

A Concept for a High Performance Reflector-Based X-Band SAR

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Abstract

The success of current spaceborne Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) is boosting the performance requirement of next generation systems. In order to cope with the evolution of SAR the design of the new systems will need to meet higher requirements for spacial and radiometric resolutions together with an increased availability. This tendency is recognized nearly independently of the application area and manifests itself through several study programs initiated by space agencies aiming at the design of future SAR systems. In this context the use of large reflectors combined with digital feed arrays for SAR has not always received adequate attention. This paper suggests an X-band spaceborne SAR system utilizing a deployable reflector together with a digital feed array, analyzes its performance and highlights its advantages compared to other systems based on direct radiating arrays.

1 Introduction

A review of several ongoing studies for the conception of next generation SAR systems, reveals the shared characteristic of being multi-channel systems utilizing digital beamforming (DBF) techniques [1, 2, 3]. The common purpose of using multi-channel systems is to simultaneously obtain high spatial resolution and wide swath.

For DESDnyI/Tandem-L a reflector-based SAR system was first suggested, which was later extended to a hybrid architecture through a digital feed [4]. With this system it would be possible to image a swath width of 300 – 400 km [3]. Such a hybrid architecture has the potential to combine both the flexibility and the capabilities of DBF with the high antenna gain provided by a large reflector aperture. To lower the stowed satellite volume and weight, and therefore the launch costs, the reflector could be deployable. Unfurlable reflector antennas are a mature technology with extensive flight heritage in space telecommunications and satellites with lightweight mesh reflectors spanning diameters of > 20 m are deployed in space [5].

From the above it seems reasonable to consider reflector-based SAR systems for future, or at least to perform comprehensive trade analyses of reflector versus direct radiating array antennas. In [6] a planar and a reflector system were designed to a common set of performance parameters; the comparison revealed that the reflector system can be realized with a simpler hardware and shows a performance advantage of several dBs in terms of ambiguity and signal-to-noise ratio.

The paper addresses this issue by suggesting a SAR system utilizing a reflector in conjunction with a digital feed array. Keeping future follow-up systems for the German TerraSAR-X and TanDEM-X SAR satellites in mind, the reflector system will be designed for X-band @ 9.65 GHz operation with performance requirement possibly exceed-

ing those of HRWS [1]. In this paper emphasis will be given to the various operation modes and the performance; the antenna design is detailed in [7] while [8] elaborates on the performance improvement using dedicated DBF techniques and [9] addresses the issue of imaging gap removal by varying the pulse repetition frequency (*PRF*).

2 Architecture and Operation

In 1981 Blyth [10] suggested a basic approach for analog beam-steering such that the receive beam moves over the swath in accordance with the direction of reflection. About twenty years later, his idea finds a more detailed description and justification in two independent and almost contemporary works [11, 12]. Digital beamforming techniques in elevation and azimuth for a reflector are presented for the first time in [4].

In the following the digital beamforming technique and the corresponding system architecture is addressed. For clarity this will be given separately for the elevation and azimuth directions.

2.1 Digital Beamforming in Elevation

The SCan-On-REceive (SCORE) mode of operation, which is also suggested here, is primarily based on generating a wide transmit beam that illuminates the complete swath and a narrow, high gain receive beam that follows the pulse echo on the ground. SCORE results in an increased signal-to-noise ratio compensating the low gain of the transmit antenna and suppressing range ambiguities.

The system (in elevation) consists of a parabolic reflector and a feed array of N_{el} antenna elements fed through transmit/receive modules, where an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) is placed after each T/R-module as shown in Fig. 1.

4 Modes of Operation

The digital feed allows operation in various modes which basically differ in the number of imaged sub-swathes and the way they are combined into one larger swath. These modes can be divided into four categories and shown in the timing diagram of Fig. 2.

Single Stripmap This mode is well known from conventional SAR, where any sub-swath within the access range is imaged with a single burst and constant *PRF*. As mentioned in section 2.2 the azimuth processing needs to be adapted to the fact that each channel samples a narrow Doppler spectrum which are combined during processing.

Multi Stripmap Here multiple sub-swathes of the same *PRF* are imaged simultaneously allowing an increase of the total swath up to the access range. However, the imaged swath contains gaps caused by the transmit instances. The gaps width can be reduced by reducing the pulse duty cycle. This mode takes advantage of DBF, since several SCORE beams are generated each one following the receive echo within one sub-swath¹.

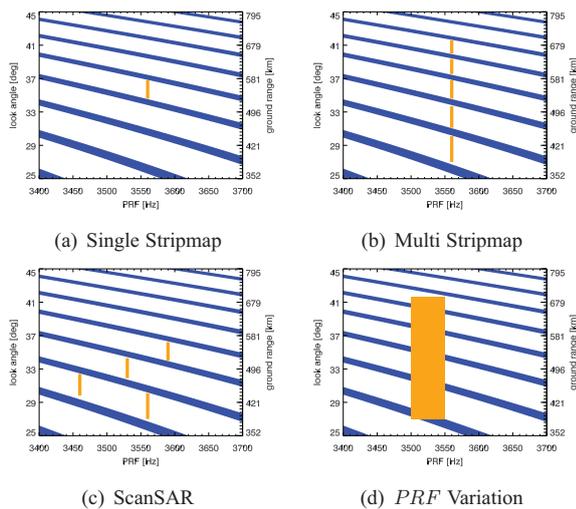


Figure 2: The timing diagram for different operation modes for a 745 km orbit and a pulse duty cycle of 10 %

ScanSAR In this mode multiple bursts are used increase the swath width. For the system shown here, a total of six to seven bursts would be required to cover the complete access range. An alternative would be to use ScanSAR to fill the gaps of the Multi-Stripmap mode; this would allow operation with only two bursts to image the complete access range. In any case the ScanSAR requires an adaption of the azimuth processing.

¹The echo signals from all the imaged sub-swathes arrive simultaneously, something that typically causes range ambiguities in a conventional SAR, here the narrow Rx SCORE pattern with low sidelobe level allows adequate range ambiguity suppression.

PRF Variation Multiple sub-swathes are imaged at the same time but in addition the *PRF* is varied from pulse to pulse. By this the gaps of the Multi-Stripmap mode can be avoided. This mode offers a highly attractive way to image an ultra wide swath, but requires innovative processing approaches [9].

5 SAR Performance

In the following the performance of the Multi-Stripmap mode is shown, since it is the most attractive one. The performance of the Single-Stripmap is identical to that of any single sub-swath. For the impact of the PRF-Variation we refer to the separate investigation in [9].

The range performance given in terms of the range-ambiguity-to-signal ratio (*RASR*) is shown in Fig. 3. The *RASR* is below -40 dB which is possible because of the narrow low sidelobe SCORE Rx patterns shown exemplarily in Fig. 3(b).

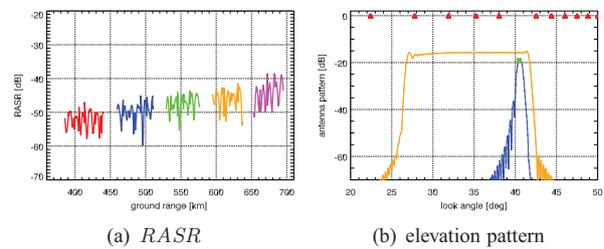


Figure 3: Elevation ambiguity performance of reflector system.

The azimuth performance is given in terms of the azimuth-ambiguity-to-signal ratio (*AASR*) shown in Fig. 4. The *AASR* suffers from the degradation of the azimuth patterns at the near-range boundary of the access range. This is basically an antenna and feed dimensioning issue which involves a compromise between the allowable maximum size and the performance. Here the *AASR* computed for a single azimuth channel is representative for the overall *AASR* as explained in section 2.2.

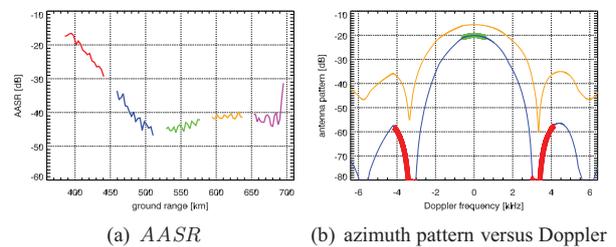
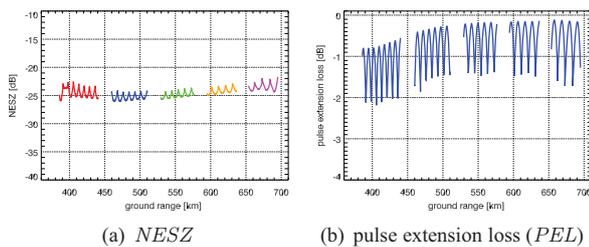


Figure 4: Azimuth ambiguity performance of reflector system.

The noise-equivalent sigma-zero for a total average transmit power of 2 kW, a 2-way system loss of 3 dB, and a system noise temperature of 460 K is shown in Fig. 5(a). One characteristic of the reflector system with a transmit feed connected to T/R-modules (TRM) is that the power density on the ground does not decrease when illuminating a wider swath. As such the NESZ shown in Fig. 5(a) is valid independently of the number of imaged sub-swathes, however the average power consumption increases with the number of imaged sub-swathes. In Fig. 5(b) the pulse extension loss (PEL) is shown. This performance parameter describes the loss due to the non-vanishing pulse extension on the ground which is attenuated by the narrow RX SCORE antenna pattern. For the 10 % duty cycle this loss is below 2 dB.



6 Conclusion

Spaceborne SAR systems utilizing reflector antennas offer the possibility to improve the SAR performance with respect to next generation SAR systems. This performance improvement manifests itself through an increased swath width and a higher signal-to-noise ratio. The digital feed of a reflector system uses a smaller number of T/R-modules and by this require a higher average power per T/R-modules the same total power. Further the imaging modes shows a high potential for systems operating at low pulse duty cycle which require a higher peak power. The power requirements are not fulfilled with current T/R-modules at X-band and thus require future technology development; here GaN technology seems to be a promising candidate. On-going research on advanced digital beam-forming techniques for reflector systems show a high potential and should be continued.

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