Electric Drive Converters for Autonomous Transport Powered by Solar/Battery Systems

Abhishek Sharma, Nutan Pandit, Gyanti Sisodia, Dhumal Pathak
Associate Professor, Assistant Professor
epartment of Power Electronics and Drives
St. Aloysius College, Mangalore, India
Email ID: *Abhisheksharma991@gmail.com, nutanpanditbp@yahoo.com, gyantisisodia6@rediffmail.com*

ABSTRACT

The growing demand for autonomous transport solutions has highlighted the need for efficient and reliable electric drive systems. Solar- and battery-powered vehicles offer a sustainable solution, yet the efficiency of these systems heavily depends on the design and control of electric drive converters. This paper reviews recent advances in electric drive converters for autonomous vehicles powered by solar and battery systems. It covers converter topologies, control strategies, energy management, and integration with autonomous vehicle requirements. Key challenges such as power quality, efficiency under varying solar irradiance, and dynamic load demands are discussed. The paper also highlights the role of multi-port converters, bidirectional converters, and predictive control in improving performance. Finally, future research directions are suggested for scalable, robust, and energy-efficient autonomous transport.

KEYWORDS: *Electric drive converters, autonomous transport, solar-powered vehicles, battery energy storage, multi-port converters, predictive control.*

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomous vehicles (AVs) are rapidly transitioning from experimental models to commercial deployment. The environmental and operational efficiency of these vehicles is crucial, driving the interest in solar- and battery-powered electric drives. Unlike conventional vehicles, autonomous electric vehicles require advanced power electronics to manage energy flows efficiently, provide reliable torque control, and maintain vehicle stability. Electric drive converters are pivotal components in such systems, converting energy from solar panels and battery packs into controlled electrical power for traction motors.

The integration of solar energy introduces variability in power availability due to changes in irradiance and weather conditions. This variability necessitates converters capable of adaptive operation. Furthermore, battery systems require careful management to avoid overcharging, deep discharging, and thermal stress. Electric drive converters, including DC-DC, DC-AC, and multi-port topologies, provide the interface between renewable energy sources and vehicle loads.

This paper reviews current research and technological developments in electric drive converters for autonomous transport, focusing on solar- and battery-powered systems. Key considerations include converter topologies, control strategies, energy management, and fault-tolerant operation.

ELECTRIC DRIVE CONVERTER TOPOLOGIES

Electric drive converters are key components in autonomous vehicles powered by solar and battery systems. They act as interfaces between energy sources (solar PV, battery packs) and electric traction motors, enabling controlled power conversion while ensuring efficiency, reliability, and safety. The selection of converter topology significantly affects the performance of the autonomous vehicle, including acceleration, range, energy efficiency, and system stability.

Converters can be broadly classified based on the type of power conversion they perform—DC-DC, DC-AC, AC-DC, and multi-port topologies. Each topology has specific advantages and limitations depending on the system requirements.

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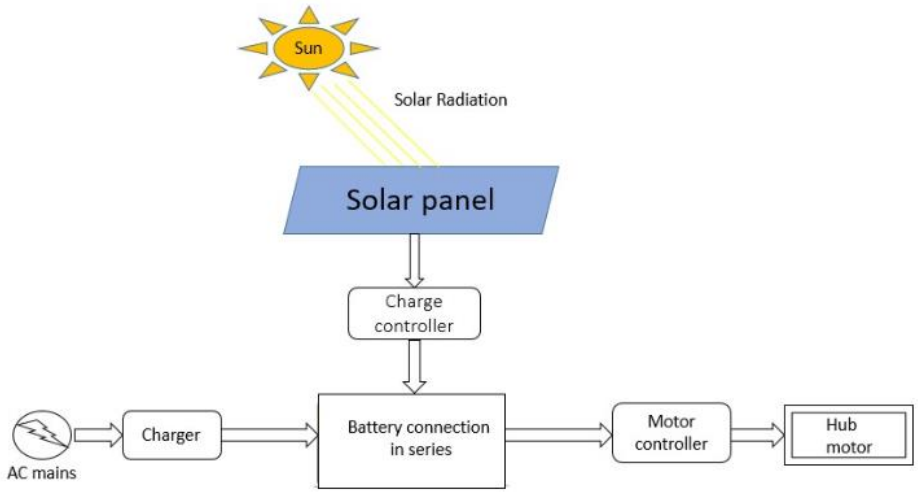


Figure 1. Simplified block diagram of a solar/battery-powered autonomous vehicle drive system.

1. DC-DC Converters

DC-DC converters are crucial in autonomous vehicles powered by solar and battery systems because they regulate and stabilize the voltage supplied to traction motors and auxiliary loads. Solar panels generate variable voltage depending on sunlight intensity, temperature, and shading, while batteries have strict voltage limits to prevent degradation. DC-DC converters bridge this gap, ensuring that both energy sources supply power efficiently and safely.

Common Topologies

- **Buck Converters**

Buck converters step down the input voltage to a lower level suitable for motors or control electronics. For instance, a 400 V battery pack can be stepped down to 48 V for auxiliary loads or low-voltage drive circuits. Buck converters are widely used because of their simplicity and high efficiency under constant-load conditions.

- **Boost Converters**

Boost converters increase the voltage from a lower-level source, such as a partially shaded solar panel, to match the battery or motor bus voltage. For example, a solar panel producing 200 V under

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low irradiance can be boosted to 400 V to charge the battery efficiently. This capability ensures continuous operation even under suboptimal solar conditions.

- **Buck-Boost Converters**

Buck-boost converters can either step up or step down the voltage depending on the input and load requirements. This versatility makes them ideal for vehicles experiencing rapidly changing solar input or dynamic load conditions, such as acceleration, regenerative braking, or hill climbing.

Advantages

- High conversion efficiency (typically 95–98%) under steady-state conditions.
- Compact design and relatively low cost, suitable for automotive applications.
- Fast dynamic response to fluctuating solar irradiance or battery load.

Challenges

- Switching losses increase at high power levels, requiring careful thermal management.
- Voltage and current ripple can affect sensitive electronics if not properly filtered.
- Performance can degrade under rapidly varying solar input, necessitating advanced control techniques like adaptive or predictive algorithms.

2. DC-AC Converters (Inverters)

DC-AC converters, commonly known as inverters, are used to drive AC traction motors, which are standard in most autonomous electric vehicles due to their high efficiency, torque density, and controllability. Inverters convert DC power from batteries or solar-powered DC-DC stages into AC with controllable voltage and frequency.

Common Topologies

- **Voltage Source Inverters (VSI)**

  VSI topologies are the most widely used in electric vehicles. They provide variable voltage and frequency output to AC motors, enabling precise speed and torque control. Pulse-width modulation (PWM) is typically used to synthesize AC waveforms from DC input.

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- **Current Source Inverters (CSI)**

  CSIs control the current supplied to motors rather than voltage, providing excellent torque control and stability under sudden load changes. However, CSIs require complex input filters and protection circuits, making them less common in standard AV applications.

- **Multi-Level Inverters (MLI)**

  Multi-level inverters generate AC output with multiple voltage levels, reducing harmonic distortion and switching stress. This topology is suitable for high-power autonomous vehicles, improving motor efficiency, power quality, and overall system reliability.

Advantages

- Enable variable-speed operation and precise motor control.
- Support high dynamic performance, which is critical for autonomous navigation and quick response maneuvers.
- Multi-level designs reduce EMI and improve overall drive efficiency.

Challenges

- Efficiency can drop at partial load conditions if PWM strategies are not optimized.
- High-frequency switching generates heat and EMI, necessitating careful design and shielding.
- Advanced control algorithms are required for stable operation under rapidly changing load and regenerative braking conditions.

3. Multi-Port Converters (MPCs)

Multi-port converters are advanced power electronic interfaces that manage multiple energy sources and loads simultaneously. In solar/battery-powered autonomous vehicles, MPCs integrate solar panels, battery storage, regenerative braking, and traction loads into a single efficient power network.

Key Features

- **Bidirectional Power Flow**

MPCs allow energy to flow in both directions, enabling batteries to be charged from solar input or

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regenerative braking while supplying energy to traction motors when needed.

- **Integrated Energy Management**

  By monitoring source availability and load demand, MPCs prioritize renewable energy use and optimize battery cycling. For instance, during high solar irradiance, the MPC can route excess power to the battery, while during low sunlight, the battery can supply the motor directly.

- **Flexible Topologies**

  Examples include the Dual Active Bridge (DAB) and hybrid modular converters. DAB converters are efficient for high-power bidirectional DC-DC conversion, while hybrid modular designs allow scalable power distribution across multiple sources and loads.

Advantages

- Reduce the number of separate converters, minimizing overall losses and improving system efficiency.
- Enable seamless integration of renewable energy and battery storage, improving vehicle range and energy sustainability.
- Support regenerative braking and energy recovery for improved efficiency.

Challenges

- Complex control strategies are required to coordinate power flow among multiple sources and loads.
- Higher initial cost and design complexity compared to single-port converters.
- Requires robust thermal management and fault-tolerant design to maintain safe operation in autonomous vehicles.

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Table 1: Comparison of DC-DC, DC-AC, and Multi-Port Converters for AV Applications

Converter Type	Key Function	Efficiency	Complexity	Application
DC-DC	Voltage regulation	95–98%	Low	Battery/Solar interface
DC-AC	AC motor drive	90–96%	Medium	Traction motors
Multi-Port	Source integration	85–95%	High	Battery/Solar/Regenerative integration

3. Control Strategies for Autonomous Electric Drives

The performance, efficiency, and reliability of autonomous electric vehicles (AVs) heavily depend on advanced control strategies for electric drive converters. Autonomous vehicles face highly dynamic operating conditions—rapid acceleration/deceleration, variable road loads, regenerative braking, and fluctuating solar irradiance—which require precise, fast, and adaptive control of both energy flow and motor torque. Control strategies in such systems aim to optimize energy utilization, extend battery life, maintain motor performance, and ensure safe, uninterrupted operation.

1. Traditional Controllers

Traditional control methods are widely used in electric drive systems due to their simplicity, well-understood behavior, and ease of implementation.

PI/PID Controllers

Proportional-Integral (PI) and Proportional-Integral-Derivative (PID) controllers are the most common control schemes in traction drives:

- **Application:** Regulate motor speed and current by comparing the measured value with a reference and adjusting the duty cycle of DC-DC or DC-AC converters.
- **Advantages:** Simple implementation, reliable under steady-state conditions, and computationally inexpensive.

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- **Limitations:** Performance degrades under dynamic or highly nonlinear conditions, such as fluctuating solar input or sudden changes in vehicle load. PID tuning can also be challenging for varying environmental and operational conditions.

Direct Torque Control (DTC)

Direct Torque Control is used to directly regulate the motor's torque and flux, bypassing the intermediate speed/current loops:

- **Advantages:** Fast dynamic response, precise torque control, and reduced reliance on complex modulation schemes.
- **Applications:** High-performance traction motors in autonomous vehicles, where rapid torque changes are necessary for smooth maneuvering.
- **Challenges:** Requires high-frequency sampling and accurate motor parameter knowledge. Torque ripples may occur if switching frequency or control resolution is limited.

Summary: Traditional controllers are effective for baseline operation but often require augmentation with adaptive or predictive strategies to meet the demands of autonomous, solar/battery-powered vehicles.

2. Model Predictive Control (MPC)

Model Predictive Control (MPC) has emerged as a powerful method for managing complex, multi-source energy systems in autonomous vehicles:

- **Principle:** MPC uses a mathematical model of the vehicle's drive system to predict future states over a short horizon and optimizes the control inputs to achieve desired objectives while respecting system constraints.
- **Applications:** Optimizes power flow between solar panels, batteries, and traction motors in real-time. For example, MPC can prioritize solar energy usage when irradiance is high and switch to battery power during low sunlight while minimizing energy losses.
- **Constraints Handling:** MPC inherently considers limits such as battery voltage, maximum motor current, DC bus voltage, and temperature limits of converters.

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- **Advantages:**
  A. Handles multi-input, multi-output systems efficiently.
  B. Provides optimal energy utilization and improved battery life.
  C. Reduces converter stress by anticipating load changes.

Example: During regenerative braking, MPC can predict the available battery capacity and motor torque demand to determine the optimal current injection into the battery without overcharging or overheating.

3. Adaptive Control

Adaptive control methods dynamically adjust converter parameters to maintain efficiency and stability under changing environmental and system conditions:

- **Application in Solar-Powered AVs:** Solar irradiance, temperature, and partial shading affect the output voltage of PV panels. Adaptive controllers can modify the duty cycle of DC-DC converters or the modulation strategy of inverters to maintain optimal power delivery.
- **Battery Aging Compensation:** Over time, battery internal resistance changes, affecting charging/discharging efficiency. Adaptive control algorithms adjust charging currents to maximize battery life.
- **Advantages:**
  A. Maintains high energy conversion efficiency under non-ideal conditions.
  B. Improves robustness to environmental variability.
  C. Enhances performance without requiring complex predictive models.

Example: In a vehicle operating under partially shaded solar panels, the adaptive controller can dynamically adjust the maximum power point tracking (MPPT) algorithm parameters to extract maximum solar energy without overloading the battery.

4. Fault-Tolerant Control

Fault-tolerant control ensures safe and continuous operation of autonomous vehicles, even when faults occur in converters or motors:

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- **Monitoring:** Sensors and diagnostic algorithms continuously monitor voltage, current, temperature, and switching device health.
- **Fault Isolation:** In the event of overcurrent, overvoltage, or device failure, faulty modules are isolated, and the system dynamically reconfigures the remaining functional converters to maintain vehicle operation.

- **Advantages:**
  A. Prevents sudden loss of propulsion or energy supply, which is critical for autonomous navigation and passenger safety.
  B. Extends system lifetime by preventing stress on remaining components.

- **Applications:**
  A. Redundant multi-port converters can maintain power flow to traction motors even if one port or module fails.
  B. DC-AC inverter arrays can switch to backup modules to maintain torque output.

Example: If one inverter leg supplying a PMSM motor fails, a fault-tolerant controller can isolate the fault and redistribute current through other inverter legs to maintain partial traction and safe vehicle operation.

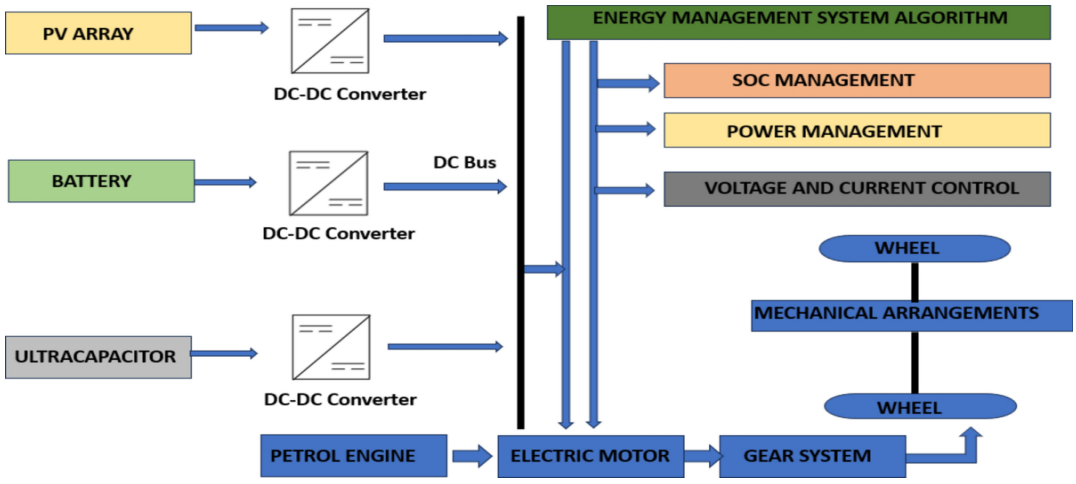


Figure 2. Control architecture for solar/battery-powered AV drive system.

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ENERGY MANAGEMENT IN AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

Energy management strategies are critical for extending range, optimizing solar utilization, and ensuring battery health.

1. Maximum Power Point Tracking (MPPT)

- Ensures solar panels operate at maximum efficiency.
- Common algorithms: Perturb & Observe (P&O), Incremental Conductance (IncCond).

2. Battery Energy Management

- Prevents overcharge/discharge cycles.
- Balances load between battery and solar input using converters.

3. Regenerative Braking

- Converts kinetic energy back to electrical energy.
- Multi-port converters enable efficient bidirectional power flow.

Table 2: Energy Management Strategies and Benefits

Strategy	Function	Benefit
MPPT	Solar optimization	Maximizes solar energy harvest
Battery management	Charge/discharge regulation	Extends battery life
Regenerative braking	Energy recovery	Improves vehicle efficiency

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

1. Challenges

- **Variability of Solar Input:** Requires adaptive control and storage buffering.
- **Thermal Management:** High-power converters generate heat affecting efficiency.
- **Electromagnetic Interference (EMI):** High switching frequencies may interfere with vehicle sensors.
- **Reliability:** Autonomous operation demands fault-tolerant converter designs.

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2. Future Directions

- Integration of **SiC/GaN semiconductors** for higher efficiency and smaller converters.
- Development of **intelligent multi-port converters** combining AI-based predictive energy management.
- Lightweight and compact converter designs for better vehicle integration.
- Advanced MPPT algorithms using machine learning for variable solar conditions.

CONCLUSION

Electric drive converters are central to the performance and efficiency of autonomous vehicles powered by solar and battery systems. This paper has reviewed converter topologies, control strategies, and energy management methods critical for reliable autonomous transport. Multi-port and bidirectional converters, combined with predictive and adaptive control, provide optimal energy flow while ensuring safety and reliability. Future research should focus on intelligent, high-efficiency, compact converters that can seamlessly integrate multiple energy sources and meet the dynamic demands of autonomous transport.

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