Safe, Learning-Based MPC for Highway Driving under Lane-Change Uncertainty: A Distributionally Robust Approach

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***Abstract*— We present a case study applying learning-based distributionally robust model predictive control to highway motion planning under stochastic uncertainty of the lane change behavior of surrounding road users. The dynamics of road users are modelled using Markov jump systems, in which the switching variable describes the desired lane of the vehicle under consideration. We assume the switching probabilities of the underlying Markov chain to be unknown. As the vehicle is observed and thus, samples from the Markov chain are drawn, the transition probabilities are estimated along with an ambiguity set which accounts for misestimations of these probabilities. Correspondingly, a distributionally robust optimal control problem is formulated over a scenario tree, and solved in receding horizon. As a result, a motion planning procedure is obtained which through observation of the target vehicle gradually becomes less conservative while avoiding overconfidence in estimates obtained from small sample sizes. We present an extensive numerical case study, comparing the effects of several different design aspects on the controller performance and safety.**

I. Introduction

The prospect of significantly increasing safety and efficiency of traffic have motivated considerable research efforts towards increasingly advanced driving assistance systems and even (fully) autonomous driving. Due to their strong theoretical foundations and the ability to naturally include safety constraint in the control design, systems based on model predictive control (MPC) provide promising avenues towards this goal. However, one of the key challenges in planning and following safe trajectories among neighboring traffic participants is the large amounts of uncertainty present in forecasts of the traffic state in the near future [1].

This central challenge has led to the growing popularity of stochastic MPC formulations using models obtained through techniques from machine learning (ML) and statistics [2]. However, among all domains where ML techniques provide great promise, it is clear that autonomous driving is one where both interpretability, safety and reliability of the employed models are of vital importance. This is a concern with many commonly used ML models, in particular at smaller sample sizes. Indeed, it is well-known that optimizing uncertain objective functions under sample-based estimates of the probability distributions often leads to bad out-of-sample performance. This phenomenon is known as the optimizer's curse [3], [4].

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Code and illustrative videos are available at https://mathijssch.github.io/DRMPC-lane-change-supp/

Motivated by these concerns, robust approaches are traditionally considered as a safe alternative. Here, one would replace a probability distribution over realizations of an uncertain influence on the system by the worst-case realization over a prediction horizon. As such, only the knowledge of the support of the disturbance distribution (i.e., the uncertainty set) is required to provide *a priori* safety guarantees. The obvious drawback of such formulations is that, in practice, requiring robustness to all possible realization may be too strict. The resulting control formulation may be overly conservative, and therefore lead to severe loss of driving efficiency or infeasibility (situations in which no action or policy satisfying the safety constraints exists). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that overly cautious behavior may even reduce safety [5].

In order to capture the benefits of both approaches, while mitigating their respective drawbacks, we propose a distributionally robust control methodology [6], [7]. To do so, we consider a stochastic model of the joint dynamics of the agents in the immediate traffic environment assuming that the underlying distribution is unknown. In every time step, the proposed controller receives a sample from this distribution through observing the current state of the system. Using these gathered samples, the parameters of a stochastic model are estimated, along with statistical bounds on the possible misestimation of these parameters. Combining these two quantities yields a set of statistically plausible distributions over the stochastic process in the next time step—these are commonly referred to as ambiguity sets.

The controller then plans a trajectory assuming the worst-case probability distribution within this ambiguity set, resulting in a formulation equivalent to a risk-averse optimal control problem (OCP) [8], [9]. Initially, all ambiguity sets are expected to contain (almost) all distributions (leading to a robust OCP), whereas over time, the uncertainty on the estimated distributions decreases and accordingly, the conservatism of the corresponding control decisions is systematically reduced.

In this work, we focus on the task of highway path planning, considering stochastic behavior of the surrounding vehicles (target vehicles). We model the target vehicle states as autonomous Markov jump systems; At every time step, the driver of the target vehicle makes a choice of semantically meaningful driving behaviors, which we refer to as the *mode* of the system. In particular, each mode could correspond to a desired lane of the vehicle. Given the (randomly) selected mode, the continuous state of the vehicle is updated using a kinematic vehicle model. Repeating this over multiple time-steps yields a dynamically feasible state trajectory.

The choice of this model class is motivated by the typical multimodal nature of distributions of vehicle trajectories on highways [10]. Indeed, the majority of lateral position trajectories will be concentrated around the lane center lines, whereas only a small minority of trajectories will run along the separating lines between the lanes. By contrast, a Gaussian model, for instance, would typically assign the largest probability to the latter, as it will approximately correspond to the mean trajectory.

Furthermore, under this model, the resulting optimal control problem can be represented on a scenario tree, which allows us to optimize over all causal closed-loop policies without requiring a parametric approximation, reducing conservatism with respect to alternative

approaches, such as tube-based formulations [11].

The same class of switching models was used in earlier work [12], [13] for an adaptive cruise control (ACC) setting. In [13], this model is employed in a stochastic MPC framework. In [12], this was extended to a distributionally robust setting, where the transition probabilities were no longer required to be known *a priori*. In this work, we subsequently extend the work of [12] to a full path planning use case, which includes both longitudinal and lateral control as well as possibly nonlinear vehicle dynamics and (nonconvex) collision avoidance constraints.

We aim to impose these collision avoidance constraints in the form of conditional *chance constraints*. For numerical reasons, however, it is common to replace chance constraints by risk constraints [14]. This approach has been utilized before in the context of collision avoidance [15]–[17]. In contrast to these approaches, however, we do not assume knowledge of the underlying distribution here. To account for this, we follow the approach of [18] and impose *ambiguous chance constraints*, in which the risk level is adapted to the confidence level of the ambiguity set, to ensure satisfaction of the chance constraint with respect to the true-but-unknown distribution.

A. Contributions and organization

The main contributions of this work are summarized as follows.

1) We propose a simple, interpretable and extendable model for the behavior of target vehicles in highway scenarios. This model takes the form of a Markov jump system, which naturally models both the uncertainty inherent to the tactical driving decisions of the driver (represented by the discrete modes) and the more predictable nature of vehicle kinematics.
2) We present a distributionally robust MPC scheme for closed-loop path planning under probabilistic collision avoidance constraints. The true underlying distributions are assumed to be unknown. As the target vehicle behavior is observed online, the nominal transition probabilities are estimated, along with an *ambiguity set* which models the statistical uncertainty on the estimated distribution.
3) We carry out an extensive numerical case study, illustrating the effects of the involved design parameters on the behavior of the control system. This includes a comparison of several formulations of the collision avoidance constraints.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: In Section II, we describe the set-up of the case study. We describe the used vehicle models, and introduce several possible formulations describing collisions avoidance constraints. In Section III, we briefly review some technical preliminaries and introduce the MPC design. Section IV presents an extensive numerical case study of the resulting control scheme. Finally, in Section V, we discuss the most prevalent conclusions and suggest possible extensions and improvements for future work.

NOTATION

Let $\mathbb{R}$ and $\mathbb{N}$ denote the set of real and natural numbers, respectively. $\mathbb{R}_+$ ($\mathbb{R}_-$) denotes the set of positive (negative) real numbers. I_n denotes the $n \times n$ identity matrix. Given $a, b \in \mathbb{N}, a \leq b$, we write $\mathbb{N}_{[a,b]} := \{k \in \mathbb{N} \mid a \leq n \leq b\}$. We use $\mathbf{1}_d$ to denote a vector in $\mathbb{R}^d$ with all elements equal to 1. For some $i \in \mathbb{N}_{[1,d]}$, we denote by $\mathbf{e}_i \in \mathbb{R}^d$ the i'th standard basis vector, taking the value 1 in its i'th components and 0 everywhere else. Given a matrix P, we denote its ith row by $P_{i:}$. We denote by $[x]_+$ the positive part of x, i.e., $[x]_+ = \mathbf{max}\{0, x\}$, where max is evaluated element-wise.

II. MODELLING FOR HIGHWAY MOTION PLANNING

The following section describes the set-up and the models used in our case study. This involves the dynamics of the host vehicle, of *target vehicles* and the considered formulations for the obstacle avoidance constraints. Overall, we will consider driving scenarios on a multi-lane highway. For simplicity, we consider straight road segments. As our final controller does not rely on convexity or linearity of the involved dynamics, the set-up can be straightforwardly extended to more general curved roads by transforming all involved coordinates to a Frenét frame [19].

We will denote the state of the i'th vehicle in the scene by $x^{(i)}$. We'll assume the convention that vehicle 0 is the ego vehicle. The augmented state vector obtained by combining the states of both the ego vehicle and the target vehicles will be denoted as $\mathbf{x} = \begin{bmatrix} x^{(0)} & \dots & x^{(n)} \end{bmatrix}^\top \in \mathbb{R}^{n_x}$. The dynamics described below can similarly be joined to create a single dynamics model of the neighboring traffic situation.

A. Target vehicle behavior

The target vehicle dynamics are given by an autonomous Markov jump linear system (MJLS) [20] which has a separate driving mode corresponding to each lane on the road. Within each mode, the dynamics are governed by an autonomous system that drives the lateral component of the vehicle position to the centerline of the lane corresponding to the current mode and the longitudinal component to a preferred velocity (given for each lane). The state vector $x^{(i)} = \begin{bmatrix} p_x^{(i)} & p_y^{(i)} & v_x^{(i)} & v_y^{(i)} \end{bmatrix}^\top$ of vehicle i consists of the position and velocity in the (x, y)-plane.

For simplicity, the longitudinal and lateral dynamics are decoupled for these vehicles into two double-integrator systems, leading to dynamics of the form $x_{t+1} = Ax_t + p(\theta_{t+1})$, with

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 & T_\mathrm{s} & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & T_\mathrm{s} \\ 0 & 0 & 1-T_\mathrm{s}k_{v,x} & 0 \\ 0 & -T_\mathrm{s}k_y & 0 & 1-T_\mathrm{s}k_{v,y} \end{bmatrix}, \quad p(\theta) = \begin{bmatrix} 0_{2\times 2} \\ T_\mathrm{s} I_2 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} k_{v,x} v_{\mathrm{ref},\theta} \\ k_y y_{\mathrm{lane},\theta} \end{bmatrix}, \tag{1}$$

where we have dropped the vehicle index i for ease of notation. Here, $(\theta_t)_{t\in\mathbb{N}}$ is a Markov chain with (unknown) transition kernel P, taking values on the finite set $W := \{1, \dots, d\}$.

See Table I for a description of the involved parameters. We assume here that the parameters involved in (1) are given. In practice, data-driven estimates of these parameters would need to be obtained. However, this is beyond the scope of the current paper and considered for future work. We assume that at each time t, the mode θ_t can be measured, for example by means of the indicator lights of the target vehicle, its lateral motion, or a combination of both. See, e.g., [21] for a procedure to determine mode observations from the continuous state.

TABLE I: Symbols used in modelling the lane change scenario.

Parameter	Description
$k_y, k_{v,x}, k_{v,y}$	Internal control gains used to model target vehicle behavior
v_ref	Reference velocity
$y_{\mathrm{lane},i}$	Lateral position of the lane center of lane i
T_s	Sampling rate
l_r, l_f	Longitudinal distance from center of gravity and rear/front wheels
l, w	length ($l = l_r + l_f$) and width of a vehicle

B. Host vehicle Dynamics

The host vehicle dynamics are considered to be deterministic and known. We will perform experiments using a simplified linear model as well as a more realistic nonlinear model. In the first experiments, the host vehicle dynamics are modelled as decoupled double integrator systems in the longitudinal and lateral directions, similarly to the previously introduced target vehicle model. We will refer to this model as the **double integrator model**, the dynamics of which is given by

$$x_{t+1} = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & T_\mathrm{s} & & \\ & 1 & & \\ & & 1 & T_\mathrm{s} \\ & & & 1 \end{bmatrix} x_t + \begin{bmatrix} 0_{2\times 2} \\ T_\mathrm{s} I_2 \end{bmatrix} u_t. \tag{2}$$

Dynamics (2) describes the evolution of the state vector $x = [\, p_x \; p_y \; v_x \; v_y \,]^\top$, which represent the positions and velocities in the longitudinal (x) and lateral (y) direction with respect to the inertial road frame. The control actions $u = [\, a_x \; a_y \,]^\top$ describe the longitudinal and lateral accelerations of the vehicle. In this model, the longitudinal and lateral motion are completely decoupled, which, under a no-slip assumption on the tires, allows for physically inconsistent trajectories. Although in practice, we have not found this to be of major consequence this coupling can be reintroduced by defining a small constant $c > 0$ and imposing a constraint $-cv_x \leq v_y \leq cv_x$ as proposed in [22], for instance.

Later experiments use a more realistic and commonly used dynamics model known as the **kinematic bicycle model** [23], which is governed by continuous-time dynamics of the form

$$\dot{p_x} = v\,\mathbf{cos}(\psi + \beta) \tag{3a}$$
$$\dot{p_y} = v\,\mathbf{sin}(\psi + \beta) \tag{3b}$$
$$\dot{\psi} = \tfrac{v}{l_\mathrm{r}}\,\mathbf{sin}(\beta) \tag{3c}$$
$$\dot{v} = a \tag{3d}$$
$$\beta = \mathbf{tan}^{-1}\left(\tfrac{l_\mathrm{r}}{l_\mathrm{f}+l_\mathrm{r}}\,\mathbf{tan}\,\delta\right) \tag{3e}$$

with state vector $x = [\, p_x \; p_y \;\; \psi \; v \,]^\top$ (longitudinal and lateral position, heading angle and longitudinal velocity) and input vector $u = [\, a \; \delta \,]^\top$ (longitudinal acceleration and steering angle). In our experiments, we discretize these equations using a simple forward Euler scheme, although of course, more sophisticated integration schemes could readily be used for our control scheme, if additional accuracy were required. For simplicity, we will set $l_\mathrm{r} = l_\mathrm{f} = \frac{l}{2}$.

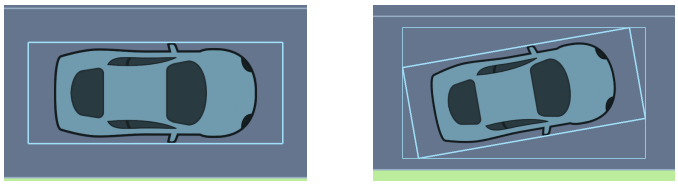
C. Collision avoidance formulations

In order to ensure safety of the obtained trajectories, we impose collision avoidance constraints in the optimal control problem. Suppose we are given the augmented state $\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^{n_x}$ of the vehicles in the scene. Then, the obstacle avoidance constraint will be of the form

$$h(\mathbf{x}) \leq 0, \tag{4}$$

where, in the case of a single pair of vehicles, the function $h : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \to \mathbb{R}$ represents a negative distance between the vehicles. Below, we propose several alternatives for the choice of this function h, assuming a single "obstacle" vehicle. In the case where more vehicles are present in the scene, the pointwise maximum of the resulting functions can be used. It is important to emphasize at this point that in the optimal control problem, the future states cannot be exactly predicted. Therefore, a probabilistic counterpart to (4) is enforced in practice (see (13)). This is discussed in more detail in §III. For now, however, we focus on the possible instances of the function h.

For the purpose of collision avoidance, we model vehicles using rectangular bounding boxes, as illustrated in Fig. 1. The bounding boxes can either be aligned with the longitudinal axis of the road or with the longitudinal axis of the vehicle. The former will typically lead to simplified collision avoidance constraints at the cost of some additional conservatism which scales with $|\,\mathbf{sin}\,\psi|$. Since $\mathbf{sin}\,\psi$ is typically a small value in highway situations, this is unlikely to cause significant losses in performance.



(a) Heading angle $\psi = 0$. (b) Heading angle $\psi \neq 0$.

Fig. 1: Bounding boxes around a vehicle. For a rotated vehicle, an axis-aligned bounding box induces some additional conservatism.

1) Axis-aligned bounding boxes:

a) Computation of axis-aligned bounding boxes: An axis-aligned rectangle can be represented as the set

$$\mathcal{B} = \{p \in \mathbb{R}^2 \mid \underline{p} \leq p \leq \overline{p}\},$$

where the inequalities are taken element-wise. Given a vehicle with length l, width w and state $[\, p_x \; p_y \; \psi \; v \,]^\top$, then $\Delta_y = \frac{l}{2}|\,\mathbf{sin}\,\psi| + \frac{w}{2}|\,\mathbf{cos}\,\psi|$, $\Delta_x = \frac{l}{2}|\,\mathbf{cos}\,\psi| + \frac{w}{2}|\,\mathbf{sin}\,\psi|$ and

$$\overline{p} = \begin{bmatrix} p_x+\Delta_x \\ p_y+\Delta_y \end{bmatrix}, \quad \underline{p} = \begin{bmatrix} p_x-\Delta_x \\ p_y-\Delta_y \end{bmatrix}. \tag{5}$$

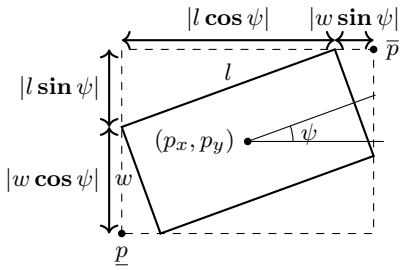


Fig. 2: Axis-aligned bounding box dimensions

Due to the absolute values involved, these quantities are nonsmooth functions of the state, which is undesirable for the purposes of numerical optimization. Assuming that each vehicle respects the driving direction of the road, we have that $\mathbf{cos}\,\psi > 0$, so that we may omit the absolute value. For $\mathbf{sin}\,\psi$, however, this is not the case, hence we will introduce an approximation.

In particular, we will overapproximate $\phi : x \mapsto |x|$ by slightly modifying the result in [24]:

$$\tilde{\phi}_k(x) = b_k + x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx), \quad b_k = \tfrac{W_\mathrm{L}(1)}{k}\left(1 - \mathbf{tanh}(W_\mathrm{L}(1))\right) \tag{6}$$

where k is a parameter controlling the smoothness as illustrated in Fig. 3 and W_L denotes the Lambert W-function [25]. The higher k, the better the approximation, yet the larger the second derivatives around 0. In all experiments below, a value of $k = 20$ is used. Replacing now $|\,\mathbf{sin}\,\psi|$ with $\tilde{\phi}_k(\mathbf{sin}\,\psi)$ in expressions (5) for $\underline{p}$ and $\overline{p}$, these quantities become smooth functions of the augmented state $\mathbf{x}$. Note, finally, that b_k is chosen such that $\tilde{\phi}_k(x) \geq |x|$ holds for all $x \in \mathbb{R}$ (see Appendix), so that the full vehicle is always fully contained within the bounding rectangle, regardless of the approximation quality.

Given two vehicles ($i \in \{0, 1\}$) with axis-aligned bounding boxes of lengths and widths $l^{(i)}, w^{(i)}$, it will be convenient to construct a

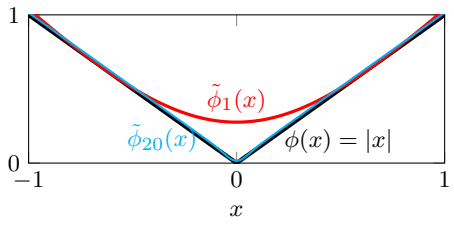
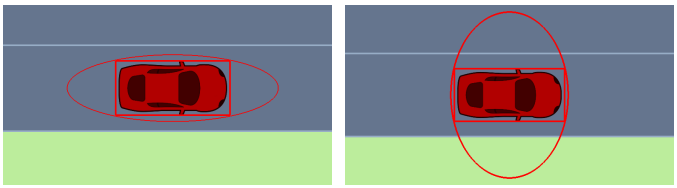


Fig. 3: Smooth approximation (6) of $|x|$ for different values of the smoothness parameter k.



(a) Elongated ellipse ($\gamma = 7$) (b) Widened ellipse ($\gamma = 0.5$)

Fig. 4: Ellipsoidal sets around a given bounding box $\mathcal{B}$, for different values of the elongation parameter γ.

single bounding box around the vehicle serving as the "obstacle" (by convention, vehicle 1). For a position $p^{(1)} = \begin{bmatrix} p_x^{(1)} & p_y^{(1)} \end{bmatrix}^\top$ of vehicle 1, this bounding box $\mathcal{B}$ is defined as before, with

$$\underline{p} = p - \tfrac{1}{2}\begin{bmatrix} l^{(0)}+l^{(1)} \\ w^{(0)}+w^{(1)} \end{bmatrix}, \quad \overline{p} = p + \tfrac{1}{2}\begin{bmatrix} l^{(0)}+l^{(1)} \\ w^{(0)}+w^{(1)} \end{bmatrix}.$$

Collision avoidance constraints now amount to the statement $p^{(0)} \notin \mathcal{B}$. This can be expressed in several ways. We discuss and explicitly compare two alternatives, which we refer to as the *projection* and *ellipse* formulation.

b) Projection formulation: A direct formulation of the aforementioned constraints is simply to express the distance from the current position $p^{(0)}$ to the expanded bounding box $\mathcal{B}$, i.e.,

$$\mathbf{dist}_{\mathcal{B}}(p^{(0)}) = \|p^{(0)} - \mathbf{max}\{\underline{p}, \mathbf{min}\{p^{(0)}, \overline{p}\}\}\|. \tag{7}$$

Then the collision avoidance constraint will amount to $\mathbf{dist}_{\mathcal{B}}(p^{(0)}) > 0$. For numerical reasons, however, it is necessary to add some positive constant $\epsilon > 0$ and instead impose (4) with

$$h(\mathbf{x}) = h_{\text{proj}}(\mathbf{x}) := \epsilon - \mathbf{dist}_{\mathcal{B}}(p^{(0)})^2. \tag{8}$$

Since this squared distance is only once differentiable, it may be numerically beneficial to approximate this formulation by replacing the **min** and **max** operator in this constraint with a smooth function as follows. Note that $\mathbf{max}\{x, y\} = x\mathbf{I}_{x\geq y} + y(1 - \mathbf{I}_{x\geq y})$, where

$$\mathbf{I}_{x\geq y} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } x \geq y \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

is the indicator of the predicate $x \geq y$, which can be approximated using a sigmoid function, resulting in $\tilde{\mathbf{I}}_{x\geq y} = \sigma_k(x - y) = (1 + \mathbf{exp}(-k(x - y)))^{-1}$, with $k > 0$ again some smoothness parameter (the larger, the better the approximation, but the worse the conditioning, due to increased curvature). We will refer to this approximated distance formulation as the **sigmoid approximation**. Experimentally (using the IPOPT solver [26]), this has been observed to improve the reliability with which the online optimization problem is solved (see Experiment IV.1).

c) Ellipse formulation: As an approximation of the collision avoidance constraint, we fit an ellipse

$$\mathcal{E} = \left\{ x \in \mathbb{R}^2 \;\middle|\; (x - p^{(1)})^\top E (x - p^{(1)}) \leq 1 \right\}$$

around the bounding box $\mathcal{B}$. Here, $E = \mathbf{diag}(\lambda_1, \lambda_2)$ is a positive definite diagonal matrix with eigenvalues λ_1 and $\lambda_2 = \gamma\lambda_1$, where λ_1 is computed such that the vertices of $\mathcal{B}$ lie on the boundary of $\mathcal{E}$, i.e., $\overline{p}^\top E \overline{p} = 1$, and $\gamma > 0$ is a freely chosen parameter controlling the elongation of the ellipse (see Fig. 4). The resulting collision avoidance constraint then uses the function

$$h(\mathbf{x}) = h_{\text{ellipse}}(\mathbf{x}) = 1 - (p^{(0)} - p^{(1)})^\top E (p^{(0)} - p^{(1)}). \tag{9}$$

Note that since $\overline{p}$ and $\underline{p}$ are functions of the vehicle heading angle, E is a function of the state $\mathbf{x}$. However, with the simplified *double integrator* dynamics, the heading angle of the vehicle is fixed at 0, so that the dimensions of the bounding box $\mathcal{B}$ are fixed and E can be computed offline. Similarly, for modest heading angles, E could be precomputed for the bounding box that accounts for the largest allowed heading angle. Nevertheless, since a closed-form expression for the parameters of E exists, their computational cost is negligible and we compute them online during our experiments, allowing us to account for the instantaneous orientation of the vehicles.

2) Arbitrarily oriented bounding boxes: If the bounding boxes of either of the vehicles are not mutually aligned, then the projection requires the following modifications.

a) Point-wise projection formulation: We define $\mathcal{O} = \{v \mid \underline{p} \leq v \leq \overline{p}\}$, where $\overline{p} = -\underline{p} = 1/2\,[\,l\ w\,]^\top$. Now the vehicle-aligned bounding box in a state $[\,p\ \psi\ v\,]^\top$ is defined as $\mathcal{B} = \{p + R(\psi)v \mid v \in \mathcal{O}\}$, where

$$R(\psi) = \begin{bmatrix} \mathbf{cos}(\psi) & -\mathbf{sin}(\psi) \\ \mathbf{sin}(\psi) & \mathbf{cos}(\psi) \end{bmatrix},$$

as illustrated in Fig. 5. An expression for the distance is then obtained from (7) as follows. If $\mathcal{O}' = \{Rv \mid v \in \mathcal{O}\}$, then for any point $q \in \mathbb{R}^2$,

$$\mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{B}}(q) = \mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{O}'}(q - p).$$

Due to the orthogonality of R:

$$\mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{O}'}(q) = \mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{O}}(R^\top q)$$
$$\Rightarrow \mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{B}}(q) = \mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{O}}(R^\top(q - p)).$$

Thus, the squared distance between a point q and the rectangle $\mathcal{B}$ is

$$\mathbf{dist}^2_{\mathcal{B}}(q) = \|R^\top(q - p) - \mathbf{min}\{\mathbf{max}\{R^\top(q - p), \underline{p}\}, \overline{p}\}\|_2^2.$$

Collision occurs whenever at least one corner of at least one vehicle is at distance zero from the other vehicle. For each target vehicle in the environment, this leads to 8 constraints similar to (4) with functions h of the form (8); one for every corner of every vehicle. The reduction of the approximation error thus comes at the cost of a moderate increase in computational demand of the constraint.

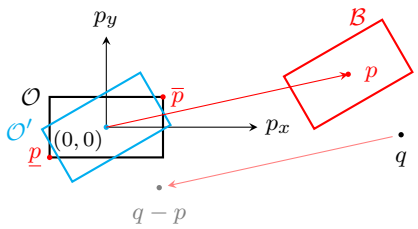


Fig. 5: Illustration of the distance to a regularly oriented rectangle.

It is worthwhile to note that many other collision constraint formulations exist [27]–[29]. In particular, preliminary experiments suggested that the method proposed in [28] performs similarly to the projection formulation. However, it introduces additional auxiliary

variables for every node in the scenario tree, inducing a visible computational overhead. For this reason, it is less suitable for planning over scenario trees and we have not included it in our final experimental comparison.

D. Physical constraints

We impose several constraints which enforce physically consistent or reasonable behavior and should therefore not be imposed probabilistically. The advantage of such constraints is that they can be imposed directly on the variables residing in the nodes of the scenario tree, without requiring a risk measure and the corresponding risk reformulation described in [9]. This reduces the number of auxiliary variables and constraints introduced in the final optimal control problem. We impose the following constraints in this manner.

a) Road boundary constraints: We impose that the lateral position of the ego vehicle remains between the road boundaries, i.e., constraints of the form $p_y^{(0)} - \overline{c} \leq 0$ and $-p_y^{(0)} + \underline{c} \leq 0$, where $\overline{c}, \underline{c}$ depend on the width of the road and the lateral dimensions of the axis-aligned bounding box.

b) Velocity constraints: We enforce that all (longitudinal) velocities remain bounded from above by some positive limit $v_{\max} > 0$, and from below by 0. That is, $0 \leq v^{(0)} \leq v_{\max}$ for the bicycle model and $0 \leq v_x^{(0)} \leq v_{\max}$ for the double integrator model (assuming that v_y is negligible, which is justified in the highway set-up under consideration).

For ease of notation, we concatenate these constraints and compactly write them as

$$g_{\text{phys}}(\mathbf{x}) \leq 0,$$

where $g_{\text{phys}} : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \to \mathbb{R}^3$ is an affine function.

E. Control objective

We conclude this section by specifying the control objective of the controller. The goal of the controller is to maintain a (given) constant velocity v_{ref}, preferably in the rightmost lane. To this end, we define a desired state x_{ref} and specify the quadratic cost function $\ell : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \times \mathbb{R}^{n_u} \to \mathbb{R}_+$ of the form

$$\ell(\mathbf{x}, u) := (x^{(0)} - x_{\text{ref}})^\top Q (x^{(0)} - x_{\text{ref}}) + u^\top R u,$$

where $Q \succeq 0$ and $R \succ 0$ (given in Table IV) are determined to penalize in every time step (i) the deviation of the lateral position of the host vehicle from the right lane center; (ii) the longitudinal velocity of the host vehicle from some target value; and (iii) the total control effort. If the double integrator model is used for the host vehicle, then $x_{\text{ref}} = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & v_{\text{ref}} & 0 \end{bmatrix}^\top$ is used, otherwise $x_{\text{ref}} = \begin{bmatrix} 0 & 0 & v_{\text{ref}} & 0 \end{bmatrix}^\top$

The relative weighting was decided mainly to compensate for differences in scale of the different state/input variables, but could of course be tuned more specifically to reflect desired driving behavior. We choose the cost to be a function of the host vehicle state $x^{(0)}$ only, but allow for more general costs as well, allowing to penalize high relative velocities between vehicles in the environment, for instance, which may help reduce congestions.

Finally, we remark that in general, the stage cost may also depend on the discrete mode θ, i.e., we have $\ell : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \times \mathbb{R}^{n_u} \times W \to \mathbb{R}_+$. This could be used to model changing preferences depending on the maneuver of surrounding vehicles. This poses no theoretical difficulties or additional computational cost. However, as this addition is not particularly meaningful for the case study at hand, we opt to simplify notation and disregard this dependence.

III. Control Methodology

We will now formally describe the motion planning formulation. As mentioned before, we formulate the decision making problem as a distributionally robust optimal control problem [18], taking into account ambiguity in estimated transition probabilities. In the following, we compactly denote the joint (discrete-time) vehicle dynamics as $f : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \times \mathbb{R}^{n_u} \times W \to \mathbb{R}^{n_u}$.

We will begin by introducing the related concepts *risk* and *ambiguity* in §III-A and then formulating the optimal control problem (14) in §III-B, which will be used in the case studies described further.

A. Risk and ambiguity

Let $(W, \mathcal{F}, \mathbb{P})$ denote the probability space defined by the finite sample space $W = \{1, \dots, d\}$, the set of all its subsets $\mathcal{F}$ and probability measure $\mathbb{P}$. A random variable $Z : W \to \mathbb{R}$ on this space can be identified with a vector $z = (z_i)_{i=1}^d \in \mathbb{R}^d$, where $z_i = Z(i)$. Similarly, the distribution over Z can be fully represented by $p \in \Delta_d$ with $p_i = \mathbb{P}\{i\}$, $i \in W$ the atomic probabilities, where $\Delta_d := \{p \in \mathbb{R}^d \mid p \geq 0, \mathbf{1}^\top p_i = 1\}$ denotes the d-dimensional probability simplex. A similar construction can be made for a stochastic process θ_t, $t = 1, \dots, N$ by taking the sample space to be W^N.

Interpreting Z as a random cost, a risk measure $\rho : \mathbb{R}^d \to \mathbb{R}$ represents a mapping from an uncertain realization of this cost to an *a priori* measure of its value. Trivial examples of risk measures are the expectation (corresponding to a *risk neutral* attitude) and the $\mathbf{max}$ operation (corresponding to a *robust* or fully *risk-averse* attitude). In particular, the class of *coherent* risk measures are of interest for most problems involving decision making [30, §6.3]. These risk measures satisfy four additional properties, namely (i) Monotonicity; (ii) Convexity; (iii) Translational invariance; and (iv) Positive homogeneity, which ensure that they exhibit characteristics that one would intuitively expect, e.g., if a random variable X is larger than Y with probability 1, then the risk of X must also be larger than the risk of Y. Coherent risk measures were originally used to represent the asymmetry in the preferences of decision makers. In most cases, an incurred cost that is larger than the expected value carries more weight than one which is smaller by the same margin. This notion, which originated in finance and operations research, but has recently received increased interest in the control and robotics community [17], [31]–[33], considers the selection of the risk measure and its parameters as a degree of freedom for the designer.

Alternatively, one may observe that coherent risk measures are intimately related to *distributionally robust* optimization through a well-known result, which we refer to as the *dual risk representation* [30, Thm. 6.4]. This result states that one can associate with each coherent risk measure ρ, a nonempty, closed, and convex subset of the probability simplex $\mathcal{A}_\rho \subseteq \Delta_d$ such that

$$\rho[Z] = \max_{p \in \mathcal{A}_\rho} \mathbb{E}_p[Z] = \max_{p \in \mathcal{A}_\rho} p^\top z.$$

In other words, the risk measure ρ can be written as a worst-case expectation over a set of probability distributions. We refer to $\mathcal{A}_\rho$ as the ambiguity set induced by a risk measure.

From this perspective, risk measures can be defined implicitly by constructing an ambiguity set, for instance based on statistical considerations. Given an ambiguity set $\mathcal{A}$, we denote the corresponding risk measure by $\rho_{\mathcal{A}} \equiv \mathbf{max}_{p \in \mathcal{A}} \mathbb{E}_p$. This approach has been applied in several different settings, under varying assumptions on the underlying system and data-generating distributions [12], [34]–[37]. In this work, we construct ambiguity sets as the set of distributions that lie within a given distance from the empirical distribution under

the total variation (TV) metric. In particular, we rely on the following well-known concentration inequality.

Lemma III.1 (Total variation bounds [38, Thm. A.6.6])**.** *Let $\{\theta_k\}_{k=1}^t$ denote an i.i.d. sample drawn from a distribution $p \in \Delta_d$, and let $\widehat{p}_t := t^{-1}\sum_{k=1}^t \mathbf{e}_{\theta_k}$ denote the empirical distribution. Then, for any confidence level $\beta \in (0,1)$,*

$$\mathbb{P}[\|p - \widehat{p}_t\|_1 \leq r_{\beta,t}] \geq 1-\beta, \text{ with } r_{\beta,t} = \sqrt{\tfrac{d\log 2 - \log\beta}{t}}. \quad (10)$$

This leads to the ambiguity set

$$\mathcal{A}_t(\beta) = \left\{\pi \in \Delta_d \mid \|\pi - \widehat{p}_t\|_1 \leq r_{\beta,t}\right\}, \quad (11)$$

which has the desirable property that the true distribution p is captured by $\mathcal{A}_t(\beta)$ with high probability, i.e., $\mathbb{P}[p \in \mathcal{A}_t(\beta)] \geq 1-\beta$. This property allows us to establish theoretical guarantees such as stability and constraint satisfaction of the closed-loop control system described in the next section (see [18] for details).

B. Distributionally robust MPC over scenario trees

We now move to the multi-stage setting, where we consider a Markov chain $(\theta_t)_{t\in\mathbb{N}}$, with $\theta_t \in W$, defined on a probability space $(\Omega, \mathcal{F}, \mathbb{P})$, which can be constructed as the product space of the probability space introduced in §III-A. Let $P = (P_{ij})_{i,j\in W}$ denote

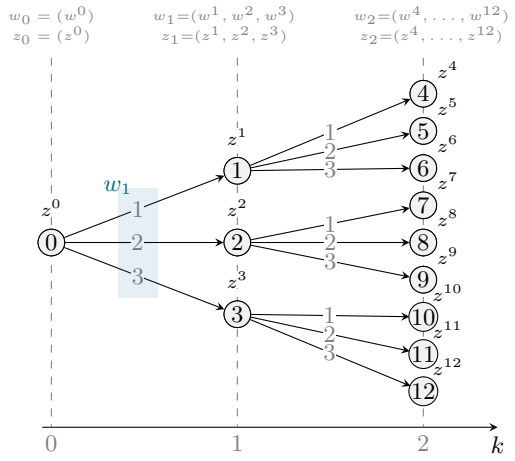


Fig. 6: Scenario tree representation of a stochastic process $(z_t)_{t=0}^2$ adapted to the filtration generated by the Markov chain $(\theta_t)_{t=0}^2$, with $W = \{1,2,3\}$.

the transition probability matrix such that $P_{ij} = \mathbb{P}[\theta_{t+1} = j \mid \theta_t = i]$ for all $t \in \mathbb{N}$.

Since W is a finite set, the possible realizations of a sequence $\theta_{[0,N]}$ can be enumerated and represented on a *scenario tree* [18], [39], [40]. Similarly, any stochastic process (z_t) adapted to the filtration induced by (θ_t) can be represented on the resulting scenario tree. We denote the value of z_t corresponding to a node ι in the tree as z^ι, as illustrated in Figure 6. The set of nodes in the tree are partitioned into time steps or *stages*. The set of nodes at a stage k is denoted by $\mathbf{nod}(k)$, and similarly, for $k_0, k_1 \in \mathbb{N}_{[0,N]}$, with $k_1 > k_0$, $\mathbf{nod}([k_0,k_1]) = \bigcup_{k=k_0}^{k_1} \mathbf{nod}(k)$. Correspondingly, we have $z_t = (z^\iota)_{\iota\in\mathbf{nod}(t)}$. For a given node $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}(t)$, $t \in \mathbb{N}_{[0,N-1]}$, we call a node $\iota_+ \in \mathbf{nod}(t+1)$ that can be reached from ι in one step a *child* node, denoted $\iota_+ \in \mathbf{ch}(\iota)$. Conversely, we denote the (unique) *parent* node of a node $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}(t)$, $t \in \mathbb{N}_{[1,N]}$ by $\mathbf{anc}(\iota) \in \mathbf{nod}(t-1)$. The nodes $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}(N)$ have no child nodes and are called *leaf nodes*. The unique node at stage 0 is called the *root node*. Finally, we will slightly abuse notation to write $z^{\mathbf{ch}(\iota)} := (z^j)_{j\in\mathbf{ch}(\iota)}$ for any non-leaf node ι.

Using this construction, we can proceed to formulate the optimal control problem for the ego vehicle. This problem, which will take the form of a *distributionally robust optimal control problem*, will be solved in receding horizon. At every time step, the realized value of θ_t is observed, and the involved ambiguity sets are updated accordingly, giving rise to a learning closed-loop control scheme.

Let $\mathbf{u} = \{u^\iota \in \mathbb{R}^{n_u} \mid \iota \in \mathbf{nod}([0,N-1])$ denote a sequence over control actions over all non-leaf nodes of an N-stage scenario tree. It is worthwhile to remark that the set of all such sequences suffice to represent all possible closed-loop N-step policies, without requiring a predetermined parametrization. Consider the corresponding stochastic process $x_t \in \mathbb{R}^{n_x}$, $t \in \mathbb{N}$, representing the system state and satisfying dynamics $x_{t+1} = f(x_t, u_t, \theta_{t+1})$, or, in scenario tree notation, $x^\iota = f(x^{\mathbf{anc}(\iota)}, u^{\mathbf{anc}(\iota)}, \theta^\iota)$, for all $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}([1,N])$. Secondly, let $\ell : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \times \mathbb{R}^{n_u} \to \mathbb{R}_+$ and $V_\mathrm{f} : \mathbb{R}^{n_x} \to \mathbb{R}_+$ denote some appropriate stage cost and terminal cost functions.

Given a sample sequence $\{\widehat{\theta}_k \in W\}_{k=1}^t$ from the Markov chain, the sets $W_{t,i} := \{\widehat{\theta}_k \mid \widehat{\theta}_{k-1} = i, k \in \mathbb{N}_{[2,t]}\}$ for $i \in W$ define i.i.d. data samples from the distribution $P_{i:}$, i.e., the i'th row of the transition matrix. Following the procedure described in §III-A, we can for each mode $i \in W$, construct an ambiguity set $\mathcal{A}_{t,i}(\theta)$ containing possible distributions over its successor modes. Storing the ambiguity sets (which are fully defined by their centers and radii) in the scenario tree, yielding $\mathcal{A}^\iota$, and correspondingly for all $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}([0,N-1])$, we can define at every time step, a *conditional risk mapping* [9], [30]

$$\rho_{|t}[z_{t+1}] := \left(\rho_{\mathcal{A}^\iota}[z^{\mathbf{ch}(\iota)}]\right)_{\iota\in\mathbf{nod}(t)}.$$

Using this construction, we can define a multi-stage risk cost

$$V(\mathbf{u}) := \ell(x_0,u_0) + \rho_{|0}\Big[\ell(x_1,u_1) + \rho_{|1}\big[\dots \ell(x_{N-1},u_{N-1}) + \rho_{|N-1}[V_\mathrm{f}(x_N)]\dots\big]\Big]. \quad (12)$$

Example III.2 (Cost function). To illustrate the practical computation of the cost (12), consider a prediction horizon of $N = 2$ steps and $W = \{1,2\}$, resulting in the scenario tree depicted in Fig. 7. The cost function can be evaluated through a backward substitution: The conditional risk mapping of the terminal cost $V_\mathrm{f}(x_2)$ is represented on the scenario tree as $\rho_{|1}[V_\mathrm{f}(x_2)] = (z^1, z^2)$. These values are stored in node 1 and 2, on which the risk mapping is conditioned. These nodes additionally store the values of the stage cost $\ell(x_1,u_1)$ for the corresponding realizations, which are subsequently added to the values z^i, $i = 1,2$. This process can be repeated, until the root node is reached, and the value $V(\mathbf{u})$ is obtained. △

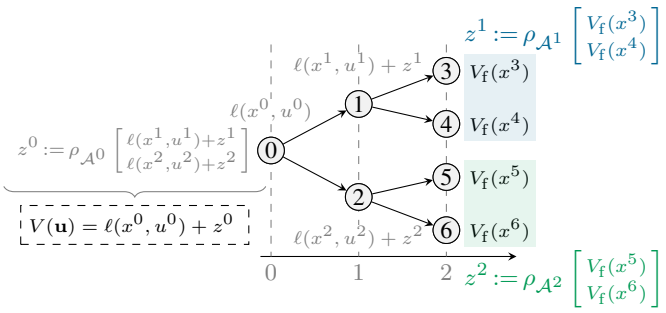


Fig. 7: Graphical illustration of the computation of the cost in example III.2 on a scenario tree for a prediction horizon $N = 2$, and $W = \{1,2\}$.

Finally, following [12], collision avoidance constraints are imposed as *ambiguous* conditional chance constraints. To this end, we utilize a popular coherent risk measure known as the *average value-at-risk* [9], [15], [16], which, for a given risk level $\alpha > 0$ and probability distribution $p \in \Delta_d$ is defined as [30, §6.2.4]

$$\mathsf{AV@R}^p_\alpha[Z] = \min_{t \in \mathbb{R}} t + \tfrac{1}{\alpha}\, \mathbb{E}_p\left[[Z-t]_+\right].$$

The use of ambiguous chance constraints can be intuitively justified as follows. Suppose that nominally (under full knowledge of the distribution p), we would impose chance constraints of the form $\mathbb{P}_p[Z > 0] \leq \alpha$. We can equivalently denote this by $\mathbb{E}_p\left[1_{(0,\infty)}[Z]\right] \leq \alpha$, as illustrated in Fig. 8. Since this function is nonconvex and discontinuous at zero, it is often approximated by its smallest convex upper bound $\mathbf{inf}_{t>0}\, \mathbb{E}_p\left[[1+tZ]_+\right]$ [14]. Constraining this function to be below α, in turn is equivalent to asserting that $\mathsf{AV@R}^p_\alpha[Z] \leq 0$ [30, §6.2.4].

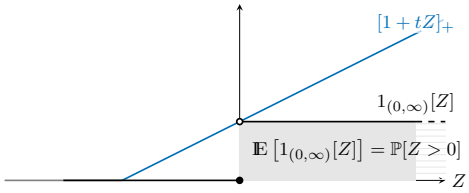


Fig. 8: Graphical interpretation of the AV@R risk measure as a convex over-approximation for chance constraints.

This, however requires knowledge of p, which is only partially available through the ambiguity set. For this reason, we impose constraints of this type robustly with respect to misestimation of p. In particular, this leads to the collision constraints

$$\bar{\rho}^\iota\left[h\big(x^{\mathbf{ch}(\iota)}\big)\right] := \max_{p \in \mathcal{A}^\iota} \mathsf{AV@R}^p_\alpha\left[h\big(x^{\mathbf{ch}(\iota)}\big)\right] \leq 0, \qquad (13)$$

for all $\iota \in \mathbf{nod}\left([0, N-1]\right)$, where $h : \mathbb{R}^n \to \mathbb{R}_-$ is some function of the state that represents a negative distance. Section II-C describes several possible choices for the function h.

For a given state x, we can now combine these components together with the previously introduced constraints in §II into the optimal control problem

$$\begin{aligned}
\underset{\mathbf{u}}{\mathbf{minimize}} \quad & V(\mathbf{u}) \\
\mathbf{subj.\ to} \quad & x^0 = x, \\
& x^\iota = f(x^{\mathbf{anc}(\iota)}, u^{\mathbf{anc}(\iota)}, \theta^\iota),\ \forall \iota \in \mathbf{nod}\left([1, N]\right), \\
& \bar{\rho}^\iota\left[h\big(x^{\mathbf{ch}(\iota)}\big)\right] \leq 0,\ \forall \iota \in \mathbf{nod}\left([0, N-1]\right), \\
& \underline{u} \leq u \leq \bar{u},\ \forall \iota \in \mathbf{nod}\left([0, N-1]\right), \\
& g_{\text{phys}}(x^\iota) \leq 0,\ \forall \iota \in \mathbf{nod}\left([0, N]\right).
\end{aligned} \qquad (14)$$

In typical MPC fashion, our proposed controller involves repeated application of the following steps: (i) solve (14) for the current state x; (ii) apply the resulting control action in the root node; (iii) measure/observe the new state and mode; and (iv) update the ambiguity set parameters and repopulate the scenario tree.

The ambiguity set (11) belongs to the general set of *conic-representable* risk measures, which allows us to tractably reformulate the OCP (14) as a standard nonlinear program, using duality-based techniques described in [9], [18], [37]. For more details on the closed-loop properties of this control methodology, we refer to [18].

IV. Numerical Case Studies

A. Exploratory experiments

This section provides some exploratory and qualitative simulation results which motivate some of the decisions made for the configurations of further experiments. Unless stated otherwise, the sampling time used for these experiments is $T_\text{s} = 0.2\,\text{s}$. The reference velocity was kept at $v_\text{ref} = 30\,\frac{\text{m}}{\text{s}}$. For other settings, we refer to the Appendix.

All nonlinear programs are solved using IPOPT [26], using the CasADI [41] interface in Python.

Experiment IV.1 — Collision avoidance formulations. As a first comparison of the effectiveness of the above collision-avoidance constraints, we run a closed-loop simulation of an overtaking scenario with a single target vehicle, shown in Fig. 9. For the time being, we employ **deterministic** model predictive control, i.e., we keep the mode of the (single) target vehicle fixed to the right lane, both for the predictive model and the simulation model. This allows us to isolate the effects of the choices regarding collision avoidance formulations.

Figure 10 gives an overview of the resulting trajectories of the ego vehicle with the different formulations. For the projection formulation, the solver occasionally returned an infeasible solution. In this experiment, we accepted the solution regardless, allowing the controller to correct using feedback in the next time instances.

TABLE II: Infeasible instances per configuration (out of 50).

		Projection			
	Ellipse	AA* (exact)	AA* (smooth)	exact	smooth
Double integrator	0	3	0	-	-
Bicycle	0	19	0	1	1

**Axis-Aligned*

In Table II, the number of infeasible instances are found for the different collision avoidance constraints (columns) and ego vehicle dynamics (rows). This leads to several conclusions. (i) The ellipsoidal and smoothened, axis-aligned projection-type collision avoidance constraints perform the most reliably, yielding no infeasible solutions. We conclude that this formulation is most numerically well-behaved, as infeasibilities are not caused by model mismatch or other sources of uncertainty; (ii) The sigmoid approximation for the projection-type constraints decreases the number of infeasible instances significantly; (iii) The exact projection-type constraint leads to infeasible solutions at a rate that prohibits corrections using feedback, leading to a collision in the closed-loop trajectories; (iv) From Fig. 10, the conservatism introduced by either the ellipsoidal constraints or the smoothing approximation seems insignificant.

This experiment, combined with similar test runs yielding observations consistent with the above conclusions motivates the use of the **ellipsoidal constraints** by default.

Experiment IV.2 — Ellipsoidal parameter tuning. A remaining degree of freedom of the ellipsoidal constraint is the choice of the tuning parameter γ, which determines the "elongation" of the ellipsoidal shape. The lower this value, the wider the ellipse. If it is chosen too low, an overtaking maneuver will be rendered impossible, as illustrated in Fig. 12a. On the other hand, if an excessively large value is chosen, the time spent in the non-preferred lane during an overtaking maneuver increases, with an increased cost as a result. This trade-off is illustrated in Fig. 11. For the current cost function, values between 7 and 15 were observed to provide the best performance.

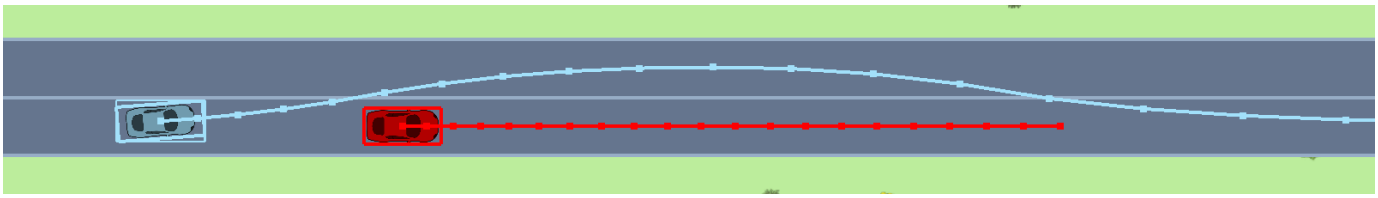
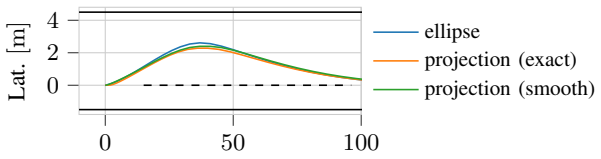
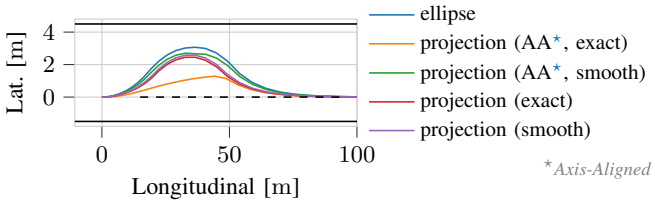


Fig. 9: Scene layout for the experiments in Section IV. (Blue: ego vehicle; red: target vehicle)



(a) Double integrator model.



(b) Bicycle model.

Fig. 10: Overtaking trajectories for different collision-avoidance formulations. The colored lines indicate the ego vehicle trajectories for different collision avoidance constraints. The dashed line indicates the target vehicle positions.

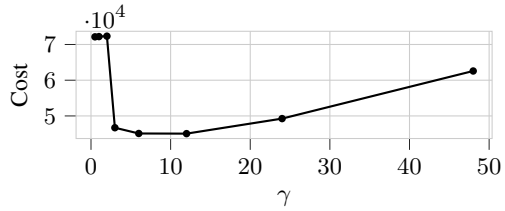
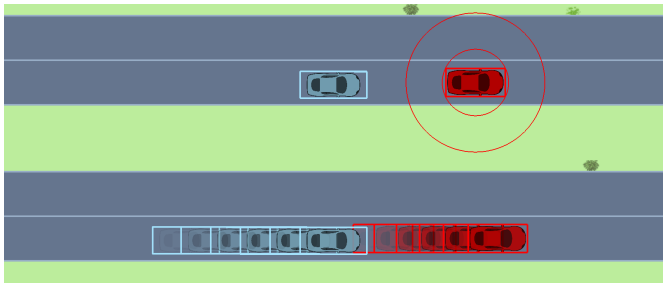
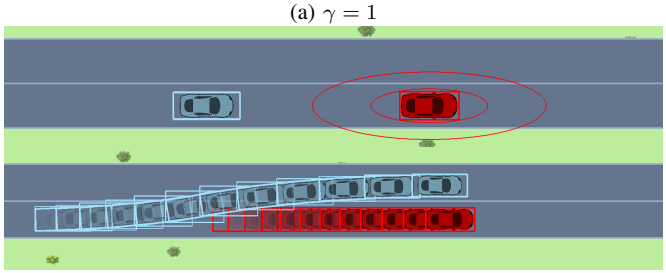


Fig. 11: Closed-loop cost versus the elongation parameter γ.



(a) $\gamma = 1$



(b) $\gamma = 12$

Fig. 12: Illustration of the ellipsoidal constraint sets and closed-loop trajectories for different values of the elongation parameter γ. The outer ellipse corresponds to the extended rectangle and delineates the constraint set for the center point of the ego vehicle. (Blue: ego vehicle; red: target vehicle)

B. Effects of sample-size and scenario tree topology on conservatism

We now move on to the setting where a (nontrivial) scenario tree is built for the predictive model and the full learning distributionally robust MPC framework is used for control. The following experiments illustrate the effects of two important parameters that control risk-aversion in this setting.

1) Deterministic target vehicle: We first study the behavior of the controller in a situation where the true behavior of the target vehicle is rather safe and predictable, i.e., it regulates to a fixed reference velocity in the right lane and performs no lane-change maneuvers, i.e., the transition kernel governing the target vehicle driving style in this experiment is $P = \left[\begin{smallmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 0 \end{smallmatrix}\right]$. Recall that the modes in this set-up represent a target lane, i.e., element P_{ij} in P represents the probability that at any time, the target vehicle will change its desired lane to lane j given that it is currently driving towards lane i. Thus, with this instance of P, the target vehicle will drive towards the center of the right lane with probability 1, regardless of the initialization of the Markov chain. The overall setup of the scenario is the same as in Experiment IV.1. This scenario is representative of a large fraction of expected driving situations and is therefore an interesting case to consider.

Under these conditions, it is evident that a deterministic MPC scheme would be optimal, since the mode sequence is fixed a priori and therefore, the deterministic predictions are exact. In these experiments, we will therefore refer to the deterministic controller as *prescient*. Since by construction of the driving scenario, the behavior of the target vehicle is predictable and safe for an overtaking maneuver, the interesting question is: *"How conservative is the learning distributionally robust MPC scheme in an inherently safe scenario, and does this lead to impractical behavior?"*

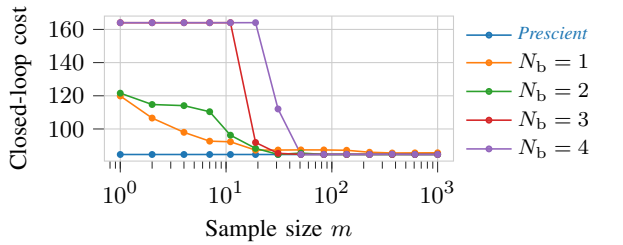
Experiment IV.3 — Conservatism versus branching horizon. The current experiment investigates the effect of the following two quantities on the conservatism of the collision avoidance constraints (13): (i) the amount of observed data from the target vehicle; and (ii) the branching horizon used in the scenario tree.

We simulate the MPC scheme in closed loop for the overtaking scenario and record its achieved cost by evaluating the stage cost at every time step and summing over the simulation run. To simulate the behavior of the controller after observing the target vehicle for some time, we sample a sequence of length m from the governing Markov chain to train the learning controller. Note that since we initialize the empirical distribution to the uniform distribution and the experiment is constructed such that $\theta_t = 1, \forall t \in \mathbb{N}$, the estimated probability matrix will be identically $\widehat{P} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0.5 & 0.5 \end{smallmatrix}\right]$, for any sample size larger than 1. Therefore, any difference in the behavior stems from the confidence on these estimates, as

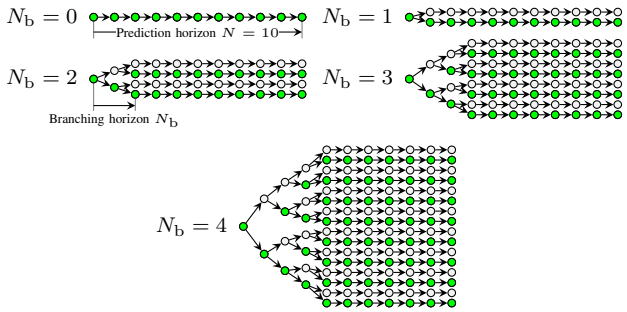
measured by the radii of the ambiguity sets.

Fig. 13 shows estimated closed-loop costs over a simulation versus this sample size m. As the sample size grows and the radii of the ambiguity sets shrink according to (10), the controllers become more confident about the prediction that a sudden lane change will not occur and decide to perform an overtaking maneuver, which results in the sudden decrease in costs in the figure. Note that the smaller the branching horizon, the more quickly this threshold is reached, as fewer potentially dangerous future situations are taken into account during prediction.

However, after roughly 50 data points – corresponding to 10 seconds of observation – even the most conservative design is able to perform the overtaking maneuver without violating its constraints, achieving the same closed-loop cost as the *prescient* controller. Meanwhile, this controller does plan with respect to a considerably more detailed model, which robustifies it against use cases where a sudden lane chance would spuriously occur. In contrast, a robust formulation, where the collision avoidance constraints are imposed in the worst-case realization, an overtaking maneuver is not feasible, as illustrated by the behavior of the distributionally robust (DR) controller at sample size $m = 0$.



(a) Cost versus sample size.



(b) Scenario tree topologies.

Fig. 13: Closed-loop costs versus sample size and scenario tree topologies corresponding to different branching horizons N_b and fixed prediction horizon $N = 10$ in the deterministic setting of Experiment IV.3. The colored nodes indicate modes where the target vehicle is predicted to move towards the right lane.

Experiment IV.4 — Prediction breadth versus depth. In Experiment IV.3, an increasing branching horizon was demonstrated to rather quickly yield optimal behavior in the case where the true underlying system is not exhibiting low-probability switching behavior, even though it improves resilience of the control scheme to unexpected behaviors.

Naturally, however, an increased branching horizon also induces larger scenario trees, and therefore higher computational costs. For this reason, we repeat Experiment IV.3 with (approximately) constant scenario tree sizes. That is, the prediction horizon (*"depth"* of the prediction) is traded off with the branching horizon (*"breadth"* of the prediction) such that the total size of the scenario tree does not change significantly — see Fig. 14b for an illustration of the resulting scenario trees. In doing so, we investigate whether it is beneficial to increase the detail of the prediction at a given stage at the cost of a reduced prediction horizon, given a fixed computational budget.

Fig. 14 shows that in this setup a degradation in the performance can indeed be observed whenever the trade-off is made too heavily in favor of *breadth* rather than *depth*. Although at sufficiently large sample sizes, the controllers with short prediction horizons are still able to perform an overtaking maneuver (note the sudden decrease in closed loop costs), they do so at a significantly slower pace, as only a part of the maneuver can be predicted at each time instance. This naturally leads to higher costs. Note, however, that until a branching horizon of 2, there does not yet seem to be a significant degradation in performance as a result of the shortened horizon.

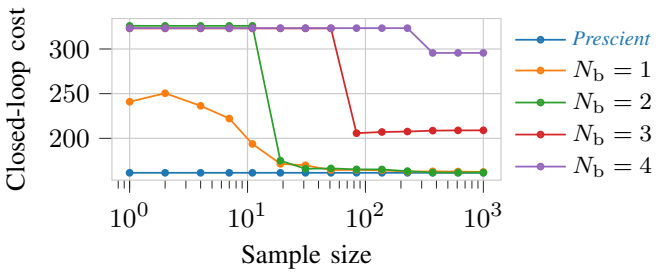
This suggests that there exists a minimal prediction horizon that is required to allow the prediction of the optimal maneuver. As long as the prediction horizon is longer than this value, the optimal behavior is obtained (given enough time to learn the governing distributions). By consequence, it is expected that as a larger sampling time is used, and thus the elapsed *real* time per discrete time step is increased, the lower this required horizon. Indeed, by increasing the sampling horizon to $T_\mathrm{s} = 0.3\,\mathrm{s}$, as presented in Fig. 15, the discrepancy between the results for different values of N_b is reduced considerably. It is however important to emphasize that despite the observed trend, the closed-loop cost need not increase monotonically with the branching horizon, as one may suspect from Fig. 14 alone. Indeed, in the case of Fig. 15 for instance, the controller using $N_\mathrm{b} = 2$ outperforms the one using $N_\mathrm{b} = 1$ at smaller sample sizes. It is therefore advisable in practice to fine-tune the exact choice of N_b to the application at hand.

We conclude that depending on the timescale of the use case, a minimal prediction horizon may be required in order to achieve satisfactory performance. In such cases, it may be beneficial to reduce the branching horizon by a number of steps to make this possible. An important caveat here, is that if a terminal constraint is imposed, it needs to be imposed at stage N_b for it to guarantee recursive feasibility of the scheme. As a result, N_b should be as large as possible in order to maximally enlarge the region of attraction.

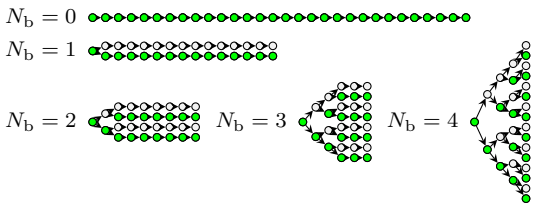
2) Stochastic target vehicle: Until now, the true behavior of the target vehicle was taken to be deterministic. In that case, there is no benefit to a learning-based stochastic controller. Of course, in reality, we cannot assume to have perfect predictions of the target vehicle behavior. This experiment aims to investigate the degree to which adding a nonzero switching probability between the lanes leads to hazardous situations.

Experiment IV.5 — Safety comparison with deterministic MPC. For the sake of illustration, we model a target vehicle that switches lanes rather often by taking $P = \left[\begin{smallmatrix} 0.7 & 0.3 \\ 0.3 & 0.7 \end{smallmatrix}\right]$. We repeat the previous overtaking scenario with stochastic target vehicle behavior for 10 times and record the number of times the solver runs into infeasibility for each of the scenario tree topologies and sample sizes.

Figure 16 presents the fraction of instances of the optimal control problem that were detected to be infeasible. Since the deterministic MPC controller does not anticipate any of the lane changes, it overconfidently attempts to perform an overtaking maneuver in most simulations, leading to many dangerous situations, and infeasibility in approximately 5% of the simulated time steps, on average. By contrast, the learning distributionally robust MPC



(a) Cost versus sample size



(b) Scenario tree topologies.

Fig. 14: Closed-loop costs versus sample size and scenario tree topologies corresponding to different branching horizons N_b in the deterministic setting of Experiment IV.3.

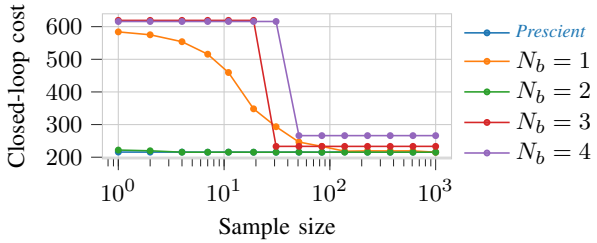


Fig. 15: Cost versus sample size for the scenario tree topologies shown in Fig. 14b, for a sample size of $T_\mathrm{s} = 0.3\,\mathrm{s}$ (compared to $T_\mathrm{s} = 0.2\,\mathrm{s}$ in Fig. 14).

controllers more accurately assess the situation and do not run into infeasibilities. An example of a trajectory leading up to infeasibility of the deterministic controller is given in Fig. 17.

The random seed for all simulations was kept constant so that one would expect the failure rate of the deterministic controller to be independent of the sample size. The apparent dependence of the results for the deterministic controller on the sample size in Fig. 17 are simply due to numerical errors. Indeed, visual inspection of the trajectories confirms that in some runs, the predicted state sequence lies very close to the boundary of the feasible set, so that a very slight deviation in solutions up to this time step may make it infeasible.

Finally, it is important to note that by careful selection of a terminal constraint set, recursive feasibility can be guaranteed for the distributionally robust controller, whereas this is not possible for the deterministic variant in this situation. This was demonstrated for an ACC use case described in [12]. There furthermore exists a significant body of literature on the problem of constructing invariant sets in the context of motion planning and obstacle avoidance, although most are developed with slightly different use cases in mind [42]–[44]. Comparing such approaches on their computational efficiency, conservativeness etc., is however beyond the scope of the current work.

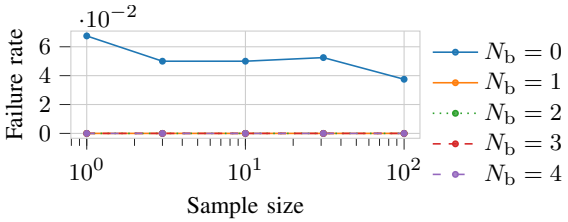
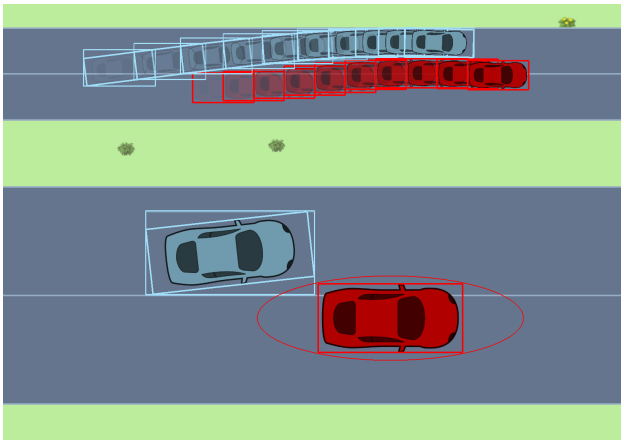


Fig. 16: Fraction of infeasible problem instances over 10 random simulations of 40 time steps. Note that the lines of all nonzero branching horizon results overlap at zero.



(a) Deterministic

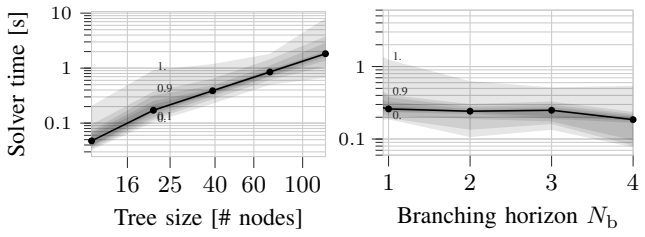
(b) Distributionally robust

Fig. 17: Snapshot of an infeasible state that occured during the simulation of the deterministic controller (a) and the corresponding state (and trajectory) of the distributionally robust controller (b). The latter correctly anticipates the dangerous maneuver of the target vehicle and stays behind it. (Blue: ego vehicle; red: target vehicle)

C. Complexity benchmarks

Figure 18 presents a summary of the computation times measured during Experiments IV.3 and IV.4 described above. In Fig. 18a, the runtimes are shown as a function of the tree size. Analogously to the convex case [12], the complexity of the optimal control problem is linear in the number of nodes in the scenario tree. Given a fixed branching horizon, it consequently grows linearly in the prediction horizon as well. However, the complexity does grow exponentially in the branching horizon. As a result, the choice of the branching horizon will therefore largely be dictated by the available computational budget.

As demonstrated by Fig. 18b, trading of the prediction horizon with the branching horizon in such a way that the total tree size (measured in the number of nodes) is preserved (as in Experiment IV.4) indeed has no significant influence on the computational load.



(a) Fixed prediction horizon. (b) Fixed tree size (approx. 25 nodes).

Fig. 18: Solver time (IPOPT [26]) versus (a) the number of nodes in the scenario tree, for a fixed prediction horizon (see Fig. 13b); and (b) the branching horizon in the scenario tree, for a fixed number of nodes (see Fig. 14b). The solid line depicts the median solver time over a closed-loop MPC run with the setup of Experiment IV.3, the shaded regions (from light to dark) represent the quantiles at increments of 0.1.

V. Conclusion and Future Work

We have presented a case study on the use of a learning, distributionally robust MPC controller for closed-loop path planning in a highway driving set-up. We have highlighted the most important design parameters and illustrated empirically how they affect controller performance, safety and computational load, among which a suitable trade-off is to be found, based on the concrete application.

This study has highlighted some of the desirable behavioral properties of the controller related to its ability to autonomously and systematically trade-off performance with caution. Combined with its strong theoretical foundations [18], these empirical results provide a promising foundation for future developments of distributionally robust MPC methodologies for autonomous navigation and other automated driving applications. Finally, we highlight several interesting directions for further extensions and improvements to the methodology.

A. Suggestions for future work

We identify several possible directions for further research on the topic, aimed primarily at extending the utility of the developed methodology to more practical, non-academic settings. We divide these directions into the following categories.

1) Computational:

a) Custom (parallelized) solvers: As demonstrated in the case studies, a significant bottleneck in the practicality of distributionally robust MPC techniques over scenario trees remains the computational load. However, in this work, only off-the-shelf, general-purpose solver have been used, without any exploitation of the underlying scenario tree structure. For instance, the increasingly widespread availability of GPUs, even in embedded applications, makes an appealing case for a massively parallelized approach towards solving optimal control problems over the individual scenarios within a tree. (see, e.g, [45], [46].)

2) Methodological:

a) Observers and parameter estimation: In the case where observations are made from continuous data (state or output measurements), with or without additive noise, an important question is how to determine the most likely mode to explain such an observation. This is particularly challenging in the case of nonlinear dynamics and additive measurement noise [21]. Furthermore, one would investigate how the misestimation at this level would translate into possible system-theoretic guarantees of the closed loop.

b) Time-varying distributions: we have considered static Markov chains to govern the stochastic processes. However, in real driving scenarios, the underlying distributions would likely be time-varying. In this case, the derived ambiguity bounds are no longer valid. However, empirical bounds based on cross-validation or bootstrapping could be considered, in order to obtain online estimates of the uncertainty, which could track relatively slow-varying distributions. A trade-off would then likely arise between the time window/forgetting factor in the learning scheme and the expected rate of change of the distributions. If the distribution is rapidly changing, the time window in which the observations are valid is expected to be short, which will likely lead to rather large uncertainty bounds in steady state. By contrast, for a slowly changing distribution, a long window of observations can be gathered, and therefore, the estimates are expected to converge to a closer estimate of the true distribution.

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APPENDIX

A. Computation of smooth approximations

Lemma A.1. *Let* $\tilde{\phi}_k : \mathbb{R} \to \mathbb{R}$ *be defined as in* (6)*. Then, for all* $k > 0$, $\tilde{\phi}_k(x) \geq |x|$.

Proof. We need to show that $b_k \geq \Delta(x) := |x| - x\,\mathbf{tanh}\,(kx), \forall x \in \mathbb{R}$. Since for $k \geq 0$, both $|x|$ and $x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx)$ are symmetric, so is $\Delta(x)$. Therefore $\mathbf{sup}_{x\in\mathbb{R}}\,\Delta(x) = \mathbf{sup}_{x\in\mathbb{R}_+}\,\Delta(x)$, i.e., we may assume that $x \geq 0$ and so $|x| = x$. Furthermore since for all $x \in \mathbb{R}$, $x - x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx) \leq |x| - x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx)$, the maximum of the left-hand side will be attained for nonnegative x. The constraint $x \geq 0$ is therefore redundant. Thus, it suffices to show that $b_k \geq \mathbf{sup}_x\, x - x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx)$. Let x be a stationary point of $x \mapsto x - x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx)$, then

$$\begin{aligned} & 1 - \mathbf{tanh}(kx) - \tfrac{kx}{\mathbf{cosh}(kx)} = 0 \\ \Leftrightarrow \quad & \mathbf{cosh}(kx) - \mathbf{sinh}(kx) = kx \\ \Leftrightarrow \quad & x = \tfrac{W_{\mathrm{L}}(1)}{k}. \end{aligned}$$

It is easy to show that the unique stationary point $\frac{W_{\mathrm{L}}(1)}{k}$ is indeed a local maximizer. Since, furthermore, $x - x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx)$ is smooth and bounded above, it is also the global maximizer. Since $b_k \geq \frac{W_{\mathrm{L}}(1)}{k}$ by construction, it holds that $x\,\mathbf{tanh}(kx) + b_k \geq |x|$. □

B. Detailed simulator settings

TABLE III: Default settings for the scenario

Setting	Value
Sample time T_{s} [s]	0.2
Transition matrix P	$\left[\begin{smallmatrix} 0.99 & 0.01 \\ 0.05 & 0.95 \end{smallmatrix}\right]$
Ego vehicle length [m]	4.5
Ego vehicle width [m]	1.8
Target vehicle lengths [m]	4
Target vehicle widths [m]	1.9
Max. velocity $v_{\max}$ [m/s]	40.0
Horizon length N	10
Branching horizon N_b	3
Ellipse elongation γ	7
(Nominal) violation rate α	0.05
confidence parameter β	0.05

TABLE IV: Default settings for the optimal control problem

Setting	Value	
	Double integrator model	Bicycle model
Min. controls $\underline{u}$	$[\,-6.5\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\;\;-3\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\,]^\top$	$[\,-6.4\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\;\;-3^\circ\,]^\top$
Max. controls $\overline{u}$	$[\,5.4\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\;\;3\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\,]^\top$	$[\,5.4\,\mathrm{m/s^2}\;\;3^\circ\,]^\top$
Stage cost state weights Q	$\mathbf{diag}(0, 2, 1, 1)$	$\mathbf{diag}(0, 2, 100, 5)$
Stage cost input weights R	I_2	$\left[\begin{smallmatrix} 1 & \\ & 10 \end{smallmatrix}\right]$
Reference state x_{ref}	$[\,0\;0\;30\;0\,]^\top$	$[\,0\;0\;0\;30\,]^\top$