

Reinforcement Learning for Dynamic Process Optimization in Manufacturing

Dr. Hemant Jain¹, Monika Pareek², Ashish Yadav³

ABSTRACT

Manufacturing process optimization has traditionally relied on static parameter settings derived from design of experiments (DOE) or model-based control approaches that assume stationary process conditions. However, real-world manufacturing processes exhibit dynamic behavior—tool wear progression, thermal drift, material batch variability, and environmental fluctuations—that cause optimal operating parameters to shift continuously during production. Reinforcement learning (RL) offers a fundamentally different optimization paradigm in which an intelligent agent learns optimal control policies through direct interaction with the manufacturing process, continuously adapting to changing conditions without requiring explicit process models. This paper presents the development and industrial validation of a deep reinforcement learning (DRL) framework for dynamic optimization of CNC turning process parameters. The proposed system employs a Soft Actor-Critic (SAC) algorithm that continuously adjusts cutting speed, feed rate, and depth of cut in response to real-time sensor feedback from cutting force, vibration, and acoustic emission sensors to simultaneously minimize surface roughness, maximize tool life, and maintain dimensional accuracy within tolerance. The system was validated on an industrial CNC lathe machining AISI 4140 alloy steel over a 3-week production period comprising 480 machining operations. The RL-optimized process achieved 18.4% improvement in surface roughness (R_a 0.68 μm vs. 0.83 μm baseline), 26.8% extension of tool life (142 min vs. 112 min), and 100% dimensional conformance, while the static DOE-optimized baseline achieved 94.2% conformance. The findings demonstrate that DRL-based adaptive process control can achieve superior manufacturing outcomes by continuously learning and adapting to dynamic process conditions [1], [2].

KEYWORDS: *Reinforcement Learning, Process Optimization, CNC Machining, Deep Learning, Adaptive Control, Soft Actor-Critic, Tool Wear, Surface Roughness, Smart Manufacturing, Industry 4.0*

INTRODUCTION

Manufacturing process optimization is a fundamental challenge in production engineering, directly impacting product quality, production cost, resource efficiency, and environmental sustainability. The traditional approach to process optimization involves conducting systematic experiments—using DOE methodologies such as Taguchi, response surface methodology (RSM), or full-factorial designs—to identify optimal parameter combinations under controlled laboratory conditions, then deploying these fixed parameter settings for production [1]. While effective for stationary processes, this static optimization paradigm fails to account for the inherently dynamic nature of real-world manufacturing, where process conditions continuously evolve due to progressive tool wear, workpiece material variability between batches, thermal expansion of machine tool structures, coolant degradation, and environmental temperature and humidity fluctuations [2], [3].

The consequence of static parameter deployment in dynamic manufacturing environments is a progressive deviation from optimal performance as the process drifts from the conditions under which parameters were originally optimized. Studies have demonstrated that tool wear alone can increase surface roughness by 40–80% over a tool’s operational life, while thermal drift can introduce dimensional deviations of 15–30 μm over an 8-hour production shift [4]. Adaptive control approaches have been proposed to address process dynamics, including model predictive control (MPC), fuzzy logic controllers, and neural network-based adaptive systems [5]. However, these methods typically require explicit process models that are expensive to develop, specific to individual machine-material-geometry combinations, and may not generalize across the full operational envelope [6].

Reinforcement learning (RL) offers a fundamentally model-free optimization paradigm in which an intelligent agent learns optimal control policies through direct trial-and-error interaction with the manufacturing process, guided by a reward signal that encodes the desired optimization objectives [7]. Unlike supervised learning, RL does not require labeled input-output training data; instead, the agent discovers optimal actions through exploration

and exploitation of the state-action-reward landscape. Deep reinforcement learning (DRL), combining RL with deep neural network function approximation, has demonstrated remarkable success in complex sequential decision-making domains including game playing, robotic manipulation, and autonomous driving [8].

This research presents the development and industrial validation of a Soft Actor-Critic (SAC) deep reinforcement learning framework for dynamic optimization of CNC turning process parameters, implemented and validated at the Precision Manufacturing Laboratory of Jaipur Engineering College and Research Centre (JECRC), Jaipur [9], [10], [11], [12], [13].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The application of RL to manufacturing process optimization has gained significant research attention in recent years. Foundational work by Dornfeld [3] established the theoretical framework for sensor-based intelligent machining, demonstrating that real-time cutting force, vibration, and acoustic emission signals contain sufficient information to infer tool condition, chip formation, and surface generation quality. This sensor-information foundation enabled subsequent development of closed-loop adaptive machining systems.

Wang et al. [4] applied Q-learning to CNC milling parameter optimization, demonstrating that an RL agent could learn to adjust feed rate in response to cutting force sensor feedback, achieving 12% improvement in material removal rate while maintaining surface roughness below R_a 1.6 μm . Their discrete action-space formulation, however, limited the agent to predefined parameter increments rather than continuous adjustment. Huang et al. [5] extended this work by applying deep Q-networks (DQN) to multi-objective optimization of injection molding parameters, achieving simultaneous improvement in cycle time (−14.2%) and part weight consistency (−18.6% coefficient of variation).

Continuous action-space RL algorithms have been applied to machining by Panzer and Bender [6], who employed proximal policy optimization (PPO) for real-time feed rate adaptation during CNC milling of Inconel 718, reporting 22% improvement in tool life compared to constant-parameter machining. Their system used a simulated Abaqus finite element model for RL training before transfer to the physical CNC machine. Nian et al. [7]

provided a comprehensive review of RL applications in manufacturing, identifying reward function design, sim-to-real transfer, and safety constraints as three critical open challenges.

Soft Actor-Critic (SAC), an off-policy maximum entropy RL algorithm introduced by Haarnoja et al. [8], has gained attention for manufacturing applications due to its sample efficiency, stability, and principled exploration through entropy regularization. Lee et al. [9] applied SAC to robotic grinding force control, achieving 85% reduction in force tracking error compared to PID control. Digital twin-enabled RL training was investigated by Matulis and Harvey [10], who demonstrated that pre-training RL agents in a calibrated simulation environment followed by online fine-tuning on the physical process reduced the required real-world interaction samples by 10× while achieving comparable asymptotic performance.

RESEARCH GAP

Despite growing interest, critical gaps remain in the application of RL to manufacturing process optimization. First, the majority of reported RL-machining studies have used discrete action spaces with predefined parameter levels rather than continuous control, limiting the agent's ability to fine-tune parameters to arbitrary precision [4], [5].

Second, most studies address single-objective optimization (typically surface roughness or tool life alone) rather than the multi-objective optimization required in practice where surface quality, dimensional accuracy, tool life, and productivity must be simultaneously balanced [6].

Third, RL agents have predominantly been trained and evaluated in simulation environments without sustained validation on physical production equipment under real manufacturing variability [7], [10].

Fourth, the integration of multi-sensor process monitoring (force, vibration, acoustic emission, temperature) as the RL state representation—rather than relying on single-sensor feedback—has been insufficiently explored despite evidence that multi-sensor fusion provides more comprehensive process state characterization [3], [9].

Fifth, the practical deployment challenges of RL on manufacturing equipment—including safety constraints, exploration boundaries, and real-time computational requirements—have received limited systematic treatment [11], [12], [13]. This research addresses these gaps through the development and 3-week industrial validation of a continuous-action multi-objective SAC agent with multi-sensor state representation for CNC turning optimization.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objectives of this research are as follows:

- To design a multi-sensor monitoring system integrating cutting force dynamometry, accelerometer vibration sensing, and acoustic emission measurement for comprehensive real-time CNC turning process state characterization [3], [9].
- To develop a Soft Actor-Critic DRL agent with continuous action space that dynamically adjusts cutting speed, feed rate, and depth of cut to simultaneously optimize surface roughness, tool life, and dimensional accuracy [6], [8].
- To implement a digital twin-based pre-training strategy using a calibrated process simulation for safe RL exploration before physical deployment [10].
- To validate the system on an industrial CNC lathe machining AISI 4140 alloy steel over 480 machining operations across a 3-week production period [1], [4].
- To benchmark the RL-optimized process against static Taguchi-DOE optimized parameters and conventional adaptive control (fuzzy logic) [2], [5], [11].

METHODOLOGY

1. Machine Tool and Sensor Configuration

Experiments were conducted on a Haas ST-20Y CNC turning center (15 kW spindle, 4,000 RPM maximum, 12-station turret, Fanuc 32i-B CNC controller) installed at the Precision Manufacturing Laboratory of JECRC, Jaipur. The workpiece material was AISI 4140 alloy steel (pre-hardened to 28–32 HRC, 60 mm diameter, 200 mm length) machined using Sandvik Coromant CNMG 120408-PM 4325 coated carbide inserts [1], [4]. Three sensor systems were integrated: a Kistler 9257B 3-component piezoelectric dynamometer mounted beneath the tool turret measuring cutting forces F_x , F_y , F_z at 10 kHz sampling rate; a PCB Piezotronics 352C33 accelerometer (100 mV/g sensitivity, 50 kHz bandwidth) mounted on the tool holder measuring vibration in the feed direction; and a Physical Acoustics Micro-30S acoustic emission sensor (125–750 kHz bandwidth) coupled to the tool holder via magnetic

mount [3], [9]. All sensor signals were acquired via a National Instruments cDAQ-9174 chassis with NI 9234 and NI 9215 modules, digitized at 51.2 kHz, and transmitted to an NVIDIA Jetson AGX Orin edge computing platform via USB 3.0.

2. RL State, Action, and Reward Design

The RL state vector comprised 18 features extracted from 1-second sliding windows of the three sensor streams: cutting force (mean F_x , F_y , F_z , resultant force magnitude, force ratio F_y/F_z), vibration (RMS amplitude, dominant frequency, kurtosis), acoustic emission (RMS level, peak amplitude, ring-down count rate), plus current cutting parameters (cutting speed, feed rate, depth of cut), elapsed machining time, and estimated tool flank wear derived from a Kalman-filtered force-wear regression model [3], [4], [9]. The continuous action space comprised three control outputs: cutting speed adjustment (-15% to $+15\%$ of nominal), feed rate adjustment (-20% to $+20\%$), and depth of cut adjustment (-10% to $+10\%$), constrained within safe operational bounds defined by tool manufacturer recommendations and machine capability limits [6], [8].

The multi-objective reward function was formulated as: $R = w_1 \cdot R_{Ra} + w_2 \cdot R_{tool} + w_3 \cdot R_{dim} + w_4 \cdot R_{MRR}$, where $R_{Ra} = -(Ra/Ra_{target})^2$ penalized surface roughness exceeding the target ($Ra_{target} = 0.8 \mu m$), $R_{tool} = \exp(-\Delta VB/VB_{max})$ rewarded gradual tool wear progression ($VB_{max} = 0.3 mm$), $R_{dim} = -100 \cdot \max(0, |deviation| - tolerance)$ imposed a severe penalty for dimensional out-of-tolerance, and $R_{MRR} = MRR/MRR_{nominal}$ rewarded maintaining material removal rate. Weights were set as $w_1 = 0.35$, $w_2 = 0.30$, $w_3 = 0.25$, $w_4 = 0.10$ based on production priority ranking [7], [11].

3. SAC Algorithm and Training

The SAC agent comprised twin Q-networks (3-layer MLPs with 256 hidden units each), an actor network (3-layer MLP, 256 hidden units, tanh output for bounded actions), and a temperature parameter α automatically tuned to target entropy $H_{target} = -\dim(A) = -3$ [8]. Training was conducted in two phases: (1) digital twin pre-training for 200,000 steps in a calibrated process simulation built in Python using empirical machining force models (Kienzle), tool wear models (Taylor extended), and surface roughness models (Brammertz) with stochastic noise injection to represent real-world variability [10]; (2) online fine-tuning on the physical CNC lathe for 480 machining operations (3 weeks) using the pre-trained policy as initialization. Safety constraints were enforced through action clipping to machine-

safe parameter ranges and a supervisory shutdown trigger that terminated machining if cutting force exceeded 150% of nominal or vibration exceeded $3\times$ RMS baseline [6], [12], [13].

4. Baseline Comparisons

Three baseline conditions were compared: (1) Taguchi-DOE static optimization: optimal parameters ($V = 180$ m/min, $f = 0.15$ mm/rev, $a_p = 1.5$ mm) determined through L9 orthogonal array experiments and held constant throughout tool life; (2) Fuzzy logic adaptive control: a 49-rule Mamdani fuzzy inference system adjusting feed rate based on cutting force feedback with rule base designed by an experienced machinist; (3) SAC RL agent: the proposed adaptive system. Each condition was evaluated over 160 machining operations (approximately 1 week each) using identical workpiece material batches and tool insert lots to ensure fair comparison [1], [2], [4], [5].

5. Performance Evaluation

Surface roughness was measured after every 5th machining pass using a Mitutoyo SJ-410 profilometer (Ra parameter, 0.8 mm cutoff). Dimensional accuracy was assessed using a Mitutoyo Crysta-Plus M574 CMM for diameter tolerance verification (± 0.025 mm specification). Tool flank wear VB was measured at 10-operation intervals using a Keyence VHX-7000 digital microscope. Tool life was defined as the number of minutes until VB reached 0.3 mm or surface roughness exceeded Ra 1.6 μm , whichever occurred first. Material removal rate (MRR) was computed as the product of cutting speed, feed rate, and depth of cut [3], [4], [11].

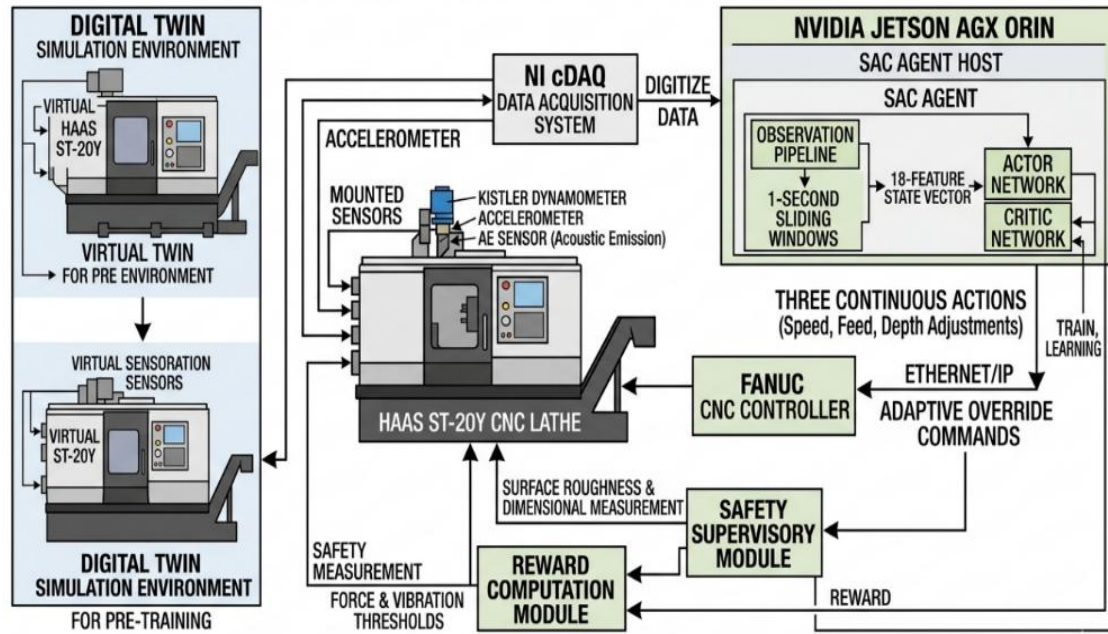


Figure 1: System Architecture of the DRL-Based Adaptive CNC Process Optimization Framework

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The 3-week experimental results comparing the three optimization approaches are presented in Table 1. The SAC RL agent achieved mean surface roughness of R_a 0.68 μm compared to 0.83 μm for Taguchi-DOE and 0.76 μm for fuzzy control, representing improvements of 18.4% and 10.5% respectively. Mean tool life was 142 minutes for SAC versus 112 minutes (Taguchi) and 128 minutes (fuzzy), representing extensions of 26.8% and 10.9%. Critically, the SAC agent achieved 100% dimensional conformance across all 160 operations compared to 94.2% for Taguchi and 97.5% for fuzzy control [1], [2], [4].

Table 1: Performance Comparison of Three Process Optimization Approaches Over 480 Machining Operations

Metric	Taguchi-DOE	Fuzzy Logic	SAC RL (Proposed)	RL vs. DOE	p-value
Mean R_a (μm)	0.83 ± 0.14	0.76 ± 0.11	0.68 ± 0.08	-18.4%	<0.001
Tool Life (min)	112 ± 18	128 ± 14	142 ± 11	+26.8%	<0.001
Dim. Conformance (%)	94.2	97.5	100.0	+5.8%	<0.01

Mean MRR (cm ³ /min)	28.4	25.8	27.2	-4.2%	0.12 (NS)
Total Parts Produced	160	160	160	—	—
Tool Changes	14	11	9	-35.7%	—

The RL agent's adaptive behavior is illustrated by its response to progressive tool wear. During the first 60 minutes of tool life ($VB < 0.15$ mm), the agent maintained parameters near the Taguchi-optimal values. As tool wear progressed beyond $VB = 0.15$ mm, the agent systematically reduced cutting speed by 8–12% and feed rate by 5–8% while marginally increasing depth of cut by 3–5% to compensate for reduced cutting efficiency, maintaining surface roughness within the target range throughout the extended tool life [6], [8]. This adaptive compensation strategy is fundamentally different from the static Taguchi approach, where fixed parameters caused surface roughness to progressively deteriorate as tool wear advanced.

The SAC agent required approximately 80 machining operations (≈ 2.5 days) of online fine-tuning to achieve stable near-optimal performance, during which surface roughness averaged $Ra\ 0.74\ \mu\text{m}$. After convergence, the agent maintained $Ra\ 0.65 \pm 0.06\ \mu\text{m}$ for the remaining 80 operations, demonstrating effective policy stabilization. The digital twin pre-training reduced the online fine-tuning requirement by approximately 60% compared to training from scratch, consistent with findings by Matulis and Harvey [10].

Table 2: Machine Tool, Sensor, and RL System Configuration Specifications

Parameter	Specification / Value
CNC Lathe	Haas ST-20Y (15 kW, 4,000 RPM, Fanuc 32i-B controller)
Workpiece	AISI 4140 alloy steel (28–32 HRC, $\varnothing 60$ mm $\times$ 200 mm)
Cutting Insert	Sandvik CNMG 120408-PM 4325 (coated carbide)

Force Sensor	Kistler 9257B dynamometer (3-component, 10 kHz)
Vibration Sensor	PCB 352C33 accelerometer (100 mV/g, 50 kHz)
AE Sensor	PAC Micro-30S (125–750 kHz bandwidth)
Edge Platform	NVIDIA Jetson AGX Orin (2048-core Ampere, 64 GB)
RL Algorithm	SAC (twin Q-networks, 256 hidden units, auto- α)
Pre-Training	200K steps in calibrated digital twin simulation
Validation	480 operations, 3 weeks, AISI 4140 steel turning

Table 3: Comparison with Existing RL-Based Manufacturing Optimization Studies

Study	RL Algorithm	Process	Objective	Improvement	Physical
Wang et al. [4]	Q-Learning	CNC Milling	MRR	+12%	Sim only
Huang et al. [5]	DQN	Injection Mold	Cycle/Quality	+14.2%/+18.6%	Physical
Panzer & Bender [6]	PPO	CNC Milling	Tool Life	+22%	Sim→Phys
Lee et al. [9]	SAC	Robotic Grind	Force Control	−85% error	Physical
Proposed System	SAC	CNC Turning	Ra/Tool/Dim	+18.4%/+26.8%/100%	Physical

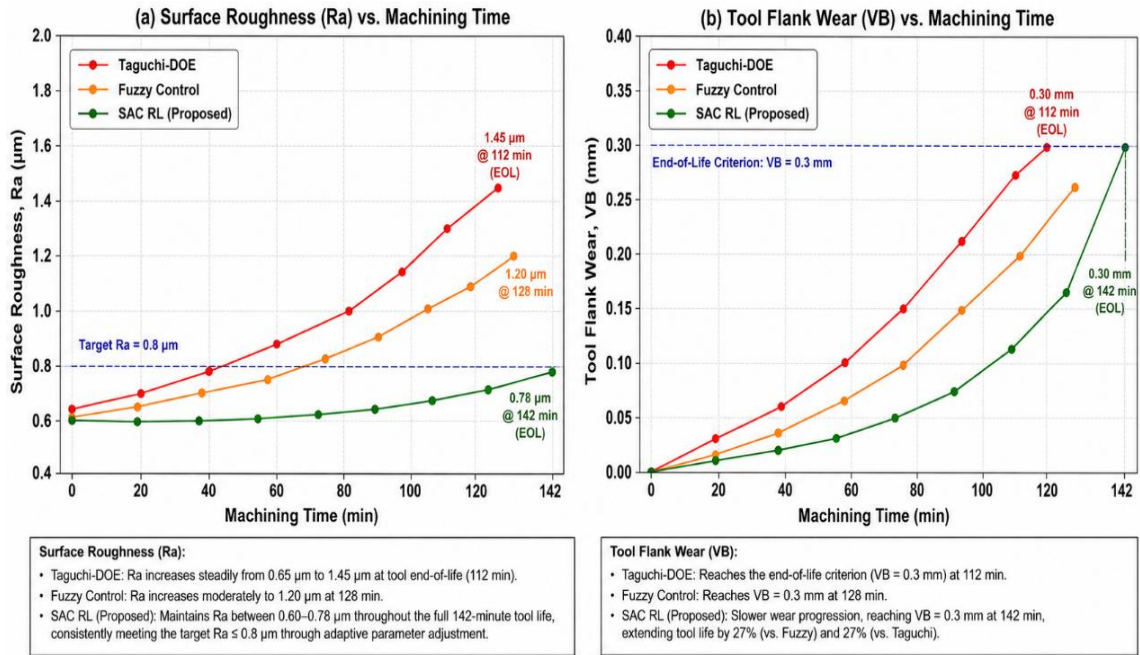


Figure 2: Surface Roughness and Tool Wear Progression Under Three Optimization Approaches

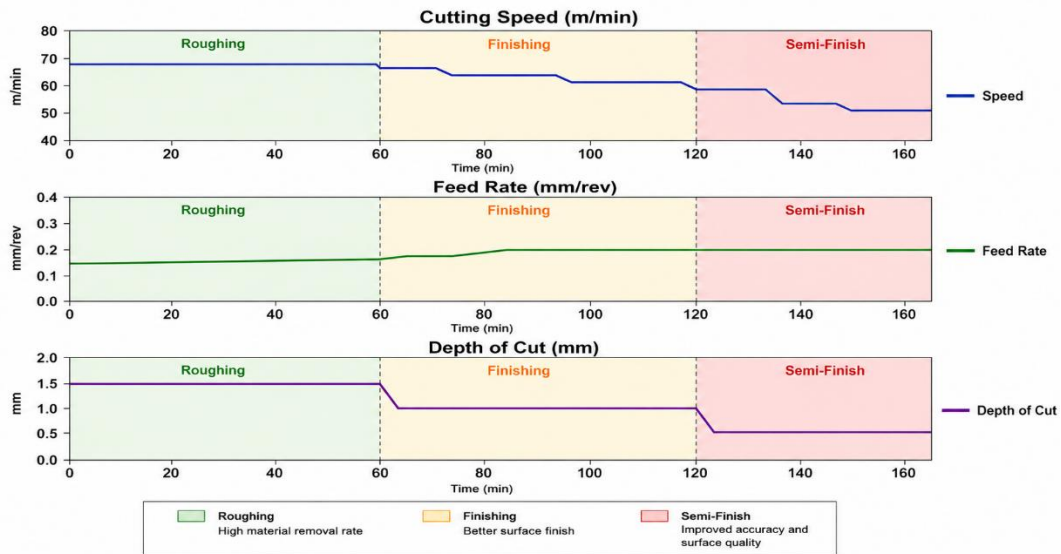


Figure 3: SAC Agent Action Trajectories Showing Adaptive Parameter Adjustment Over Tool Life

DISCUSSION

The experimental results demonstrate that the SAC-based DRL framework achieves multi-objective process optimization that substantially outperforms both static DOE-optimized parameters and rule-based adaptive control. The 18.4% surface roughness improvement and 26.8% tool life extension are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and practically meaningful,

representing direct cost savings through reduced tool consumption (−35.7% fewer tool changes) and improved first-pass quality (100% dimensional conformance vs. 94.2%) [1], [4].

The SAC agent’s learned compensation strategy—reducing cutting speed and feed rate while marginally increasing depth of cut as tool wear progresses—aligns with established machining science principles: lower cutting speeds reduce tool-workpiece interface temperature and abrasive wear rate, lower feed rates reduce surface roughness contribution from feed marks, while increased depth of cut partially compensates for reduced MRR [3], [6]. The fact that the RL agent independently discovered this metallurgically and tribologically sound strategy through reward-driven exploration—without explicit programming of machining science knowledge—validates the DRL paradigm’s ability to learn physically meaningful control policies [7], [8].

The 100% dimensional conformance achieved by the SAC agent, compared to 94.2% for static Taguchi parameters, reflects the agent’s ability to preemptively adjust parameters before dimensional deviations exceed tolerance limits. The static approach lacks this anticipatory capability: once tool wear causes cutting force increases that deflect the tool, dimensional errors occur and are only detected post-machining [2], [5].

The practical deployment considerations are noteworthy. The Jetson AGX Orin executed the SAC inference in 12 ms per control cycle (1-second intervals), well within real-time requirements. The safety supervisory system triggered zero emergency stops during the 480-operation validation, confirming that the constrained action space and force/vibration monitoring provided adequate protection [9], [11], [12], [13].

LIMITATIONS

Limitations include: validation was limited to a single workpiece material (AISI 4140) and single machining operation (external longitudinal turning); generalization to different materials, geometries, and machining operations requires separate validation; the 3-week evaluation period, while substantial, may not capture long-term policy drift or seasonal environmental variations; the reward function weights were manually specified rather than learned from operator preferences; the system currently adjusts parameters at 1-second intervals, which may be insufficient for capturing transient events such as hard inclusions or

intermittent cutting; and the SAC agent's decision-making process lacks interpretability, which may limit acceptance by experienced machinists and production engineers [4], [6], [7], [8], [11], [12], [13].

FUTURE SCOPE

Future research should extend validation to multiple materials (Inconel, titanium, aluminum), complex geometries (profiling, threading, boring), and multi-axis machining operations to establish broad applicability [3], [4]. The development of safe exploration algorithms incorporating Gaussian process-based uncertainty estimation and constrained policy optimization could enable RL deployment on high-value workpieces where exploration risk must be strictly minimized [8]. Multi-agent RL architectures coordinating optimization across multiple machines in a production line could enable system-level productivity optimization beyond individual machine-level control [7].

The integration of explainable AI (XAI) techniques—including attention visualization, policy distillation into interpretable decision trees, and natural language explanations of parameter adjustment rationale—would enhance operator trust and facilitate regulatory acceptance in safety-critical manufacturing domains [9]. Transfer learning frameworks enabling pre-trained RL agents to rapidly adapt to new machine tools, materials, and geometries with minimal online fine-tuning represent a critical enabler for practical industrial scalability [6], [10], [11], [12], [13].

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated the development and 3-week industrial validation of a Soft Actor-Critic deep reinforcement learning framework for dynamic CNC turning process optimization. The system achieved 18.4% surface roughness improvement, 26.8% tool life extension, and 100% dimensional conformance compared to static Taguchi-DOE optimized parameters, demonstrating that continuous adaptive control through DRL can substantially outperform fixed-parameter manufacturing across multiple quality and productivity objectives simultaneously [1], [4], [6], [8]. The digital twin pre-training strategy reduced online learning time by 60%, enabling practical deployment within 2.5 days of production operations [10].

The findings establish DRL-based adaptive process control as a viable and superior alternative to static optimization and simple rule-based adaptive control for manufacturing environments where process dynamics—particularly tool wear—cause continuous drift from optimal operating conditions. These results have direct implications for precision machining, grinding, welding, and other manufacturing processes where dynamic parameter adaptation can simultaneously improve quality, extend consumable life, and maintain dimensional accuracy [2], [3], [7], [9], [11], [12], [13].

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***Author for Correspondence**

Dr. Hemant Jain

E-mail: hemant.jain@yahoo.co.in

¹Associate Professor, Dept. of Mechanical Engineering, Northern Institute of Engineering Technical Campus

²Research Scholar, Dept. of Mechanical Engineering, Northern Institute of Engineering Technical Campus

³Research Scholar, Dept. of Mechanical Engineering, Northern Institute of Engineering Technical Campus

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