IMU/LIDAR based positioning of a gangway for maintenance operations on wind farms
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Abstract—This article studies the feasibility of an exteroceptive system for the contactless control of a motion-compensated gangway which can be used for maintenance operations on offshore wind farms. Our study shows that current systems based only on inertial systems are not accurate enough to ensure the gangway is held in place without being secured mechanically. Using measurements from a 2D LIDAR system, we propose a method for the real-time monitoring of the position of the gangway in relation to the offshore wind turbine. Our algorithm involves detecting and estimating the position of the wind turbine pile in a 2D scatter diagram using robust approaches. To evaluate our method, we have installed a real-time 3D simulation chain fed with data from actual measurements. We obtain a measurement accuracy of the order of a centimeter, in real time, in representative sea state scenarios.

I. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of the European Union for bringing the proportion of electricity produced by renewable energies to 23% have led to a sharp increase in activity in this area and particularly in production by offshore wind farms. By 2012, more than 1,500 wind turbines had already been deployed in 55 offshore wind farms, mainly in the North Sea and the Atlantic[17]. The economic constraints associated with the deployment of wind farms (high investment, regulation of electricity tariffs) require a very high level of operational availability which assumes an ability to carry out work quickly and in all weathers, either by air (helicopter), or by sea (ship). The latter solution is the most economical but gives rise to safety issues for maintenance operators who are often not hardened to carrying out work at sea. Thus, more and more so-called "motion-compensated" gangways are being developed for carrying out transshipment operations between the ship and the wind turbine from a stabilised platform. The most well-known of these is that by Ampelmann [1] designed on a hexapod base.

Other solutions exist or are being developed based on turret and telescopic ladder type structures [2][3][5][6] or cradles with poly-articulated arms [4]. With the exception of solution [4], all these systems need to be mechanically secured to a device which has to be permanently installed on the wind turbine.

II. PERCEPTION CHAIN FOR CONTACTLESS COMPENSATION OF THE MOTION OF A GANGWAY

A. System analysis

The motion-compensated gangway can be viewed as mechatronic system installed on board the ship and whose function is to counter react to the movements arising from the combined effects of swell, current and wind. Actually, most of the ships which are to receive this type of gangway are equipped with a dynamic positioning system (DP) whose performance now enables a single-hulled ship of less than 100m length to be held in an ellipse of 1 to 1.5m. However, the movements compensated by the DP are only the translations, i.e. surge and sway (Figure 1).

This restriction makes it difficult to release the gangway quickly in the event of a problem and requires the ship to be held in an accurate position relative to the wind turbine. In this article, we propose to study the feasibility of a contactless coupling solution based on an inertial measurement of the ship's movement coupled with a measurement by laser telemetry.

The figure below (Figure 2) shows the main functional blocks of a motion-compensated gangway. One of the key factors in the performance of such a system is the perception...
In conclusion, these tests confirm that the heave, pitch and roll are provided accurately by the IMU. Nevertheless, it is necessary to add a perception device at the end of the gangway to estimate surge, sway and yaw.

C. Solutions for telemetry at the end of the gangway

We are aiming to define an exteroceptive sensor which, placed at the end of the gangway, will supplement the data provided by the inertial system with a measurement of the horizontal translations and if necessary the yaw. All of these measurements will be used by an information and control system responsible for the servoing of the gangway position. This model is similar to a sensor referenced control problem and has been comprehensively treated for the case of visual servoing[15][16]. For this application and in spite of its cost advantages, the use of a robotic vision system does not appear to be a viable solution. Indeed, as can be seen on the central picture in Figure 3, a wind turbine pile has very little texture and is subject to fouling and contamination from the marine environment.

The tests we have carried out in simulation mode on the traditional robotic vision-based methods have not provided conclusive results. Another solution consists of using an infra-red triangulation system such as [7]. This system is used to measure sway when craning containers in ports and is therefore fully suited to use in a maritime environment. In addition, the measurement performance (<0.02° i.e. 1 mm at 5m) is compatible with our application. However, the use of such a solution would require all wind turbines to be fitted with active infra-red beacons and which, in addition, have to be powered.

A 1D laser telemetry solution such as [8] would enable the two translations to be measured, but it would be necessary to align the end of the gangway with the wind turbine tube. The solution we have finally chosen is based on a 2D LIDAR. These systems are widely used for industrial applications in outdoor environments and under difficult conditions. The latest developments based on multi-echo methods overcome the problems of water droplets and spray making it possible to use them in operations where safety is paramount such as in crane operations in port [18]. An algorithm must therefore be developed which would extract the position of the wind turbine tube from the 2D LIDAR data while guaranteeing an accuracy and a response time compatible with our instrumentation and control algorithms.
Sea conditions cause the ship to move in 6 degrees of freedom (Figure 4). The goal is to maintain the end of the gangway in front of point $P_t$. The inertial measurement unit measures a part of the information in the reference frame $R_{sh}$, but it is not sufficient to solve the issue.

As explained, a closed loop position control (Figure 8) will require an additional measurement system in order to correct the horizontal ship translations. Therefore, we have considered a 2D LIDAR system installed at the end of the fixed span. This position is a compromise between the angular resolution of the LIDAR and the shadow areas generated by very close objects, such as marine fenders.

With the data fusion between proprioceptive sensors, the LIDAR range finder and an IMU, we are able to compute the position of $P_t$ point. The position variations and the inverse Jacobian Matrix are used to determine actuator commands.
In the first step, the control only uses the IMU data. The DP residual movements can’t be compensated, but with this first stabilization, it is possible for the range finder to lock on to its target. In the second step, the LIDAR range finder algorithm provides us with the horizontal translation in the end of the gangway reference frame (R_{RF}), to fully control the target position.

### B. Algorithm for estimating the position by LIDAR

In this configuration, the laser sheet measures a horizontal cross-section of the wind turbine pile (anchored part of the mast). The relative position of the gangway relative to a fixed component of the wind turbine (ladder, disembarkation platform) can be calculated if the centre and diameter of the pile tube can be determined from the LIDAR measurement.

As the LIDAR measurements are contaminated with noise, a robust detection algorithm must be used. Initially, our approach consisted of detecting a circle associated with a Ransac type algorithm [13]; on each iteration, a circle equation is calculated from three points taken randomly. We keep the selection which has provided the largest number of scatter diagram points obtained by the LIDAR which confirm this hypothesis. This enables outlier points not belonging to the main tube of the wind turbine to be eliminated, like those for the ladder.

The parameters for the wind turbine circle (centre \(C(x_0, y_0)\) and radius \(r\)) may be determined from three points using the following equations:

\[
R^2 = (x - x_0)^2 + (y - y_0)^2
\]

**Given 3 points \((x_1, y_1), (x_2, y_2), (x_3, y_3)\)**

\[
a_1 = (y_1 - y_3)/(x_1 - x_3) \quad a_2 = (y_2 - y_3)/(x_2 - x_3)
\]

\[
b_1 = (y_1 + y_3)/2 + (x_1 + x_2)/2 \cdot a_1
\]

\[
b_2 = (y_2 + y_3)/2 + (x_2 + x_3)/2 \cdot a_1
\]

\[
x_0 = (b_2 - b_1) / (1/a_2 - 1/a_1) \quad y_0 = -x / a_1 + b_1
\]

Once the circle equation which maximises the number of points considered as valid has been obtained, we apply a circular regression [10][12] to minimise the errors in the least squares sense.

To test this method, we generated a scatter diagram distributed randomly around a circle (radius = 1m, \(\sigma=0.01m\)) in a simulation.

The initial tests showed that the method was highly sensitive depending on the distribution of the points. The points from the LIDAR are not distributed evenly around the circle but, as shown in Figure 3, on a quarter circle only. An error in estimating the radius directly increases the positioning error (Figure 9). To overcome this problem, we modified the circular regression algorithm to only estimate the centre. Indeed, as the radius is a constant, no longer continually estimating it increases the robustness of the algorithm.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points over the whole of the circle</th>
<th>Without estimating the radius</th>
<th>With estimation of the radius</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean error ((\text{standard deviation}))</td>
<td>0.0024 ((0.0018))</td>
<td>0.0024 ((0.0018))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Points over ¼ of the circle</td>
<td>0.0031 ((0.0025))</td>
<td>0.0143 ((0.0095))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A shown in Table II, the estimate of the radius does not cause any errors as long as the points are equally distributed around the circle. In the actual case where the LIDAR has a field of view over a quarter of the pile, the error increases significantly. This method improves the estimate of the centre by more than fourfold.

![Figure 8](image8.png)

**Figure 8** Simplified synoptic gangway control system

![Figure 9](image9.png)

**Figure 9** Estimate of the position of the circle when the measuring points are distributed around a ¼ of the circle only, 100 samples. The circles in...
green relate to the estimate of the position and the radius of the circle, that is in red when the radius is no longer estimated.

Figure 10 shows for 100 samples the distance errors with or without estimation of the radius. Deleting an unknown in minimizing the circular regression significantly increases the accuracy of the other two estimated parameters (x, y).

Following the initial results, the overall algorithm in the docking phase takes place in two stages: the first is the initialisation phase where a complete estimate (position and radius of the wind turbine) is produced. A low-pass filter then extracts a filtered estimate of the radius. Once this value is sufficiently stable, it is kept as a constant. During the second phase, only the position of the centre of the wind turbine is estimated.

In our application, the movements of the ship cause the LIDAR to tilt. The intersection of the plane formed by its sheet with the cylinder of the wind turbine will not therefore form a circle, but an ellipse which can be represented by the equation:

\[
\frac{(x - x_0)^2}{a^2} + \frac{(y - y_0)^2}{b^2} = 1
\]

which requires five points to be sampled instead of three. However, as the positions of the foci vary according to the inclination of the LIDAR, it will not be possible to fix them as when estimating the radius. We have not selected this method and have preferred an approach which consists of projecting LIDAR points in a horizontal plane from attitude data provided by the inertial system.

C. Evaluation with a 3D simulator

To evaluate the algorithm in realistic scenarios and in real time, we implemented a full simulation chain using a ProSivic simulator and RTMaps middleware. The ship is animated with the same sea movements as those used for evaluating the inertial systems (Figure 4). The gangway simulated is of the turret and telescopic ladder type (Figure 11).

By using a more realistic 3D model of the wind turbine pile (presence of a ladder), we note that the measurement of the position of the centre of the wind turbine is upset, the LIDAR plane intersects a rung of the ladder. The best circle no longer corresponds to the wind turbine pile as numerous relevant points are hidden by the objects in front of the tube (Figure 12).

A jump in the position of the centre occurs which will cause a major disturbance for the instrumentation and control system. The algorithm calculates the error in the least squares sense between the estimated circle and the LIDAR points selected by the Ransac. This value correctly distinguishes the incorrect estimates (Figure 13). A Kalman filter [9] is therefore employed to carry out 2D tracking of the position of the centre of the wind turbine [11]. The state vector to be estimated is made up of the position and speed of the centre of the wind turbine. For the transition between two successive states (eq. 3), we assume a constant speed and the position is integrated using the product of the speed with the sampling period \(t_s\). This model ignores completely the underlying physical and nonlinear behavior of ship movements. Nevertheless, as the frequency of sensor updates is high (40 Hz), one can consider the displacement between two measurements small enough to assume linear dynamics.
The measurement equation (eq. 4) is entered with position data only.

\[
\dot{x}_k = A \dot{x}_{k-1} + \omega_k \text{ where } A = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & t_s & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & t_s \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \tag{3}
\]

Measurement equation:

\[
z_k = Hx_k + v_k \text{ where } H = \begin{bmatrix} 1 \\ 0 \\ 0 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix} \tag{4}
\]

The error between the estimated circle and the points selected by the Ransac will be used directly as noise \( v_k \) in the measurement equation (4), which allows the filter to adjust the confidence between the model and the data from the Ransac.

![Figure 13](image1.png)

Figure 13 Correlation between the least squares error (blue) and the distance error at the output from the Ransac (green).

IV. OVERALL PERFORMANCES OF THE PERCEPTION CHAIN

To analyse the performances of our model, we compared the results with and without the Kalman filter.

In Figure 14, we see that the Ransac produced foreign objects (due, amongst other things, to the ladder rungs) which are corrected with the Kalman filter as shown in Figure 15.

![Figure 14](image2.png)

Figure 14 Positioning error at the output from the Ransac for X and Y: the error is major and incompatible with control of the gangway.

To facilitate the comparison, we calculated the norm of the distance error which represents the distance between the actual position of the wind turbine and the estimated centre.

![Figure 15](image3.png)

Figure 15 Positioning error at the output from the Kalman filter: the filter smooths the points by limiting the displacement speed of the centre of the wind turbine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance error in meters</th>
<th>Specific height 2.5 m Mean error (standard deviation)</th>
<th>Specific height 4m Mean error (standard deviation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Specfic height 2.5 m Mean error (standard deviation)</td>
<td>Specfic height 4m Mean error (standard deviation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ransac output</td>
<td>0.06347</td>
<td>0.069153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.051236)</td>
<td>(0.059956)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalman output</td>
<td>0.0080851</td>
<td>0.0088713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.8942e-05)</td>
<td>(5.41e-05)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III shows that the algorithms are not sensitive to the sea state, as that the amplitude and speed of the movements imparted have little effect on the accuracy of the measurements. For the rest of the study, we will use the sea state at a Specific Surge Height (Hs) of 2.5 m, which corresponds to our application.
Figure 16 Distance error according to LIDAR noise: output from the Ransac in blue, output from the Kalman in red

Figure 16 represents the distance error as a function of the noise in the LIDAR measurements. The output from the Ransac is not affected by the LIDAR noise as the artefacts due to the problems of the ladder rungs are predominant (Figure 14). On the other hand, once the position data has been filtered by the Kalman, the LIDAR noise is found on the mean and standard deviation on output from the algorithm.

For our application (Hs 2.5m) and LIDAR noise of about 2 cm, we obtain an average precision of about 8 mm positioning with a standard deviation of 7 mm.

From the performance point of view, all the processing is carried out in real time from LIDAR data at 25Hz, using 6% of one of the cores of an Intel i7-2640M @ 2.8GHz with RTMaps middleware. A video showing our problem and the results obtained is available at the following address:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yUvnkWEVDA

V. CONCLUSION

By using a Ransac algorithm and a Kalman filter, we have been able to develop a wind turbine positioning algorithm which provides the accuracy necessary for safe disembarkation of personnel working on offshore wind turbines which is sufficiently robust to foreign objects. This positioning data will be used in controlling the kinematic chain of the gangway.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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