

Engineering Notes

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Relative Semimajor Axis Uncertainty in High Earth Orbits

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I. Introduction

SEVERAL proposed missions have identified satellite formation flying in high Earth orbit (HEO) as an enabling technology for increasing the science return while decreasing total mission risk [1,2]. Precision formation flying in HEO requires accurate estimation of the semimajor axis difference between the vehicles for state prediction, formation control, and formation maneuver planning [3–5]. This Note derives the complete linearized mapping relating relative position and velocity error to semimajor axis uncertainty for HEO formations.

The majority of relative navigation filters estimate the state of the secondary vehicle with respect to the primary in Cartesian position and velocity coordinates [6–13]. The uncertainty in the semimajor axis is found by rotating the estimated position and velocity covariance into orbital element space. Carpenter and Schiesser [3] presented the complete linearized relationship between absolute position and velocity uncertainty and semimajor axis error; however, the form of their result is not particularly intuitive. Carpenter and Alfriend [4] used a similar method to develop a simplified expression for the semimajor axis uncertainty that assumes the radial position and velocity and in-track velocity are the primary contributions. However, this assumption is not justified for eccentric orbits. The generalized relationship between relative position and velocity uncertainty and semimajor axis uncertainty is derived here explicitly. The resulting equation shows that the semimajor axis error is dependent on all of the coplanar position and velocity uncertainties in highly eccentric orbits.

The coordinate frames that form the foundation of this research are described in Sec. II. The generalized relationship between position and velocity error and semimajor axis uncertainty is derived in Sec. III, and the conclusions are summarized in Sec. IV.

II. Coordinate Frames

A. Relative Keplerian Element Frame

Consider the motion of two vehicles in nearby eccentric orbits. The trajectory of the primary vehicle, termed the chief, is described

by the classical set of Keplerian elements

$$\alpha_* = [a_* \quad e_* \quad i_* \quad \Omega_* \quad \omega_* \quad M_*]^T$$

where a is the semimajor axis, e is the eccentricity, i is the inclination, Ω is the right ascension of the ascending node, ω is the argument of perigee, and M is the mean anomaly. Note the subscript $*$ is used to designate properties of the chief. The trajectory of the secondary vehicle, termed the deputy, is similarly defined by the set of Keplerian elements

$$\alpha = [a \quad e \quad i \quad \Omega \quad \omega \quad M]^T$$

Thus, the relative state of the deputy with respect to the chief in the relative Keplerian element (RKE) frame is

$$\delta\alpha = \alpha - \alpha_* = [\delta a \quad \delta e \quad \delta i \quad \delta\Omega \quad \delta\omega \quad \delta M]^T$$

where it is well known that in certain orbital geometries some Keplerian elements are ill defined [14,15]. In particular, if $e = 0$, then ω is undefined and if $i = 0$, then Ω is undefined. Alternate sets of orbital elements that avoid these singularities can be implemented if the orbit of interest is problematic [14,15]. However, only inclined, eccentric orbits are considered here, and thus, the traditional set of Keplerian elements a , e , i , Ω , ω , and M are used for clarity.

B. Curvilinear Radial, In-track, and Cross-Track Frame

The curvilinear radial, in-track, and cross-track (RIC) frame is shown in Fig. 1. It is a noninertial frame centered at the chief and defined by the following basis vectors and their time derivatives [15,16]:

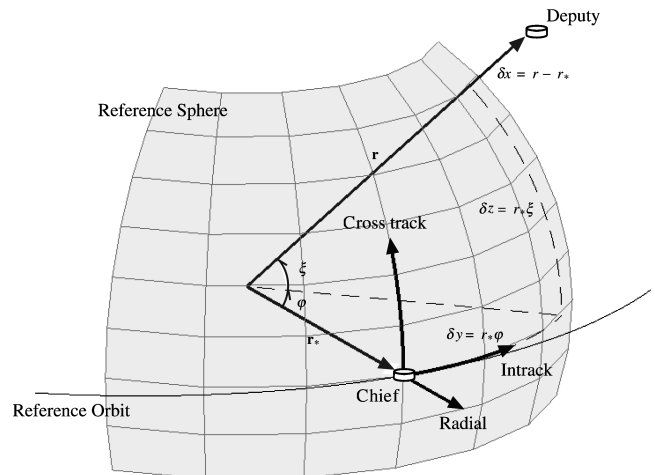


Fig. 1 The radial, in-track, and cross-track (RIC) frame.

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$$\begin{aligned}
\mathbf{R}_* &\equiv \frac{\mathbf{r}_*}{r_*}, & \mathbf{C}_* &\equiv \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*}{|\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*|}, & \mathbf{I}_* &\equiv \mathbf{C}_* \times \mathbf{R}_* \\
\frac{d\mathbf{R}_*}{dt} &= \frac{\mathbf{v}_*}{r_*} - \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \cdot \mathbf{v}_*}{r_*^3} \mathbf{r}_* \\
\frac{d\mathbf{C}_*}{dt} &= \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{a}_*}{|\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*|} - \frac{(\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*) \cdot (\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{a}_*)}{|\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*|^3} (\mathbf{r}_* \times \mathbf{v}_*) \\
\frac{d\mathbf{I}_*}{dt} &= \frac{d\mathbf{C}_*}{dt} \times \mathbf{R}_* + \mathbf{C}_* \times \frac{d\mathbf{R}_*}{dt}
\end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

where \mathbf{r} , \mathbf{v} , and \mathbf{a} are the Earth-centered-inertial (ECI) position, velocity, and acceleration vectors, respectively, of the vehicle and $r = |\mathbf{r}|$. In Fig. 1, a reference sphere of radius r_* is defined, tangent to the $\mathbf{I} - \mathbf{C}$ plane at the chief. The radial component of the relative position δx is the difference between r and r_* ; the curvilinear intrack and cross-track relative positions, δy and δz , are measured along the surface of the sphere as indicated in the figure. Mathematically, they are defined as follows [15–18]. The radial component δx is given by

$$\delta x = r - r_*, \quad \delta \dot{x} = \frac{\mathbf{r} \cdot \mathbf{v}}{r} - \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \cdot \mathbf{v}_*}{r_*} \quad (2)$$

The intrack component δy is given by

$$\delta y = r_* \varphi, \quad \delta \dot{y} = \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \cdot \mathbf{v}_*}{r_*} \varphi + r_* \dot{\varphi} \quad (3)$$

where

$$\tan(\varphi) = \frac{\mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{I}_*}{\mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{R}_*}$$

and

$$\begin{aligned}
\dot{\varphi} &= \frac{1}{1 + \tan^2(\varphi)} \left[\frac{1}{\mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{R}_*} \left(\mathbf{R} \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{I}_*}{dt} + \frac{d\mathbf{R}}{dt} \cdot \mathbf{I}_* \right) \right. \\
&\quad \left. - \frac{\mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{I}_*}{(\mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{R}_*)^2} \left(\mathbf{R} \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{R}_*}{dt} + \frac{d\mathbf{R}}{dt} \cdot \mathbf{R}_* \right) \right]
\end{aligned}$$

The cross-track component δz is given by

$$\delta z = r_* \xi, \quad \delta \dot{z} = \frac{\mathbf{r}_* \cdot \mathbf{v}_*}{r_*} \xi + r_* \dot{\xi} \quad (4)$$

where

$$\sin(\xi) = \mathbf{R} \cdot \mathbf{C}_*$$

and

$$\dot{\xi} = \frac{1}{\cos(\xi)} \left(\mathbf{R} \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{C}_*}{dt} + \frac{d\mathbf{R}}{dt} \cdot \mathbf{C}_* \right)$$

Thus, the relative state of the deputy with respect to the chief in the curvilinear RIC frame is

$$\delta \mathbf{X} = [\delta x \quad \delta y \quad \delta z \quad \delta \dot{x} \quad \delta \dot{y} \quad \delta \dot{z}]^T$$

III. Covariance Transformation

Let $\hat{\delta \mathbf{X}}$ denote the linear, unbiased, minimum variance estimate of the true state $\delta \mathbf{X}$ and $P_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$ the associated estimation error covariance matrix [19],

$$\begin{aligned}
P_{\delta \mathbf{X}} &\equiv E[(\hat{\delta \mathbf{X}} - \delta \mathbf{X})(\hat{\delta \mathbf{X}} - \delta \mathbf{X})^T] \\
&= \begin{bmatrix} \sigma_{\delta x}^2 & \rho_{\delta x \delta y} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta y} & \cdots & \rho_{\delta x \delta z} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta z} \\ \rho_{\delta x \delta y} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta y} & \sigma_{\delta y}^2 & \cdots & \rho_{\delta y \delta z} \sigma_{\delta y} \sigma_{\delta z} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \rho_{\delta x \delta z} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta z} & \rho_{\delta y \delta z} \sigma_{\delta y} \sigma_{\delta z} & \cdots & \sigma_{\delta z}^2 \end{bmatrix}
\end{aligned}$$

where the diagonal elements represent the variance of the estimation

error and the off-diagonal terms are a measure of the cross correlation between the estimated uncertainties. The covariance matrix in the RKE frame, $P_{\delta \alpha}$, can be similarly defined as

$$\begin{aligned}
P_{\delta \alpha} &\equiv E[(\hat{\delta \alpha} - \delta \alpha)(\hat{\delta \alpha} - \delta \alpha)^T] \\
&= \begin{bmatrix} \sigma_{\delta a}^2 & \rho_{\delta a \delta e} \sigma_{\delta a} \sigma_{\delta e} & \cdots & \rho_{\delta a \delta M} \sigma_{\delta a} \sigma_{\delta M} \\ \rho_{\delta a \delta e} \sigma_{\delta a} \sigma_{\delta e} & \sigma_{\delta e}^2 & \cdots & \rho_{\delta e \delta M} \sigma_{\delta e} \sigma_{\delta M} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \rho_{\delta a \delta M} \sigma_{\delta a} \sigma_{\delta M} & \rho_{\delta e \delta M} \sigma_{\delta e} \sigma_{\delta M} & \cdots & \sigma_{\delta M}^2 \end{bmatrix}
\end{aligned}$$

where $\hat{\delta \alpha}$ is the linear, unbiased, minimum variance estimate of $\delta \alpha$.

Relative filters typically provide an estimate of $\delta \mathbf{X}$ and $P_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$. The uncertainty in the relative semimajor axis can be obtained by rotating $P_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$ into the RKE frame using the linear transformation

$$[P_{\delta \alpha}]_{\delta \mathbf{X}} = \Gamma_*^{-1} P_{\delta \mathbf{X}} \Gamma_*^{-T} \quad (5)$$

where $[P_{\delta \alpha}]_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$ is the linear approximation of $P_{\delta \alpha}$ given $P_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$, and Γ_*^{-1} is the inverse of the mapping matrix relating $\delta \mathbf{X}$ to $\delta \alpha$,

$$\delta \mathbf{X} \approx \Gamma_* \delta \alpha$$

A brief development of Γ_* and Γ_*^{-1} is presented in the Appendix; the complete derivation is found in Lane and Axelrad [16]. Note similar equations relating $\delta \mathbf{X}$ and $\delta \alpha$ are found in [17,18,20–22].

Evaluating Eq. (5) using the results from the Appendix yields the following expression for the relative semimajor axis uncertainty as a function of the elements of $P_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$:

$$\begin{aligned}
[\sigma_{\delta a}]_{\delta \mathbf{X}} &\approx \frac{4[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2}{1 - e_*^2} \left\{ \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2 [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2}{(1 - e_*^2)^3} \sigma_{\delta x}^2 \right. \\
&\quad \left. + 2 \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)][1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]}{n_*(1 - e_*^2)^{3/2}} \rho_{\delta x \delta y} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta y} + \frac{1}{n_*^2} \sigma_{\delta y}^2 \right\} \\
&\quad - \frac{8[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]e_* \sin(v_*)}{1 - e_*^2} \left\{ \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)][1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^3}{(1 - e_*^2)^3} \right. \\
&\quad \times \rho_{\delta x \delta y} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta y} - \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)][1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]}{n_*(1 - e_*^2)^{3/2}} \rho_{\delta x \delta \dot{x}} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta \dot{x}} \\
&\quad \left. + \frac{[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2}{n_*(1 - e_*^2)^{3/2}} \rho_{\delta y \delta \dot{y}} \sigma_{\delta y} \sigma_{\delta \dot{y}} - \frac{1}{n_*^2} \rho_{\delta \dot{x} \delta \dot{y}} \sigma_{\delta \dot{x}} \sigma_{\delta \dot{y}} \right\} \\
&\quad + \frac{4e_*^2 \sin^2(v_*)}{1 - e_*^2} \left\{ \frac{[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^4}{(1 - e_*^2)^3} \sigma_{\delta y}^2 \right. \\
&\quad \left. - 2 \frac{[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2}{n_*(1 - e_*^2)^{3/2}} \rho_{\delta y \delta \dot{x}} \sigma_{\delta y} \sigma_{\delta \dot{x}} + \frac{1}{n_*^2} \sigma_{\delta \dot{x}}^2 \right\} \quad (6)
\end{aligned}$$

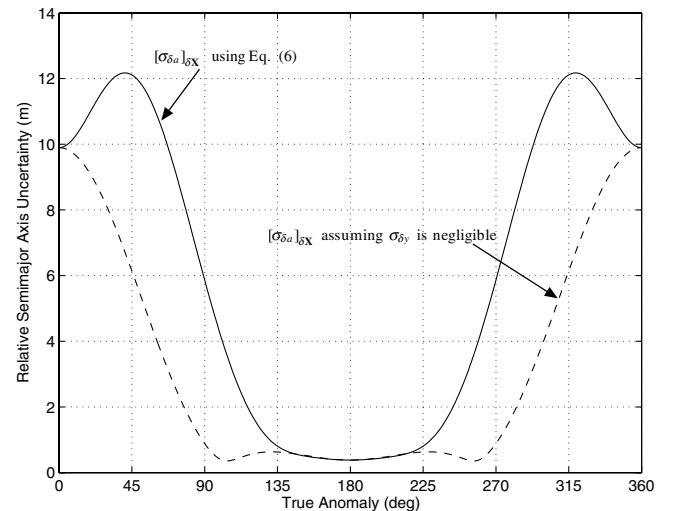


Fig. 2 Comparison of relative semimajor axis uncertainty for $a_* = 42,096$ km, $e_* = 0.8$, $\sigma_{\delta x} = 0.1$ m, $\sigma_{\delta y} = 0.5$ m, $\sigma_{\delta \dot{x}} = 0.01$ mm/s, and $\sigma_{\delta \dot{y}} = 0.05$ mm/s.

where n_* is the mean motion of the reference orbit. The accuracy of Eq. (6) depends on the validity of the mapping matrix Γ_*^{-1} , which is a function of the separation between the vehicles in both position and velocity.

In near-circular orbits, $e \approx 0$ and Eq. (6) reduces to

$$[\sigma_{\delta a}^2]_{\delta \mathbf{X}} \approx 4 \left[4\sigma_{\delta x}^2 + \frac{4}{n_*} \rho_{\delta x \delta y} \sigma_{\delta x} \sigma_{\delta y} + \frac{1}{n_*^2} \sigma_{\delta y}^2 \right] \quad (7)$$

This is identical to the result obtained in [3–5]. From Eq. (7), it is easy to show that $\sigma_{\delta a} = 0$ when $\rho_{\delta x \delta y} = -1$ and $\sigma_{\delta y}/\sigma_{\delta x} = 2n$. Thus, if the uncertainty in the radial position and in-track velocity are highly correlated and properly balanced, a perfect estimate of δa can be achieved in near-circular orbits. A similar set of correlation and balance requirements can be derived for eccentric orbits using Eq. (6). However, as noted by Mitchell et al. [5], control over $\sigma_{\delta x}$, $\sigma_{\delta y}$, $\sigma_{\delta \dot{x}}$, $\sigma_{\delta \dot{y}}$, and the associated cross correlations is necessary to achieve the desired constraints, and there is no method for tuning these elements independently in a Kalman filter.

In [4], the primary focus is on the uncertainty in the relative semimajor axis derived assuming the principal components are the radial position and velocity and in-track velocity errors. However, in Eq. (6), it is clear $[\sigma_{\delta a}]_{\delta \mathbf{X}}$ is a function of all of the coplanar uncertainties in highly eccentric orbits. This is illustrated for a simple example in Fig. 2 for $a_* = 42,096$ km, $e_* = 0.8$, $\sigma_{\delta x} = 0.1$ m, $\sigma_{\delta y} = 0.5$ m, $\sigma_{\delta \dot{x}} = 0.01$ mm/s, and $\sigma_{\delta \dot{y}} = 0.05$ mm/s. Note that $\rho_{\delta x \delta y} = -1$ and $\rho_{\delta y \delta \dot{x}} = 1$ in Fig. 2; the cross correlations $\rho_{\delta x \delta y}$, $\rho_{\delta x \delta \dot{x}}$,

$\rho_{\delta y \delta \dot{y}}$, and $\rho_{\delta \dot{x} \delta \dot{y}}$ are assumed to be negligible. In Fig. 2, ignoring the contribution of $\sigma_{\delta y}$ leads to dramatically underestimating the relative semimajor axis uncertainty for most of the orbit.

IV. Conclusions

This Note has derived the complete linearized relationship between relative position and velocity and relative semimajor axis error for highly eccentric orbits. This approach was shown to be a direct generalization of the circular orbit solution and account for errors in all of the coplanar uncertainties. The results indicate that previous assumptions (of semimajor axis error being solely dependent on radial position and velocity and in-track velocity error) lead to underestimating the relative semimajor axis uncertainty for significant portions of the orbit. This has important implications for formation flying in HEO where precise semimajor axis knowledge is essential to mission operations. It is possible to derive the complete nonlinear mapping relating position and velocity to the semimajor axis error, but this degree of fidelity is not required for most applications.

Appendix: Derivation of Mapping Matrix Γ_*

The derivation of the mapping matrix Γ_* begins with the expressions relating ECI position and velocity to Keplerian elements [14]

$$\mathbf{r} = r \begin{bmatrix} \cos(\Omega) \cos(\theta) - \sin(\Omega) \cos(i) \sin(\theta) \\ \sin(\Omega) \cos(\theta) + \cos(\Omega) \cos(i) \sin(\theta) \\ \sin(i) \sin(\theta) \end{bmatrix}, \quad \mathbf{v} = \sqrt{\frac{\mu}{a(1-e^2)}} \begin{bmatrix} -\cos(\Omega)[\sin(\theta) + e \sin(\omega)] + \sin(\Omega) \cos(i)[\cos(\theta) + e \cos(\omega)] \\ -\sin(\Omega)[\sin(\theta) + e \sin(\omega)] - \cos(\Omega) \cos(i)[\cos(\theta) + e \cos(\omega)] \\ \sin(i)[\cos(\theta) + e \cos(\omega)] \end{bmatrix} \quad (A1)$$

where $\theta = \omega + \nu$ and

$$r = \frac{a(1-e^2)}{1+e \cos(\nu)}$$

Expanding the definition of $\delta \mathbf{X}$ in Eqs. (2–4) around α_* using Eq. (A1) gives Γ_* ,

$$\Gamma_* = \begin{bmatrix} \gamma_* \\ \gamma'_* \end{bmatrix}$$

where

$$\gamma_* = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{r_*}{a_*} & -a_* \cos(\nu_*) & 0 & 0 & 0 & \frac{a_* e_* \sin(\nu_*)}{\sqrt{1-e_*^2}} \\ 0 & \left(a_* + \frac{r_*}{1-e_*^2}\right) \sin(\nu_*) & 0 & r_* \cos(i_*) & r_* & \frac{a_*^2}{r_*} \sqrt{1-e_*^2} \\ 0 & 0 & r_* \sin(\theta_*) & -r_* \sin(i_*) \cos(\theta_*) & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\gamma'_* = \dot{r}_* \begin{bmatrix} -\frac{1}{2a_*} & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & \frac{\sin(\nu_*)}{1-e_*^2} & 0 & \cos(i_*) & 1 & -\left(\frac{a_*}{r_*}\right)^2 \sqrt{1-e_*^2} \\ 0 & 0 & \sin(\theta_*) & -\sin(i_*) \cos(\theta_*) & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$+ \dot{\nu}_* \begin{bmatrix} 0 & a_* \sin(\nu_*) & 0 & 0 & 0 & \frac{a_* e_* \cos(\nu_*)}{\sqrt{1-e_*^2}} \\ -\frac{3r_*}{2a_*} & \left(a_* + \frac{r_*}{1-e_*^2}\right) \cos(\nu_*) & 0 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & r_* \cos(\theta_*) & r_* \sin(i_*) \sin(\theta_*) & 0 & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

and

$$\dot{r}_* = \frac{a_* e_* n_* \sin(\nu_*)}{\sqrt{1-e_*^2}}, \quad \dot{\nu}_* = \left(\frac{a_*}{r_*}\right)^2 n_* \sqrt{1-e_*^2}$$

Inverting Γ_* yields

$$\Gamma_*^{-1} = [\gamma_*^{-1} \mid \gamma'^{-1}]$$

where

$$\gamma_*^{-1} = \begin{bmatrix} [4 + 2e_* \cos(v_*)] \left(\frac{a_*}{r_*}\right)^2 & -2e_* \sin(v_*) \left(\frac{a_*}{r_*}\right)^2 & 0 \\ \frac{e_* \cos^2(v_*) + 3 \cos(v_*) + 2e_*}{r_*} & \frac{[e_* \cos^2(v_*) + 2 \cos(v_*) + e_*] e_* \sin(v_*)}{a_* (1 - e_*^2)} & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & \frac{e_* \sin(\omega_*) + \sin(\theta_*)}{a_* (1 - e_*^2)} \\ 0 & 0 & -\frac{e_* \cos(\omega_*) + \cos(\theta_*)}{a_* (1 - e_*^2) \sin(i_*)} \\ \frac{\{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2 - 1\} \sin(v_*)}{a_* e_* (1 - e_*^2)} & \frac{e_* \cos^3(v_*) + 2 \cos^2(v_*) - 1}{a_* (1 - e_*^2)} & \frac{[e_* \cos(\omega_*) + \cos(\theta_*)] \cos(i_*)}{a_* (1 - e_*^2) \sin(i_*)} \\ -\frac{\{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)]^2 - (1 - e_*^2)\} \sin(v_*)}{a_* e_* \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}} & \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)] \sin^2(v_*)}{a_* \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}} & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

$$\gamma_*'^{-1} = \begin{bmatrix} \frac{2e_* \sin(v_*)}{n_* \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}} & \frac{2[1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]}{n_* \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}} & 0 \\ \frac{\sin(v_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* n_*} & \frac{[e_* \cos^2(v_*) + 2 \cos(v_*) + e_*] \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]} & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & \frac{\cos(\theta_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]} \\ 0 & 0 & \frac{\sin(\theta_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)] \sin(i_*)} \\ -\frac{\cos(v_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* e_* n_*} & \frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)] \sin(v_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2}}{a_* e_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]} & \frac{\sin(\theta_*) \sqrt{1 - e_*^2} \cos(i_*)}{a_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)] \sin(i_*)} \\ \frac{[e_* \cos^2(v_*) + \cos(v_*) - 2e_*] (1 - e_*^2)}{a_* e_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]} & -\frac{[2 + e_* \cos(v_*)] \sin(v_*) (1 - e_*^2)}{a_* e_* n_* [1 + e_* \cos(v_*)]} & 0 \end{bmatrix}$$

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