

AUTOMATIC SPOOL TENSIONING MECHANISM

FIELD

[0001] This document relates generally to spool tensioning mechanisms. More particularly, this document relates to spool tensioning mechanisms that will automatically achieve optimal drag.

BACKGROUND

[0002] UGVs are motorized vehicles that operate without an on-board human presence. Remotely-controlled and remotely-guided unmanned vehicles (such as UGVs) are in widespread use in applications such as Explosive Ordinance Disposal (“EOD”), search and rescue operations, hazardous material disposal, surveillance, etc. A typical UGV includes a chassis, wheels, drive motors mounted on the chassis, an articulating arm mounted on top of the chassis, grippers and a camera mounted on the arm. UGVs can also be equipped with steerable front wheels to facilitate directional control. Alternatively, UGVs can include tracks that facilitate operation over rough terrain. Steering of tracked UGVs can be effectuated by simultaneously operating the wheels or tracks on opposite sides of the UGV.

[0003] Movement and steering of an UGV can be controlled by a user from a location remote from the UGV using a joystick-equipped control unit. The control unit communicates with the UGV by way of a wireless communication link or a tether communication link. The control unit may also be used to remotely control the UGV’s robotic arm, gripper, and camera. Movement of the UGV is typically controlled by modulating the velocity of the UGV in proportion to the displacement of the joystick of the control unit.

[0004] The tether communication link is used when Radio Frequency (“RF”) communication is not possible or not preferred. For example, the tether communication link is used when the UGV is operating in an RF-denied environment (e.g., jamming), in a difficult RF environment (e.g., underground tunnels), or in a scenario in which it is desirable to minimize RF signature (e.g., to avoid detection).

[0005] The tether communication link is typically implemented via a Fiber-Optic (“F/O”) cable. The tether media is paid out from a spool. Spool pay-out is controlled. Re-usable tether media is re-wound onto the spool after use. This type of spooling mechanism requires the use of a spool drag device to control tether tension during pay-out. It is extremely difficult to achieve consistent drag (due to effects of temperature, humidity, dust, etc.). Incorrect drag performance can foul the spool, compromising the mission.

[0006] There are two types of tether spools, namely a single use tether spool and a multi-use tether spool. The single use tether spool has a simple design with no drag mechanism. However, the single use tether spool is not reusable, and therefore is an expensive solution. The multi-use tether spool is reusable, and therefore has a lower lifetime cost as compared to the single user tether spool. However, the multi-use tether spool is more complex (e.g., it may require a level-wind mechanism) and experiences spool fouling if drag is not applied correctly.

SUMMARY

[0007] The present disclosure concerns implementing systems and methods for operating a spool mechanism. The methods comprise: paying out a certain amount of tether from the spool while a coupler (e.g., a clutch) is disengaged; transitioning an operational mode of the spool mechanism from a first operational mode of a plurality of different operational modes in which a drag torque is not settable to a second operational mode of the plurality of different operational modes in which the drag torque is settable; selectively mechanically coupling a rewind motor to a spool of the spool mechanism by engaging a coupler (e.g., a clutch) in response to the spool mechanism’s transition into the second operational mode; activating the rewind motor such that the rewind motor applies a motor torque having a pre-defined value selected for facilitating a setting of the drag torque to an optimal value; mechanically gradually adjusting an amount of drag resistance applied to the spool by a drag mechanism; discontinuing the mechanical adjustment of the drag resistance when the spool’s speed is within a threshold percentage range of a zero resistance speed; and/or discontinuing a supply of power to the rewind motor when the spool’s speed is within the threshold percentage range of the zero resistance speed.

[0008] In some scenarios, the operational mode of the spool mechanism is changed via user interaction with an input device of the spool mechanism. In those or other scenarios, the motor

torque is proportional to a desired drag torque generated in the spool mechanism as a result of contact between the drag mechanism and an element mechanically coupled to the spool's rotation (e.g., mechanically coupled to one of the spool's retaining plates). The motor torque may act to rewind the tether onto the spool.

[0009] The drag mechanism can comprise an adjustable spring loaded support arm having a brake pad coupled thereto for providing the drag resistance through sliding friction against a rotating element of the spool mechanism. The amount of drag resistance is adjusted by rotating the brake pad towards or away from the spool. The amount of drag resistance may be manually adjusted using a tool.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] Embodiments will be described with reference to the following drawing figures, in which like numerals represent like items throughout the figures, and in which:

[0011] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of an UGV and a control unit.

[0012] FIG. 2 is a perspective view of the vehicle shown in FIG. 1.

[0013] FIG. 3 is a schematic illustration of various electrical and electronic components of the vehicle shown in FIGS. 1-2.

[0014] FIG. 4 is a schematic illustration of various electrical and electronic components of the controller shown in FIG. 3.

[0015] FIG. 5 is a schematic illustration of various electrical and electronic components of the control unit shown in FIG. 1.

[0016] FIGS. 6-8 each provide a perspective view of an illustrative spool mechanism.

[0017] FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view of the spool mechanism shown in FIGS. 6-8.

[0018] FIG. 10 is an illustration that shows various components of the spool mechanism shown in FIGS. 6-9 in more detail.

[0019] FIGS. 11-13 provide illustrations that are useful in understanding the operation of the spool mechanism shown in FIGS. 6-10.

[0020] FIG. 14 is a flow diagram of an illustrative method for operating a spool mechanism.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0021] It will be readily understood that the components of the embodiments as generally described herein and illustrated in the appended figures could be arranged and designed in a wide variety of different configurations. Thus, the following more detailed description of various embodiments, as represented in the figures, is not intended to limit the scope of the present disclosure, but is merely representative of various embodiments. While the various aspects of the embodiments are presented in drawings, the drawings are not necessarily drawn to scale unless specifically indicated.

[0022] The present invention may be embodied in other specific forms without departing from its spirit or essential characteristics. The described embodiments are to be considered in all respects only as illustrative and not restrictive. The scope of the invention is, therefore, indicated by the appended claims rather than by this detailed description. All changes which come within the meaning and range of equivalency of the claims are to be embraced within their scope.

[0023] Reference throughout this specification to features, advantages, or similar language does not imply that all of the features and advantages that may be realized with the present invention should be or are in any single embodiment of the invention. Rather, language referring to the features and advantages is understood to mean that a specific feature, advantage, or characteristic described in connection with an embodiment is included in at least one embodiment of the present invention. Thus, discussions of the features and advantages, and similar language, throughout the specification may, but do not necessarily, refer to the same embodiment.

[0024] Furthermore, the described features, advantages and characteristics of the invention may be combined in any suitable manner in one or more embodiments. One skilled in the relevant art will recognize, in light of the description herein, that the invention can be practiced without one or more of the specific features or advantages of a particular embodiment. In other

instances, additional features and advantages may be recognized in certain embodiments that may not be present in all embodiments of the invention.

[0025] Reference throughout this specification to “one embodiment”, “an embodiment”, or similar language means that a particular feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the indicated embodiment is included in at least one embodiment of the present invention. Thus, the phrases “in one embodiment”, “in an embodiment”, and similar language throughout this specification may, but do not necessarily, all refer to the same embodiment.

[0026] As used in this document, the singular form “a”, “an”, and “the” include plural references unless the context clearly dictates otherwise. Unless defined otherwise, all technical and scientific terms used herein have the same meanings as commonly understood by one of ordinary skill in the art. As used in this document, the term “comprising” means “including, but not limited to”.

[0027] The present disclosure concerns systems and methods for providing an automatic spool tensioning mechanism. The automatic spool tensioning mechanism is designed to automatically achieve optimal drag. The automatic spool tensioning mechanism can be used in a variety of applications, such as UGV applications or other vehicle applications. In the UGV applications, it is desirable to maintain tension in the tether at all times while the tether is being paid-out. If loops of tether around the spool loosen, then the tether loops can overlap and jam the spool. This jamming is called tether fouling.

[0028] In conventional systems, the drag is provided via friction on the spool. The spool can overshoot if there is too little friction, which results in fouling of the tether. The tether media can break if there is too much friction. Additionally, the UGV’s course of travel can be undesirably and unintentionally altered when there is too much friction.

[0029] The most common reusable tether spool with a drag mechanism is a fishing spool. Drag is set by hand each time the fishing rod is used (by feel via manual rotation of a handle). The fishing spool design suffers from certain drawbacks when contemplated for use in a UGV application. For example, the drag on a vehicle-mounted spool needs to be set accurately. This cannot be done by feel (especially when the UGV is being used in an extremely time sensitive

and/or dangerous matter, such as disabling a bomb). Drag torque could be applied by a motor while the tether is being controllably paid-out of the spool via the motor. However, this paying out motor based design is relatively expensive and consumes a relatively large amount of power. In UGV scenarios, one cannot afford to waste power, add a relatively large amount of weight to the vehicle, and/or use a relatively large amount of limited space on the vehicle base.

[0030] The present solution solves the above described drawbacks of conventional fishing spools. In this regard, the present solution comprises a spool mechanism with a motor for rewinding the tether, a coupler (e.g., a clutch) for selectively engaging/disengaging the rewind motor from the spooling system, and a drag mechanism. The drag mechanism is implemented as an adjustable friction device. The motor, coupler (e.g., clutch) and drag mechanism are used to perform automatic tether tension/drag setting as described below.

[0031] Referring now to FIGS. 1-4, there are provided schematic illustrations of an illustrative UGV **100** and control unit **102**. The schematic illustrations of the UGV **100** and control unit **102** shown in FIGS. 1-2 are not drawn to scale. For example, the UGV **100** can be significantly larger than the control unit **102**. However, FIGS. 1-2 are sufficient for understanding the present solution, and relationship between the two electronic components **100** and **102**.

[0032] The UGV **100** is a motorized vehicle that operates without an on-board human presence. The UGV **100** can be used in various applications, such as EOD applications, search and rescue applications, hazardous material disposal applications, and/or surveillance applications. The UGV **100** can be remotely controlled using the control unit **102**. In this regard, the control unit **102** enables a user's control of the UGV's operations and movement from a remote location. The control unit **102** may be configured to communicate with the UGV **100** via a wireless communication link **104** (e.g., an RF link) and a tether communication link **152**.

[0033] The tether communication link **152** is facilitated by a tether **154**. A connector (not shown in FIG. 1) is provided at a distal end **156** of the tether **154**. When in use, the connector mates with a plug (not shown in FIG. 1) of the control unit **102** so as to facilitate communications between the UGV **100** and control unit **102**. Mating connectors and plugs are

well known in the art, and therefore will not be described herein. Any known or to be known mating connector and plug can be used herein without limitation.

[0034] The UGV **100** comprises a spool mechanism **150** with a motor for rewinding the tether **154**, a coupler **304** for selectively engaging/disengaging the rewind motor from the spooling system, and a drag mechanism **310**. The coupler **304** can include, but is not limited to, a clutch. The coupler **304** will be referred to herein as a clutch. However, the present solution is not limited in this regard. The drag mechanism is implemented as an adjustable friction device. The motor, clutch and drag mechanism are used to perform automatic tether tension/drag setting as discussed below. The electronics of the UGV **100** can be electrically connected to the electronics of the spool mechanism **150**. This electrical connection allows a user to remotely control the spool mechanism **150** and/or allows the use of already existing hardware/software of the UGV **100** for controlling/operating the spool mechanism **150**.

[0035] The UGV **100** includes a body **200** comprising a rigid chassis **202**. The UGV **100** also includes movable elements in the form of two rear wheels **204**, **122** and two front wheels **208**, **210**. The rear wheels **204**, **122** are mounted proximate a rear-end **224** of the rigid chassis **202** on opposite sides thereof. The front wheels **208**, **210** are mounted proximate the frontend **226** of the rigid chassis **202** on opposite sides thereof. In alternative scenarios, the movable elements can be structures other than wheels, such as articulating legs.

[0036] The UGV **100** further comprises actuating devices in the form of two variable-speed, reversible electric motors **302**. The motors **302** are mounted on the body **200**. A first motor is coupled to the front wheel **208** so that activation of the first motor causes the front wheel **208** to rotate. A second motor is coupled to the front wheel **210** so that activation of the second motor causes the front wheel **210** to rotate. Additional motors (not shown) can be employed for directly driving the rear wheels **204**, **122**.

[0037] The rear wheel **204** and the front wheel **208** are located on the same side of the UGV **100**. The rear wheel **204** and the front wheel **208** are coupled by way of a tread or track **212**. Rotation of the front wheel **208** drives the track **212**, which in turn causes the rear wheel **204** to rotate. Similarly, the rear wheel **122** and the front wheel **210** are located on the same side of the UGV **100**. The rear wheel **122** and the front wheel **210** are coupled by way of a

tread or track **214**. Rotation of the front wheel **210** drives the track **214**, which in turn causes the rear wheel **122** to rotate.

[0038] The UGV **100** further includes a controller **216**. The controller **216** comprises a processor **402** (e.g., a Central Processing Unit (“CPU”)), a main memory **404** and a static memory **406**. These electronic components **402-406** communicate with each other via a bus **306**. The static memory **406** stores one or more sets of instructions **408** (e.g., software code). The instructions **408** implement one or more of the methodologies, procedures, or functions described herein. The instructions **408** can also reside, completely or at least partially, within the main memory **404** or the processor **402** during execution thereof thereby. The main memory **404** and the processor **402** also can constitute machine-readable media.

[0039] The UGV **100** includes a transceiver **308** communicatively coupled to the processor **402** via the bus **306**. The transceiver **308** communicates with the control unit **102** via a wireless communication link **104** (e.g., a Radio Frequency (“RF”) transmission). One or more antennas **218** (is)are provided to facilitate the transmission and reception of information to and from the transceiver **308** of the UGV **100**.

[0040] An articulating arm **106** is mounted on the body **200** of the UGV **100**. The articulating arm **106** is equipped with at least one gripper **220**, which is mounted on the freestanding end thereof. One or more cameras **206, 222** is(are) also mounted on the body **200** of the UGV **100**. The articulating arm **106**, gripper **220** and camera(s) **206, 222** can be remotely controlled via the control unit **102**.

[0041] The position of the UGV **100** is controlled through the selective activation and deactivation of the motors **302** in response to control inputs generated by the control unit **102**. Linear or straight-line travel of the UGV **100** is effectuated by the simultaneous activation of motors **302** in the same direction and at the same speed so as to drive tracks **212, 214** in the same direction and at the same speed. Turning of the UGV **100** can be achieved by (1) simultaneously activating the motors **302** in opposite directions or in the same direction at different speeds or (2) operating only one of the motors **302**.

[0042] The control unit **102** comprises a controller **502**. The controller **502** is similar to or the same as the controller **216** of the UGV. As such, the controller **502** may include a processor (not shown) and memory (not shown) housed in a rigid casing (not shown). Instructions (not shown) may be stored in the memory. The instructions can be implemented as software code configured to implement one or more of the methodologies, procedures, or functions described herein. The processor and memory can constitute machine-readable media.

[0043] The control unit **102** also includes a wireless transceiver **504** and a power connector **506** communicatively coupled to the controller **502**. The transceiver **504** is configured to communicate with the transceiver **308** of the UGV **100** via an RF communication link **104**. An antenna **506** is provided to facilitate the transmission and reception of RF signals to and from the control unit **102**. The power connector **506** is configured to mate with a connector disposed at a distal end of the tether **154** of the UGV **100** so as to facilitate the tether communication link **152**.

[0044] The control unit **102** further comprises an input device **108** for providing user inputs to the controller **502**. In some scenarios, the input device **108** comprises a joystick to command the vehicle's movement. In other scenarios, the input device **108** comprises a hand grip **110** movably coupled to a base **112** via a plurality of linkages **114**. The hand grip **110** includes a body **116** and a trigger **118**. The body **116** is sized and shaped to be grasped by the hand of an operator. The trigger **118** is movable between a rest position and a fully depressed position. In this regard, the trigger **118** is mounted on the body **116** so that the user can pull or depress the trigger using his or her index finger while grasping the hand grip **110**. Buttons **120** are disposed on the hand grip **110** for providing a means to control the grippers **220**, camera **222** and other operational features of the manipulator arm **106**.

[0045] As noted above, the UGV **100** and control unit **102** can be communicatively coupled to each other via the tether communication link **152**. The tether communication link **152** is facilitated by tether **154**. The tether **154** is retractable. In this regard, the UGV **100** comprises a spool mechanism **150** with a motor for rewinding the tether **154**. The motor is engaged and disengaged via the clutch **304**. A drag mechanism **310** is provided as an adjustable friction device. The particulars of the spool mechanism **150** will now be discussed in relation to FIGS. 6-13.

[0046] As shown in FIGS. 6-10, the spool mechanism **150** comprises a spool section **612** for receiving a length of a tether **154** and a base section **618** for attachment to the UGV's body **200**. Notably, the spool mechanism **150** can alternatively be attached to another object remote from the UGV **100** (e.g., the control unit **102** of FIG. 1). However, in some scenarios, it is desirable to have the spool mechanism **150** coupled directly to the UGV **100** for purposes of minimizing the risk of the tether snagging on an obstacle when paying out. The spool mechanism **150** can be coupled to the robot or vehicle at any location selected in accordance with a particular application. For example, the spool mechanism is coupled to a rear portion of the robot or vehicle so that the tether pays out as the robot or vehicle moves in a forward direction.

[0047] The tether **154** is formed of any known or to be known tether communication media. For example, the tether **154** includes, but is not limited to, a fiber optic cable or an electrical cable. The tether **154** has a length selected in accordance with a particular application. For example, the tether **154** has a length between 100-500 meters. The present solution is not limited to the particulars of these examples.

[0048] A tether boom **608** is attached to the spool section **612** via mechanical couplers (e.g., screws), an adhesive and/or weld. The tether boom **608** ensures that the tether **154** does not interfere with the UGV's movement or become tangled with the UGV **100** (or other object) while being paid-out and/or rewound. The tether boom **608** is formed of a rigid material (e.g., metal) or semi-rigid material (e.g., plastic). The tether boom **608** comprises a hollow tube through which the tether **154** passes. The interior surface of the hollow tube is generally smooth so as to not frictionally engage the tether when being pulled therethrough. A tether stop **604** is coupled to the tether **154** at its distal end **156**. The tether stop **604** ensures that the entire tether **154** does not rewind, or (stated differently) that the connector **602** does not become damaged during the tether's rewinding. In this regard, the tether stop **604** has an overall size that is larger than the aperture formed through the tether boom **608**. The tether stop **604** can be formed of any suitable material, such as a plastic material and/or a rubber material. In some scenarios, the tether stop **604** and/or tether boom **608** comprises electronic elements (e.g., sensors and communications components) to detect and provide notification of when they come in contact with one another during a tether rewinding process.

[0049] The male connector **602** mates with a female plug of the control unit **102** so as to facilitate a tether communication link between the UGV **100** and the control unit **102**. Electrical connector assemblies are well known in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail herein. Any known or to be known electrical connector assembly can be used herein without limitation. The base section **618** may also comprise an electrical connector **702** for enabling the electrical connection between the electronics of the UGV and the electronics of the spool mechanism.

[0050] A level wind mechanism **616** is also attached to the spool section **612** via mechanical couplers (e.g., threaded nuts), an adhesive and/or weld. The level wind mechanism **616** is generally configured for facilitating the guided criss-cross laying of the tether **154** on the spool section **612** which is rotated by a motor **610** during a tether rewind process. A clutch **1014**, gears **1016** and pulleys **1018** are also provided to facilitate the rewinding of the tether. In this regard, the level wind mechanism **616** is able to slide in two opposing directions along shafts **640** as the spool rotates. The direction of travel of the level wind mechanism **616** is reversed each time the level wind mechanism arrives at an end of the shafts **640**. Level wind mechanisms are well known in the art, and therefore will not be described here in detail. Any known or to be known level wind mechanism can be used herein without limitation.

[0051] The spool section **612** comprises a generally cylindrical spool body **902** for receiving a length of tether **154** used for communication between two communication devices (e.g., the UGV **100** of FIG. 1 and the control unit **102** of FIG. 1). The tether **154** is wound around the spool body **902**, and retained on the spool body **902** via two retaining plates **626**. The spool body and retaining plates are formed of a rigid material (e.g., metal) or a semi-rigid material (e.g., plastic). The retaining plates may be coupled to the spool body via an adhesive and/or weld. Alternatively, the retaining plates are integrally formed with the spool body (e.g., during a molding process).

[0052] The spool body **902** has an aperture **904** formed therethrough. The aperture **904** extends along a central axis **912** of the spool body **902**. The aperture **904** is sized and shaped to receive a longitudinal shaft **624**. The spool section **612** is rotatably coupled to a first side **906** of the base section **618** via the longitudinal shaft **624**, coupling plate **628** and couplers **630** (e.g.,

threaded fasteners (e.g., screws, bolts, and/or nuts). The spool section **612** is rotatably coupled to a second side **908** of the base section **618** via a protrusion **910**. Notably, the spool section **612** is coupled to the base section **618** such that its lateral movement relative to the base section **618** is restricted or limited. The present solution is not limited to the manner in which the spool section **612** is rotatably coupled to the base section **618** and/or the manner in which the spool section's lateral movement is restricted. There are many techniques known in the art for rotatably coupling a spool to a base and/or for limiting a spool's lateral movement. Any known or to be known technique for rotatably coupling a spool to a base and/or for limiting a spool's lateral movement can be used herein without limitation.

[0053] One of the retaining plates **626** has a plurality of holes **642** formed along its circumferential peripheral edge. The holes **642** are sized and shaped to receive at least a portion of a locking pin **614**. The locking pin **614** and holes **642** provide a means to prevent rotation of the spool body **902**. For example, it may be desirable to prevent rotation of the spool body **902** when the UGV **100** is being stored.

[0054] The base section **618** comprises a spool support structure **632** and an electronics enclosure **634**. The spool support structure **632** comprises two upward standing sidewalls **636**, **638**. The sidewalls **636**, **638** extend perpendicular to the central axis **912** of the spool section **612**, and are provided to support the spool section **612** during use (i.e., as the tether pays out from the spool and as the tether is rewound onto the spool).

[0055] A first sidewall **636** is designed to also support a brake assembly **606**. The brake assembly **606** provides a means to maintain and control the tension of the tether **154** as the UGV **100** moves away from the control unit **102** whereby the tether pays out from the spool. Notably, the tension (or drag force) is held at an optimized value while the tether pays out. This is facilitated through the use of a drag mechanism **1012**. In some scenarios, the drag mechanism comprises a brake pad. Accordingly, the drag mechanism **1012** is referred to herein as a brake pad. The present solution is not limited in this regard. Other known or to be known drag mechanisms can be used herein. When the brake pad **1012** touches the spool body **902**, friction between the two elements is created. The friction limits the speed at which the spool rotates, and

prevents the spool from rotating when the tether tension (or drag force) reaches a certain threshold value.

[0056] The optimized value is automatically or manually set via a drag adjustment mechanism **1002**. The drag adjustment mechanism **1002** includes, but is not limited to, an adjustment fastener **1004**, resilient members **1006**, a support bar **1008**, and a pivot point **1010**. Each of the listed components **1004** and **1006** are well known in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail herein. Still, it should be noted that the adjustment fastener **1004** is threaded so that it threadingly engages the sidewall **636**. The adjustment fastener **1004** can include, but is not limited to, a screw, a bolt, a threaded post, and/or a threaded nut. The resilient members **1006** include compression springs.

[0057] The support bar **1008** is formed of a rigid material, such as metal. An aperture **1026** is formed in the support bar **1008** that is sized and shaped to receive at least a portion of the adjustment fastener **1004**. A first resilient member **1006** is disposed along an elongated body of the adjustment fastener **1004**, and compressed between the adjustment fastener's head and the support bar **1008**. A second resilient member **1006** is disposed along an elongated body of the adjustment fastener **1004**, and compressed between support bar **1008** and the sidewall **636**. The resilient members and support bar provide a spring loaded support arm. A first end **1028** of the support bar **1008** is designed so that the support bar is rotatably coupled to the sidewall **636**, whereby the support bar is able to move in opposing directions **1022** and **1024**. A second end **1030** of the support bar **1008** is designed so that the support bar can be securely coupled to the brake pad **1012**. The brake pad **1012** is stationary relative to the support bar, i.e., it is not able to rotated relative to the support bar.

[0058] In the automated scenarios, the adjustment fastener **1004** is controllably mechanically rotated about its central axis **1020** to set the optimized drag force value. The mechanical rotation of the adjustment fastener can be achieved using a motor, gears, and/or linkages. In the manual scenarios, the adjustment fastener **1004** is manually rotated about central axis **1020** to set the optimized drag force value. The manual rotation of the adjustment fastener can be achieved via a screw driver, wrench or other tool.

[0059] The rotation of the adjustment fastener **1004** in a clockwise direction causes the support bar **1008** to rotate about pivot point **1010** in a direction **1022** towards the spool body **902**. The rotation of the adjustment fastener **1004** in a counter clockwise direction causes the support bar **1008** to rotate about pivot point **1010** in a direction **1024** away from the spool body **902**. In effect, the amount of frictional engagement the brake pad **1012** has with the spool body **902** is selectively controlled. The frictional engagement provides the tether tension (or drag force) set to the optimal value. The brake pad **1012** is formed of any suitable material, such as metal or ceramic.

[0060] The spool support structure **632** is disposed on the electronics enclosure **634**. The electronics enclosure **634** is generally configured to house the electronics of the spool mechanism **150**. The electronics can include, but are not limited to, signal converters for converting an optical signal into an electrical signal (and vice versa), signal amplifiers, a controller (e.g., a processor or CPU) for controlling operations of the spool mechanism **150**, a memory, and Input/Output (“I/O”) devices **644** (e.g., buttons, Light Emitting Diodes (“LEDs”), and/or connector ports). These electronic components communicate with each other via a bus. Instructions are executed by the controller. The instructions implement one or more of the methodologies, procedures, or functions described herein. The instructions can also reside, completely or at least partially, within the main memory or the controller during execution thereof thereby. The memory and the controller also can constitute machine-readable media. Each of the listed electronic elements is well known in the art, and therefore will not be described in detail herein. Any known or to be known electronic element can be used herein without limitation.

[0061] The operation of the spool mechanism **150** will now be described in relation to conceptual drawings shown in FIGS. 11-13. The spool mechanism **150** has three modes of operation: a Setting Drag (“SD”) mode; a Paying Out Tether (“POT”) mode; and a Rewinding Tether (“RT”) mode. The SD mode will be described below in relation to FIG. 11. The POT mode will be described below in relation to FIG. 12. The RT mode will be described below in relation to FIG. 13. The I/O devices **644** of the electronics enclosure **634** include means to select and change the operational mode of the spool mechanism **150**. This means can include, but is

not limited to, at least one push button, at least one switch, at least one knob, a keypad, and/or a touch screen (configured to detect human gestures including tap gestures).

[0062] Referring now to FIG. 11, a novel technique for setting an optimal drag torque **1104** of a spool mechanism is illustrated. The illustration of FIG. 11 includes the following components: motor **610**; a gearhead **1114**; clutch **1014**; spool body **902** with a retaining plate **626**; and level wind mechanism **616**. The gearhead **1114** can include, but is not limited to, a mechanical device used to increase the motor torque.

[0063] In order to set the optimal drag torque **1104**, the tether **154** is paid-out a certain amount through the application of a pulling force thereto. For example, 20 feet of tether **154** is paid-out. Next, the operational mode of the spool mechanism **150** is changed to the SD mode. The operational mode can be manually changed via the depression of a push button **644**. The operational mode can be automatically changed when a detection is made that a certain amount of the tether **154** has been paid-out. In response to the mode change, the clutch **1014** is engaged. Notably, the clutch **1014** allows for the selective coupling and decoupling of the motor/gearhead to/from the rest of the system.

[0064] The rewind motor **610** is then activated for causing the tether **154** to be rewound on the spool. In this regard, the rewind motor **610** applies a motor torque **1102** to the gearhead **1016**. This activation is achieved using a controller disposed in the electronics enclosure **634**. The motor torque **1102** has a pre-defined value. The pre-defined value can be stored in a memory of the electronics disposed in the electronics enclosure **634**, and used by the controller to control operations of the rewind motor **610**. In some scenarios, the motor torque **1102** is proportional to a desired drag torque generated in the spool mechanism as a result of contact between the brake pad **1012** and the spool's retaining plate **626**.

[0065] If a drag setting (or friction) is too high, the shaft **624** does not rotate despite the motor's activation. In this case, the amount of friction between the brake pad **1012** and retaining plate **626** is adjusted via the drag adjustment mechanism **1002**. As noted above, this adjustment can be a manual adjustment or an automatic adjustment. In both cases, an adjustment fastener **1004** is rotated in a counter clockwise direction to move the brake pad **1012** in a direction away from the retaining plate **626**, whereby the compression force applied by the brake pad to the

retaining plate is decreased. As a result of the reduced compression force, the friction between the brake pad and the retaining plate is decreased.

[0066] If the drag setting (or friction) is too low, the shaft **624** rotates in response to the motor torque at a relatively fast speed. This causes the spool body **902** to rotate in direction **1110** at the relatively fast speed. As the spool body **902** rotates, the gears/belts/pulleys **1016-1018** cause the level wind mechanism **616** to move along shaft **640** in directions **1106, 1108** in an alternating manner (e.g., left, right, left, right, etc.). Notably, the gears/belts/pulleys **1016-1018** are disposed in a sidewall **638** of the spool support structure **632**. In this regard, the sidewall **638** is designed with a housing having a cavity in which the gears/belts/pulleys **1016-1018** are disposed, as shown in FIG. 10. Also as the spool body **902** rotates, the retaining plate **626** rotates whereby too little friction is created between the retaining plate **626** and the stationary brake pad **1012**.

[0067] Accordingly, the pressure applied to the retaining plate **626** by the brake pad **1012** is adjusted manually or automatically for setting the drag torque to its optimal value at the present moment (i.e., the current time of day, humidity, temperature, level of dust in the air, etc.). In this regard, the amount of friction between the brake pad **1012** and retaining plate **626** is adjusted via the drag adjustment mechanism **1002**. As noted above, this adjustment can be a manual adjustment or an automatic adjustment. In both cases, an adjustment fastener **1004** is rotated in a clockwise direction to gradually move the brake pad **1012** in a direction towards the retaining plate **626**, whereby the compression force applied by the brake pad to the retaining plate is gradually increased. As a result of the increased compression force, the friction between the brake pad and the retaining plate is increased. The friction is increased until the spool body **902** just begins to stop rotating (i.e., when the friction is set so as to exactly or substantially cancel out the specifically chosen motor torque **1102**) and/or until the drag resistance is equal and opposite to the motor torque applied to the spool by the rewind motor. In some scenarios, the speed of the spool is reduced to a point where it is within a threshold percentage of a zero resistance speed. The threshold hold percent may be, for example, equal to or fall within the range of 1-40% of the zero resistance speed. As a result, the drag friction is adjusted to an ideal amount, accounting for current environmental conditions (e.g., temperature, humidity, etc.).

[0068] In the automated scenarios, a drag motor is provided to rotate a threaded element for gradually moving the brake pad **1012** in a direction towards the retaining plate **628**. A sensor is also provided to monitor the speed of the spool as the friction between the brake pad **1012** and retaining plate **626** is increased. A processor is provided to determine when the spool's speed is within a threshold percentage of the zero resistance speed (e.g., via a comparison of a measured speed to at least one pre-stored reference speed). In response to such a detection, the supply of power to the rewind motor **610** is discontinued and the threaded element's rotation is discontinued. The drag motor, sensor and/or processor may be additional components added to the UGV and/or may comprise existing components of the UGV (e.g., the motor comprises one of the track drive motors). The present solution is not limited to the particulars of this automated scenario. Other configurations can be employed to facilitate the automation of the above-described SD mode process.

[0069] Referring now to FIG. 12, the POT mode of the spool mechanism **150** will be described. Notably, prior to entering the POT mode, the optimal drag torque was set as discussed above in relation to FIG. 11. The illustration of FIG. 12 includes the following components: motor **610**; gearhead **1114**; clutch **1014**; spool body **902** with a retaining plate **626**; and level wind mechanism **616**.

[0070] In order to pay out the tether **154**, the operational mode of the spool mechanism **150** is changed to the POT mode. The operational mode can be manually changed via the depression of a push button **644**. If the mode changed from the SD mode, then the clutch **1014** is disengaged in response to the mode change from the SD mode to the POT mode. As noted above, the clutch **1014** allows for the selective coupling and decoupling of the motor/gearhead to/from the rest of the system. During the POT mode, power is not supplied to the motor **610**. Accordingly, power is not consumed and components **610**, **1014** do not move in the POT mode.

[0071] The distal end **156** of the tether is electrically connected to the control unit **102** via an electrical connector assembly **602**. As the UGV **100** travels in a forward direction, the tether pays out in a direction **1204**. The drag **1202** provides a constant resistance at an optimal level to prevent fouling of the spool when the UGV decelerates. As the tether pays out, the level wind

mechanism **616** moves along shaft **640** in directions **1106**, **1108** in an alternating manner (e.g., left, right, left, right, etc.).

[0072] Referring now to FIG. 13, the RT mode of the spool mechanism **150** will be described. The illustration of FIG. 13 includes the following components: motor **610**; gearhead **1114**; clutch **1014**; spool body **902** with a retaining plate **626**; and level wind mechanism **616**.

[0073] In order to rewind the tether **154**, the distal end **156** of the tether is electrically disconnected from the control unit **102**. Next, the operational mode of the spool mechanism **150** is changed from the POT mode to the RT mode. The operational mode can be manually changed via the depression of a push button **644**. In response to the operational mode change, the clutch **1014** is engaged. As noted above, the clutch **1014** allows for the selective coupling and decoupling of the motor/gearhead to/from the rest of the system.

[0074] Power is then supplied to the motor **610**. In turn, the motor **610** applies a rewind torque **1302**. The rewind torque **1302** is greater than the motor torque **1102** to overcome the friction between the brake pad **1012** and retaining plate **626**. The motor torque **1302** causes the spool body **902** to rotate in direction **1302** whereby the tether **154** is wound onto the spool. As the tether rewinds, the level wind mechanism **616** moves along shaft **640** in directions **1106**, **1108** in an alternating manner (e.g., left, right, left, right, etc.).

[0075] The tether is wound until (a) the motor **610** is turned off and/or (b) the tether stop **604** hits the tether boom **608**. One or more sensors can be provided to detect when the tether stop **604** hits the tether boom **608**. The present solution is not limited to the two described ways (a) and (b) of ending the rewind process. Other techniques can be used herein without limitation. For example, a smart device can be employed that determines when the motor torque increased above a threshold value or the motor stopped for the same amount of torque.

[0076] In view of the forgoing, the present solution provides systems and methods of setting drag of a spooling mechanism prior to a mission that guarantees precise, repeatable drag friction. This eliminates the risk of tether fouling and the risk of comprising a mission.

[0077] Referring now to FIG. 14, there is provided a flow diagram of an illustrative method for operating a spool mechanism (e.g., spool mechanism **150** of FIGS. 1-10). The method begins

with **1402** and continues with **1404** where a certain amount of tether is paid-out from a spool (e.g., spool section **612** of FIGS. 6-10) of the spool mechanism. Notably, a clutch (e.g., clutch **1014** of FIG. 10) of the spool mechanism is disengaged when the tether is paying out.

[0078] Subsequently, an operational mode of the spool mechanism is transitioned in **1406** from a first operational mode of a plurality of different operational modes in which a drag torque is not settable to a second operational mode of the plurality of different operational modes in which the drag torque is settable. In some scenarios, the operational mode of the spool mechanism is changed via user interaction with an input device (e.g., input device **644** of FIG. 6) of the spool mechanism. In other scenarios, the operational mode of the spool mechanism is changed automatically via electronics disposed within an electronics enclosure (e.g., electronics enclosure **634** of FIG. 6) of the spool mechanism.

[0079] In response to the spool mechanism's transition into the second operational mode, the clutch is engaged in **1408** so as to selectively mechanically couple a rewind motor (e.g., motor **610** of FIGS. 6-10) to the spool. Next in **1410**, the rewind motor is activated such that the rewind motor applies a motor torque having a pre-defined value selected for facilitating a setting of the drag torque to an optimal value. In some scenarios, the motor torque is proportional to a desired drag torque generated in the spool mechanism as a result of contact between the drag mechanism and one of the spool's retaining plates. The motor torque may act to rewind the tether onto the spool.

[0080] Thereafter in **1412**, an amount of drag resistance applied to the spool by a drag mechanism (e.g., **1002**) is mechanically gradually adjusted. In some scenarios, the drag mechanism comprises an adjustable spring loaded support arm (e.g., support bar **1008** and resilient members **1006** of FIG. 10) having a brake pad (e.g., brake pad **1012** of FIG. 10) coupled thereto for providing the drag resistance through sliding friction against a rotating element (e.g., retaining plate **626** of FIG. 6) of the spool mechanism. In some scenarios, the amount of drag resistance is adjusted by rotating the brake pad towards or away from the spool. The amount of drag resistance is manually adjusted using a tool.

[0081] When the spool's speed is within a threshold percentage range of a zero resistance speed [**1414:YES**], method **1440** continues with **1416**. In **1416**, the mechanical adjustment of

the drag resistance is discontinued. The supply of power to the rewind motor is also discontinued in **1418**. Although **1416** and **1418** are shown as being sequentially performed, the present solution is not limited in this regard. Alternatively, the operations of **1416** and **1418** are performed concurrent or simultaneously in response to the spool's speed being within the threshold percentage of the zero resistance speed. Subsequently, **1420** is performed where method **1400** ends or other processing is performed.

[0082] All of the apparatus, methods, and algorithms disclosed and claimed herein can be made and executed without undue experimentation in light of the present disclosure. While the invention has been described in terms of preferred embodiments, it will be apparent to those having ordinary skill in the art that variations may be applied to the apparatus, methods and sequence of steps of the method without departing from the concept, spirit and scope of the invention. More specifically, it will be apparent that certain components may be added to, combined with, or substituted for the components described herein while the same or similar results would be achieved. All such similar substitutes and modifications apparent to those having ordinary skill in the art are deemed to be within the spirit, scope and concept of the invention as defined.

[0083] The features and functions disclosed above, as well as alternatives, may be combined into many other different systems or applications. Various presently unforeseen or unanticipated alternatives, modifications, variations or improvements may be made by those skilled in the art, each of which is also intended to be encompassed by the disclosed embodiments.

CLAIMS

We claim:

1. A method for operating a spool mechanism, comprising:
 - transitioning an operational mode of the spool mechanism from a first operational mode of a plurality of different operational modes in which a drag torque is not settable to a second operational mode of the plurality of different operational modes in which the drag torque is settable;
 - selectively mechanically coupling a rewind motor to a spool of the spool mechanism by engaging a coupler in response to the spool mechanism's transition into the second operational mode;
 - activating the rewind motor such that the rewind motor applies a motor torque having a pre-defined value selected for facilitating a setting of the drag torque to an optimal value;
 - mechanically gradually adjusting an amount of drag resistance applied to the spool by a drag mechanism; and
 - discontinuing the mechanical adjustment of the drag resistance when the spool's speed is within a threshold percentage range of a zero resistance speed.
2. A spool mechanism, comprising:
 - an input element configured to cause a transition of the spool mechanism's operational mode from a first operational mode of a plurality of different operational modes in which a drag torque is not settable to a second operational mode of the plurality of different operational modes in which the drag torque is settable;
 - a spool having a length of a tether wound thereon;
 - a coupler disposed between the spool and a rewind motor, where the coupler is (i) selectively disengaged when the spool mechanism is in the first operational mode so as to mechanically decouple the rewind motor from the spool and (ii) selectively engaged when the spool mechanism is in the second operational mode so as to mechanically couple the rewind motor to the spool;

the rewind motor configured to apply a motor torque to the spool that has a pre-defined value selected for facilitating a setting of the drag torque to an optimal value when the spool mechanism is in the second operational mode;

a drag mechanism configured to apply a drag resistance to the spool; and

a drag adjustment mechanism configured to mechanically gradually adjust an amount of drag resistance applied to the spool by the drag mechanism, where the mechanical adjustment of the drag resistance is discontinued when the spool's speed is within a threshold percentage range of a zero resistance speed.

3. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein a certain amount of tether is paid-out from the spool prior to when the spool mechanism's operational mode is transitioned into the second operational mode.

4. The spool mechanism according to claim 3, wherein the coupler is disengaged when the tether is paying out.

5. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein the operational mode of the spool mechanism is changed via user interaction with an input device of the spool mechanism.

6. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein the motor torque is proportional to a desired drag torque generated in the spool mechanism as a result of contact between the drag mechanism and an element mechanically coupled to the spool's rotation.

7. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein the motor torque acts to rewind the tether onto the spool.

8. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein the drag mechanism and the drag adjustment mechanism collectively comprise an adjustable spring loaded support arm having a brake pad coupled thereto for providing the drag resistance through sliding friction against a rotating element of the spool mechanism.

9. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein a supply of power to the rewind motor is discontinued when the spool's speed is within the threshold percentage range of the zero resistance speed.
10. The spool mechanism according to claim 2, wherein the amount of drag resistance is adjusted by moving a brake pad towards or away from the spool.