fraction of the weight. This allows for lighter, stronger aircraft structures that are more fuel-efficient and capable of carrying heavier payloads.

Moreover, the fatigue life of composites is a critical consideration, as aerospace components are subjected to cyclic loading during flight. Advanced composite materials are engineered to offer superior resistance to fatigue failure, extending the lifespan of critical structures such as wing spars and fuselage panels.

Thermal properties

Aerospace vehicles must operate across various temperatures, from the freezing cold of high-altitude flight to the extreme heat generated during atmospheric re-entry. Composite materials used in

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these environments must exhibit low thermal expansion, high thermal stability, and resistance to thermal cycling.

For instance, ceramic matrix composites have become essential in designing turbine blades and other components exposed to high temperatures in jet engines. The materials maintain their mechanical strength at temperatures exceeding 1,500°C, significantly improving the efficiency and durability of aerospace propulsion systems. In contrast, carbon-carbon composites (a type of CMC made of carbon fibers in a graphite matrix) used in space vehicle heat shields can withstand temperatures over 3,000°C during re-entry.[10,11]

Environmental durability

In addition to mechanical and thermal performance, composite materials must resist environmental factors such as moisture, ultraviolet (UV) radiation, and chemical exposure. Aircraft frequently operate in humid and corrosive environments, which can degrade materials over time. Polymer composites, such as CFRPs, are inherently corrosion-resistant, offering a significant advantage over traditional metallic materials like aluminum, which require protective coatings.[12]

The development of protective surface treatments and coatings has further improved the environmental durability of aerospace composites. For instance, UV-resistant coatings help prevent the degradation of composite materials exposed to sunlight over long periods, particularly for aircraft operating at high altitudes where UV exposure is more intense.

Recent developments in composite material synthesis

The field of composite material synthesis has seen rapid advancements in recent years, driven by the need for materials that offer improved performance, lower production costs, and enhanced sustainability. Researchers continuously explore new manufacturing techniques, novel reinforcement materials, and environmentally friendly alternatives to traditional composites.

Advanced manufacturing techniques

Traditional methods of composite material fabrication, such as hand lay-up and vacuum bagging, are being replaced by more advanced, automated processes that improve precision and reduce production times. Two of the most notable advancements are Automated Fiber Placement (AFP) and Automated Tape Laying (ATL).[13,14] These techniques involve the automated deposition of composite fibers or tapes onto molds, significantly speeding up the production of large, complex aerospace structures while minimizing material waste.

Additive manufacturing (AM), also known as 3D printing, has revolutionized the production of composite materials, creating complex geometries and multi-material components that were previously impossible to manufacture.[15] Recent breakthroughs in continuous fiber-reinforced 3D printing have produced lightweight, high-strength components for aerospace applications. For example, NASA has utilized this technology to produce parts for spacecraft, reducing weight while maintaining structural integrity.

Nanostructured composites

Nanomaterials such as carbon nanotubes (CNTs), graphene, and nano-silica have been integrated into composite matrices to create nanostructured composites with enhanced mechanical, electrical, and thermal properties.[16] These nanomaterials offer exceptional strength and stiffness and improve electrical conductivity and thermal management, making them particularly attractive for aerospace applications.

For instance, graphene-enhanced composites have been shown to improve the performance of aircraft skins, providing better resistance to lightning strikes and reducing the aircraft's overall weight. Additionally, nanostructured composites with CNTs are being developed for aircraft and spacecraft components requiring high strength and electrical conductivity, such as antennas and EMI shielding.[17]

Biocomposite materials

As environmental sustainability becomes a key focus for industries worldwide, the aerospace sector has begun to explore the use of biocomposite materials—composites made from natural fibers and bio-based resins.[18] While traditional composite materials offer excellent performance, their production is energy-intensive and often relies on non-renewable resources. On the other hand, biocomposites are made from renewable sources such as flax, hemp, and jute, offering a more environmentally friendly alternative.

Recent developments in bio-based epoxy resins derived from renewable resources, like vegetable oils, have shown promise for aerospace applications. Although biocomposites generally exhibit lower mechanical performance than their synthetic counterparts, advancements in material processing and surface treatments are narrowing this gap.[19] Researchers are also investigating ways to improve biocomposites' fire resistance and durability, making them more suitable for aircraft interiors and secondary structures.

Case studies and applications

To better illustrate the practical applications of the latest developments in composite material synthesis, we present five case studies highlighting the integration of advanced composites in aerospace engineering. These case studies showcase how material science innovations address key challenges such as weight reduction, fuel efficiency, thermal resistance, and sustainability.

Case study 1: Boeing 787 Dreamliner

The Boeing 787 Dreamliner is a revolutionary commercial aircraft that extensively utilizes composite materials to improve performance significantly. The aircraft's fuselage and wings are primarily constructed from Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Polymer (CFRP), which accounts for approximately 50% of the total structural weight (Table 1).[20]

Table 1 Materials used in Boeing 787 Dreamliner

Material	Approximate Percentage
Carbon fiber composite	50%
Aluminum Alloy	20%
Titanium Alloy	15%
Steel alloy	10%
Other materials (e.g., Copper, Silicon, Teflon)	5%

Scientific data:

1) **Material composition:** The CFRP used in the Dreamliner consists of a matrix of epoxy resin reinforced with high-strength carbon fibers. The carbon fibers provide exceptional tensile strength, with a typical tensile strength of 3,500 MPa (MegaPascals) and a modulus of elasticity of around 230 GPa (Gigapascals).

2) **Weight reduction:** Using CFRP has reduced the aircraft's weight by about 20% compared to conventional aluminum structures. This weight reduction translates to a 15-20% improvement in fuel efficiency, allowing the Dreamliner to achieve a range of approximately 8,000 nautical miles (14,800 kilometers).

3) **Durability:** CFRP's inherent resistance to corrosion and fatigue has significantly decreased maintenance requirements. The Dreamliner's CFRP components are less susceptible to environmental degradation, contributing to lower operating costs over the aircraft's lifespan. (Figure 6)

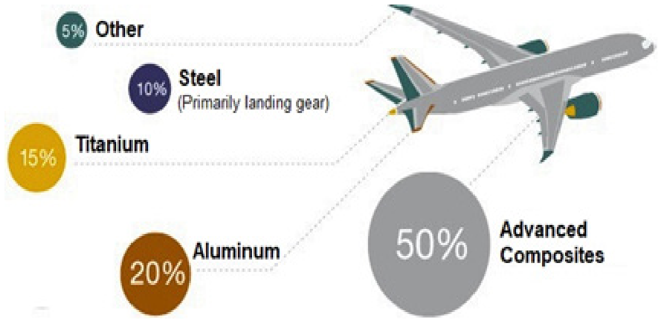

Figure 6 How to composite solutions are applied throughout the 787.

The extensive use of CFRP in the Dreamliner has also enabled the integration of larger windows and quieter cabin designs, enhancing passenger comfort and reducing the aircraft's overall environmental impact.

Case study 2: Airbus A350 XWB

The Airbus A350 XWB represents one of the most advanced implementations of composite materials in modern commercial aviation. Approximately 53% of the aircraft's structure, including the fuselage and wings, is made of CFRP (Table 2).[21]

Table 2 Materials used in Airbus A350 XWB

Material	Approximate percentage
Carbon fiber composite	53%
Aluminum Alloy	25%
Titanium Alloy	15%
Other Materials (e.g., Copper, Silicon, Teflon)	7%

Scientific data:

1) **Material composition:** The CFRP used in the A350 XWB is reinforced with fibers aligned in multiple directions to optimize strength and stiffness. The carbon fibers used have a tensile strength of around 4,000 MPa and a modulus of 300 GPa.

2) **Structural efficiency:** The A350 XWB's wings, made from CFRP, are designed with a 32-meter (105-foot) wingspan and feature advanced aerodynamic shapes. Using CFRP allows the wings to achieve a higher aspect ratio and more efficient aerodynamic performance, reducing drag and improving fuel efficiency.

3) **Thermal resistance:** The aircraft's engines incorporate Ceramic Matrix Composites (CMCs), which can withstand temperatures up to 1,600°C. CMCs are used in turbine blades and exhaust systems to improve engine performance and fuel efficiency. (Figure 7)

Figure 7 Airbus A350 XWB [Credit: airbus.com].

Integrating CFRP and CMCs in the A350 XWB contributes to its reduced weight, enhanced aerodynamic performance, and overall environmental sustainability, making it one of the most efficient aircraft in its class.

Case study 3: Lockheed martin F-35 lightning II

The Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, a fifth-generation stealth multirole fighter, is engineered with cutting-edge technologies, including advanced composite materials, to enhance its stealth, structural integrity, and performance capabilities.[22,23] These materials provide key advantages in weight reduction, durability, and radar evasion, making the F-35 one of the most advanced fighter jets (Table 3).

Table 3 Materials used in Lockheed Martin's F-35 Lightning II

Material	Approximate percentage
Carbon fiber composite	30-35%
Aluminum alloy	25-30%
Steel	15-20%
Titanium Alloy	10-15%
Other Materials (e.g., Copper, Silicon, Teflon)	5-10%

Scientific data:

1) **Material composition:** The F-35's airframe incorporates approximately 35% advanced composites, including CFRP and resin-infused carbon fibers. The composites have tensile strengths of up to 3,500 MPa and moduli of around 200 GPa.

2) **Stealth capability:** The composites used in the F-35's construction are designed to reduce the aircraft's radar cross-section (RCS) by minimizing radar reflectivity. The stealth materials are integral to achieving an RCS of less than 0.1 square meters.

3) **Performance:** Composites significantly reduce the aircraft's weight, enhancing maneuverability and agility. The F-35's weight reduction also improves its fuel efficiency and operational range. (Figure 8)

Figure 8 Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II [Credit: lockheedmartin.com].

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The advanced composite materials used in the F-35 are central to its mission success, contributing to its stealth and agility, survivability, fuel efficiency, and long-term operational effectiveness in diverse combat environments.

Case study 4: SpaceX falcon 9 rocket

SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket is a leading example of using composite materials in modern space launch systems.[24–26] The rocket's payload fairings are made from CFRP, contributing to the vehicle's overall performance and reusability (Table 4).

Table 4 Materials used in SpaceX's Falcon 9 Rocket

Material	Approximate percentage
Carbon fiber composite	40-50%
Aluminum alloy	20-25%
Stainless steel	15-20%
Other materials (e.g., Copper, Silicon, Teflon)	5-10%

Scientific data:

1) **Material composition:** The CFRP fairings are designed with a density of approximately 1.6 g/cm³ and provide a tensile strength of up to 2,800 MPa. This material choice ensures that the fairings are both lightweight and robust.

2) **Performance:** Using CFRP in the fairings reduces the rocket's weight, allowing for a higher payload capacity. This has enabled Falcon 9 to carry a maximum payload of around 22,800 kilograms to low Earth orbit (LEO).

3) **Reusability:** The rocket's first stage, which employs carbon-carbon composites in its thermal protection system, is designed to withstand re-entry temperatures exceeding 1,500°C. These composites enable the rocket to be reused multiple times, significantly reducing the cost of space launches. (Figure 9)

Figure 9 Falcon 9 lifts off with its Iridium-8 payload [Credit: spacex.com].

SpaceX's use of CFRP and carbon-carbon composites has been instrumental in reducing space travel costs and improving the efficiency of launch systems.

Case study 5: NASA mars helicopter (Ingenuity)

NASA's Ingenuity helicopter has accomplished a remarkable feat, achieving controlled flight on Mars. This is a monumental milestone in extraterrestrial aerospace technology, particularly given the Martian environment's unique challenges. It underscores the crucial role of advanced composite materials and engineering designs in overcoming these challenges (Table 5).[27–30]

Table 5 Materials used in NASA's mars helicopter (Ingenuity)

Material	Approximate percentage
Carbon fiber composite	40-50%
Aluminum alloy	15-20%
Copper	10-15%
lithium-ion batteries	5-10%
Other materials (e.g., Teflon, Silicon, Steel)	5-10%"

Scientific data:

1) **Material composition:** Ingenuity's rotor blades are made from CFRP with an approximately 1.2 g/cm³ density. The blades are designed to achieve a tensile strength of up to 3,500 MPa to generate lift in the thin Martian atmosphere.

2) **Flight performance:** The helicopter's design allows it to achieve flight in Mars' atmosphere, which has only about 1% of Earth's density. Ingenuity's rotor blades spin at up to 2,400 RPM speeds to generate sufficient lift.

3) **Mission success:** The lightweight CFRP materials contributed to a total mass of around 1.8 kilograms, enabling Ingenuity to perform its mission of aerial exploration and data collection on Mars. (Figure 10)

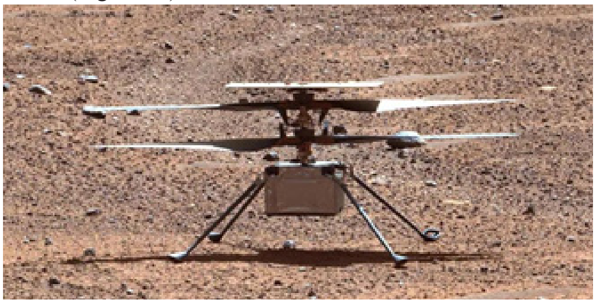

Figure 10 NASA mars helicopter (Ingenuity) [Credit: nasa.gov].

The successful deployment of Ingenuity showcases the critical role of advanced composites and autonomous systems in enabling aerospace technologies for extraterrestrial exploration. The use of CFRP and cutting-edge energy management and navigation systems demonstrates how these technologies can be applied to overcome the extreme challenges the Martian environment poses.

Case analysis

The case studies outlined clearly show how advanced composite materials, particularly Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Polymers (CFRP), drive significant advancements in aerospace engineering. Each case illustrates composite materials' unique properties and contributions to enhancing structural performance, fuel efficiency, and durability while addressing modern engineering challenges such as weight reduction and thermal resistance. This section synthesizes key findings from our case studies and evaluates the broader implications of composite material applications in aerospace technology (Figure 11).

Impact of weight reduction on fuel efficiency and performance

Across all five case studies, composite materials, specifically CFRP, have proven instrumental in reducing the overall weight of aerospace vehicles, which directly correlates with improved fuel efficiency. For instance, the Boeing 787 Dreamliner's CFRP-based construction results in a 20% weight reduction, contributing to a 15-

20% increase in fuel efficiency. Similarly, the Airbus A350 XWB's CFRP components enhance the aircraft's aerodynamic performance, reducing drag and improving fuel consumption.

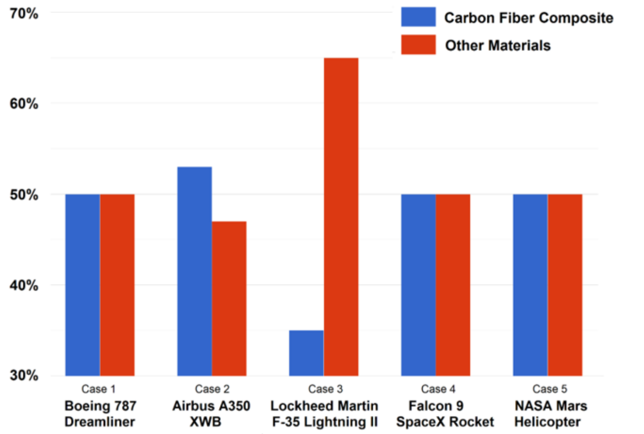

Figure 11 Use of composite materials in the 5 cases.

The Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II and SpaceX's Falcon 9 also benefit from significant weight savings. The F-35's weight reduction enhances its stealth and agility, whereas the Falcon 9's lighter CFRP fairings increase its payload capacity. Ingenuity, NASA's Mars Helicopter, showcases the potential of composites to enable flight in environments with extreme constraints, where weight must be minimized to achieve lift in a thin atmosphere. The cumulative data from these examples demonstrate the critical role of lightweight composite materials in improving aerospace performance and fuel economy.

Strength, durability, and maintenance

In addition to weight reduction, the inherent strength and durability of CFRP and other composite materials offer significant operational benefits. The Boeing 787 Dreamliner, for example, leverages CFRP's high tensile strength (up to 3,500 MPa) and modulus of elasticity (~230 GPa) to ensure structural integrity while reducing the frequency of maintenance caused by corrosion and fatigue. Similar properties are seen in the Airbus A350 XWB and Lockheed Martin F-35, where high-strength CFRP improves structural efficiency and longevity (Figure 12).

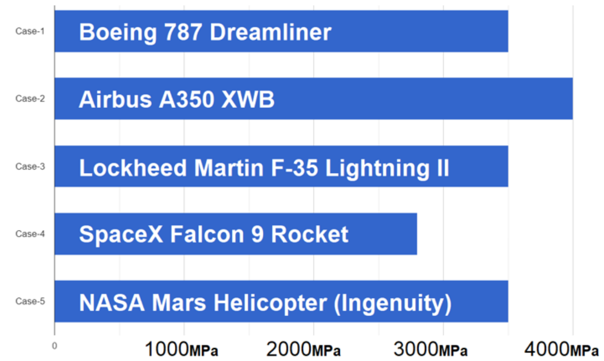

Figure 12 The tensile strength of composite materials in the 5 cases.

In more extreme environments, such as those encountered by the SpaceX Falcon 9 and NASA's Ingenuity, composites must withstand high thermal stresses. The Falcon 9's use of carbon-carbon composites in its thermal protection system allows it to endure re-entry temperatures exceeding 1,500°C, enabling its reusability and lowering launch costs. Similarly, the Mars helicopter's rotor blades, made from CFRP, demonstrate durability in a harsh Martian environment, operating at high speeds to generate lift in a low-density atmosphere.

Thermal resistance and advanced applications

Integrating composite materials with high thermal resistance, such as Ceramic Matrix Composites (CMCs), further expands the capabilities of aerospace technologies. The Airbus A350 XWB's engines incorporate CMCs that withstand temperatures up to 1,600°C, essential for improving engine efficiency and performance under extreme operating conditions. This is an important development, as conventional metallic materials tend to degrade or lose efficiency at high temperatures.

The Lockheed Martin F-35's composites also serve a critical function in stealth technology. The materials reduce the aircraft's radar cross-section (RCS) by minimizing radar reflectivity, which is crucial for reducing detectability. This demonstrates how composite materials can serve multiple purposes beyond structural integrity, including operational performance enhancements, such as radar evasion.

Environmental and sustainability impacts

The growing use of composite materials in aerospace engineering aligns with broader environmental sustainability goals. By reducing the weight of aircraft, such as the Boeing 787 and Airbus A350, fuel consumption is lowered, reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The fuel efficiency gains seen in these case studies underscore the role of composites in supporting more sustainable aviation technologies.

SpaceX's reusable Falcon 9 rocket demonstrates the potential for composites to reduce the environmental impact of space travel by enabling the reusability of key rocket components, reducing material waste and launch costs. This highlights the potential for advanced composites to contribute to economic and environmental sustainability in aerospace operations.

Challenges and future directions

While advancements in composite material synthesis have been significant, several challenges must be addressed to realize these materials' potential in aerospace applications fully. These challenges include cost, scalability, sustainability, and the need for further research into new materials and manufacturing processes.[31]

Current challenges

One of the most significant challenges in the widespread adoption of advanced composites is the high cost of raw materials, particularly for carbon fiber and other high-performance reinforcements. The production of these materials is energy-intensive, and the costs associated with processing and manufacturing are often prohibitive for large-scale applications.

Another challenge is the scalability of advanced manufacturing processes. While techniques like AFP and ATL offer improved precision and reduced production times, they require significant capital investment and specialized equipment.[32,33] This limits their use to high-value aerospace applications and prevents widespread adoption in other industries.

Recycling is also a major issue in composite material synthesis. Unlike traditional materials such as metals, composites are difficult to recycle due to the strong bonding between the matrix and reinforcement materials. Efforts are underway to develop more sustainable composites that can be easily disassembled and recycled at the end of their life cycle, but this remains a challenge for the industry.[34,35]

Future directions

Several emerging trends and technologies are likely to shape the future of composite materials in aerospace.[36]

One area of active research is the development of multifunctional composites that combine mechanical performance with additional properties such as electrical conductivity or thermal management. These materials could directly integrate sensors and other electronic components into the aircraft's structure, improving performance and reducing weight.[37,38]

Sustainability will also play an increasingly important role in developing aerospace composites. Researchers are exploring using recycled materials and bio-based composites to reduce the environmental impact of composite production.[39] Advances in bio-based resins and natural fiber reinforcements could develop lightweight, sustainable composites for use in aircraft interiors and secondary structures.[40]

Impact of emerging technologies

Another area of future development is integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) into the design and manufacturing of composite materials.[41,42] AI and ML algorithms can be used to optimize composite structure design, predict new materials' performance, and improve manufacturing processes. For example, machine learning can be used to analyze large datasets of material properties and identify new composite formulations that offer enhanced performance.

In addition to AI, advancements in digital manufacturing and simulation technologies will likely drive the development of more efficient and cost-effective manufacturing processes for composite materials. These technologies could enable the rapid prototyping of new composite designs and reduce the time and cost associated with material testing and certification.

Conclusion

Composite materials have become a cornerstone of modern aerospace engineering, offering unparalleled weight, strength, and durability advantages. Recent developments in composite material synthesis, including nanomaterials, biocomposites, and advanced manufacturing techniques, pave the way for even more innovative applications in the aerospace industry.[43] However, challenges remain in terms of cost, scalability, and sustainability.

The future of aerospace composites is bright, with emerging technologies like AI and machine learning poised to revolutionize the design and manufacturing of composite materials. By addressing the current challenges and continuing to push the boundaries of material science, the aerospace industry can look forward to a future where composite materials play an even more central role in developing safer, more efficient, and environmentally sustainable aircraft and spacecraft.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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