

DESIGN AND EXPERIMENTAL IMPLEMENTATION OF A  
QUASI-DIRECT-DRIVE LEG FOR OPTIMIZED JUMPING

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BY

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THESIS

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# ABSTRACT

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*To my parents, for their love and support.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The last century has seen great advancement of human transportation technology. whether it be wheeled vehicles running on the road, or submarines cruising the depth of seas, or rockets exploring the outer space. Human have not only conquered the land, but also the ocean, and even the space by enhancing our mobility using advanced vehicles. While these vehicles are fast, efficient and far-reaching, they all need highly structured media to work well. The Earth's most unstructured terrain still haven't seen the modern machinery of mankind. For example, the Amazon rain forest has remained mysterious for its dense branches have baffled even the most advanced of man-made machine. However, small and agile animals such as squirrels can perform highly dynamic maneuvers and move freely in highly unstructured environment.

In addition to running fast, climbing trees, squirrels are capable of jumping from branch to branch because of its small size and long jumping distance, which spans for around one meter. Squirrels could perform these powerful jumps using its short limbs and position its foot accurately for landing. This highly dynamic and agile movement is unparalleled in conventional vehicles. That is the reason why scientists devote decades to study the movement of agile animals such as squirrels and robotists draws inspiration from nature to create robotic counterparts.

Current state-of-art robots are becoming more agile with higher capability to interact with complicated environment. Boston Dynamics have recently developed robots such as BigDog, Spot and SpotMini, Atlas and Handle have demonstrated impressive progress made in legged robots. Quadrupedal robots made by Boston Dynamics could not only walk and climb stairs but also run, bound and recover rapidly from external push or slippage. Other robots such as MIT Cheetah[13] has demonstrated remarkable traits of high speed bounding and ability to jump over high obstacles. Minitaur from

University of Pennsylvania[12] has shown that small robots could perform highly agile motions like running, hopping and transversing uneven terrain. An additional advantage of small robots is that they could maneuver in tight space.

## 1.1 Motivation

Wheeled vehicles are widely used for transportation, but they cannot reach places with unstructured terrain. In contrast, human and animals are able to access these places using legs. While legged locomotion is not as efficient as wheeled one, it certainly possesses advantage in overcome large and complex obstacles and traversing unstructured land. This is especially useful in disaster scenarios where there are a lot of debris and collapsed structures. For example, in the Fukushima nuclear disaster happened in March 2011, no robots were able to reach the most damaged area let alone do inspection and repairing. This disastrous accident has since called attention to robot development. Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) organized a robotic challenge which assembled teams with the most advanced robots at that time to perform disaster relief related tasks. These robots are delicate and complicated machines designed by talented robotists all over the world. Furthermore, advanced control algorithm were employed. In spite of the brilliance imbued in the robots, the robots' motion was slow and by no means dynamic.

In order to achieve robust locomotion in the real world, legged robots should be able to interact with the environment. In addition, the robot should also be able to achieve multiple modes of locomotion. It should be able to move fast and dynamically in structured terrain by employing running gait; and move cautiously and slowly in unstructured terrain using advanced motion planning algorithm. In addition, the robot should be able to execute explosive motion such as jumping in face of large obstacles. This trait is very useful especially in disaster zones where there are a collapsed walls and floors which impedes the ways of the robot. In this situation, jumping motion could easily clear the obstacle.

In order to achieve such dynamic motion such as jumping, researchers have been drawing inspiration from nature. The squirrels is a small and

agile animal that can perform highly dynamic maneuvers. As could be seen in Figure 1.1, where a squirrel is jumping from a pole to a branch. It has to exert considerable amount of force in the jumping phase and balance its attitude during aerial phase and handle large impulse at touch-down moment.

Inspired by the athletic biological system, we investigated the dynamic motion generation scheme of small scale robots, specifically the jumping capability. It is observed in nature that animals with extremely different scales can achieve same magnitude jumping height, given they were geometrically similar [2]. However, smaller animals need to accelerate much faster and produce higher angular speed to reach the same take-off velocity [16]. This observation motivated our interest on how scaling of a robotic system would change the requirement on actuator characteristics. Analogy was drawn to legged robot design in the sense that an isometrically scaled down robot requires higher actuator speed to produce comparable dynamic motion [17].

Motor speed scarcity becomes a bigger problem in smaller sized robot design. Because if the linkage dimension scaled down by  $\frac{1}{L}$  ( $L > 1$ ), required motor speed is scaled by  $L$  to produce the same end-effector velocity. High torque density (torque per unit mass) is desirable for dynamic robotic systems [18], because actuators need to produce forces 2.6 to 3 times of body weight for high speed locomotion [19][4]. Heavily geared motors have high torque density at the cost of increased reflected inertia and friction[15], which compromises robustness because it is prone to break upon impact. Series elastic actuators (SEA) could produce variable mechanical impedance and recycle energy for high efficiency gait. However, their actuation bandwidth is limited [14]. Direct drive robots [3] do not use any speed reduction system, thus eliminate all the problems(backlash, friction, high reflected inertia) associated with gearboxes and possess the benefits of high transparency [5] and mechanical robustness. In addition, the absence of speed reduction excludes the possibility of speed scarcity. Nevertheless, low torque density, high motor weight and Joule heating are the main disadvantages of direct drive. Quasi-direct-drive actuator strategy [11] was employed in this work to balance amongst torque density, motor speed and impact force.

For dynamic locomotion, motors' torque and speed limit should both be taken into account for legged robot design in order to optimize the robot's performance. In this paper, we present the design and optimization process of a leg prototype. Major design decisions were made based on the hybrid

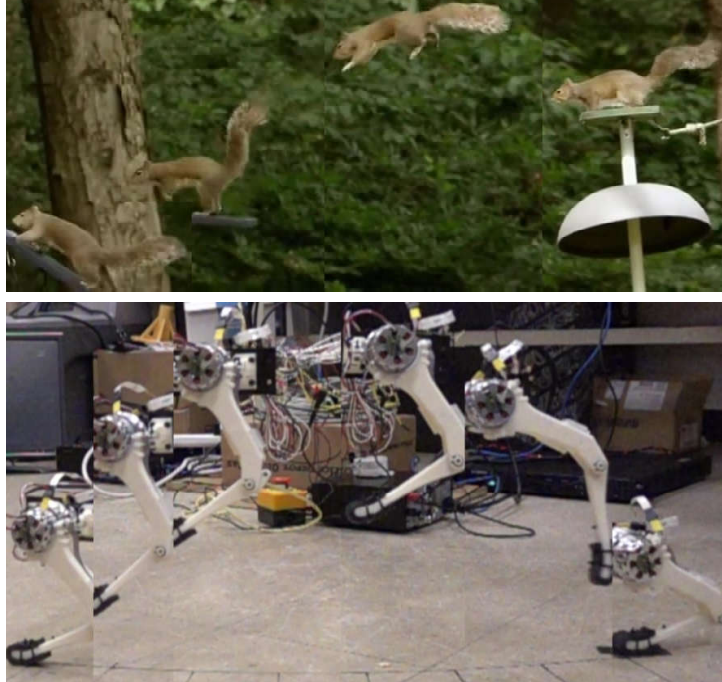


Figure 1.1: A squirrel leaping forward (up) The robot leg presented in this leaping forward (bottom)

approach of nonlinear optimization and manipulability analysis. Section ?? introduces the dynamic models for optimization. In Section ?? we describe the mechanical design process of the leg based on simulation and manipulability analysis. Section ?? demonstrates the jumping capability of the leg.

## 1.2 Contribution

## 1.3 Thesis Outline

# CHAPTER 2

## SYSTEM MODELING

### 2.1 System Modeling

A sequential and iterative design process was adopted to refine simulation model and mechanical design as shown in Figure 2.1. The 1-DOF template [8] called **knee extensor model** was used to investigate the torque and angular speed requirement of the leg, as depicted in Figure 2.1(a). It assumes all masses are lumped at the base; thigh and shank link are of same length and have no mass or inertia; foot is located directly below the hip, which means no horizontal off-set for foot hold. Jumping motion was simulated using this knee extensor model under various motors' maximal speed and maximal torque. These simulations in turn exposed the speed and torque requirements in order to achieve the desired motion, which provides guidance for choosing appropriate motor and gear ratio.

A more detailed leg model with motors' rotary inertia and horizontal foot off-set was introduced as shown in Figure 2.1 (b). The detailed leg model was used to further narrow the choice of gear ratio by minimizing ground impact force while maintaining balance between torque and speed requirements. Optimized parameters were tested on the hardware platform shown in Figure 2.1 (c) to validate the design.

#### 2.1.1 Knee Extensor Model

The knee extensor model was used to estimate the torque and speed requirements to achieve desirable jumping motions, which provides us with an initial guidance for choosing motor and gearbox. Figure 2.1 (a) shows the schematics of the knee extensor model. The model assumes that all masses are lumped at the base to be  $M$ , which is mounted on a vertical linear rail.

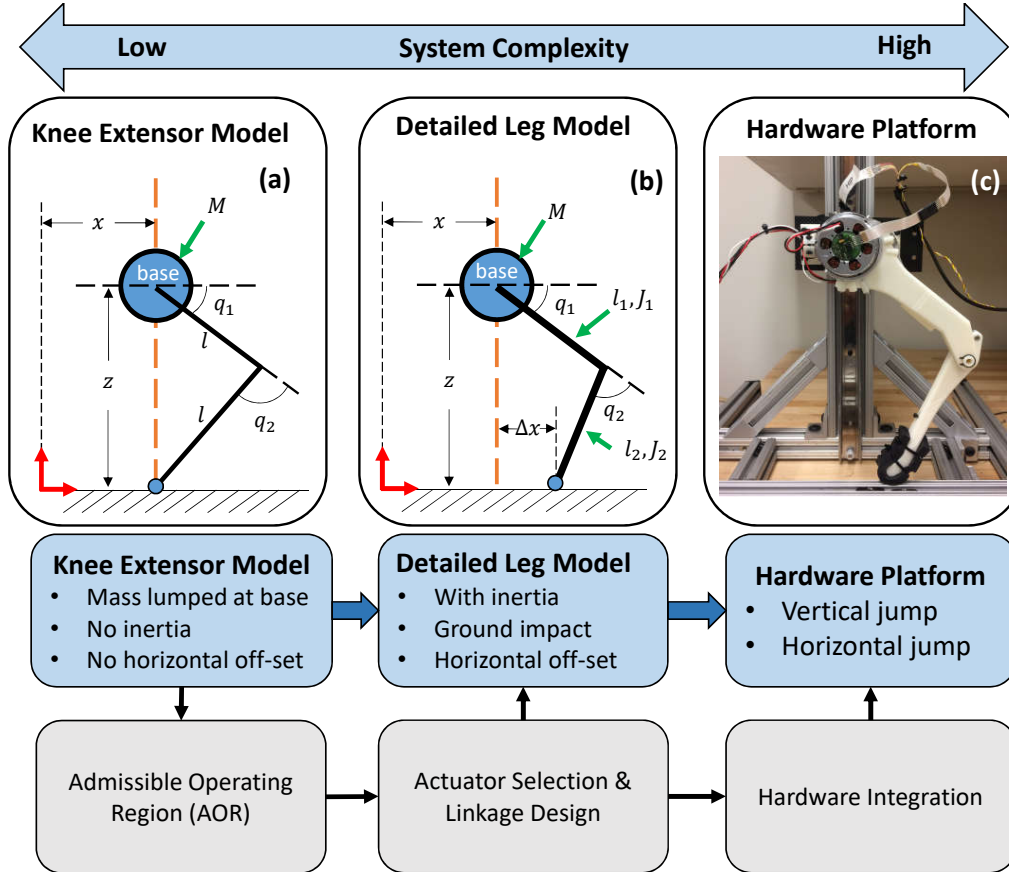


Figure 2.1: Sequential design process for determining design parameters.  
 (a) knee extensor model for motor selection (b) detailed leg model for linkage design and gear ratio choice (c) hardware platform for experiments

Thigh and shank links have an identical length of  $l$ , while its foot and base are vertically aligned. Hence only the knee joint needs to be actuated to perform vertical jump while the hip joint is not actuated. The vertical height of the base  $z$  and joint angles  $q_1, q_2$  are shown in Figure 2.1.

The dynamics of this model was formalized as a single point mass accelerated due to ground reaction force (GRF). Ground reaction force was chosen as the control input because it is the only external force in the knee extensor model that could increase the mechanical energy of the system. The equation of motion (EOM) of the system is:  $\ddot{z} = \frac{F_z}{M} - g$ , where  $z$  is the vertical displacement of the base,  $F_z$  is the vertical component of GRF,  $M$  is the lumped mass at the base and  $g$  is the gravitational acceleration.

### 2.1.2 GRF Parameterized as Bézier Polynomial

A 5<sup>th</sup> order Bézier polynomial was used to parameterize the GRF profile. The reasons for using Bézier Polynomial to parametrize the ground reaction force is two fold. Firstly, the first and last coefficient of a Bézier polynomial corresponds to the initial and final value of the GRF, which makes it more convenient to anchor GRF to desired values at the initial and final instance; secondly, integration of Bézier Polynomial is a linear operation, which is computationally inexpensive.

The coefficients of Bézier polynomial are assumed to be  $[Mg, \alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3, \alpha_4, 0]$ . The first coefficient was set to be the weight of the leg because it is assumed that the leg starts from static equilibrium state, and last coefficient was set as 0 to ensure a smooth and physically feasible motion at the take-off moment.

Since a Bézier polynomial is the linear combination of a Bernstein polynomial basis[6] defined as,

$$C_N(s) = \sum_{i=0}^N \alpha_i B_{i,N}(s) \quad (2.1)$$

where  $\alpha_i$  is the coefficient for the  $i^{th}$  Bernstein polynomial  $B_{i,N}$ , analytical solution for velocity and position could be obtained using the property of the Bernstein polynomial[7]:

$$\frac{d}{ds} B_{i,N}(s) = \frac{N}{T} (B_{i-1,N-1}(s) - B_{i,N-1}(s)) \quad (2.2)$$

where  $s$  is a point between general time interval  $[0, T]$ .

Given the initial velocity  $\dot{z}_0$ , the velocity trajectory in stance phase is a 6<sup>th</sup> order Bézier polynomial with coefficients  $\gamma_{(0-6)}$ . The linear relationship between force and velocity Bézier coefficient is:

$$\frac{6}{T_{st}} \begin{bmatrix} -1 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & -1 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & -1 & 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & -1 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -1 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & -1 & 1 \\ 1 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \gamma_0 \\ \gamma_1 \\ \gamma_2 \\ \gamma_3 \\ \gamma_4 \\ \gamma_5 \\ \gamma_6 \end{bmatrix} = \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ \alpha_1 \\ \alpha_2 \\ \alpha_3 \\ \alpha_4 \\ 0 \\ \dot{z}_0 \end{bmatrix} \frac{1}{M} - g \quad (2.3)$$

where  $T_{st}$  is the stance duration for jumping up.

Similarly, the position trajectory in stance phase could also be retrieved by applying the linear operation shown in Equation 2.3 given initial position  $z_0$ . At each instance  $t \in [0, T_{st}]$ , the joint angle  $q = [q_1, q_2]$  defined in Figure 2.1(a) was solved by inverse kinematics. Since the thigh and shank links are assumed to be massless, joint torque  $\tau = [\tau_1, \tau_2]$  could be reconstructed using  $\tau = J(q)^T F$ , where  $\tau_1$  and  $\tau_2$  are joint torques for hip and knee joints,  $F$  is the ground reaction force, and  $J(q) \in R^{2 \times 2}$  is the manipulator Jacobian of the foot relative to the hip.

The jumping performance was evaluated by the maximal reachable height  $h_{max}$ ,  $h_{max} := h_{to} + \frac{v_{to}^2}{2g}$  where  $h_{to}$  and  $v_{to}$  are the base height and speed at the moment of take-off.

### 2.1.3 Nonlinear Optimization for Ground Reaction Force



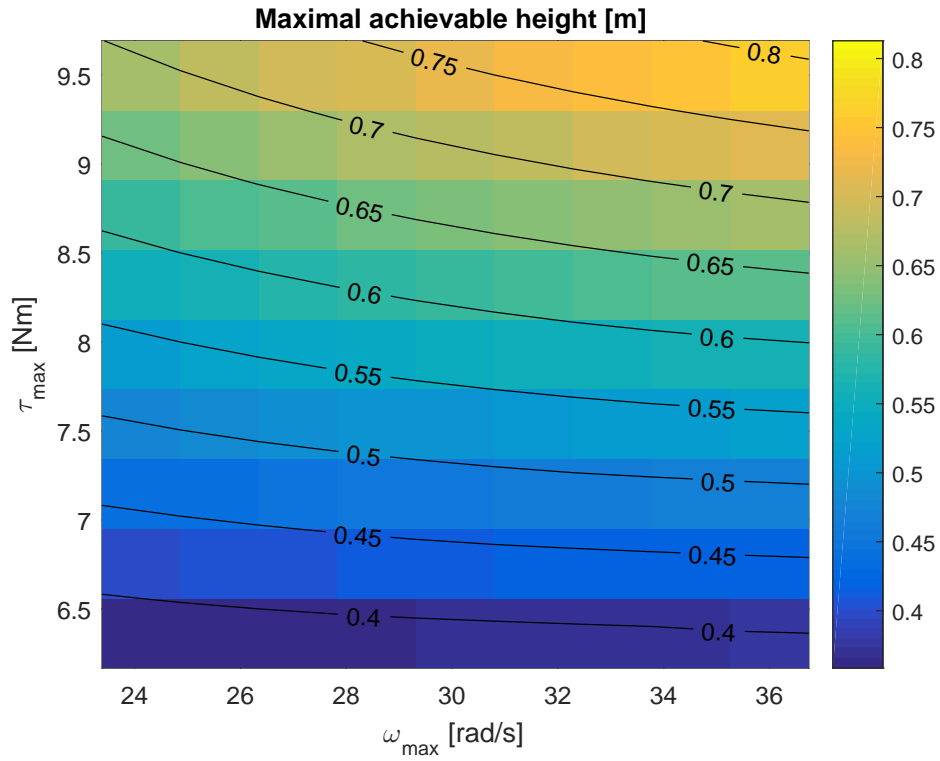


Figure 2.2: Maximal achievable height for specific torque and speed limit. The x-axis corresponds to maximal angular velocity of the actuator, the y-axis corresponds to maximal torque of the actuator, and the depth represents the maximal achievable height of a jump

# CHAPTER 3

## HARDWARE INTEGRATION

### 3.1 Transmission Design

The actuator design philosophy is to make high power actuators with the capability of interacting with the environment. Namely, the actuator should not be stiff as the heavily geared motors, which are widely used in industrial robots. Instead, it should be back-drivable meaning that the torque applied at the output shaft should be felt at the input shaft. The benefits are threefold, firstly, back-drivability prevents gearboxes from being damaged by external forces; second, it allows for proprioceptive sensing[18]; thirdly, allows for fast dynamics in legged locomotion.

After the motor selection and gear ratio is determined from previous sections, focus was put on how to design the transmission system so that it can achieve the desired gear ratio while satisfying dimensional constraints.

#### 3.1.1 Transmission Design Comparison

**Harmonic drive** is composed of the wave generator, flexspline and circular spline. It could provide high gear ratio typically between 30:1 to 200:1 with zero backlash. Harmonic drive is employed by the quadrupedal robot starlETH[10] and the bipedal robot ATRIAS[9]. However, harmonic drive is not back-drivable, which contradicts with our design paradigm.

**Cycloidal gearbox** has very low backlash and high torsional stiffness. It can operate quietly and withstand shock load. Bipedal robot Cassie uses cycloidal gearbox as the transmission. The drawback of cycloidal gearbox is that it requires customizing high precision parts.

**Single stage planetary gearbox** has high efficiency and the load could be distributed between planet gears, and standard gears are widely available

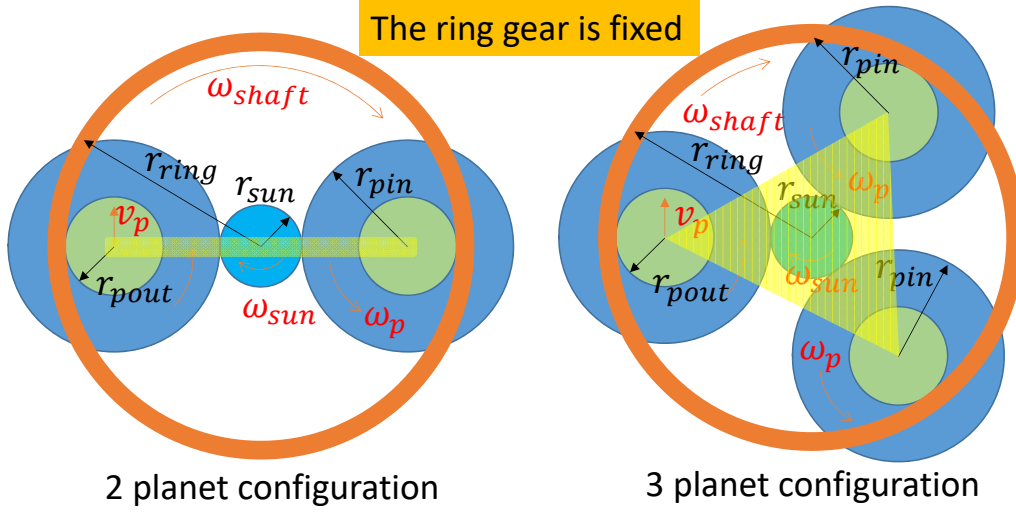


Figure 3.1: Schematics of Compound Planetary Gearbox Configurations. (left) 2 planet configuration, (right) 3 planet configuration

at low cost. Nevertheless, no gear combination could provide the desired gear ratio for the given dimensional limitation with pitch of 0.4.

**Compound planetary gearboxes** have the benefits of single stage planetary gearboxes while providing more compact design for there are two stages for the planet gear. There are a range of gear teeth selection for the given dimensional limits. It is adopted as the transmission system design considering the dimensional limit and gear ratio requirement of the motor design.

### 3.1.2 Compound Planetary Gearbox Design

The objective of compound planetary gearbox design is to achieve desired gear ratio within dimensional constraints imposed by motor selection. In order to derive the gear ratio for given gear teeth number, a schematics of the two-stage compound planetary gearbox is used as shown in Figure 3.1. For given gear teeth numbers, both configurations in Figure 3.1 are equivalent. Some assumptions for this analysis is posed here:

1. The sun gear located at the center is the input.
2. The output shaft shown as yellow transparent shape is the output.
3. The output shaft is connected to the axes of all the planet gears.

4. The sun gear is meshed with input planet gears.
5. The ring gear is meshed with output planet gears.
6. The ring gear is fixed.

Velocity equivalence is used to calculate the gear ratio.

$$\omega_{sun}r_{sun} = v_p + \omega_p r_{pin} \quad (3.1)$$

$$v_p = \omega_p r_{pout} \quad (3.2)$$

$$\omega_p = \frac{\omega_{sun}r_{sun}}{r_{pout}+r_{pin}} \quad (3.3)$$

$$\omega_{shaft} = \frac{\omega_p r_{pout}}{r_{sun}+r_{pin}} \quad (3.4)$$

where  $\omega_{shaft}$  is the angular velocity of the output shaft and the rest of the variable definitions could be found in Table 3.1.

Therefore, the gear ratio of a compound planetary gearbox could be formulated as:

$$GR = \frac{\omega_{sun}}{\omega_{shaft}} = \frac{(r_{pout} + r_{pin})(r_{sun} + r_{pin})}{r_{sun}r_{pout}} = \frac{(N_{pout} + N_{pin})(N_{sun} + N_{pin})}{N_{sun}N_{pout}} \quad (3.5)$$

The planetary gearbox shown in Figure 3.2 utilizes two-stage compound planet gears to provide desired gear ratio while satisfying the dimensional constraints imposed by motor selection.

The constraints for choosing teeth numbers are listed as follows:

1. The teeth number of sun gear ( $N_{sun}$ ) and ring gear ( $N_{ring}$ ) could both be divided by the number of planet gears.
2. The pitch circles of sun gear and planet gears, as well as that of planet gears and the ring gear should be externally tangent,  
i.e.  $r_{ring} = r_{sun} + r_{pin} + r_{pout}$  or  $N_{ring} = N_{sun} + N_{pin} + N_{pout}$ .

Table 3.1: Variable Definition for Gear Ratio Calculation

	Sun gear	Input planet	Output planet	Ring gear
Pitch diameter	$r_{sun}$	$r_{pin}$	$r_{pout}$	$r_{ring}$
Angular velocity	$\omega_{sun}$	$\omega_p$	$\omega_p$	N/A
Linear velocity	N/A	$v_p$	$v_p$	N/A
Teeth number	$N_{sun}$	$N_{pout}$	$N_{pout}$	$N_{ring}$

3. The gear ratio  $GR$  should be within the range of 22 - 25.
4. The radius of the gearbox should be less than 25 mm,  
i.e.  $Max[r_{ring}, r_{sun} + 2r_{pin}] < 12.5mm$
5. The teeth number for sun gear  $N_{sun}$  should be no less than 6. Otherwise the meshing would be problematic because the profile of gear teeth would be distorted too much.

On top of the constraints, some practical issues were also considered in choosing gear teeth. Ideally, the phase difference between two stages of the planet gears should be the same. However, in compound gear manufacturing, the phase difference could not be well maintained. To solve this problem, the planet gear teeth combination was chosen to be 16/53, which only share the common factor of 1. This choice provides tunable backlash with  $2.1^\circ$  increment in the gearbox assembly. This is very similar to the working principle of a mechanical caliper, which uses two scales (main scale and vernier scale) with small difference to achieve high precision.

A large number of teeth combinations were enumerated taking into account all the constraints. The optimal gear teeth choice emerged as  $N_{sun} = 12$ ;  $N_{pin} = 53$ ;  $N_{pout} = 16$ ;  $N_{ring} = 81$  and the gear ratio is 23.3594.

All gears are custom made by *HPC Gears Ltd* with 0.4 pitch and pressure angle of  $20^\circ$ .

## 3.2 Mechanical Design of The Leg

With actuator from [section](#) and linkage design from [section](#), this section presents a detailed mechanical design layout of the leg. The leg module is composed of three motor modules(HIP/KNEE/ABAD), each has a motor coil and a planetary gearbox with moderate gear ratio to achieve the Quasi-Direct-Drive[1] strategy. To accommodate size limitation imposed by actuator choice, the two-stage compound planetary gearbox is used as the transmission. The leg is design to optimize for large workspace, with the novel HIP-KNEE connection design, the knee joint could rotate  $360^\circ$ , the curved upper link and hollow thigh link design also enables large knee joint workspace.

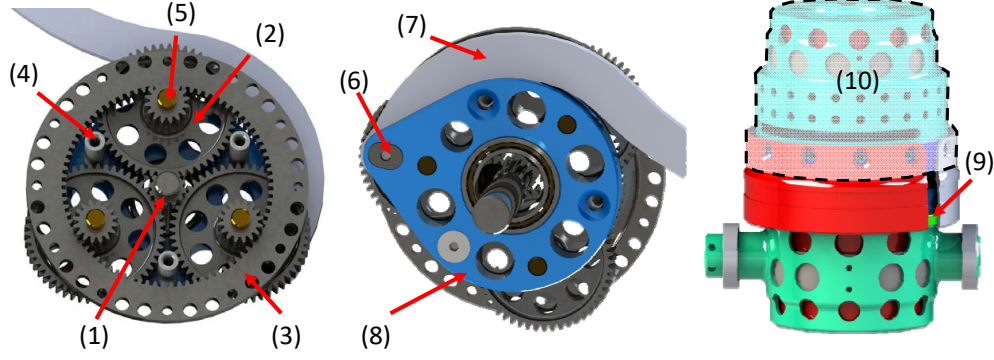


Figure 3.2: Planetary gearbox design with three compound planet gears (left); curved upper-link design (middle); hip and knee motor module (right); (1) sun gear, (2) compound planet gear, (3) ring gear, (4) stand-off, (5) brass dowel pin, (6) output pin, (7) upper link, (8) KNEE carrier, (9) KMF PBXS020 bearing, (10) the KNEE motor module

### 3.2.1 HIP-KNEE Connection Design

Each leg module is composed of three brush-less DC (BLDC) motor modules. HIP, KNEE, ABAD stand for hip joint, knee joint and abduction/adduction joints respectively. The HIP and KNEE motors are placed face-to-face and coaxially as shown in Figure 3.3. Double supported by two thin-section bearings (KMF: PBXS020/ PBXS015), the KNEE motor could rotate  $360^\circ$  with respect to the HIP motor. One bearing (KMF: PBXS015) is located between HIP and KNEE motors and the other one (PBXS020) is located outside of the HIP motor shell and enclosed by two hip caps. An explosive view could be found in Figure 3.4. The HIP motor shell's outer surface is used as one of bearing PBXS020's mating surface, and the inner surface of the Hip cap is used as the other mating surface. The hip cap is fixed to the KNEE motor and grips on the HIP motor via PBXS020 bearing, allowing the KNEE motor to rotate freely related to the HIP motor.

The ABAD motor's rotational axis is placed perpendicular to the HIP/KNEE motors' axis. The internal structure of the ABAD motor is shown in Figure 3.4. The torque produced by electrical coil is magnified by the planetary gearbox and transferred to the output shaft, whose motion is constrained by the bearing mount via another thin-section bearing (KMF PBXU0035). The output shaft of ABAD motor is directly connected to the HIP/KNEE module. With transmission eliminated, the workspace of the ABAD joint is not limited by the leg itself.

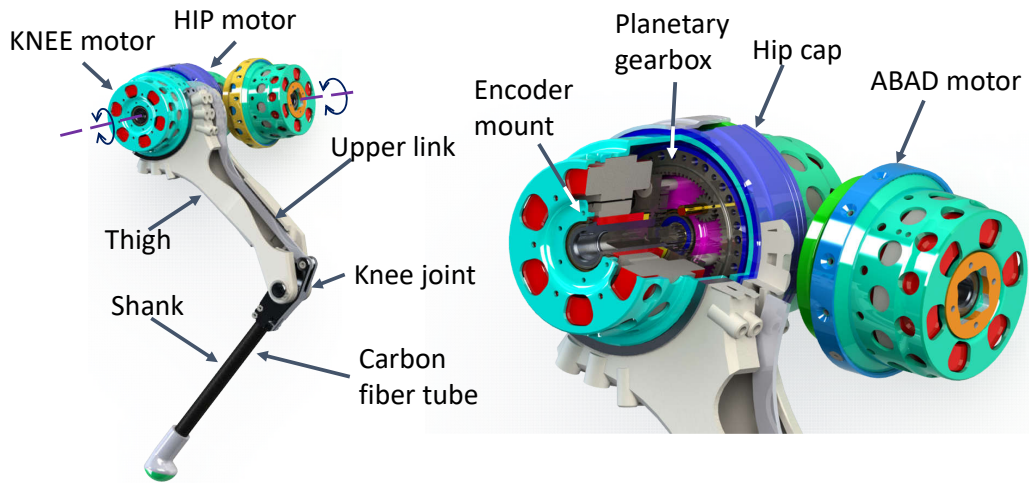


Figure 3.3: CAD Model of the Leg Module Design; (left) A side-view of the leg module with cut-out on thigh link showing the four-bar linkage design; (right) A cut-out view showing the internal structure of a motor module

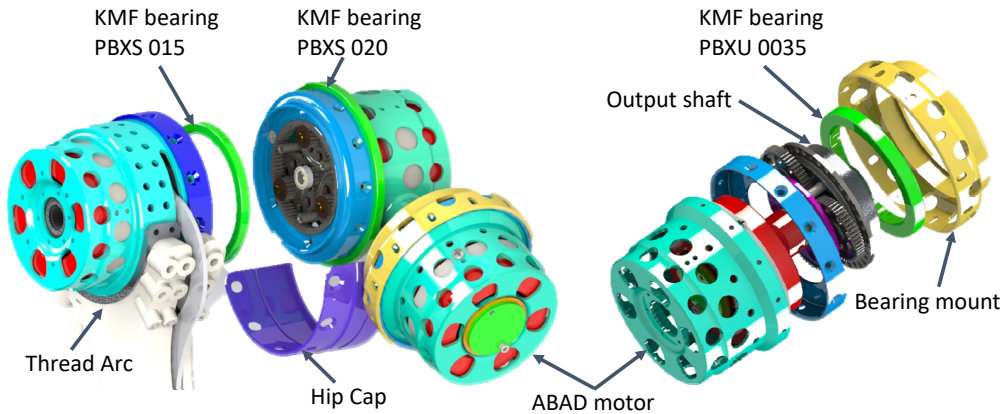


Figure 3.4: (left) Connection Design Between HIP and KNEE Motors for Large Hip Range of Motion (ROM); (right) Exploded View of ABAD motor

### **3.2.2 Linkage Transmission Design**

The linkage transmission design is shown in Figure 3.3. The torque of the KNEE motor is transmitted to the knee joint through a four-bar linkage mechanism. Hence the KNEE motor could be put nearer to the main body and the rotary inertia could be reduced. The 3D printed hollow thigh design allows the curved upper link to travel inside without interference, while providing protection to the upper link. Consequently, the robot-human interface would be safer. In addition, the curved upper link design allows larger knee joint workspace compared with straight link design. As shown in Figure 3.2, the curved link avoids the standoff (4) in the figure and gains  $27^\circ$  more rotation angle compared with straight four-bar linkage design.

The thigh link was connected to the KNEE motor surface through four screws initially. During preliminary jumping tests it turned out that the large ground impact impulse at touch down would rip off the thread on the KNEE motor shell. To solve this problem, an additional part called thread arc was made to provide more threaded holes on the knee motor. Figure 3.4 shows that the thread arc is attached to the KNEE motor surface and the new thigh link is fixed to the thread arc with 18 screws to evenly distribute the load.

### **3.2.3 Electronic System Integration**

The electronic system of the robot leg consists of the following components: two Elmo Gold Twitter amplifiers were used for motor commutation, two RLS-RMB20 magnetic encoders were used to measure motor angle, ATI Mini40 F/T sensor was used to measure the ground reaction force created by the leg. The control loop runs at 4kHz on an Intel i5 desktop in Simulink Real-Time.



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