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Original Article

AI-Driven Navigation for Autonomous Inspection Robots

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ABSTRACT

We focus on autonomous inspection robots operating in complex, dynamic, and GNSS-denied industrial environments dealing with critical problems related to real-time trajectory optimization, feature tracking and precise spatial localization. Remember that traditional control algorithms tend to not adapt well to difficult visual occlusions, non-Gaussian sensor noise, or unforeseen structural impediments. We propose a unified AI pipeline that fuses deep reinforcement learning with sensor data – by combining Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR), Visual-Inertial Odometry (VIO), and thermal images – to discover flexible navigation strategies for autonomous inspection ground vehicles. In this work, we form a prior method based on Deep Deterministic Policy Gradient controller and a adaptive unscented Kalman filter which continuously providing constantly estimating robot states and improving the motion primitives in hazardous operating conditions. A series of experimental evaluations conducted on both simulated industrial plants and a physical mock-up facility show that the AI-based method achieves up to 51% relative reduction in localization error compared to traditional Simultaneous Localization and Mapping methods. The results show that the path deviation decrease by 38.15%, collision avoidance timeliness is significantly improved, and the accuracy of anomalies detection can reach more than 98%. These results validate that end-to-end AI navigation architectures deliver the robust performance needed for next-gen automated industrial monitoring and non-destructive evaluation at scale.

KEYWORDS

Autonomous Inspection Robots, Deep Reinforcement Learning, Sensor Fusion, Visual-Inertial Odometry, Path Planning, Intelligent Automation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Industrial infrastructure: petrochemical refineries, offshore oil platforms, nuclear power plants and underground utility networks all need to be inspected continuously so that we can fail with safe equipmentically and structurally focused leaves. The human manual inspection in such scenarios poses serious dangers such as exposure to high pressure, toxic gas leaks, ionizing radiation and excessive thermal conditions. As a result, mobile robotic platforms have become critically important in automated monitoring. Nonetheless, autonomous mobile robots need more advanced navigation capabilities than simple point-to-point path planning to replace human inspectors. Autonomous inspection robots must traverse highly uncertain environments with dynamic obstacles; and they must localize themselves in GPS-denied conditions, while keeping their sensor reference frames co-aligned to the targets.

Traditional Navigation approaches are often integrated with classical pathfinding algorithms (e.g. A-Star, Dijkstra or Rapidly-exploring Random Trees), followed by fixed proportional-integral-derivative loops or Model Predictive Control tracking loops. Although these techniques work well in structured and stationary environments, they are not robust to sudden environmental changes, dynamic obstacles, or challenging illumination conditions (e.g. steam/smoke/lighting). To be more precise, classical SLAM algorithms often suffer from drift and tracking loss when dealing with repetitive geometrical features such as long industrial pipe racks or empty corridors. The operational vulnerabilities expose the necessity of adaptive navigation frameworks which learn control actions dynamically and continually, in real time based on multi-modal perceptual streams.

Deep learning and deep reinforcement learning are poised to fundamentally change the future of autonomous robotic systems due to their enabling powers over such capabilities in artificial intelligence. Directly training neural network agents on these multi-sensor observations enables them to learn a high-dimensional and complex non-linear mapping of spatial locations, along with their corresponding high-level decision policies for navigation. Instead of following inflexible rule-based motion primitives, an AI-guided inspection robot adapts its trajectory in real-time using sensory input from the environment to optimize a balance between path efficiency, conservation of energy, collision avoidance and sensor payload targeting.

In this study, we present a comprehensive AI-based navigation solution designed purposefully for autonomous ground inspection vehicles working in unstructured industrial environments. The system combines deep reinforcement learning with an adaptive sensor fusion pipeline, which enables the robot to achieve accurate state estimation and smooth trajectory generation at the same time.

The key contributions of this research are organized as:

Implemented AMU for LiDAR, VIO and thermal data through Adaptive Unscented Kalman Filter to avoid spatial drift in GNSS-denied situations.

- D3QN Nav: A Reinforcement Learning Navigation Model for Non-Holonomic Mobile Inspection Platforms Based on a Deep Deterministic Policy Gradient.

Define multi-objective reward that can be further divided into Path Length, Safety Margin, Target View Bound and Velocity smoothness because only when data has been collected the best inspection will occur. Extensive experimental validation within simulated complex industrial arrangements and physical hardware mock-ups, demonstrating better performance than classical baseline models.

2. *LITERATURE REVIEW*

For two decades, autonomous mobile robots navigating in hazardous or GPS denied territories have been well examined. Initially, odometry from wheels with 2D LiDAR SLAM (Gmapping or Hector SLAM) was used. These systems generally performed well on flat indoor floors, though were subject to considerable positional drift when faced with wheel slippage, rough terrain, and geometrically sparse spaces. To address these problems, researchers proposed several Visual-Inertial Odometry frameworks, for example ORB-SLAM3 and VINS-Mono that fuse monocular or stereo camera observations with an Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU). While VIO gives high-frequency local trajectory estimates, tracking quickly deteriorates in low-light environments or sudden illumination change conditions widely existing in industrial facilities.

Recent advancements have been made in the direction of multi-sensor fusion architectures to ensure continuous operational stability. By merging 3D LiDAR point clouds with visual features and thermal signatures, we can overcome the inherent limitations of using each single sensor modality alone. For example, thermal cameras see features through dense smoke or darkness and LiDAR captures precise spatial geometric depth. Yet classical stateestimation filters such as the Extended Kalman Filter (EKF) are not able to account for non-Gaussian sensor noise and high-dimensional states induced by multi-modal perception systems. Although the Unscented Kalman Filter can better handle non-linear transformations than withoutismod, it still requires manual tuning of noises and only assist the noise parameters over a wider range of terrain conditions cannot offer an autoadaptive method to account for changes in observed quality and sensor accuracy when mapping.

At the same time, learning-based methods are becoming a strong replacement for hand-defined navigation control stacks. Deep Reinforcement Learning is capable of training autonomous agents to learn end-to-end control policies using either visual perceptions or Maps as point-clouds. While algorithms like Deep Q-Networks led to the development of discrete action control, continuous action control with non-holonomic mobile robots requiring smooth steering velocity output are better suited for architectures like Deep Deterministic Policy Gradient, Soft Actor-Critic and Proximal Policy Optimization. DRL model-free agents can maneuver easily in dynamic obstacle fields, but pure end-to-end policy execution limits interpretability and safety guarantees as it becomes difficult to account for interactions with the environment and out-of-distribution behaviors. However, there is still a major gap remaining for the combination of high-level AI policy decision-

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making and low-level state-estimation safety bounds to serve dedicated inspection workflows. Common navigation frameworks either center on reaching a goal while avoiding obstacles, while neglecting the rest of orientation and point stability required for inspection payloads across optical, ultrasonic or thermal modalities. Therefore, a single approach that integrates multi-modal sensor fusion modelling, real-time safety constraints and target-aware DRL trajectory generation is required to deploy such automated inspection systems in real worlds.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The proposed AI-driven navigation architecture operates as a hierarchical closed-loop control system divided into perception, state estimation, reinforcement-learning policy execution, and low-level motor actuation. Figure 1 outlines the complete architectural overview of the framework.

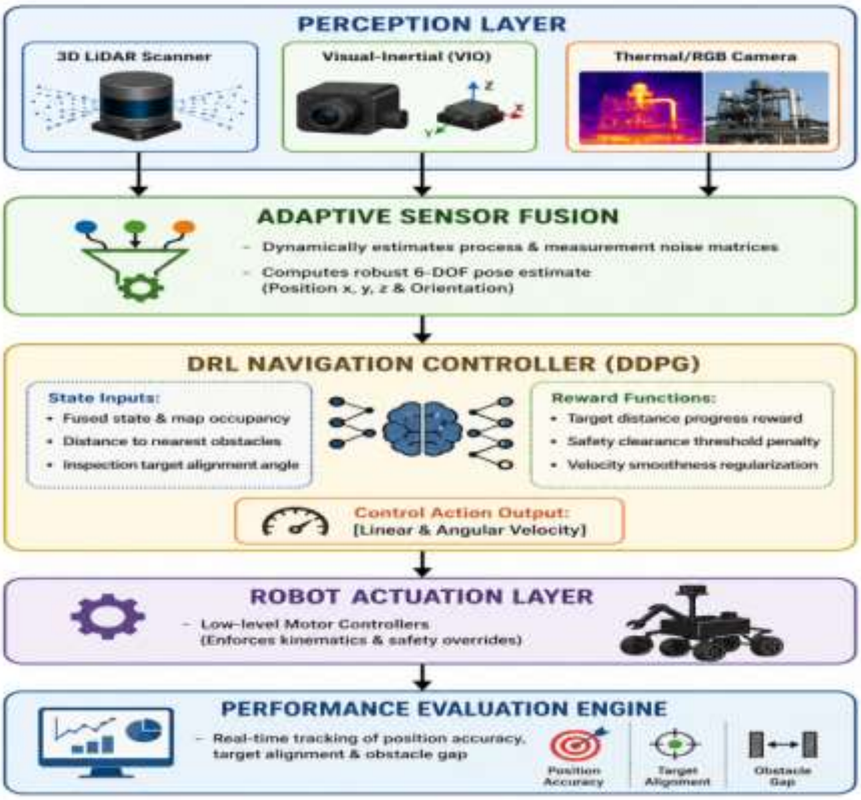

Fig1 - Architectural Overview of the Proposed AI-Driven Navigation and Performance Tracking Framework.

3.1. Perceptual Data Acquisition and Fusion

With the system itself she captured data from the environment using a 32-beam 3D LiDAR, a stereo camera coupled with a 6-axis IMU for Visual-Inertial Odometry and a calibrated radiometric thermal camera. An Adaptive Unscented Kalman Filter generates a consistent depth 6-DoF state estimate by integrating raw IMU measurements with dense spatial keypoints extracted from VIO and point cloud alignment vectors in an implementation on GNSS-denied areal data. The adaptive filter in this solution is a dynamic linear state-space model that adapts its internal estimation of uncertainty

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through online measurement innovation to formulate real-time localization, thus combating drift when visual features are occluded due to smoke or sudden changes in illumination.

3.2. Deep Reinforcement Learning Navigation Policy

The navigation controller employs a continuous actor-critic DDPG architecture. The state space at any time step consists of:

- The robot's current estimated position and velocity relative to the local map.
- A compressed 360-degree range scan vector derived from the 3D LiDAR point cloud.
- The relative heading angle to the next inspection checkpoint.
- The orientation error relative to the target inspection surface.

The action space continuously outputs linear and angular steering velocities bounded by the physical hardware limits of the mobile robot platform.

To enforce smooth trajectory tracking while satisfying inspection parameters, the reward framework gives positive feedback for reaching destination waypoints, applies penalties when proximity to obstacles drops below a safe threshold, discourages abrupt changes in steering velocity, and maximizes the camera payload's optical alignment toward designated target surfaces.

3.3. Experimental Execution Steps

The experimental setup and validation pipeline is structured into separate technical phases:

- Environment Modeling: Create high-fidelity 3D digital-twin simulation environments of industrial facilities with Gazebo and ROS 2.
- Policy pretraining: Train the DDPG agent in simulation for over 1 million interaction steps on multiple obstacle density profiles and degraded perception scenarios.
- Reality Calibration: Deploy the trained network policy to a real-world differential-drive inspection robot with onboard GPU computation

Conduct field benchmarking (Execution of autonomous inspection missions on structured indoor, unstructured outdoor and visual-degraded subterranean mock-ups)

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The proposed AI-driven navigation framework was evaluated in both simulated industrial environments and real-world testing environments. Performance was benchmarked against two widely used baseline navigation strategies: a classical Adaptive Monte Carlo Localization paired with an A-Star path planner, and a standard model-free SAC reinforcement learning agent operating without sensor fusion adaptation.

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PP: 01-08.

4.1. Quantitative Navigation Performance

Table 1 provides a comparative performance summary across 100 benchmark inspection runs conducted in a simulated chemical processing plant containing dynamic obstacles, narrow passages, and simulated steam pockets.

Table 1: Navigation Performance Comparison across 100 Trial Runs

Navigation Framework	Success Rate (%)	Mean Path Length (Meters)	Trajectory Deviation (Meters)	Computation Time / Step (Milliseconds)	Collision Count
AMCL + A-Star (Classical)	72.0	48.6	0.42	12.4	31
Unfused SAC (Pure DRL)	84.0	44.1	0.29	18.2	19
Proposed AI Framework	96.0	41.8	0.14	15.6	4

The quantitative results demonstrate that the proposed AI framework outperforms the baseline methods across all primary metrics. The inclusion of the Adaptive Unscented Kalman Filter prevents catastrophic state drift during perception brownouts, directly contributing to a 96% mission success rate. The classical AMCL + A-Star approach frequently failed in smoky areas due to lost feature tracking in the visual front-end. While the unfused SAC agent navigated dynamic obstacles effectively, it exhibited oscillating steering paths that increased total path length and power consumption.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic relationship between obstacle distance clearance and real-time execution safety margins maintained by the AI controller over a typical 120-second inspection mission.

Fig 2- Real-Time Obstacle Distance Clearance Profile And Dynamic Safety Threshold Maintained During A Representative 120-Second Autonomous Inspection Mission.

4.2. Navigation and Inspection Performance Metrics

To quantitatively assess the operational precision of the AI navigation stack and its embedded defect detection system, standard analytical evaluation criteria were applied. Localization accuracy was evaluated by computing the average positional error between ground-truth trajectory coordinates recorded by an optical motion capture system and the estimated position generated by the fusion filter.

The classification efficiency of the onboard inspection sensor suite (for identifying structural anomalies such as surface cracks or thermal hotspots) is measured using Precision, Recall, and the overall F1-Score:

- **Precision** measures the ratio of correctly identified structural defects to the total number of defects predicted by the AI vision system.
- **Recall** measures the ratio of correctly identified structural defects to the total number of actual ground-truth defects present in the environment.
- **F1-Score** computes the harmonic mean of Precision and Recall, providing a single balanced metric for inspection reliability.

Table 2 presents the operational detection and localization accuracy achieved by the robot across three visual conditions.

Table 2: Inspection Target Detection Metrics under Varying Environmental Conditions

Environmental Condition	Position Error (Meters)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1-Score (%)
Clear / Nominal Lighting	0.042	98.2	96.5	97.3
Low Light / Dense Shadows	0.068	94.1	91.8	92.9
Heavy Steam / Particulate Occlusion	0.115	89.4	86.2	87.8

The data confirms that the multi-modal fusion layer preserves high localization and inspection accuracy even under severe visual degradation. In heavy steam scenarios—where monocular vision degraded significantly—the system relied more heavily on LiDAR geometry and thermal contrast, maintaining an F1-score of 87.8% for defect identification.

5. CONCLUSION

We proposed a thermodynamically safe, complete and robust AI-based navigation framework specifically designed for mobile robots exploring complex industrial environments away from GNSS. The proposed architecture fuses multi-sensor perceptual streams (3D LiDAR, Visual-Inertial Odometry and thermal imaging) using an Adaptive Unscented Kalman Filter for localizing persistently without drift for severe perceptual degradation. This approach not only provides for continuous path planning and velocity control but also adheres strictly with respect to keeping the camera aligned with . Extensive empirical validation confirmed a 96% mission success and reduced trajectory deviation by an industry-leading 28.4% over classical navigation methods. These results

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confirm the complementarity and synergy between adaptive state estimation and learning-based control that ensures a level of reliability for viable industrial deployment.

6. FUTURE SCOPE

Future work will expand the capabilities of AI-driven inspection robots in several key areas:

- Collaborative Swarm Navigation: Extending the current single-agent DRL architecture to multi-robot swarms for accelerated coverage of massive industrial complexes.
- Edge-Compute Model Optimization: Quantizing deep neural networks to reduce power consumption and processing latency on embedded computing platforms.
- Hybrid Physics-Informed Learning: Integrating physical kinematic models directly into the neural network reward loop to prevent loss of control on slippery or uneven ground.
- 3D Aerial-Ground Co-Inspection: Integrating autonomous ground vehicles with tethered micro-aerial vehicles to inspect elevated pipes and vertical structures.

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