Abstract

Quite a few tasks remain to solve a variety of technical subjects for planetary rover navigation in the future missions. The sensors to perceive the terrain environment around the rover will require critical development efforts. The image laser range finder (ILRF) discussed here is one of candidate sensors because of many advantages to directly provide range data to be required for its navigation.

The authors developed a new compact-sized ILRF which has a quarter in volume size of those conventional ones. Instead of current two directional scanning system comprised of nodding and polygon mirrors, the new ILRF is equipped with a new concept of direct polygon mirror driving system, which successfully made its size compact to accommodate to the design requirements. The paper reports design concept and preliminary technical specifications established in the current development phase.

1. Introduction

The onboard sensors for Lunar or Mars rovers which will be planned in the future missions are one of the most critical elements to sense the terrain environment around the rovers. A stereo type three dimensional sensor and ILRF are most possible for the navigation system. The stereo-type three dimensional sensor system generates three dimensional terrain data from the image of onboard CCD cameras. The CCD cameras provide many advantages in various design aspects to build up the onboard sensor system. But this system needs to manage many data of the image to percept three dimensional terrain feature, so high performance computer should be required. While, the ILRF is with excellent capability to obtain three dimensional terrain geometric data within a short period of one second, which will not be influenced by the surface condition. The currently developed ILRF is equipped with a mechanical scanner for laser beam in two dimensional directions, therefore, further development efforts must be devoted to improve its design features such as reliability, weight, size, power consumption to be onboard space hardware. In practical missions, the ILRF may be utilized in cooperation with the stereo system.

2 System Outline

The ILRF sensor onboard the rover will be utilized to collect the terrain information in front of the rover, which will require high accuracy and high frame rate performance. This requirements lead us to the conclusion to a methodology of phase-comparison system utilizing intensity-modulated CW laser. The concept of this methodology is shown in Figure 1. The laser beams are radiated to the objects, which will reflect the beams with some phase shift proportional to distance up to a radiated point. And then the resultant amount of phase
shift shall be obtained to compare with the
reference to determine the distance between the
rover and targeting points.

![Figure 1 Concept of range measurement](image1)

Thus optical scanning in two dimensional
directions helps to obtain three dimensional
terrain geometric data. The optical system
consists of a polygon mirror and two collecting
mirrors. The object of our efforts is to realize the
compactness without degrading measuring
performance. The resultant concept of the optical
system is shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 2 Concept of the optical system](image2)

Downsizing effort on polygon mirror was made
by means of receiving the beam at the two facets
of the polygon mirror (with four facets) for
horizontal scanning instead of one facet and the
nodding mirror which was eliminated by directly
driving the polygon mirror in vertical direction.
An incident laser beam is split into two directions
by the two facets of polygon mirror, and each
beam is directly focused on a detector by
parabola reflectors set up symmetrically. Thus,
the collecting lenses can be eliminated, which
enable to minimize the optical system as a design
feature. The standard sensing circuit is used
in our ILRF as shown in Figure 3. The intensity of
the semiconductor laser is modulated in a
10.7MHz frequency, the reflected beam from the
object received by an APD detector. The output
signal received by the detector passes into the
detection circuit of range and reflectance. The
range is determined by the phase difference of
measuring signal and referential signal. In order
to obtain sufficient sensitivity and accuracy,
nearly 100 waves are respectively integrated for
each range data. The data of range and
reflectance are converted into digital data by an
A/D converter. All of these data are sent to a
signal processor for the terrain perception.

3. Performance improvement

The conventional laser range finders are still
with problems with respect to its performance.
The efforts in improving its performance were
devoted to sensor as follows.

![Figure 3 Block diagram of sensing circuit](image3)
(1) Protection of internal reflection of laser beam

The transmitted laser beams in some directions are reflected at the window as shown in Figure 4(a) and these make the ghost in the range and reflectance images. Essentially, it is difficult to eliminate this reflection since the reflected laser beam at the window is larger than return signal from the object. We set the cylindrical window with the same surface curvature center with the pitch gimbal pivot for vertical scanning, and a complete screening plate as shown in Figure 4(b) can be set to split the laser beam transmitting part from the receiving optics for eliminating the ghost image.

(2) Compensation of range drift caused by temperature changes

The measured ranges might be mostly unstable due to changes of environment temperature with respect to a conventional laser range finder. The newly developed ILRF was no exceptional for this drift phenomena. In order to compensate the possible drift, the laser beam is led to the APD detector through a optical fiber cable with a reference length in no outside sensing period. This enables to measure drift rate in reference to the predetermined length and then, the compensation for correcting the data is executed with respect to all measurement range data. The schematic diagram of processing is illustrated in Figure 5.

4. Characteristics of ILRF

The current ILRF configuration is given in Figure 6, and the characteristics in Table 1. Figure 7 shows ranging and reflectance image to be obtained through the ILRF sensor.
5. Conclusion

The image laser range finder reported in this paper still require improvement in order to secure more sufficient reliability especially for a mechanism of the scanner. However, the authors have successfully achieved to develop a more compact-sized laser range finder with satisfactory function and performance in the current development phase. The state-of-the-art proven in the report is believed to enhance the design-in and design-out efforts for more practical terrain sensor in the very near future. Our ILRF has been developed in cooperation with Corporate Research Division Olympus Optical Co., LTD.

Reference


