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PASSIVE ATHERMALIZATION OF INFRARED LENSES

Muraviov O. V., Dovbysh I. O.
National Technical University of Ukraine «Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute», Kyiv, Ukraine, stals98@ukr.net, ivanna.dovbysh@gmail.com

Infrared (IR) imaging systems are widely used in various applications, including surveillance, remote sensing, thermal detection, and scientific research [1]. Unlike visible light optics, IR optical systems face considerable challenges due to the inherent sensitivity of IR detector materials and the high refractive indices of IR-transparent optical materials. A major concern is the change in focal length and image quality over a wide temperature range, which can significantly degrade system performance if not properly addressed [2].

Athermalization is the process of controlling or compensating for temperature-induced focal shift. Although active athermalization methods (e.g., introducing temperature control units) are effective, they add substantial size, weight, and power constraints to the system. Passive optical athermalization, on the other hand, seeks to mitigate these thermal effects purely through smart optical and mechanical design. By exploiting the thermal expansion or refractive index variations of carefully chosen materials, one can minimize or nullify net focal length change across the operational temperature range.

This paper provides an overview of the theory behind passive athermalization, including the optical materials used, the mechanical compensation strategies employed, and key design considerations. We also discuss performance metrics and offer insights into emerging materials and design methods that enable a new generation of robust, high-precision IR systems.

Fundamentals of passive athermalization. The change in focal length f of a lens system with temperature can be expressed as:

$$\frac{df}{dT} \approx f(a_n - a_L),$$

where α_n is the thermal coefficient of refractive index of the material (i.e., the rate at which the refractive index changes with temperature), and α_L is the coefficient of thermal expansion of the lens' mechanical structure and/or housing.

When the temperature changes, the refractive index of the lens material will alter, causing a variation in optical power. Simultaneously, the physical dimensions of the lens and its supporting mechanics expand or contract, further shifting the lens's focus. If these effects are not adequately compensated, image quality and system performance degrade.

Passive athermalization aims to balance the changes in lens power due to refractive index variations with those arising from mechanical expansion or contraction. By combining different optical materials and carefully managing the geometry of the system, it is possible to reduce or nullify the net change in focal length across a wide temperature range. The figure of merit in athermalization design is the total effective thermal sensitivity $(df/dT)_{eff}$, which ideally should approach zero for perfect compensation [3].

Optical materials for infrared athermalization. Infrared optical systems typically employ materials such as Germanium (Ge), Zinc Selenide (ZnSe), Zinc Sulfide (ZnS), Chalcogenide glasses, and various fluorides. Each of these materials has distinct advantages and challenges in terms of transparency window, thermal conductivity, hardness, and cost. Additionally, the temperature dependence of the refractive index, αn\alpha_nαn, varies significantly among these materials, directly influencing the feasibility and complexity of athermalization design.

Below is a brief overview of common IR optical materials.

- **Germanium (Ge)**. Highly popular in the long-wave infrared (LWIR) region. It has a high refractive index (~4.0) and good transmission from 2 to 14 µm. However, its refractive index is strongly temperature-dependent, making it prone to large thermal defocus.
- **Zinc selenide (ZnSe)**. A lower refractive index (~2.4) compared to Ge, ZnSe transmits across a wide spectral range (approximately 0.6 to 16 µm). It features a moderate thermal coefficient of refractive index, rendering it suitable for partial athermalization strategies.
- **Zinc sulfide (ZnS)**. Similar to ZnSe but with a narrower spectral range (typically 0.4 to 12 µm). It has a relatively stable refractive index with temperature compared to Ge.
- **Chalcogenide glasses**. These are glassy materials containing chalcogen elements (S, Se, Te). They exhibit high refractive indices, broad IR transparency, and can be molded, which allows for lightweight and low-cost optics. The thermal coefficient of refractive index can be tailored through compositional adjustments, making these materials highly appealing for athermalization design.
- **Fluorides** (e.g., MgF2, CaF2). These crystalline materials possess comparatively low refractive indices and a lower dispersion. They are used to balance the thermal behavior of higher-index IR materials, contributing to partial or complete athermalization.

One standard approach in passive athermalization is to pair materials with differing signs or magnitudes of α_n. When these elements are combined in a multi-element lens group, the net power shift is partially or fully canceled out. For instance, a positive thermal coefficient in one lens can be offset by a negative or smaller positive coefficient in a companion lens. Properly selecting these materials to achieve a targeted net thermal coefficient remains one of the most critical steps in passive athermal design.

Design approaches and mechanical compensation. The simplest passive athermalization schemes often involve two-element lens groups, in which one element expands or contracts more significantly than the other in response to temperature change. By carefully setting the thicknesses, curvatures, and air gaps, the designer can minimize the net optical power shift. While two-element systems suffice for modest requirements, more complex multi-element assemblies are frequently employed for high-precision imaging, wider spectral coverage, or broader operating temperature ranges [4].

Mechanical compensators utilize lens spacers or cells made from materials with a specific coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) that differs from standard metals like aluminum or steel. By carefully selecting CTE-matched or CTE-mismatched mechanical components, the designer can create an intentional motion of lens elements that offsets the thermally induced focus shift. For instance, if a high-CTE spacer expands more rapidly than the lens mount, it can move one lens element closer or farther from another, neutralizing optical power changes.

Mechanical compensation strategies often introduce complexity in assembly and alignment. Therefore, they must be executed with precision to avoid off-axis aberrations or misalignment [5]. Still, they remain one of the most robust and cost-effective solutions for IR systems requiring minimal to moderate athermal performance.

Recent trends and developments.

- **Emerging Chalcogenide Glasses.** Chalcogenide glasses are one of the most promising materials for passive athermalization. Recent advancements in glass formulation allow designers to precisely tune the refractive index and its temperature coefficient. These novel chalcogenide compositions can reduce the complexity of multi-element systems by providing ideal combinations of α_n and dispersion characteristics. Moreover, some chalcogenide glasses can be molded, enabling high-volume production of aspheres and freeform elements that facilitate compact, high-performance designs.
- **Novel Composites and Polymers.** In parallel with glass-based developments, certain polymers and composites are being investigated for use in IR optics. Although many polymers degrade or lose transparency at elevated temperatures or in harsh environments, specialized IR polymers offer potential advantages such as low density, low cost, and custom-tailorable CTE. Researchers are also exploring polymer-glass hybrid designs, where polymer lenses can serve as a thermally compensating element alongside glass or crystal substrates.
- **Freeform and Aspheric Surfaces.** Freeform and aspheric surfaces reduce the number of elements needed in a lens assembly by more effectively managing aberrations. This decreased number of elements can make athermalization simpler to achieve, as designers can reduce the overall thermal interactions of multiple lens groups. Moreover, freeform surfaces offer flexible curvatures that enable fine-tuning of the optical system for optimal performance across wide temperature ranges. As manufacturing processes for freeform optics mature, it is anticipated that this technology will become increasingly relevant for IR passive athermalization [6].

Practical Design Guidelines.

1. **Select Suitable Material Combinations**. Carefully choose materials that offer the required transparency range, refractive index, and α_n. Look for pairs or sets of materials with complementary thermal coefficients.

2. **Incorporate Mechanical Compensation**. If suitable materials alone cannot achieve the desired athermal performance, introduce mechanical spacers with specific CTE values that offset thermal changes in lens power.

3. **Leverage Modern Optical Design Software**. Utilize ray tracing and finite element analysis to iteratively refine lens shapes, thicknesses, and air gaps. This ensures that both thermal compensation and aberration control are adequately balanced [7].

4. **Conduct Rigorous Tolerance Analysis**. Manufacturing and assembly variations may introduce misalignments or thickness errors that degrade athermal performance. Quantifying these tolerances is essential for robust designs.

5. **Assess Environmental Factors**. In real-world applications, thermal gradients, shock, vibration, and humidity can affect IR lens performance. The final design should consider all relevant environmental conditions, ensuring consistent function in the field.

Passive optical athermalization in infrared lens systems is essential for high-precision imaging under changing temperatures. By strategically combining IR materials, leveraging mechanical compensators, and carefully optimizing lens geometry, designers can minimize or eliminate thermal defocus without adding weight, power consumption, or system complexity. Current research into chalcogenide glasses, specialized polymers, and advanced aspheric/freeform fabrication techniques continues to expand the toolbox of athermalization solutions. As these technologies evolve, infrared systems will become smaller, lighter, and more robust, meeting the ever-increasing demands of modern imaging applications in defense, security, surveillance, and scientific exploration.

Keywords: *infrared optics, passive optical athermalization, thermal compensation, image quality thermostabilization.*

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