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Feng, Xuewei; Xie, Hongwei; Wang, Ximan; Wu, Changwei; Zhang, Xiaoliang

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A motion coordination formation control algorithm for fixed-wing unmanned aerial vehicles

1st Xuwei Feng

College of software

Taiyuan University of Technology

Taiyuan, China

15235170935@163.com

2nd Hongwei Xie

College of software

Taiyuan University of Technology

Taiyuan, China

xiehongwei@tyut.edu.cn

3rd Ximan Wang

Delft Center for Systems and Control

TU Delft

Delft, The Netherlands

X.Wang-15@tudelft.nl

4th Changwei Wu

College of software

Taiyuan University of Technology

Taiyuan, China

1741456790@qq.com

5th Xiaoliang Zhang

College of software

Taiyuan University of Technology

Taiyuan, China

1131676434@qq.com

Abstract—Formation control is the main subject of the coordination control of multi-agent system. The purpose of the control is to drive the system following a target position to keep some specific geometric structures by information exchange between agents. The formation geometry is described by a set of expected positions for all UAVs concerning the heading of the group. We try to display the relative position and attitudes on the formation control of numerous fixed-wing UAVs in this paper. And the behaviors of formation-hold about following are achieved by using the segment control based on unicycle-type by the heading rate of the vehicle are reviewed in this paper. Finally, the digital simulation implemented has validated the effectiveness of the proposed method.

Index Terms—UAVs, formation, Unicycle Type Approach, the segment control

I. INTRODUCTION

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) or drones are known as powered flying vehicles without a human pilot onboard, that can be operated using a remote control or completely autonomously by an onboard computer and that can carry a payload. There are many different types of vehicles that are mainly Fixed-Wing, multi-copter, and Vertical Take-Off Landing (VTOL). The main advantage of fixed-wing UAVs is that its possible to fly by using a very less amount of energy or energy-free by using the airflow. So the fixed-wing UAVs serve in many applications, e.g. traffic control, payload transportation, pipeline inspection, road upkeep, dam supervision, forest fire search or view [1], search and rescue and so on. However, a single drone fails to execute any complex missions in some cases, for instance, large payload shipping, searching for something in a large area, etc. Researchers are more and more attracted by the cooperation of multiple UAVs because of these potential applications [2].

There exist various control strategies for a robot swarm for formation [3], such as behavior-based approaches, Virtual structure techniques and the leader tracking approach. The leader mobile robot moves along a predefined path while

the followers sustain a desired distance and direction from the leader in the leader tracking approach [4]. The formation control between robots and fixed-wing UAVs has some similarities like collision avoidance and communication constraints. However, the UAV has a different dynamic and it needs to have a forward motion to generate the required lift to fly, thus stop-and-wait, stop-and-reverse, and instantaneous lateral motions are not possible. The frequently used methods of the structure of the UAVs include behavior-based, virtual structure, and the leader-follower methods in a comparable way. For the leader-follower approach, the leader vehicle plays a significant role as a reference in the group [4] [5], while a virtual leader is widely adopted as the geometrical center of the formation in virtual-structure formation [6] [7] [8]. And the unicycle type controller, is a motion coordination formation control algorithm and a tracking controller used in robot obstacle avoidance. The output of the controller can achieve global asymptotic stability under some special constraints to track the reference trajectories [9].

In this paper, we introduce a separate control approach supported by the unicycle type tracking algorithm about the fixed-wing UAVs formation control, so that it can get close to and follow the leader and well to accomplish the formation flight. The main strategy used by the leader is simultaneously the vector fields (VFs) guidance control that provides the right desired heading to control of leader to arrive at the predesigned path in the horizontal plane introduced in [10] and [11].

The rest of this thesis is formulated as follows: Section II proposes some useful concepts including the problem formulation, kinematic models of the unicycle-type robot and leader-follower, and the tracking error dynamics. Then the definition of the algorithm for a fixed-wing aircraft model and the implementation of it in a virtual environment using the ROS with Gazebo Simulation as a physical simulator are elaborated description in Section III and IV respectively. Section V summarizes the thesis, eventually.

In this paper, we use the subscript f and l to represent each follower and leader instead of the subscript k . We solve the tracking problem by calculating ω_c and V_c such that the ψ_f converges to ψ_l , the cross-track error d converges to reaches zero asymptotically, and to maintain the predefined formation with the leader. In addition, the follower should also reach the same airspeed speed as the leader gradually, $V_f \rightarrow V_l$.

The desired position of the follower $\mathbf{p}'(x', y')$ at the current moment can be calculated according to the predefined $\mathbf{G}$ and the current position of the leader, firstly.

$$\mathbf{p}' = \begin{bmatrix} x' \\ y' \end{bmatrix} = \mathbf{W}\mathbf{G} + \mathbf{p}_l \quad (5)$$

$$\mathbf{W} = \begin{bmatrix} \cos(\tan^{-1}(g_y/g_x) + \psi_l) \\ \sin(\tan^{-1}(g_y/g_x) + \psi_l) \end{bmatrix}^T, \mathbf{G} = [g_x, g_y]^T \quad (6)$$

where the $\mathbf{G}$ represents the position vector of the follower relative to the leader after the stable formation in the horizontal plane, which is used to specify a particular formation. Therefore, the position $\mathbf{p}'(x', y')$ is a target point that the follower needs to reach at the current time. And we consider tracking errors $\mathbf{E}$, time-dependent variables, represented in the coordinate frame of the body frame:

$$\begin{aligned} \mathbf{E}(t) = \begin{bmatrix} x_e \\ y_e \\ \psi_e \end{bmatrix} &= \begin{bmatrix} \cos\psi_f & \sin\psi_f & 0 \\ -\sin\psi_f & \cos\psi_f & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} x' - x_f \\ y' - y_f \\ \psi_l - \psi_f \end{bmatrix} \\ &= \begin{bmatrix} \cos\psi_f(x' - x_f) + \sin\psi_f(y' - y_f) \\ -\sin\psi_f(x' - x_f) + \cos\psi_f(y' - y_f) \\ \psi_l - \psi_f \end{bmatrix} \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

The derivative of (7) yields the following expression:

$$\dot{\mathbf{E}}(t) = \begin{bmatrix} \dot{\psi}_f y_e - v_f + v_l \cos\psi_e \\ -\dot{\psi}_f x_e + v_l \sin\psi_e \\ \omega_l - \omega_f \end{bmatrix} \quad (8)$$

where the variables x_e and y_e are the representation of the error relative to the body coordinate system after the rotation of ψ_f in the east-north-up coordinate system. ψ_e is the heading error between the follower and leader.

III. DESCRIBE OF TRACKING CONTROLLER

Here, we will describe a controller to generate the desired ω_c and V_c for the follower to chase leader, which ensures global asymptotic stability of the error dynamics (8) according to the experiments in section IV. This will take into consideration the position of the leader plus a gap in (6) as the goal of the controller. Moreover, this target point is moving and the followers need to reach it under the controller and achieve stability while the leader is flying in several different path shapes lastly. Also, other data from the leader will be taken into consideration to build up the control solution.

A. Controller of the Angular Rate

In order that chasing the target point $\mathbf{p}'$ to achieve the purpose of the predefined formation trajectory $\mathbf{t}_l(t)$. We, firstly, should consider how to keep the flight direction of the follower and the distance vector direction from the local

position to the goal point all the time and catching under a certain speed controller. Something else they need to be careful about which these variables involved are all functions of time-variant. Based on these problems above, we will exhibit the following control laws of heading rate which ensures global asymptotic stability of the tracking error dynamics:

$$\omega_{c1} = k_\omega(\psi_{ref} - \tan^{-1}(\frac{\pi}{2} - \psi_{ref})) \quad (9)$$

$$\begin{aligned} \omega_{c2} = \omega_{ref} - \tan^{-1}(\frac{y_e}{k_y \sqrt{1 + (x_e)^2 + (y_e)^2}}) \\ + (\omega_{max} - |\omega_l| - k_v v_l) \tanh(k_\psi \psi_e) \end{aligned} \quad (10)$$

where $k_\omega, k_y, k_\psi, k_v \in R_+$ are design parameters. The cross-tracking error d represents the straight-line distance between the follower and the desired target point $\mathbf{p}'$, and τ is a distance parameter used to segment and limit the scope of action of the controller. If e_ψ is greater than τ , the (9) would be activated. Otherwise, the (10) that is mainly introduced in this paper would be in motion. The $\tanh(\cdot)$ whose value range is from -1 to 1 is the hyperbolic tangent function. And the expected angular velocity is a continuous uniformly bounded variable with the following constraints:

$$u = \begin{cases} -V_f^2/R_{min} & \text{if } |u| > V_f^2/R_{min} \text{ and } u < 0 \\ V_f^2/R_{min} & \text{if } |u| > V_f^2/R_{min} \text{ and } u > 0 \\ u & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

where the lateral acceleration u , restricted to above formula, is equal to $V_f \omega_{c*}$, and $* \in \{1, 2\}$. R_{min} is the minimum turning radius of the airplane and can make sure you keep the airplane in balance and keep the turn coordinated.

B. Controller of the Speed

The controller of the angular rate can make sure that y_e in (8) will decrease to near zero, as time goes on. The error model only needs to consider x_e which was defined on the x -axis of the follower airframe axis now. Therefore, it is necessary to design a speed controller for contributing enough thrust to generate the desired velocity to decrease the x_e .

We can imagine the setpoint as a point in a 1D space moving at the same speed as the leader, the desired speed of the follower should be the same speed as the leader when the follower has reached the target point. If the follower is after the point, the expected airspeed speed will be lower than the airspeed speed of the point. And, if the follower is behind the point, it will have to keep a speed higher than the leader to reach the goal position. Given the considerations, we can define V_c :

$$V_c = k_s(|V_f - V_l|)x_e + V_l \quad (12)$$

where the variables x_e and ψ_e can be calculated by the (7). $|\cdot|$ represents the absolute value of a number. k_s is a proportional gain that defines how aggressive is the correction given errors x_e , and $k_s \in R_+$.

TABLE I:
Variables for the Formation Control

variable	Description
$\mathcal{R}$	rotation matrix from enu to vehicle frame
S_l	airspeed speed of the leader
τ	distance error threshold
ψ_l	the heading for the leader
ψ_f	the heading for the follower
ω_{max}	the maximal heading rate of the UAV
$G = (g_x, g_y)$	gap value of the distance leader
$\mathbf{p}_l = (x_l, y_l)^T$	enu coordinates for the leader
$\mathbf{p}_f = (x_f, y_f)^T$	enu coordinates for the follower
$k_s, k_\omega, k_y, k_v, k_\psi$	convergence gains, positive number all

C. Pseudocode of the Controllers

We make an outline of the formation controller algorithm and a complete list of the variables used for the algorithm which can be found in algorithm 1 and Table I. The primary idea is to make sure the position where the MAVs are in a horizontal plane and then command the desired heading rate and speed to result in a stable formation, defined in the beginning. The numerical simulations will be described in the next section.

Algorithm 1 Formation Control of Unicycle-type Algorithm(in the horizontal plane)

Input: $G, S_l, \mathbf{p}_f, \mathbf{p}_l, \psi_l, \psi_f$

- 1: $\mathbf{p}' \leftarrow (\cos(\epsilon + \psi_l)G + x_l, \sin(\epsilon + \psi_l)G + y_l)$
- 2: $\mathbf{e} \leftarrow \mathbf{p}' - \mathbf{p}_f$
- 3: $\mathbf{E} \leftarrow \mathcal{R}\mathbf{e}$
- 4: $\psi_e \leftarrow \psi_l - \psi_f$
- 5: $d \leftarrow \|\mathbf{e}\|$
- 6: **if** $d > \tau$ **then**
- 7: $V_c \leftarrow k_s V_l$
- 8: $\omega_{c1} = k_\omega(\psi_{ref} - \tan^{-1}(\frac{\pi}{2} - \psi_{ref}))$
- 9: **else**
- 10: $V_c \leftarrow k_s(|V_f - V_l|)x_e + V_l$
- 11: $\omega_d^1 \leftarrow \omega_l - k_y \tan^{-1}(y_e/d)$
- 12: $\omega_d^2 \leftarrow (\omega_{max} - |\omega_l| - k_v V_l) \tanh(k_\psi \psi_e)$
- 13: $\omega_c \leftarrow \omega_d^1 + \omega_d^2$
- 14: **end if**

IV. SIMULATION

We will show a series of numerical simulation results over here to further illustrate the idea in the previous sections. We do the software-in-the-loop experiments in ROS, Gazebo, and PX4 platforms to simulate the wind and no wind environment by using the wind plugin of Gazebo to define the scenarios in straight, orbit, and lemniscate path, the relationship between these platforms can be shown in Fig. 3. And the main parameters of the wind plugin have been defined that are WindForceMax = 3.5, WindForceMean = 2.5, WindGuestMax = 10, WindGuestMean = 7, WindDirectionMean = 45°. Because the lemniscate path is composed of straight-line and

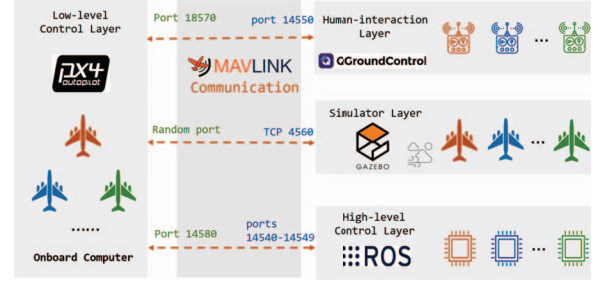


Fig. 3: A typical SITL simulation environment [13] for simulators.

orbit paths, we select a straight-line path, orbit path, and lemniscate path to test the idea.

In this section, two UAVs were hired to formation, one is regarded as the formation leader and another is regarded as the follower. And the parameters obtained from tests are defined as $G = (-10, -10)^T$, $k_s = 2$, $k_\omega = 1$, $k_y = 0.04$, $k_v = 0.11$, $k_\psi = 4$, $\tau = 30$, $\omega_{max} = 1.0472$. According to these, We will introduce simulations from each of these three aspects respectively.

A. Straight-line Path Simulation

In straight path, the leader is flying along the predetermined flight path in the lower left corner as a list of waypoints including (-300, -300), (-1000, -1000), (-1500, -1500) and (-3500, -3500). At this point, the follower begins to following from 45 degrees in the upper right, approximately 250m as shown in Fig. 4a and 5a. Fig. 5b and 5b shows the distance error from the local position to the desired position.

The leader plane is flying on a straight-line path, while the follower plane begins to chase at point (0, 0) nearly. And the formation trajectory is

$$\mathbf{t}_l(0) = [-178.80, -174.12, 3\pi/4, 14.60, 0.1425]$$

which the speed and heading rate of formation trajectory are 14.60 meters per second and 0.1425 radians per second, respectively. Fig. 4 shows the chasing path and error analysis images in no wind environment. Fig. 5 describes the same meaning in windy conditions.

In the beginning, because the distance error is much greater than the threshold τ , the speed controller will calculate a full throttle to chase the point. On the way, the mean velocity of the leader is 16.85 meters per second, and the maximum velocity of the follower can reach 21 meters per second. With a large speed difference, the distance error is increasingly smaller under the action of time. In the case of no wind, it enters the threshold at about 150 seconds. Under controllers in (10) and (12), the distance d and the velocity deviation can be stabilized within (0, 3) meters and $[-1, 1]$ meters per second respectively. With the passage of time and the action of piecewise controllers, the error offset is gradually shortened. Finally, they can be stabilized around zero that the displacement error fluctuates less than 5 meters as shown in Fig. 4b and Fig. 5b, and the maximum velocity error can be

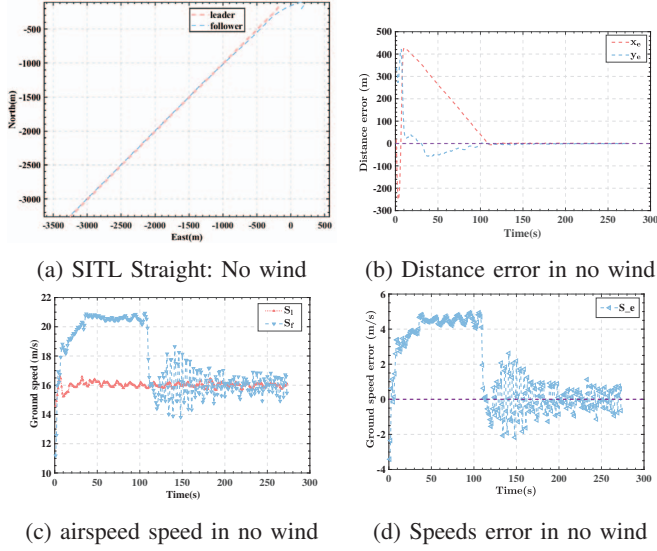


Fig. 4: The simulation of the straight in no wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

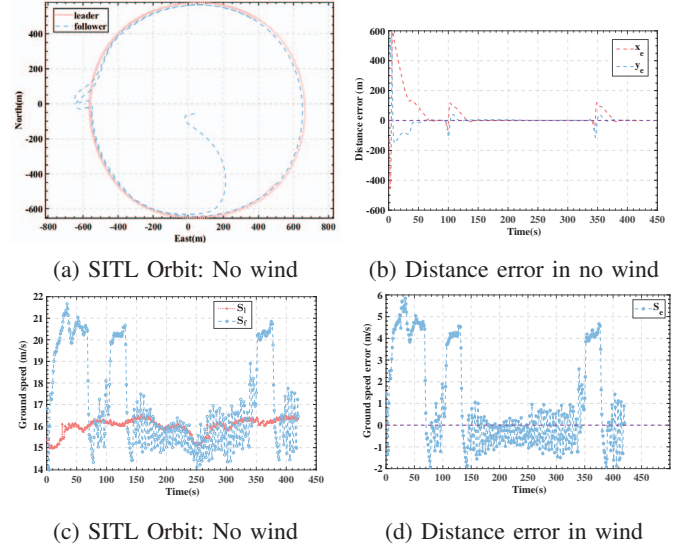


Fig. 6: The simulation of the orbit in no wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

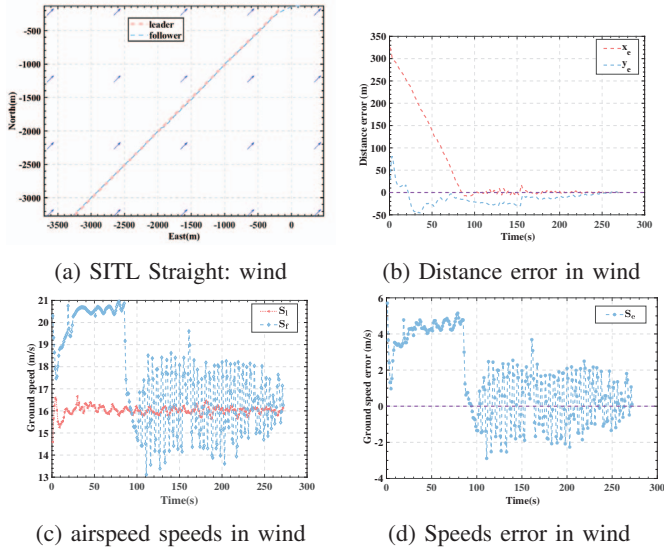


Fig. 5: The simulation of the straight in wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

stabilized at $[-2, 2]$ meters per second as shown in Fig. 4d and Fig. 5d. Because of the disturbance of wind, it takes longer to enter the inside about 200 seconds.

B. Orbit Path Simulation

In the orbit path, we consider that make the leader fly in which the loiter radius is 600 meters, and the center of the circle is $(0,0)$. When the leader is flying at $(498.72, -454.19)$, the follower starts the algorithm at $(36.08, -54.25)$. And the

formation trajectory is

$$t_l(0) = [498.72, -454.19, 3\pi/4, 15.37, 0.2456]$$

which the speed and heading rate of formation trajectory are 15.37 meters per second and 0.2456 radians per second, respectively. Due to G , the follower's radius is less than 600 meters and the roll angle of the follower is much larger than that of the leader. This condition also puts forward high requirements for speed control to stabilize the formation after overtaking. The leader's airspeed speed can be stabilized around 16 meters per second under the right throttle. The simulation results of the two scenarios have shown in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7. In the beginning, under two types of controllers, the follower catches up with the goal point at high speed. In the case of no wind, the follower suddenly lost control after 100 seconds and 350 seconds resulting in the direction angle being uncontrolled. And the position deviations in both the x -axis and y -axis were greatly changed. In the case of wind, the follower also lost control when it received the same leader data after 100 seconds. Luckily, under the controller, it was all corrected. Ultimately, the x_e and y_e can be converged to zero meters, and the S_e is around $[-2, 2]$ meters per second in Figure 4d and 5d.

C. Lemniscate Path Simulation

In the lemniscate path, we run a leader and a follower in formation fly in both no wind and wind environment and observe how to keep the predefined formation as well. The lemniscate path is sent to the leader as a list of waypoints including $(300, 300)$, $(1000, -1000)$, $(-300, 300)$ and $(-1000, -1000)$. And the leader can execute them one by one circularly.

If the relationship between the leader position and the executing waypoint is satisfied with the fillets algorithm condition

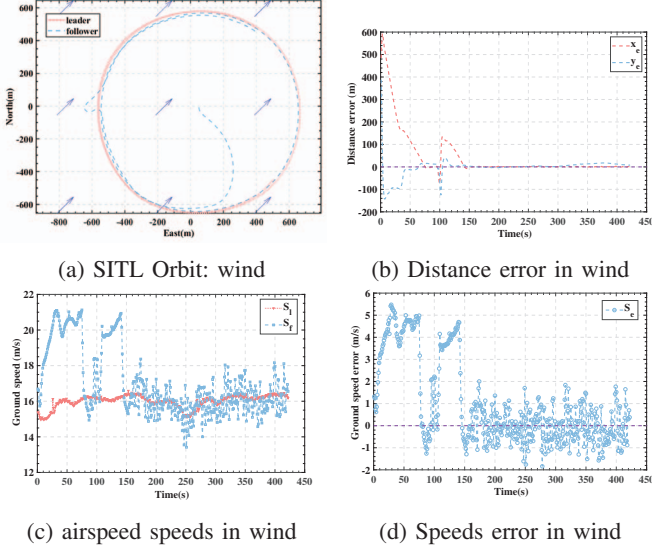


Fig. 7: The simulation of the orbit in the wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

introduced in [14], the leader will change the waypoint and choose the path following control strategies to the next in the waypoint list. The simulation results of the two scenarios have shown in Fig. 8 and Fig. 9.

The initial position of the follower is $(-42.3, -5.7)$ when the algorithm is enabled. And the formation trajectory is

$$t_l(0) = [487.9, -36.1, \pi/4, 17.11, 0.3123]$$

which the speed and heading rate of formation trajectory are 17.11 meters per second and 0.3123 radians per second. Fig. 8 shows the chasing path and error analysis images in no wind environment. Fig. 9 describes the same meaning in windy conditions. With the passage of time and the action of piecewise controllers, the offset is gradually shortened.

At first, the follower is chasing the goal point under full throttle at an average speed of 21 meters per second. As time goes on, the offsets are narrowing rapidly. Reaching within the threshold, it spent about 100 seconds. When the leader starts to change waypoints, the x_e and y_e are increasing. And then the controller comes in and corrects the deviation. Therefore, the jagged shape appeared in 8b and 9b. The remaining graphs show the velocity change curve of leader-follower.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper proposed a new formation control strategy by combining unicycle type control idea and segmented control idea to search the UAV formation flight. From the outcome of Software-in-the-Loop experiments about three kinds of trajectories, it is possible to conclude that the blueprint can be well tested in the wind or no wind environment.

Although the analysis has not considered a different type of platforms, like Hardware-in-the-Loop experiments and realistic platforms, the findings are of direct practical relevance.

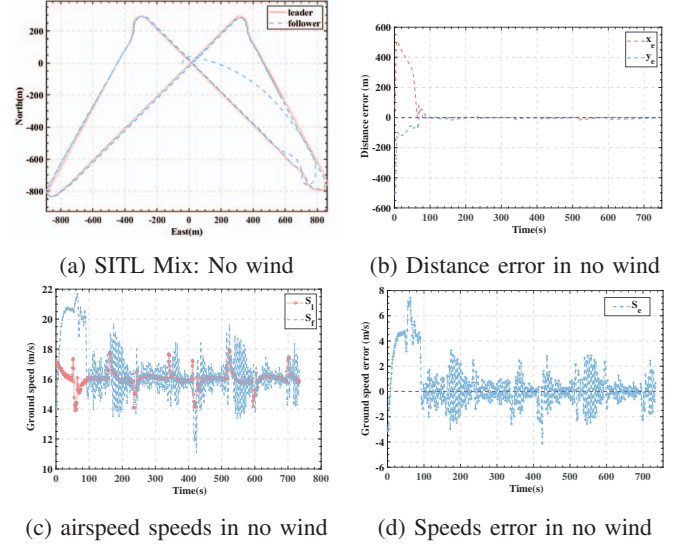


Fig. 8: The simulation of the lemniscate in no wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

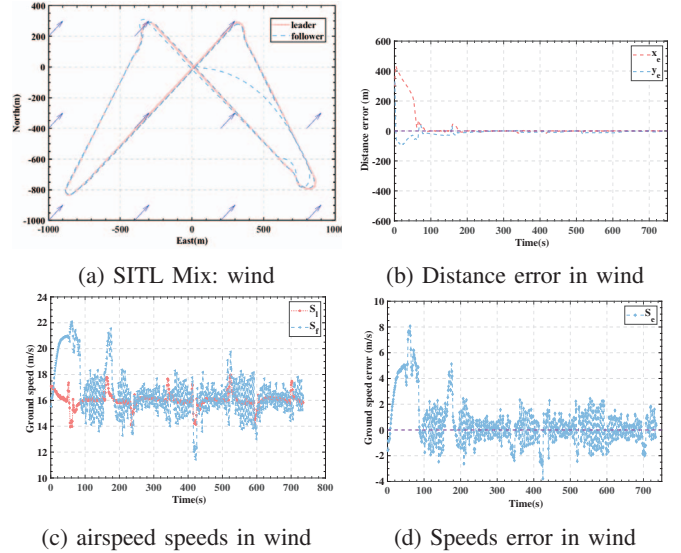


Fig. 9: The simulation of the lemniscate in wind environment including the path, distance error of x -axis and y -axis, airspeed speeds of leader and follower, and their difference diagrams.

Future work will involve applying the idea of UT to the path following algorithm for the leader in a horizontal direction with the constant altitude. We also expect to research a three-dimension path-following algorithm about this idea and analyze it under a variety of circumstances.

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