Several imaging algorithms for synthetic aperture sonar and forward looking gap-filler in real-time and post-processing on IXSEA’s ”Shadows” sonar

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SHADOWS is a new sonar system developed by IXSEA SAS. It is a towed composed of a synthetic aperture side-scan sonar and a forward-looking sonar. The system produces SAS images with a constant resolution 15cm from 30m to 300m on each side. It also fills the nadir gap from 0 to 30m with images having 40cm x 15cm resolution. The images are provided in real-time and are georeferenced.

The synthetic aperture sonar algorithm uses INS data combined with the Displaced Phase Center Algorithm (DPC). The post processing and real-time modes differ on the weight given between INS and DPC, and on the approximations to be done. The real-time beam-forming algorithm used is the time-domain fast factorized back projection which can be pushed to an exact back projection in the post processing mode.

The forward-looking sonar uses a patented “sectorized emission” architecture. The images are side-scan-like. The real-time algorithm can be customized to make some incoherent integration on several pings increasing the contrast but slightly decreasing the resolution. A post processing algorithm can also provide an animation on a specific contact on the floor.

1 Introduction

SHADOWS is a new synthetic Aperture Sonar System developed by IXSEA (Fig.1.). It provides real-time SAS processing on a 600 meters swath at a resolution of 15cm. The side-scan synthetic aperture sonar is completed with a front-looking sonar imaging the gap at nadir. The maximum speed to form a non lacunar synthetic aperture is theoretically 5 knots. The coverage rate reaches 5.56 square km per hour.

The system computes directly a georeferenced map composed of images calculated in real-time. Images are displayed through a map server and the visualization is done via a web server (Fig. 3.).

2 Shadows System

2.1 Side Scan arrays

Each side is composed of a receiver array of 24 hydrophones and of three transmitters. Two of the transmitters are located at each extremity of the physical antenna in order to perform ping-pong Displayed Phase Center Algorithm (DPCA) described further. The six transmitters are identical. The length of those transmitters is 14 cm, therefore the theoretical along track resolution using SAS processing is 7cm. We assume the practical resolution to be twice this figure i.e. 15cm all along the swath.

The central working frequency is 100 kHz and the usable bandwidth of the transducers is 30 kHz. This bandwidth is divided in three. The main part is used for imagery on the central transmitter. Two other narrower parts of the bandwidth are used for the ping-pong DPCA technique. Two different pulses are emitted alternatively on the fore end and backend transmitters.

2.2 Forward Looking Sonar

The front array is composed of 4 transmitters and 48 receivers disposed on a 70cm wide antenna. The transmitters emit separated pulses on four separated sectors of approximately 12°. The central working frequency is 300 kHz, and the bandwidth of different signals is 10 kHz.

Though the receivers array is lacunar, we avoid the grating lobes by emitting on a restricted area. The positions of the receivers are calculated in order to maximize the contrast obtained after focussing.
2.3 Auxiliary equipments

The Shadows system (Fig. 2.) is also equipped with an accurate and highly synchronized Inertial Navigation System (INS) aided with a Doppler Velocity Log (DVL). We are currently working on the replacement of the DVL by a calculation of the speed derived from DPC algorithm.

The system can be completed with an acoustic positioning system like GAPS, in order to avoid the linear drift remaining.

There are two PC on the topside. One devoted to acquisition of the signals, the other devoted to Imaging Algorithms and redistributions of images on a web server.

3 Signal Processing and Algorithms

3.1 Motion Compensation and SAS imaging

To improve the resolution of side scan sonar, one solution is to form a long virtual antenna by coherently adding successive pings (Fig. 4.). This is the main principle of Synthetic Aperture Sonar. The theoretical resolution of such sonar is only limited by the directivity of the transmitter, related to its length. Moreover, the length of the rebuilt antenna can be adapted to the range; therefore the resolution is range-independent.

Using a very accurate and highly synchronized INS aided by a DVL Log ensures that there is only a linear drift on the absolute positioning. The data given by the log are used by the Kalman filter of the Ins. This permits to control the drift on the position. This Drift is sufficiently low to allow a centimetric relative precision during the formation of the synthetic aperture. The theoretical influence of the drift has been detailed in [8]. It is negligible in our case.

The main issue in Sas processing is to rebuild the synthetic antenna along the path of the fish. This is often called the Motion Compensation.

We unfortunately can not avoid the short-term drift during the imaging but we are working on an integration of absolute positioning in real-time by the use of a USBL like GAPS.

Despite the very accurate rebuilding of the path, there are still some corrections to do in order to focus correctly as shown in [7]. They are mainly due to the evolution of depth of the sea bottom along the swath and to the influence of the underwater environment on the acoustic signal.
3.2 Forward Looking Imaging

The forward-looking sonar uses a patented “sectorized emission” architecture. The principle is to illuminate a scene from 40m to 100m in front of the sonar bottom in order to obtain a “side scan–like” image, i.e. with echoes and shadows as described in [9]. We use a lacunary reception antenna composed of 48 channels disposed on 70cm wide. To avoid the ambiguity lobes, four different signals are transmitted on four different footprints in the gap (fig. 7).

The ambiguous reception permits to reduce the amount of data. The central frequency being around 300 kHz with 10 kHz for each signal, it allows us to claim a 40cm x 15 cm resolution on the images. The ping rate is the same as the side scan one, in order to avoid electronical and acoustic interferences.

As we have a scan from 40m to 100m in front of the sonar at each ping (Fig. 8) and the inter ping displacement is about 1m, we dispose of a large amount of data.

The higher frequency and smaller geometry allows using a very simple and fast beam forming algorithm. In fact, in our configuration, the far field is at about 25m from the sonar.

In the real time mode, with respect to altitude measured, we select an area at a constant range in front of the sonar. We use the INS reconstructed path to rebuild an image.

There are different integration modes. For each pixel of the image we can do an incoherent integration of several ping’s contribution. This improves the signal to noise ratio and the contrast, but it lowers the quality of the resolution.

In a post processing mode, we use all the data contained in each ping. As the sonar is moving towards the illuminated scene, we can observe a contact on different grazing angles from 40m to 100m in front of the sonar. A point on the ground is seen with angles from 50° to 75° as shown on Fig. 9. By using the INS positioning we can rebuild a movie of a selected contact while the sonar is moving to it.
3.3 Fusion of images

Both Side scan and frontal images are provided in real time. The result is accessible via a map server.

When the images are computed, we use the absolute georeferenced position given by the INS. Hence, the mosaic is directly georeferenced on a map. A first advantage of this is to avoid image deformations due to the fish navigation. A straight line on the sea bottom remains straight on the image (Fig. 5), and is continuous from one line to the other. A mosaic is built and providing that the INS is aided by a USBL, the absolute positioning is very precise. We can follow the difference of the sea bottom texture boundaries on the different sides.

In the post processing mode, the advanced versions of the algorithm are available. Images are still displayer on the georeferenced map, and displayer via the web server (Fig. 10).

5 Further works

We are currently working on different improvements of the quality of the images and processing. In particular, we are implementing a new anti-speckle algorithm.

On the frontal sonar, we are increasing the fusion quality between the different sectors. We also have started a study of coherent integration on those data. We aim at improving the resolution on the sides of the lobes.

Another study has been started to try different frequencies for the synthetic aperture side scan sonar.

References