

# An Actuated Universal Joint using the Twisted String Actuator: Design and Experimentation

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**Abstract**—Actuated universal joints, or equivalent joint systems, are found in a number of robotic applications, in particular mobile snake robots, snake-arm robots and robotic tails. Such joints use a variety of actuation methods, including direct drive motors, linear screw drives, cable based systems, and hydraulics/pneumatics. In this paper the authors design and create a mechanism that uses the Twisted String Actuator (TSA) in an antagonistic triad to actuate the universal joint, using orientation sensors to create a robust closed loop control system. Various experiments then defined the performance of the system. This results in a compact high performance actuation system that exploits the properties of TSA to give it various advantages over existing actuation methods.

**Index Terms**—???

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Actuated Universal Joint

Actuated Universal Joint (AUJ) mechanisms are found in a wide range of robotic applications, such as confined space inspection using snake-arm robots [?], highly manoeuvrable mobile snake robots [?], and biomimetic robot tails for stability [?]. All of these applications apply different constraints on the size, mass, torque requirements, and other properties. Snake-arm robots and robotic tails can reduce the mass and size of the AUJ by moving their actuators away from the AUJs and use cables to transfer the force to the joints, or use hydraulic or pneumatic actuators which tend to be lighter than equivalent electric motors, at the expense of increased mass and bulk at the base of the arm or tail.

### B. Twisted String Actuator

First developed by [?] in 2010, TSA uses two or more strings between two fixtures as a linear actuator. When one fixture is rotated (typically by an electric motor), the looped string twists into a helix, decreasing the distance between them. Equation 1 calculates the distance  $l_s$  for a two string system with infinite stiffness for a given rotation angle  $\theta_s$ , where  $l_u$  is the unwound length between the fixtures and  $r_s$  is half the string thickness.

$$l_s(\theta_s) = \sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2} \quad (1)$$

Equation 2 defines a minimum length  $l_{min}$  for a two string system which is the length at which the helix becomes completely packed and further increases in angle or decreases in length result in recursive folding into another helix, which is undesirable in most applications.

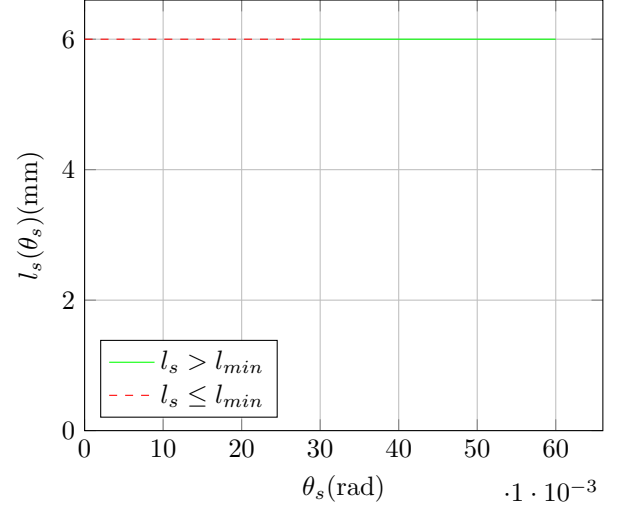


Fig. 1: Twisted String Actuator (TSA) string length against motor angle with coefficients from table I.

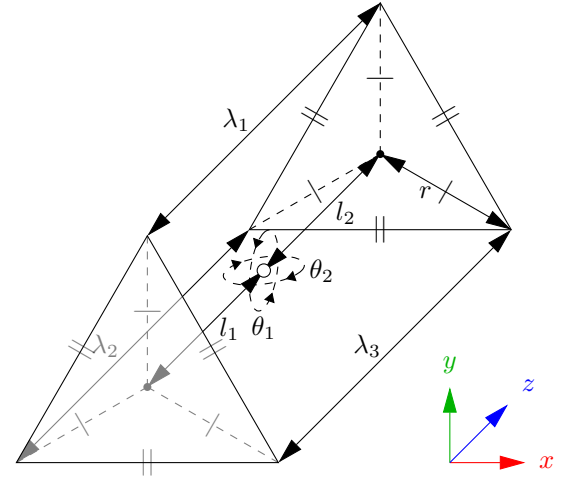


Fig. 2: Kinematic diagram of the antagonistic triad.

$$l_{min} = \frac{l_u}{\sqrt{\frac{\pi^2}{2} + 1}} \approx 0.46 l_u \quad (2)$$

## II. ANTAGONISTIC TRIAD

The geometric structure of the system can be described with two equilateral triangles of circumscribed radius  $r$  on two planes separated in the  $z$  axis. The centroids are then connected via a universal joint from each plane normal to

TABLE I: Simulation and performance estimation coefficients.

Coefficient	Value	Coefficient	Value
$l_1$	45 mm	$J$	$1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ kg m}^{-2}$
$l_2$	600 $\mu\text{m}$	$K_L$	$1000 \text{ N m}^{-1}$
$r$	13 mm	$f_{min}$	1 N
$l_n$	60 mm	$K_P$	800
$r_s$	200 $\mu\text{m}$	$K_I$	5000
$m$	72.619 13 g	$K_D$	50
$C$	0.1315 N mm	$K_{P_s}$	19
$K_t$	0.0263 N m A $^{-1}$	$\omega_s$	441.9 rad s $^{-1}$
$\alpha_s$	$1 \times 10^5 \text{ rad s}^{-2}$	$I_s$	0.19 A
$\tau_s$	4.5 mNm		

an intersecting point, described by vector  $\theta = [\theta_1 \ \theta_2]$  to denote the rotation of the second plane relative to the first, in the  $x$  and  $y$  axis around the intersecting point, and  $l_1$  and  $l_2$  to denote the normal distance from the intersection to the first and second plane centroids respectively. When  $\theta = [0 \ 0]$  the triangles are parallel to each other. The distance between the vertex pairs of each triangle is then denoted as  $[\lambda_1 \ \lambda_2 \ \lambda_3]$  for the “top”, “left” and “right” vertices of the triangles. When  $\theta$  is changed, this will change  $\lambda_1$ ,  $\lambda_2$  and  $\lambda_3$  respectively. A diagram of this is shown in figure 2.

To calculate the lengths of the strings for a given  $\theta$  of the AUJ, we can define a vector function  $\Lambda(\theta) = [\lambda_1(\theta) \ \lambda_2(\theta) \ \lambda_3(\theta)]$  with  $l_1$ ,  $l_2$  and  $r$  as the coefficients, where the scalar functions are defined in equation 3.

$$\begin{aligned} \lambda_1(\theta) &= \sqrt{(l_1 + l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2 + r \cos \theta_1 \sin \theta_2)^2 \\ &\quad + (r - r \cos \theta_2 + l_2 \sin \theta_2)^2 \\ &\quad + (l_2 \cos \theta_2 \sin \theta_1 + r \sin \theta_1 \sin \theta_2)^2} \\ \lambda_2(\theta) &= \sqrt{(a - b + c)^2 + (l_1 - d)^2 + (e)^2} \\ \lambda_3(\theta) &= \sqrt{(a + b - c)^2 + (l_1 + d)^2 + (e)^2} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

where:

$$\begin{aligned} a &= -\frac{\sqrt{3}r(\cos \theta_1 - 1)}{2} \\ b &= l_2 \cos \theta_2 \sin \theta_1 \\ c &= \frac{r \sin \theta_1 \sin \theta_2}{2} \\ d &= \frac{\sqrt{3}r \sin \theta_1}{2} + l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2 - \frac{r \cos \theta_1 \sin \theta_2}{2} \\ e &= \frac{r \cos \theta_2}{2} - \frac{r}{2} + l_2 \sin \theta_2 \end{aligned}$$

These were simply calculated by computing the transformation matrix for each string from one end to the other in cartesian coordinates, then acquiring the Euclidean norm of the resulting translation vector  $\|[x_n \ y_n \ z_n]\|_2$ .

### III. CONTROL SYSTEM

The control system is a 4 layer cascade design, using feedback of the joint position from the accelerometers and TSA force from the load cells. It uses a second order setpoint trajectory  $q$  as input, which can either be pre-defined or generated dynamically from user input. Feedback is provided by the AUJ angular position  $\theta$ , angular velocity  $\dot{\theta}$ , and TSA tension force  $f$ .

- 1)  $C_1$  AUJ Position PID Controller

- 2)  $C_2$  Inverse Dynamics
- 3)  $C_3$  TSA Force Optimisation Algorithm
- 4)  $C_4$  TSA Force P Controller

Functions  $C_{1...4}$  are then combined into a cascade function  $C_4(C_3(C_2(C_1(\dots), \dots), \dots), \dots), \dots)$ .

#### A. AUJ Position PID Controller

This function is a PID controller with the input  $q$  as the setpoint and the AUJ angular position  $\theta$  and velocity  $\dot{\theta}$  as feedback, plus the addition of a feedforward term for the input acceleration  $\ddot{q}$ .

$$\begin{aligned} e &= q - \theta \\ \dot{e} &= \dot{q} - \dot{\theta} \\ C_1(q, \dot{q}, \ddot{q}, \theta, \dot{\theta}) &= K_P e + K_I \int_0^t e dt + K_D \dot{e} + \ddot{q} \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

In the discrete implementation used for fixed step simulation and experimental model control, the integral term is replaced by the trapezoidal rule.

$$K_I \int_0^t e \approx \sum_{i=0}^N \frac{e(t_i) + e(t_{i-1})}{2} \Delta t \quad (5)$$

#### B. Inverse Dynamics

This function converts the control signal from  $C_1$  to the desired AUJ torque using the Euler-Lagrange method in compact matrix form. Firstly the affine transformation matrix  $T$  for a coordinate frame between the AUJ pivot and the centre of mass of the follower segment can be defined. The order of  $R_x$  and  $R_y$  can be reversed, but this requires other terms to be reversed as well.

$$T(\theta) = R_x(\theta_1) R_y(\theta_2) P_z(l_2) \quad (6)$$

Then the linear velocity jacobian  $J_v$  is simply the jacobian of the translation vector of  $T$ .

$$J_v(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial t_{14}}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial t_{24}}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial t_{34}}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial t_{14}}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial t_{24}}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial t_{34}}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix} \quad (7)$$

The angular velocity jacobian  $J_\omega$  is calculated using the first joint angle relative to the base frame, and the second in the frame of the first. If  $R_x$  is the first rotation in  $T$  then the first column of the jacobian is  $[100]^T$  (to represent the pitch angle) and the second column is  $R_x[010]^T$ .

$$J_\omega(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & r_{x11} \\ 0 & r_{x21} \\ 0 & r_{x31} \end{bmatrix} \quad (8)$$

Then the mass matrix  $D$  can be created from the jacobians, the mass for the follower segment  $m$  and its inertia tensor  $I \in \mathbb{R}^{3 \times 3}$ , and  $R_x$  and  $R_y$  to express the inertia in the correct frame.

$$D(\theta) = m J_v^T J_v + J_\omega^T (R_x R_y) I (R_x R_y)^T J_\omega^T \quad (9)$$

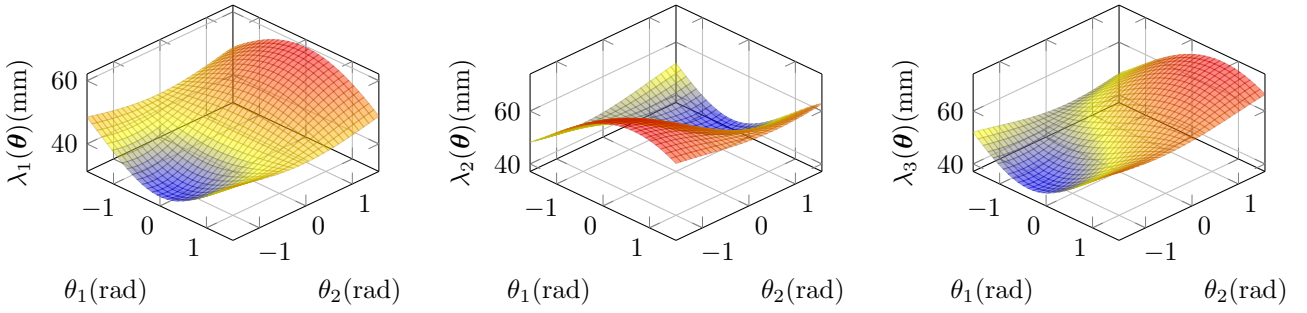


Fig. 3: Surface plots of each element of the vector function  $\Lambda(\theta)$ , assuming coefficient values from table I.

The centrifugal/coriolis matrix  $C$  is created from the christoffel symbols of  $D$ , along with the AUJ velocity vector  $\dot{\theta}$ .

$$C(\theta, \dot{\theta})_{k,j} = \sum_{i=1}^N \frac{1}{2} \frac{\partial d_{kj}}{\partial \theta_i} + \frac{\partial d_{ki}}{\partial \theta_j} - \frac{\partial d_{ij}}{\partial \theta_k} \dot{\theta}_i \quad (10)$$

Then the gravity term  $G$ . As the gravity vector direction is the same as the z axis as in figure 2, the height is equal to  $-l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2$ , therefore the potential energy is  $mg(-l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2)$ . The jacobian of this then becomes the gravity term.

$$G(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial mg - l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial mg - l_2 \cos \theta_1 \cos \theta_2}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix} \quad (11)$$

$D$ ,  $C$  and  $G$  are then combined to form the dynamics equation  $C_2$ , along with the AUJ position and velocity vectors.  $C_1$  is used as the acceleration term. This results in a setpoint joint torque which can be used in the optimisation algorithm.

$$C_2(C_1, \theta, \dot{\theta}) = D(\theta) C_1 + C(\theta, \dot{\theta}) \dot{\theta} + G(\theta) \quad (12)$$

### C. TSA Force Optimisation Algorithm

This function uses a modified algorithm from [?] to select an optimal force vector from the desired joint torque. A force matrix  $F$  is created from the torque input  $C_2$ , jacobian  $J_\Lambda$  from the vector function  $\Lambda$  as defined in equation 3, and minimum force constant  $f_{min}$ .  $f_{ii}$  is equal to  $f_{min}$ , while the other elements in the column are based on a calculation using  $J_{\Lambda-i,*}$  where  $-i$  is a row removed from the matrix.

$$J_\Lambda = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{\partial \lambda_1}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial \lambda_2}{\partial \theta_1} & \frac{\partial \lambda_3}{\partial \theta_1} \\ \frac{\partial \lambda_1}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial \lambda_2}{\partial \theta_2} & \frac{\partial \lambda_3}{\partial \theta_2} \end{bmatrix}$$

$$F(C_2, \theta) = \begin{cases} f_{i,i} = f_{min} \\ f_{-i,i} = -J_{\Lambda-i,*}^\top (J_{\Lambda-i,*}^\top f_{min} + C_2) \end{cases} \quad (13)$$

$$= \begin{bmatrix} f_{min} & f_{12} & f_{13} \\ f_{21} & f_{min} & f_{23} \\ f_{31} & f_{32} & f_{min} \end{bmatrix}$$

Finally, the following algorithm selects one column of  $F$  to be the output force vector.

```

1:  $s \leftarrow [\top \ \top \ \top]$ 
2: if  $f_{23} > f_{min}$  then  $s_2 \leftarrow \perp$  else  $s_3 \leftarrow \perp$  end if
3: if  $f_{31} > f_{min}$  then  $s_3 \leftarrow \perp$  else  $s_1 \leftarrow \perp$  end if
4: if  $f_{12} \geq f_{min}$  then  $s_1 \leftarrow \perp$  else  $s_2 \leftarrow \perp$  end if
5: for  $i = 1$  to 3 do
6:   if  $s_i \rightarrow \top$  then  $C_3 \leftarrow f_{*,i}$  end if
7: end for

```

### D. TSA Force P Controller

This function is a P controller and saturation filter, with the setpoint the force vector from the TSA force optimisation algorithm  $C_3$  and the feedback the TSA tension force  $f$ . The output from this is the motor current vector (where the sign indicates the direction of motion) which is sent to the motor controller for each TSA.  $I_s$  prevents the current from exceeding the design limits of the motor. In this case  $\text{sat}_n$  represents the saturation function for  $\pm n$ .

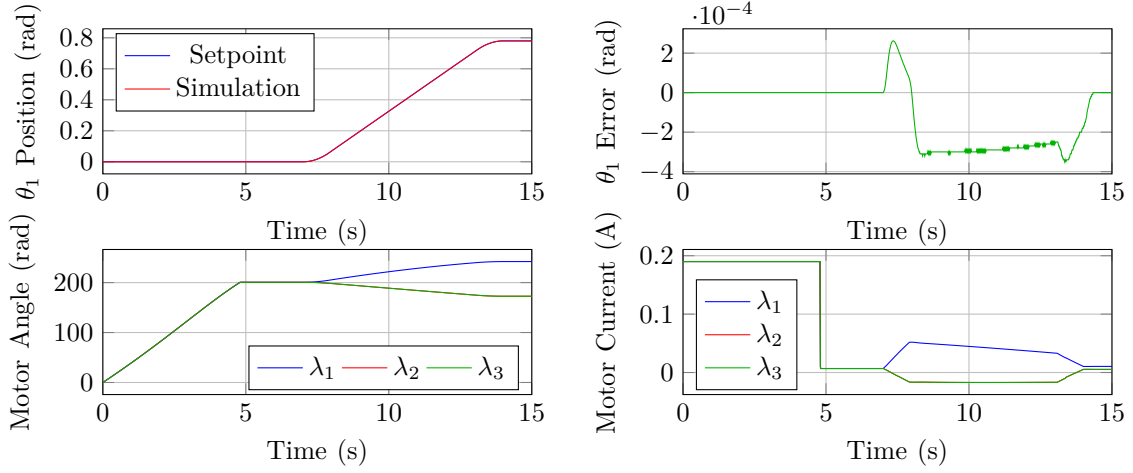
$$C_4(C_3, f) = \text{sat}_{I_s}(K_{P_s}(C_3 - f)) \quad (14)$$

## IV. SIMULATION RESULTS

To design and refine the parameters of the control system, a Simscape Multibody model of the antagonistic triad and control system was created in MATLAB/Simulink. Plots of a test joint trajectory can be seen in figure ??.

### A. TSA State Space Definition

In order to approximate a TSA plant from within a simulation, a state space model was required which takes motor current  $u$  as an input and outputs  $y$  as the TSA tension force  $f_i$ . [?] defines it as such, where  $J$  is the motor inertia,  $C$  is the motor coulomb friction (modified from viscous friction as the 1724TSR only has dry friction),  $K_t$  is the motor torque constant, and  $K_L$  is the load stiffness. As the original definition is for a fixed load  $l_u$  distance from the motor a modified model is required which takes into account the varying length between the motor and load defined by  $\Lambda(\theta)$ . A saturation function is used to prevent incorrect compression forces when the string is slack. All of the motor coefficients were taken from the Faulhaber 1724TSR datasheet as this is the motor to be used in the experimental model. An estimated value is used for the load stiffness, this was chosen to be a high number as the model is expected to be very stiff.

Fig. 4: Simulation results for a trajectory of  $\theta_1$  from 0 to  $\frac{\pi}{4}$ .

$$\begin{aligned}
 h(\theta_s) &= \frac{\theta r_s^2}{\sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2}} \\
 k(\theta_s, \theta) &= \lambda_n(\theta) - \sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2} \\
 \dot{x} &= \begin{bmatrix} x_2 \\ -\frac{K_f}{J} h(x_1) k(x_1, \theta) - \frac{B}{J} \text{sgn}(x_2) \end{bmatrix} + \begin{bmatrix} 0 \\ \frac{K_t}{J} \end{bmatrix} u \\
 y &= K_L \text{sat}_0^\infty k(x_1, \theta)
 \end{aligned} \tag{15}$$

The state space model was then adapted to include constraints on motor velocity and acceleration set by the motor controller in order to keep the motor within design limits, by replacing  $\dot{x}$  with  $\dot{x}'$  which contains saturation functions for maximum motor velocity  $v_s$  and acceleration  $\alpha_s$ .

$$\dot{x}' = \begin{bmatrix} \text{sat}_{\omega_s} \dot{x}_1 \\ \text{sat}_{\alpha_s} \dot{x}_2 \end{bmatrix} \tag{16}$$

## V. PERFORMANCE COMPARISON

### A. Tension Force and Stroke Velocity

The two most important performance metrics are the maximum tension force  $f_{max}$  and maximum stroke velocity  $\dot{p}_{max}$ . For both the TSA and leadscrew  $f_{max} \propto \frac{1}{\dot{p}_{max}}$  holds true as the mutable coefficients are changed for the AUJ, so finding a balance between these two metrics is required. These are dependant on the maximum motor torque  $\tau_{max}$  and motor velocity  $\dot{\theta}_{max}$ .

For the TSA metrics, the equations from [?], in particular  $h(\theta)$  and  $k(\theta)$  as used for the State Space in equation ??, which can be used to determine  $f_{max}$  and  $\dot{p}_{max}$  using equations ?? and ??. By extracting coefficient  $r_s$  as an input to make  $f(p, r_s)$  and  $\dot{p}(\dot{\theta}, p, r_s)$  the performance of different string thicknesses can be compared for a given unwound length  $l_u$  and  $\tau_{max}, \dot{\theta}_{max}$  over the range of the contraction length  $p$ .

For the leadscrew metrics, the raising torque calculation [] can be used as the absolute value of  $f_{max}$ , since the TSA only operates in tension, which can be used to determine the same metrics using equation ??. The performance of different screw diameters  $d_m$  and leads  $\lambda$  can then be compared for a given

$\tau_{max} \cdot \dot{p}_{max}$  is then simply calculated by multiplying  $\lambda$  with  $\dot{\theta}_{max}$  converted from  $\text{rad s}^{-1}$  to  $\text{rev s}^{-1}$  to match the units of  $\lambda$  as in equation ??. The performance of different  $\lambda$  can then be compared for a given  $\theta_{max}$ .

$$\begin{aligned}
 k(\theta) &= l_u - \sqrt{l_u^2 - \theta_s^2 r_s^2} \\
 k^{-1}(p) &= \pm \frac{\sqrt{p(2l_u - p)}}{r_s} \\
 h^{-1}(\theta) &= \frac{\sqrt{l_n^2 - r_s^2 \theta^2}}{r_s^2 \theta}
 \end{aligned} \tag{17}$$

$$f(p) = h^{-1}(k^{-1}(p)) = \pm \frac{\sqrt{(l_u - p)^2}}{r_s \sqrt{p(2l_u - p)}}$$

$$f_{max} = f(p) \tau_{max}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 \dot{k}(\dot{\theta}, \theta) &= \frac{\dot{\theta} r_s^2 \theta}{\sqrt{l_n^2 - r_s^2 \theta^2}} \\
 \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}, p) &= \dot{k}(\dot{\theta}, k^{-1}(p)) = \pm \frac{\dot{\theta} r_s \sqrt{p(2l_n - p)}}{\sqrt{(l_n - p)^2}}
 \end{aligned} \tag{18}$$

$$\dot{p}_{max} = \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}_{max}, p)$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 |\tau(f)| &= \frac{d_m f(\lambda + \pi d_m \mu)}{2(\pi d_m - \lambda \mu)} \\
 |f(\tau)| &= \frac{2\tau(\pi d_m - \lambda \mu)}{d_m(\lambda + \pi d_m \mu)} \\
 f_{max} &= |f(\tau_{max})|
 \end{aligned} \tag{19}$$

$$\begin{aligned}
 \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}) &= \lambda \frac{\dot{\theta}}{2\pi} \\
 \dot{p}_{max} &= \dot{p}(\dot{\theta}_{max})
 \end{aligned} \tag{20}$$

As the values for  $\tau_{max}$  and  $\dot{\theta}_{max}$  for the TSA depend on  $p$ , but remain constant for the leadscrew, the performance of the TSA is going to be better or worse than a given leadscrew depending on the value  $p$ . Figure ?? compares the TSA configuration using the coefficients from table ??

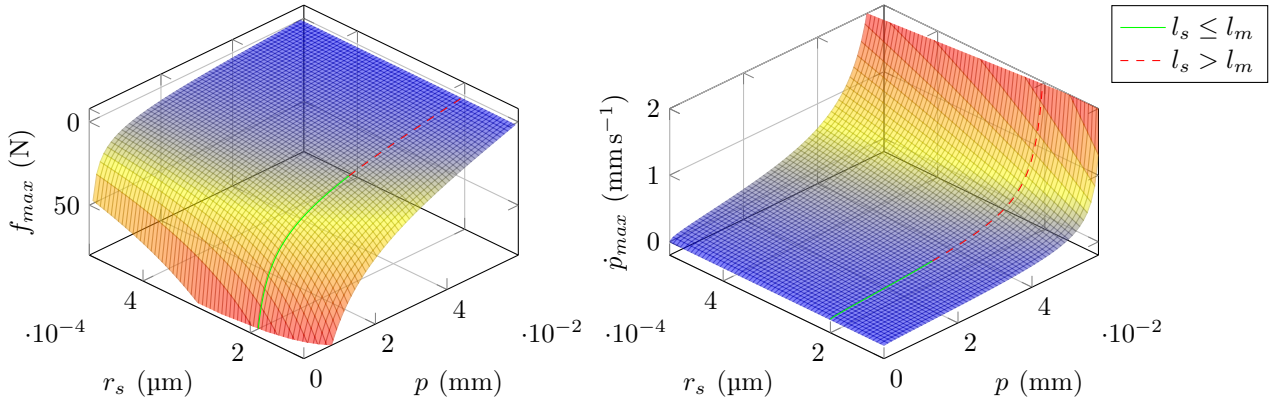
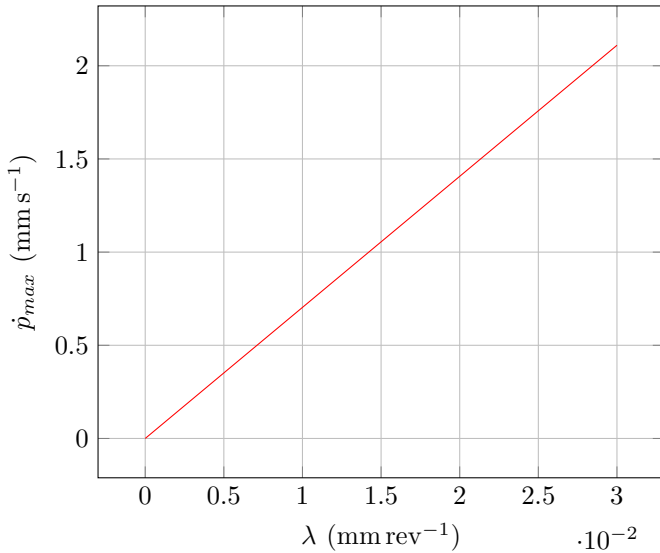
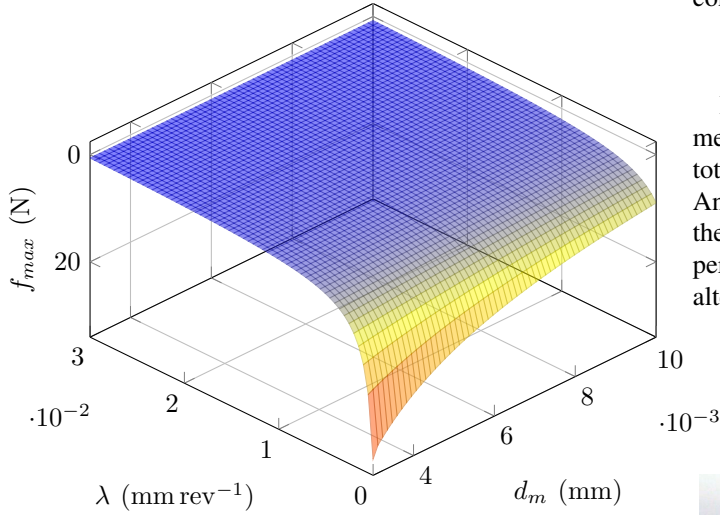


Fig. 5

against a number of common leadscrew configurations that are practical for the dimensions of the AUJ []. As can be noted, the TSA outperforms or underperforms different leadscrew configurations depending on  $p$ .

## VI. CONCLUSION

Based on the current progress of research, Further refinements need to be made to the control system to ensure total stability within a significant joint range of the AUJ. An experimental model has also been constructed to validate the results from the simulation. In the longer term various performance metrics will be used to compare the TSA to alternative actuation methods.



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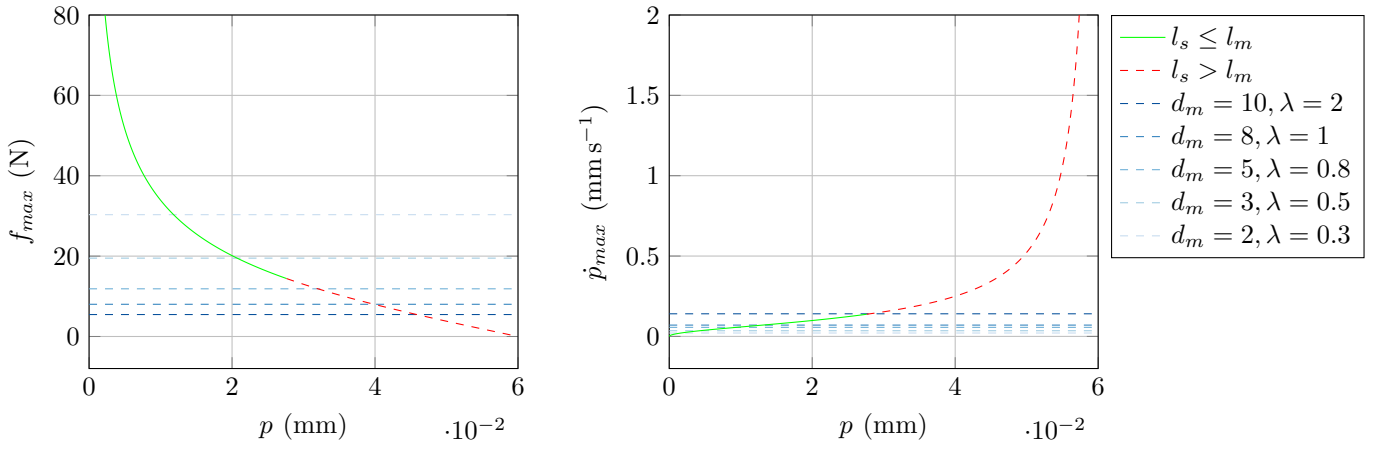


Fig. 6: Performance comparison of the TSA configuration using coefficients from table ?? to various leadscrew configurations with different  $d_m$  and  $\lambda$ .



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**Dr. Andrew Weightman** graduated in 2006 with a PhD in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Leeds. Whilst at the University of Leeds he developed rehabilitation robotic technology for improving upper limb function in adults and children with neurological impairment which was successfully utilised in homes, schools and clinical settings. In 2013 he moved to the University of Manchester, School of Mechanical, Aerospace and Civil Engineering as a Lecturer in Medical Mechatronics. Dr Weightman has research interests in biomimetic mobile robotics,

rehabilitation robotics, robotics for nuclear decommissioning and collaborative robotics.



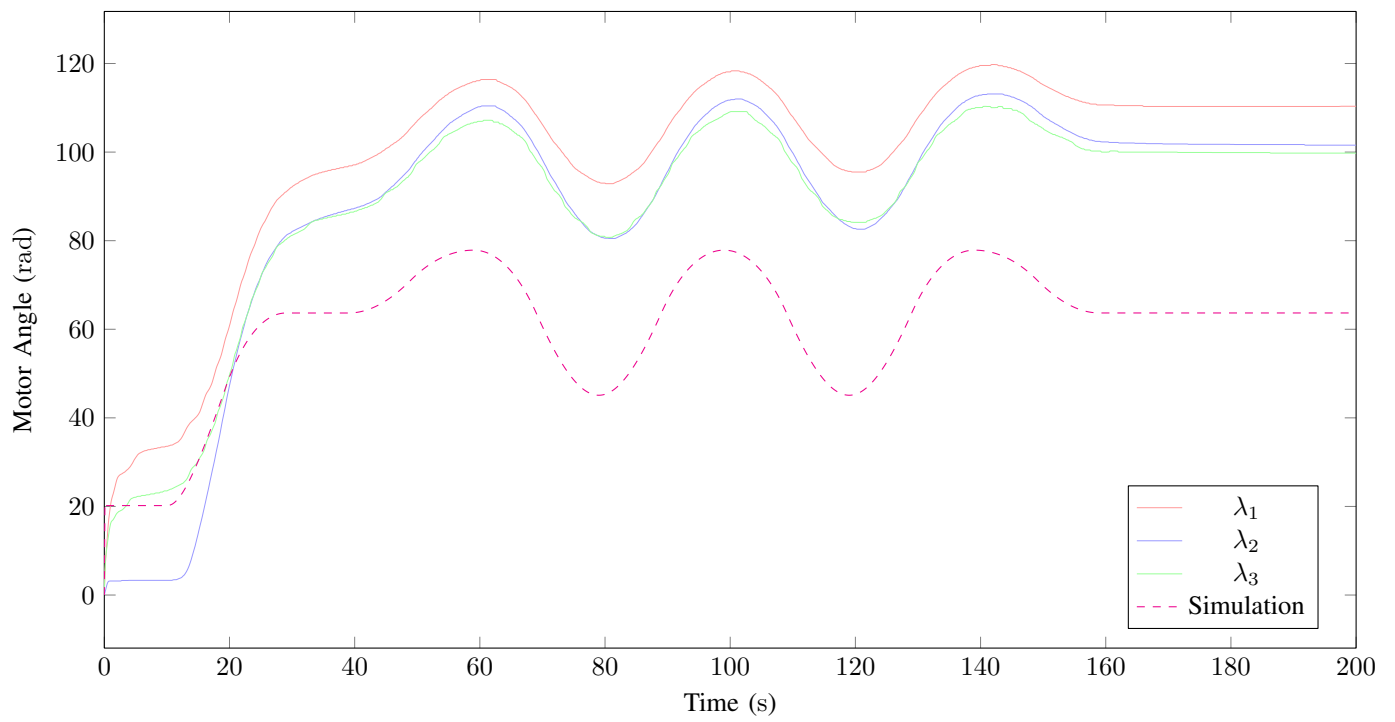
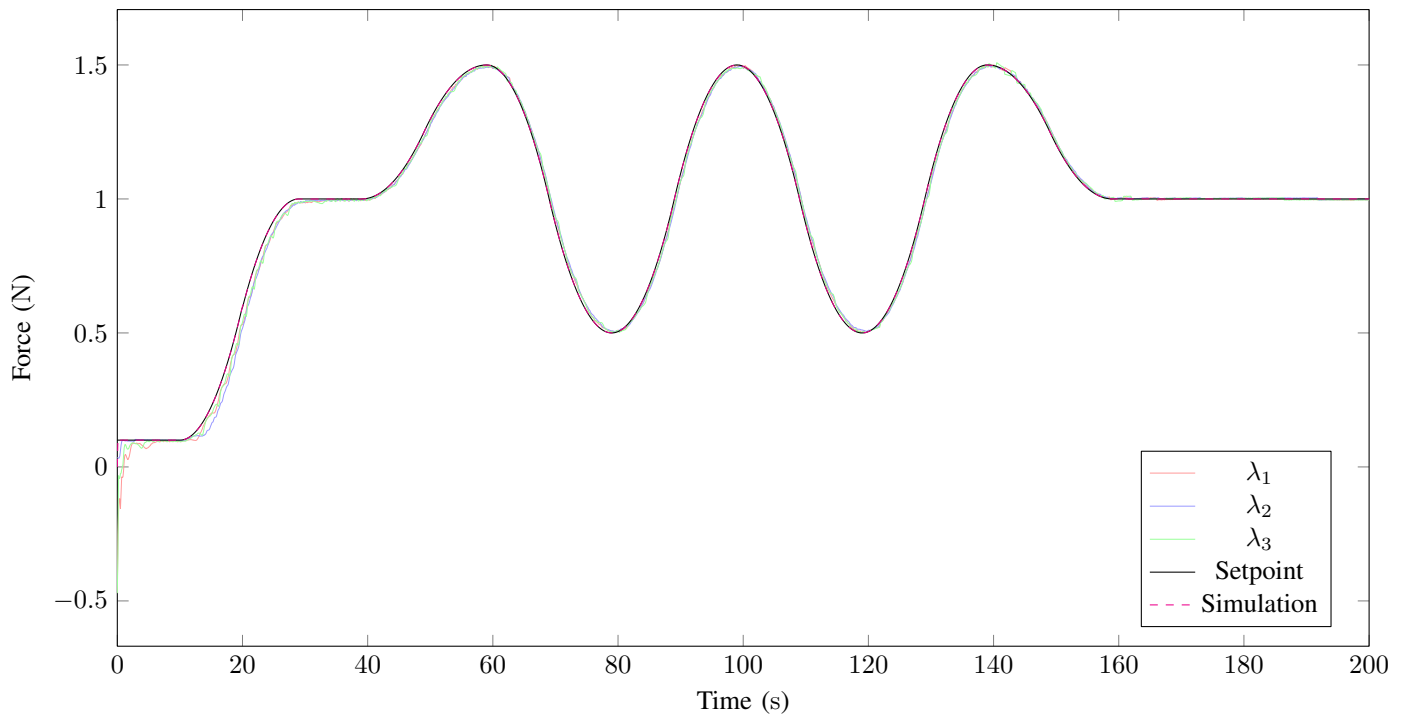


Fig. 7