

Autonomous Helicopter Formation using Model Predictive Control

Hoam Chung* and S. Shankar Sastry†

University of California, Berkeley, California, 94720, USA

Formation flight is the primary movement technique for teams of helicopters. However, the potential for accidents is greatly increased when helicopter teams are required to fly in tight formations and under harsh conditions. The starting point for safe autonomous flight formations is to design a distributed control law attenuating external disturbances coming into a formation, so that each vehicle can safely maintain sufficient space between it and all other vehicles. In order to avoid the conservative nature inherent in distributed MPC algorithms, we begin by designing a stable MPC for individual vehicles, and then introducing carefully designed inter-agent coupling terms in each performance index. The proposed algorithm works in a decentralized manner, and is applied to the problem of helicopter formations comprised of heterogeneous vehicles. The disturbance attenuation property of the proposed MPC controller is validated throughout a series of computer simulations.

I. Introduction

ROTORCRAFT have revolutionized the offensive, defensive, reconnaissance, and security operations in the battlefield due to their mobility, range, and versatility (including vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) capability). With recent advances in technology, such as aerial refueling and night vision, helicopters have taken on increasingly important roles in military operations. Formation flight is the primary movement technique for helicopter teams.¹ By maintaining a coordinated formation, it is possible to achieve flight integrity with less fuel consumption than an unstructured flight, increasing the possibility of a mission's success.

Even with such unique flight capabilities, helicopter teams are confronted by very challenging situations. The potential for accidents is increased by requirements to fly in close formation and under harsh conditions including poor weather and extremely low altitudes. The effects of battlefield stress exerted on an aircrew increase dramatically under these adverse circumstances. We propose that computer-assisted autonomous formation flight procedures can be implemented to help to diminish battlefield stress.

Even though helicopter formation flight is of critical importance in various operations, little research has been done on this topic. Since helicopter dynamics are notoriously complex and uncertain, until recently it had not been feasible to design an automatic controller for a single helicopter. However, recent advances in system identification techniques and control of rotorcraft-based unmanned aerial vehicles (RUAVs)^{2,3} have provided insight into autonomous helicopter formation flight. Although several researchers have made efforts on the stable helicopter formation,⁴⁻⁵ their applications have been restricted to homogeneous formations in which all the vehicles have identical dynamics.

Model Predictive Control (MPC), also known as moving horizon or Receding Horizon Control (RHC), has been a useful technique for the control of slow dynamic systems such as chemical processes because the scheme requires high computational speed of the control hardware due to its on-line nature. Recently, the rapid development of digital processors, and powerful and inexpensive controllers make it possible to adopt MPC into hard real-time applications.⁶

MPC can provide a better performance in controlling uncertain plants since it can update the gain of the controller based on the current states, whereas fixed-gain control algorithms cannot.⁷ The capability to

*PhD Candidate, Mechanical Engineering, University of California, Berkeley chung@seas.berkeley.edu

†Professor, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, University of California, Berkeley sastry@eecs.berkeley.edu

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