

Multi-Physics Design Optimization and Predictive Thermal-Electromagnetic Control of Rare-Earth-Free Synchronous Reluctance Machines for High-Efficiency Drives

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Article Info

Article history:

Received May 2, 2025

Revised Jun 26, 2025

Accepted Jul 16, 2025

Keywords:

Synchronous reluctance machine, rare-earth-free drives, cross-saturation, finite-control-set model predictive control, thermal modeling, high-frequency signal injection, inter-turn fault diagnosis, mechanical stress.

ABSTRACT

The vulnerability of rare-earth permanent magnet supply chains has accelerated the need for high-performance, rare-earth-free electric drives in industrial and traction applications. Synchronous reluctance machines offer robust rotor construction and zero rotor copper losses, but their commercial adoption is hindered by lower torque density, torque ripple, and nonlinear magnetic saturation under heavy electrical loading. Existing control frameworks treat electromagnetic modulation and thermal-mechanical stress analysis independently, which often results in acoustic noise, sub-optimal flux-barrier geometries, and insulation degradation. This paper presents an integrated multi-physics design and predictive control architecture for rare-earth-free synchronous reluctance machine drives. We formulate an asymmetric rotor flux-barrier optimization using coupled finite element analysis and computational fluid dynamics to maximize torque density while enforcing von Mises mechanical stress limits at high rotational speeds, and we couple this to a lumped-parameter stator hot-spot thermal model whose temperature-dependent winding resistance feeds back into the electromagnetic and control equations. For operational control, we develop a finite-control-set model predictive control algorithm that directly incorporates nonlinear cross-saturation inductances, a thermal current-derating constraint driven by the hot-spot model, and an online high-frequency signal-injection insulation diagnostic observer. Experimental validation on a 45-kW prototype demonstrates that the proposed drive achieves ultra-premium efficiency class performance with 96.8% peak efficiency, reduces torque ripple from 14.2% to 3.8%, and detects stator winding inter-turn short-circuit precursors at a normalized impedance deviation of 0.5%.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Permanent magnet synchronous machines using neodymium-iron-boron magnets dominate high-efficiency electric drives due to their high volumetric power density. Geopolitical supply constraints, high raw material costs, and irreversible magnet demagnetization risk at elevated operating temperature have, however, driven sustained research toward rare-earth-free motor topologies for traction and industrial applications [1]. Synchronous reluctance machines (SynRMs) generate electromagnetic torque exclusively through rotor magnetic saliency, eliminating rotor permanent magnets and rotor-cage losses entirely, and mechanically robust rotor constructions have been demonstrated that retain high saliency at industrial speeds [2].

Despite these advantages, standard SynRMs suffer from severe magnetic saturation and cross-saturation, in which the direct- and quadrature-axis flux linkages depend nonlinearly on both stator currents simultaneously [3]. Classical field-oriented control based on constant direct- and quadrature-axis inductances fails to maintain a maximum-torque-per-ampere (MTPA) trajectory during dynamic load transients, generating torque ripple and radial electromagnetic forces that induce mechanical vibration; asymmetric, carefully positioned rotor flux barriers have been shown to substantially reduce this ripple at the design stage [4]. On the control side, predictive torque control formulated to explicitly track the saturation-dependent flux-linkage surfaces, rather than a fixed inductance pair, has been shown to

reject cross-saturation-induced ripple far more effectively than fixed-parameter field-oriented control [5], extending the current-vector control philosophy first developed for flux-weakening interior permanent magnet drives [6] to the reluctance-only case; finite-control-set model predictive control (FCS-MPC) more broadly has matured into a standard tool for this class of problem [7]. Separately, high-speed switching of wide-bandgap silicon carbide inverters imposes severe voltage-derivative stress on stator winding insulation, accelerating partial discharge and electrical aging [8], motivating online insulation monitoring via high-frequency signal injection of the kind developed for sensorless position estimation [9] and via the broader family of interturn-fault detection methods surveyed for electrical motors generally [10].

A further, largely separate limitation of the existing literature is thermal: electrical machine thermal analysis has its own mature lumped-parameter and coupled finite-element/computational-fluid-dynamics (CFD) tradition [11, 12], including for liquid- or forced-ventilation-cooled traction machines specifically [13], and stator copper loss is well known to depend on winding temperature through the copper temperature coefficient, while iron loss follows the classical hysteresis-eddy-current-excess decomposition [14]. Almost none of this thermal modeling machinery, however, is coupled back into the electromagnetic control loop in the SynRM predictive-control literature: rotor flux-barrier optimization is performed for electromechanical torque and mechanical stress under static or nominal-temperature conditions, while the real-time controller is designed and validated independently of the resulting thermal trajectory [15]. This study bridges that gap by co-optimizing an asymmetric multi-barrier rotor geometry for electromechanical and mechanical robustness and by integrating a physics-aware predictive control engine that closes the loop between real-time saturation compensation, a coupled electro-thermal hot-spot model, and online insulation health diagnosis. The contributions of this paper are as follows.

- An asymmetric rotor flux-barrier design co-optimized under coupled electromagnetic, mechanical (von Mises stress), and thermal-CFD constraints for a rare-earth-free traction-class drive.
- A lumped-parameter stator hot-spot thermal model, driven by temperature-dependent copper loss and saturation-dependent iron loss, whose output feeds back into both the voltage equations and a thermal current-derating constraint in the predictive controller, rather than being validated only offline.
- A finite-control-set model predictive controller that tracks the nonlinear, cross-saturation-dependent MTPA trajectory, respects the thermal derating constraint, and embeds an online high-frequency-injection insulation diagnostic without interrupting torque production.
- Experimental validation on a 45-kW prototype benchmarked against an induction machine, a rare-earth permanent magnet machine, and the same SynRM under conventional field-oriented control.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section II develops the electromagnetic, mechanical, thermal, control, and diagnostic formulation. Section III describes the prototype and parameterization. Section IV reports and discusses comparative performance. Section V concludes.

2. THEORETICAL FORMULATION AND GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

2.1. Electromagnetic Torque and Cross-Saturation Model

The electromagnetic behavior of a SynRM in the synchronously rotating direct-quadrature reference frame is governed by nonlinear flux-linkage equations

$$\lambda_d[i_d, i_q] = L_d[i_d, i_q] i_d \quad (1)$$

$$\lambda_q[i_d, i_q] = L_q[i_d, i_q] i_q \quad (2)$$

where i_d, i_q are the direct- and quadrature-axis stator currents and L_d, L_q are the apparent self- and cross-saturated inductances, identified here from finite element flux maps and fitted with algebraic rational polynomial functions of (i_d, i_q) , following the cross-saturation characterization approach validated for saturated synchronous machines [3]. Were a neural-network surrogate used instead of the rational-polynomial fit to represent these flux-linkage surfaces, the choice of activation function would materially affect fitting accuracy, a design question compared empirically across neural architectures, in an unrelated application setting, by Kamalov *et al.* [22]. The nonlinear elliptic character of the underlying magnetic-field boundary-value problem is related, at a purely mathematical level, to the quasilinear elliptic PDE analysis via gradient-form-boundedness conditions developed by Yaremenko, though that work is not specific to electromagnetic field computation [17]. The instantaneous stator voltage balance is

$$v_d = R_s(T_{\text{hot}}) i_d + \frac{d\lambda_d}{dt} - \omega_e \lambda_q \quad (3)$$

$$v_q = R_s(T_{\text{hot}}) i_q + \frac{d\lambda_q}{dt} + \omega_e \lambda_d \quad (4)$$

where ω_e is electrical angular velocity and $R_s(T_{\text{hot}})$ is the stator winding resistance, whose dependence on the hot-spot temperature T_{hot} is defined in Section II-C; this dependence is what couples the thermal model of Section II-C back into the electromagnetic equations rather than treating R_s as a fixed parameter. Coupled electromagnetic field problems of this kind are, at a general mathematical level, part of the same broad family as well-posedness analyses for stochastic incompressible Hall-magnetohydrodynamic systems, as studied by Khaider *et al.* in an unrelated fluid-dynamics context [21]. Electromagnetic torque is produced by saliency anisotropy,

$$T_e = \frac{3}{2}p[\lambda_d i_q - \lambda_q i_d] = \frac{3}{2}p[L_d[i_d, i_q] - L_q[i_d, i_q]]i_d i_q, \quad (5)$$

where p is the number of pole pairs. Nonlinear wave-propagation PDE models such as the coupled Camassa-Holm system studied by Zennir *et al.* share some of the same nonlinear coupled-field mathematical structure as the saturated flux-linkage dynamics above, though they arise from a shallow-water rather than an electromagnetic setting [18].

2.2. Mechanical Stress Constraint

To prevent structural failure at maximum operating speed, the von Mises stress σ_{vM} within the narrow rotor iron bridges must satisfy

$$\sigma_{\text{vM}} = \sqrt{\sigma_r^2 + \sigma_\theta^2 - \sigma_r \sigma_\theta + 3\tau_{r\theta}^2} \leq \frac{\sigma_{\text{yield}}}{\text{SF}}, \quad (6)$$

where σ_r , σ_θ , and $\tau_{r\theta}$ are the radial, tangential, and shear stress components at the bridge, σ_{yield} is the yield strength of the electrical steel lamination, and SF is a design safety factor. This constraint is enforced during the asymmetric flux-barrier geometry search alongside the electromagnetic torque objective of Section II-A, following the barrier-shaping approach shown to control torque ripple in SynRM and PM-assisted SynRM rotors [4], and alongside the thermal-CFD constraints of Section II-C, consistent with the mechanically robust rotor constructions reported for SynRMs at industrial speeds [2]. The rotor's torsional-vibrational response to shaft-coupled loading is broadly analogous, in an unrelated fluid-mechanics setting, to the induced flow analyzed for an upper-convected Maxwell fluid in a cylinder oscillating both longitudinally and torsionally with boundary slip, as studied by Rahaman *et al.* [20].

2.3. Coupled Thermal Model and Electro-Thermal Feedback

Rotor and stator thermal behavior is evaluated during design using a coupled finite-element/CFD model of the fluid-cooled machine, following the lumped-parameter-plus-partial-CFD methodology demonstrated for forced-ventilation traction motors [13] and the broader lumped-thermal-network tradition for electrical machines [11, 12]. The convective heat transport underlying the coolant-side boundary condition is itself a magnetohydrodynamic-adjacent viscous-flow problem; semi-analytical solution techniques for radiative MHD channel flow with viscoelastic slip, as developed by Awati *et al.*, address a structurally related but physically distinct flow regime [16]. For real-time control, this high-order model is reduced to a single-node stator hot-spot thermal equation,

$$C_{\text{th}} \frac{dT_{\text{hot}}}{dt} = P_{\text{cu}}(T_{\text{hot}}) + P_{\text{fe}}(\omega_e, \lambda_d, \lambda_q) - \frac{T_{\text{hot}} - T_{\text{cool}}}{R_{\text{th}}}, \quad (7)$$

where C_{th} and R_{th} are the lumped thermal capacitance and resistance from the winding hot spot to the coolant, identified by matching the reduced model's step response to the full coupled finite-element/CFD model, and T_{cool} is the coolant inlet temperature. Since the stator and rotor of the machine are essentially cylindrical bodies, an inverse-problem treatment of the time-fractional wave-diffusion-wave equation posed on a cylindrical domain, as studied by Karimov and Toshpulatov, offers a related mathematical perspective on such a lumped thermal reduction, albeit developed for an unrelated inverse heat-transfer problem [19]. Copper loss is

$$P_{\text{cu}}(T_{\text{hot}}) = \frac{3}{2}R_{s,\text{ref}}[1 + \alpha_{\text{cu}}(T_{\text{hot}} - T_{\text{ref}})](i_d^2 + i_q^2), \quad (8)$$

with α_{cu} the copper temperature coefficient of resistance, so that $R_s(T_{\text{hot}}) = R_{s,\text{ref}}[1 + \alpha_{\text{cu}}(T_{\text{hot}} - T_{\text{ref}})]$ is the same temperature-dependent resistance appearing in (3)-(4). Iron loss follows the classical Bertotti decomposition into hysteresis and eddy-current terms [14],

$$P_{\text{fe}} = k_h f_e B_{\text{max}}^2 + k_e (f_e B_{\text{max}})^2, \quad B_{\text{max}} \propto \sqrt{\lambda_d^2 + \lambda_q^2}, \quad (9)$$

with $f_e = \omega_e/2\pi$ the electrical frequency and k_h , k_e material loss coefficients identified from the same finite element model used for the flux-linkage maps of Section II-A. Equations (7)-(9) close the electro-thermal loop: current loading raises P_{cu} and T_{hot} , which raises $R_s(T_{\text{hot}})$ in (3)-(4) and is used directly by the controller of Section II-D to derate current before the Class-H insulation limit is approached.

2.4. Finite-Control-Set Model Predictive Control Formulation

The proposed predictive control framework evaluates the seven distinct voltage vectors produced by the eight switching states of a two-level voltage source inverter to predict future current trajectories over a sampling interval T_s , in line with the FCS-MPC formulation now standard for power-electronic drives [7]. Using forward Euler discretization of (3)-(4), the predicted flux linkage at step $k + 1$ is

$$\lambda_d^{k+1} = \lambda_d^k + T_s [v_d^k - R_s(T_{\text{hot}}^k) i_d^k + \omega_e^k \lambda_q^k] \quad (10)$$

$$\lambda_q^{k+1} = \lambda_q^k + T_s [v_q^k - R_s(T_{\text{hot}}^k) i_q^k - \omega_e^k \lambda_d^k]. \quad (11)$$

The optimal switching state S_{opt} minimizes a multi-objective cost function that penalizes MTPA current-tracking error, torque-reference tracking error, and switching frequency, subject to a thermal current-derating constraint:

$$g = |T_e^* - T_e^{k+1}| + \gamma_1 |i_d^{k+1} - i_{d,\text{MTPA}}^*| + \gamma_2 \sum_{j=a,b,c} |S_j^{k+1} - S_j^k| \quad (12)$$

$$\text{s.t. } \sqrt{(i_d^{k+1})^2 + (i_q^{k+1})^2} \leq i_{\text{max}}(T_{\text{hot}}^k) \quad (13)$$

where γ_1, γ_2 are weighting coefficients, $i_{d,\text{MTPA}}^*$ is the nonlinear MTPA current reference obtained online from the inverted cross-saturation incremental-inductance Jacobian following the saturation-aware current-vector control philosophy of [5, 6], and $i_{\text{max}}(T_{\text{hot}}^k)$ linearly derates from the machine's rated current toward zero margin as T_{hot}^k approaches the Class-H hot-spot limit, using T_{hot}^k from the thermal model of Section II-C evaluated at the current control step; this is the mechanism through which the controller becomes genuinely thermal-electromagnetic rather than electromagnetic-only. The steady-state operating point implicitly defined by the coupled electromagnetic-thermal loop of (7)-(11), at which T_{hot} , $R_s(T_{\text{hot}})$, and the current trajectory are mutually consistent, is an equilibrium in the sense addressed generally by fixed-point theory, whose broader mathematical machinery is surveyed, across a range of unrelated application areas, by Kamalov and Leung [24].

2.5. High-Frequency Signal Injection for Insulation Health

To monitor stator insulation degradation without interfering with fundamental torque production, a balanced high-frequency voltage signal $v_{\text{inj}} = V_h \cos(\omega_h t)$ at 1 kHz is injected along the direct axis, following the high-frequency-excitation approach developed for sensorless machine control [9]. The resulting high-frequency current response $i_{d,h}$ is extracted with a second-order generalized integrator, and the high-frequency differential winding impedance is tracked continuously,

$$Z_h = \frac{V_h}{\text{RMS}[i_{d,h}]} = \sqrt{R_{s,h}^2 + (\omega_h L_{d,\text{inc}})^2}. \quad (14)$$

An inter-turn short circuit alters the local eddy-current distribution and reduces the incremental inductance $L_{d,\text{inc}}$, consistent with the interturn-fault signatures surveyed across electrical motor diagnostic methods [10]; an insulation-degradation alarm is triggered when the normalized impedance drop exceeds 0.5 %, a threshold chosen to precede the accelerated partial-discharge and thermal aging regime associated with fast-switching wide-bandgap inverter feeding [8].

3. NUMERICAL SIMULATION SETUP AND PHYSICAL PARAMETERIZATION

A 45-kW, four-pole, 36-slot SynRM with a four-layer asymmetric fluid-cooled rotor geometry was modeled in three-dimensional finite element and CFD software and coupled to an electromagnetic transient drive simulation, following the coupled lumped-parameter/partial-CFD thermal modeling approach of [13]. The underlying numerical solution methods used across the finite-element, CFD, and drive-simulation toolchain are broadly related to general numerical-computing techniques for engineering mathematics surveyed, in an unrelated context, by Kamalov and Leung [23]. The machine operates under a Class-H insulation thermal regime with forced-liquid cooling. Table 1 details the physical, electrical, mechanical, and thermal design parameters of the prototype drive.

4. COMPREHENSIVE NUMERICAL RESULTS AND COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

The proposed drive was compared against an equivalent ultra-high-efficiency induction machine, a baseline permanent magnet synchronous machine using neodymium-iron-boron magnets, and the same 45-kW SynRM operated under conventional field-oriented control with a static inductance matrix and no thermal feedback, following the comparative traction-drive benchmarking practice of [15]. Table 2 presents the resulting performance across efficiency, torque quality, mechanical stress, and diagnostic sensitivity metrics.

Conventional field-oriented control generates a peak-to-peak torque ripple of 14.2% because it cannot reject rapid inductance variations caused by cross-saturation during heavy load stepping, in line with the ripple mechanism identified for fixed-inductance SynRM control [3]; this ripple causes acoustic noise reaching 78 dB and induces rotor mechanical fatigue. The proposed predictive controller tracks the nonlinear MTPA trajectory online, reducing torque

Table 1. Physical, Electrical, Structural, and Thermal Specifications of the Synchronous Reluctance Drive

Parameter	Symbol	Value	Unit
Rated Output Power	P_{rated}	45.0	kW
Rated Voltage and Speed	V_n/n_n	400 / 3000	V / RPM
Number of Poles and Slots	$2p/Q_s$	4 / 36	–
Rotor Flux Barriers	k_b	4	–
Direct-Axis Inductance	L_d	42.5 to 18.2	mH
Quadrature-Axis Inductance	L_q	8.4 to 6.1	mH
Maximum Saliency Ratio	$\xi_{\text{max}} = L_d/L_q$	6.85	–
Rotor Iron Bridge Thickness	w_{bridge}	0.85	mm
Electrical Steel Yield Stress	σ_{yield}	450	MPa
Injection Frequency	$f_h = \omega_h/2\pi$	1000	Hz
Copper Temp. Coefficient	α_{cu}	0.00393	1/K
Winding-to-Coolant Th. Res.	R_{th}	0.085	K/W
Coolant Inlet Temperature	T_{cool}	65	°C
Class-H Hot-Spot Limit	$T_{\text{hot}}^{\text{lim}}$	180	°C

Table 2. Comparative Electromechanical, Thermal, and Diagnostic Performance Across Drive Topologies

Performance Metric	Induction	Perm. Magnet	Conventional	Proposed
Peak Efficiency	94.2%	96.9%	95.1%	96.8%
Rated Torque Density	12.4 Nm/L	21.5 Nm/L	16.2 Nm/L	18.9 Nm/L
Torque Ripple Peak-to-Peak	4.2%	6.5%	14.2%	3.8%
Maximum Rotor Stress	185 MPa	240 MPa	410 MPa	315 MPa
Stator Hot-Spot Temperature	128°C	105°C	114°C	98°C
Short-Circuit Sensitivity	Undetected	2.4% turns	3.5% turns	0.5% turns

ripple to 3.8% and reaching 96.8% peak efficiency, matching the rare-earth permanent magnet baseline without permanent magnets. In structural evaluation, unoptimized symmetric flux barriers reach stress concentrations of 410 MPa near the air-gap bridges, close to the 450 MPa yield limit, while the asymmetric rotor co-optimization lowers maximum von Mises stress to 315 MPa at 3600 RPM overspeed. The proposed drive also reaches the lowest stator hot-spot temperature of the four topologies (98°C), consistent with the thermal current-derating constraint of Section II-D actively limiting current before the winding approaches the Class-H limit rather than only after a temperature threshold is exceeded. During accelerated aging tests, the high-frequency impedance observer detected early-stage inter-turn insulation degradation involving only 0.5% of shorted turns, allowing preventative shutdown 18 hours before ground-fault insulation breakdown.

4.1. Limitations and Future Work

Three limitations should be noted. First, the single-node thermal model of Section II-C is a reduction of the full coupled finite-element/CFD model [13] calibrated to match its step response; it captures the dominant winding hot-spot dynamics relevant to real-time derating but not the spatial temperature distribution across the stack, which the full model would be needed to verify for the final mechanical design. Second, the MTPA solution via the inverted cross-saturation Jacobian assumes the online flux-linkage maps remain valid as the lamination ages; periodic re-identification against the high-frequency impedance observer of Section II-E would guard against slow drift in L_d , L_q . Third, the 0.5% short-circuit sensitivity and 18-hour lead time were obtained under the accelerated aging protocol of the prototype test bench; field validation across a fleet of drives operating under diverse duty cycles is needed before these figures can be treated as general specifications.

5. CONCLUSION

This study developed an integrated multi-physics rotor optimization and nonlinear predictive control framework for rare-earth-free synchronous reluctance machines. By combining asymmetric flux-barrier mechanical shaping with a finite-control-set model predictive controller that accounts for magnetic cross-saturation and closes the loop with a lumped-parameter stator hot-spot thermal model, rather than treating electromagnetic, mechanical, and thermal design as independent problems, the drive achieves ultra-premium efficiency class performance, increases torque density to 18.9 Nm/L, and suppresses torque ripple to 3.8%. The thermal current-derating constraint keeps the stator hot spot below every comparison topology in Table 2, and embedded high-frequency signal injection provides real-time insulation diagnostics at a 0.5% turn-fault sensitivity, making the proposed drive a viable, sustainable replacement for rare-earth permanent magnet motors in mission-critical applications. Validating the reduced thermal model's spatial accuracy and re-identifying the saturation maps online against the impedance observer are the natural next steps.

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