Dynamic Phase Alignment in Inertial Alfvén Turbulence

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In weakly-collisional plasma environments with sufficiently low electron beta, Alfvénic turbulence transforms into inertial Alfvénic turbulence at scales below the electron skin-depth, $k_\perp d_e \gtrsim 1$. We argue that, in inertial Alfvénic turbulence, both energy and generalized kinetic helicity exhibit direct cascades. We demonstrate that the two cascades are compatible due to the existence of a strong scale-dependence of the phase alignment angle between velocity and magnetic field fluctuations, with the phase alignment angle scaling as $\cos \alpha_k \propto k_\perp^{-1}$. The kinetic and magnetic energy spectra scale as $\propto k_\perp^{-5/3}$ and $\propto k_\perp^{-11/3}$, respectively. As a result of the dual direct cascade, the generalized-helicity spectrum scales as $\propto k_\perp^{-5/3}$, implying progressive balancing of the turbulence as the cascade proceeds to smaller scales in the $k_\perp d_e \gg 1$ range. Turbulent eddies exhibit a phase-space anisotropy $k_\parallel \propto k_\perp^{5/3}$, consistent with critically-balanced inertial Alfvén fluctuations. Our results may be applicable to a variety of geophysical, space, and astrophysical environments, including the Earth’s magnetosheath and ionosphere, solar corona, non-relativistic pair plasmas, as well as to strongly rotating non-ionized fluids.

Introduction. Many important turbulent plasma environments are characterized by a low ratio of the electron plasma pressure to magnetic energy density, that is, low $\beta_e$, in addition to weak collisionality. Examples are the ionosphere [1, 2], the Earth’s magnetosheath [3], the solar corona [4, 5] and some instances of the solar wind [6, 7]. Turbulence may play a role in structure formation, energy dissipation, magnetic reconnection, heat conduction, and other processes relevant for the dynamics and thermodynamics of such systems [6, 8–16]. Despite vigorous investigation, the nature of turbulent fluctuations in low beta regimes remains incompletely understood and continues to attract considerable interest [6, 17–20].

At scales below the electron skin depth in plasmas with sufficiently low $\beta_e$, the dominant low-frequency plasma modes are arguably nonlinear inertial Alfvén waves, whose turbulent cascade is governed by the existence of two ideal invariants: energy and generalized kinetic helicity. Turbulent dynamics in the presence of two invariants is poorly understood in both plasmas and non-ionized fluids [21, 22]. It is possible that both invariants are subject to a forward (direct) cascade, or that one of them cascades forward and the other backward [20–24]. When both quantities cascade forward, one can argue in favor of the cascade of either invariant setting the nonlinear eddy turn-over time [22], greatly complicating the analysis and leading to different predictions and understanding of the underlying turbulent dynamics.

In this Letter, we propose that, in inertial Alfvén turbulence, both energy and (kinetic) helicity cascade forward, and it is the cascade of energy, rather than that of helicity, that determines the cascade time. We demonstrate that, rather remarkably, this is achieved via a strongly scale-dependent phase alignment between fluctuations of electric and magnetic potentials, which manages to suppress helicity while allowing the energy cascade to proceed unhindered. Our phenomenological model predicts the spectra of magnetic, kinetic, and helicity fluctuations in the inertial kinetic regime, shown here to be in good agreement with the results of numerical simulations.

More broadly, we conjecture that the phenomenon of scale-dependent phase alignment uncovered in this work may be the mechanism underpinning the joint forward cascade of two ideal invariants in other physical systems, including nonconducting fluids described by the Navier-Stokes equation [22, 24, 26, 27].

Model equations. We consider a plasma permeated by a strong magnetic field, $B_0 \hat{z}$, such that the total field is $B = B_0 \hat{z} + \delta B_\perp$, with $\delta B_\perp / B_0 \ll 1$. The evolutionary equations that we adopt are:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \nabla_\perp^2 \phi + \{ \phi, \nabla_\perp^2 \phi \} = \{ \psi, \nabla_\perp^2 \psi \} + V_A \frac{\partial}{\partial z} \nabla_\perp^2 \psi + f_\phi, \quad (1)$$

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \left( 1 - d_e^2 \nabla_\perp^2 \right) \psi + \{ \phi, (1 - d_e^2 \nabla_\perp^2) \psi \} = V_A \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial z} + f_\psi. \quad (2)$$

Here, $\phi$ denotes the stream function, related to the $\mathbf{E} \times \mathbf{B}$ flow velocity by $v_\perp = \hat{z} \times \nabla_\perp \phi$, and $\psi$ is the flux function,
related to the perpendicular component of the magnetic field by $\delta \mathbf{B}_\perp / \sqrt{4\pi \rho} = \mathbf{e} \times \nabla_\perp \psi$, with $\rho$ the mass density. The Poisson bracket is defined as $[A, B] = \partial_A B - \partial_B A$, the Alfvén speed is $V_A = B_0 / \sqrt{4\pi \rho}$, and $f_\phi$ and $f_\psi$ are forcing terms to be described later. The only kinetic effect included in these equations is the electron inertia, characterized by $d_e$, the electron skin-depth [29].

These equations describe low beta non-relativistic pair-plasmas [29], as well as electron-ion plasmas in the ‘ultralow’ beta limit, $\beta_e \sim \beta_i \ll m_e / m_i$ [30]. The modes described by these equations are (as we show below) the inertial Alfvén modes. However, quite importantly, our equations are also pertinent to a wide range of other environments. When $k^2 d_e^2 \gg 1 + 2/\beta_i$, our equations are structurally identical to Eqs. (19) and (20) of Ref. [3] which were derived under the assumptions of $\beta_i \sim 1$ and $\beta_e \ll 1$. The dominant low-frequency modes there are inertial kinetic Alfvén waves ($\omega < k_\perp v_{thi}$, with $v_{thi}$ the ion thermal speed) [31, 32]. In addition, in the limit $k^2 d_e^2 \gg 1$, Eqs. (12) are structurally equivalent to Eqs. (25) and (26) of Ref. [3], which describe inertial whistler waves ($\omega > k_\perp v_{thi}$) in reduced electron MHD. One can also demonstrate that, quite remarkably, in the limit $k^2 d_e^2 \gg 1$, our equations map onto the equations describing rapidly rotating non-ionized fluids [32].

The scale on which the fields should be determined by a direct helicity cascade, we would formally conclude that the energy cannot cascade toward small scales at $k_\perp d_e > 1$. This contradiction can be solved if, as conjectured in Ref. [29], the helicity flux at scales $k_\perp d_e \gg 1$ is written as

$$F_{\psi} / F_{\phi} \sim k^{-1/3}_\perp d_e^{-1} V_A^{-1} k^{1/3}_\perp. \quad (6)$$

Using the above scalings for $\phi_\lambda$ and $\psi_\lambda$, we would predict the helicity spectrum to scale as $H(k_\perp) \sim k^{-2/3}_\perp d_e^{-1} V_A^{-1} k^{1/3}_\perp$. In what follows we demonstrate that the helicity factor is a manifestation of a new phenomenon that we call “dynamic phase alignment”:

$$R_\lambda \sim \varepsilon_H k^2 \rho \lambda^{-1} \sim \varepsilon_H (k_\perp d_e)^{-1}. \quad (7)$$

When the cancellation factor is present, the simultaneous direct cascades of both energy and helicity become possible, and we arrive at a qualitatively different prediction for the helicity spectrum, $H(k_\perp) \sim k^{-5/3}_\perp d_e^{-1} V_A^{-1} k^{1/3}_\perp$. In what follows we demonstrate that the cancellation factor is a manifestation of a new phenomenon that we call “dynamic phase alignment”: an increasing correlation between the phases of the fluctuating magnetic and velocity fields as the cascade progresses towards smaller scales.

**Numerical setup.** We now report on direct numerical simulations carried out to test these theoretical predictions. We integrate Eqs. (12) with the code Viriato [33] on a triply periodic domain using a grid of $N^3 \times N^3$ points. Hyper-dissipation terms of the form $\nu_H \nabla_\perp^2$ are included on the right-hand side of both equations, with $\nu_H$ set to remove energy at the grid scale. Energy is injected via delta-correlated forcing terms of the form

$$f_{\phi, \psi} = C_{\phi, \psi} \alpha_\pm \delta (k_\perp - k_\perp \rho) \delta (k_{\parallel} - k_{\parallel} \rho) \cos (k_{\parallel} z), \quad (9)$$

where $C_{\phi}$ and $C_{\psi}$ are randomly chosen complex numbers determining the phase of the mode being excited ($C_{\phi} \neq C_{\psi}$, and $|C_{\phi, \psi}| = 1$), and $\alpha_{\pm} > 0$ are numerical coefficients determining the strength of the drive, their subscript relating to positive and negative (generalized) kinetic helicity injection, as discussed below. The mode
numbers \(k_{x0}, k_{y0}\) and \(k_{z0}\) are randomly chosen from a predetermined range and at every time step they are the same for both \(f_0\) and \(f_\psi\).

From Eqs. (10), one can show that the kinetic helicity injected at any time step by the forcing terms is given by

\[
    \mathcal{H}_{\text{kinj}}^k \propto k_{1,0}^2 (1 + k_{1,0}^2) \alpha_{\phi}^2 \Re[C_{\phi}C_{\psi}],
\]

where \(k_{1,0}^2 = k_{x0}^2 + k_{y0}^2\). When \(\Re[C_{\phi}C_{\psi}] > 0\), i.e., when the phase between \(f_0\) and \(f_\psi\) such that positive helicity is injected at a particular time step, the \(\alpha_+\) coefficient is used in the forcing terms. When \(\Re[C_{\phi}C_{\psi}] < 0\), the coefficient \(\alpha_-\) is used instead. We define the ratio of positive to negative kinetic helicity injection as \(R_H \equiv \mathcal{H}_{\text{kinj}}^+ / \mathcal{H}_{\text{kinj}}^-\).

The ratio of the coefficients is set as \(\alpha_+ / \alpha_- = \sqrt{R_H}\).

Table I summarizes key parameters of the simulations performed. In all cases, energy is injected at the largest scales, where \(k_{1,0}d_c < 1\). In runs A1 and B2 net positive kinetic helicity is injected by the forcing terms (\(R_H = 10\) and \(R_H = 30\), respectively), while in run B1 no net kinetic helicity is injected (\(R_H = 1\)). Run A1 aims at capturing the dynamics in both the RMHD and kinetic range, and providing insight into how the transition between the two regimes occurs. Simulations of type B aim at capturing in more detail the turbulent dynamics in the kinetic range.

| ID | \(N_\perp\) | \(N_\parallel\) | \((k_{1,0} d_c)_{\text{min}}\) | \(R_H\) |
|----|------------|------------|----------------|-------|
| A1 | 2048       | 2048       | 0.02           | 10    |
| B1 | 768        | 4096       | 0.3            | 1     |
| B2 | 768        | 4096       | 0.3            | 30    |

**TABLE I. Summary of key simulation parameters.**

Energy spectra. Figs. 1a and 1b show the energy and (generalized kinetic) helicity spectra (obtained from time-averaged data after steady state is reached) for simulation A1. The magnetic energy spectrum is seen to smoothly transition from \(\sim k_{\perp}^{-3/5}\) to \(\sim k_{\perp}^{-11/3}\) at \(k_{1,0}d_c \approx 1\), whereas the kinetic energy scales as \(\sim k_{\perp}^{-5/3}\) throughout the inertial range, as does the helicity spectrum. These observations are in good agreement with the theoretical predictions, and offer an immediate confirmation of the existence of the scale-dependent cancellation factor \(R_H \sim 1/k_{\perp}^2\) at scales \(k_{\perp} d_c > 1\).

Runs of type B confirm the kinetic range results over a larger scale range; see Figs. 2a and 2b. The energy spectra are not significantly affected by the ratio of positive to negative helicity injected in the system. When no net helicity is injected in the system, the spectrum of helicity is not well defined (Fig. 2b). One can observe that the sign of kinetic helicity is different at different perpendicular wavenumbers \(k_{\perp}\) in the inertial range, and its value is zero when spatially averaged over the entire simulation domain and time averaged over the steady state. When instead net helicity is injected in the system, a well-defined spectrum is observed, exhibiting a scaling \(\sim k_{\perp}^{-3/5}\) (Fig. 4), as in simulation A1.

To characterize eddy anisotropy, we consider that the parallel wavenumber of a fluctuating field \(\phi\) at perpendicular scale \(k_{\perp}\) may be approximated as

\[
    k_{\parallel} \approx \left( \frac{\langle B_0 \partial_z \phi_{k_{\perp}} + \delta B_{k_{\perp}} \cdot \nabla \phi_{k_{\perp}} \rangle^2}{\langle B_{k_{\perp}}^2 \rangle \langle \phi_{k_{\perp}}^2 \rangle} \right)^{1/2},
\]

where \(\langle \cdot \rangle\) denotes spatial averaging. In the kinetic range, electromagnetic fluctuations are small because electron inertia \((k_{\perp}^2 \partial_z^2 \psi)\) dominates over the inductive part of the electric field \((\partial_\psi)\) in Eq. (2). Therefore, turbulence in this regime is essentially electrostatic, i.e., \(B_0 \partial_z \phi_{k_{\perp}} \gg \delta B_{k_{\perp}} \cdot \nabla \phi_{k_{\perp}}\), and thus \(k_{\parallel} \approx k_{\perp}\). The scatter plots in Figs. 2a and 2b show, for each value of \(k_{\perp}\), the corresponding value of \(k_{\parallel}\) at which the energy of the \(\phi\) fluctuations is largest. The data exhibit the scaling \(k_{\parallel} \propto k_{\perp}^{5/3}\), in agreement with Eq. (10), confirming that
the inertial Alfvén cascade is critically balanced.

**Kinetic helicity spectrum and dynamic phase alignment.** The net kinetic helicity at each wavenumber is a function of the absolute value of the Fourier coefficients $|\phi_k|$ and $|\psi_k|$, and of the phase angle between them, $\alpha_k$. For a given $k_\perp$, the average value of $\alpha_k$ is given by

$$\cos \alpha_k = \frac{1}{2} \frac{(k_\perp^2 \phi_k \perp (1 + d_\perp^2 k_\perp^2) \psi_k \perp + c.c.)}{(k_\perp^2 \phi_k \perp ||(1 + d_\perp^2 k_\perp^2) \psi_k \perp ||)}, \quad (12)$$

where the numerator represents net kinetic helicity at a given perpendicular wavenumber. In the $k_\perp d_e < 1$ range, the spectra of $|k_\perp^2 \phi_k \perp ||\psi_k \perp|$ and of generalized kinetic helicity (which turns into cross helicity at such scales) are both expected to exhibit the scaling of the MHD energy spectrum, and thus $\cos \alpha_k$ should not depend strongly on scale. At scales $k_\perp d_e > 1$, however, the spectrum of $|k_\perp^2 \phi_k \perp ||k_\perp^2 d_\perp^2 \psi_k \perp|$ is expected to scale as $k_\perp^{-2/3}$, while we predict, and observe, kinetic helicity to scale as $k_\perp^{-5/3}$. We thus expect $\cos \alpha_k \propto k_\perp^{-1}$. This is confirmed in Fig. 2: in the RMHD range, $\cos \alpha_k$ does not vary strongly as a function of scale. After a smooth transition at $k_\perp d_e \approx 1$, the scaling of $\cos \alpha_k$ asymptotes to $\propto k_\perp^{-1}$ for $k_\perp d_e > 1$. Fig. 2 confirms the scaling $\cos \alpha_k \propto k_\perp^{-1}$ in the kinetic range.

When $\cos \alpha_k = 0$, kinetic helicity is zero and the system is in a perfectly balanced state. The scaling $\cos \alpha_k \propto k_\perp^{-1}$ therefore implies that the turbulence becomes progressively more balanced as the cascade proceeds deeper in the kinetic range. This statement is corroborated by results from simulation B2 shown in Fig. 3 which we present the scale-dependence of asymmetries in the probability density function (PDF) of generalized kinetic helicity density ($h$). We plot, at different perpendicular scales, the relative difference between the PDF of positive and negative helicity density, i.e., $P(h)$ and $P(-h)$, for $h \in [0, 3 H_{\text{rms}}]$, where $H_{\text{rms}}$ is the root mean square value of helicity density obtained from unfiltered data. As the selection of scales included in the band-pass filter moves towards larger values of $k_\perp$, the relative dif-
ference between $P(h)$ and $P(-h)$ becomes smaller, showing that the PDF is progressively more symmetric and thus more balanced (a perfectly symmetric PDF implies that the turbulence is balanced, as $\mathcal{H} = \int P(h) dh = 0$).

**Conclusions.** In this Letter, we showed that, in inertial Alfvén turbulence, both energy and generalized kinetic helicity cascade forward, with the cascade of energy determining the nonlinear eddy turn-over time. Helicity is found to scale as $\mathcal{H} \propto k_{-5/3}$ in the kinetic range, a result that is underpinned by a scale-dependent alignment angle, $\cos \alpha_k \propto k^{-1}$, between the Fourier phases of magnetic and velocity fields. Consequently, turbulence becomes progressively more balanced as the cascade proceeds deeper into the kinetic range.

The results presented in this Letter may be valuable for interpreting the direct measurements of low-beta turbulence in space plasmas [4–7], as well as for other astrophysical and geophysical turbulent systems where dual energy and kinetic helicity cascades are possible (e.g., sub-relativistic pair plasma [29], whose experimental realization is upcoming [10–11], ionospheric [1, 2] and magnetospheric plasmas [3], and strongly rotating nonconducting fluids [22]). Another context where our findings may be pertinent is Navier-Stokes (NS) turbulence. Simulations reveal a $k_{-5/3}$ scaling of kinetic helicity and a scale-dependent progressive balancing of turbulence (restoration of mirror symmetry) [24, 26, 27] whose underlying dynamics is not fully understood. We conjecture that the novel mechanism of dynamic phase alignment uncovered in this work may also be at play in NS turbulence, and account for those results. While the details of the nonlinear interactions in plasma and NS turbulence are different, our conjecture is based on commonalities between particular aspects of the joint forward cascade of energy and (generalized) kinetic helicity. In particular, in both systems, a ‘naïve’ estimate of the spectral scaling of helicity, without the inclusion of a scale-dependent phase alignment factor, would yield a scaling $\sim k_{-2/3}$, which, if realized, would prevent energy from cascading forward. In both systems a scaling $\mathcal{H} \sim k_{-5/3}$ is instead observed [24, 27], which may be underpinned, in the case of NS turbulence, by a scale-dependent alignment between the phases of velocity and vorticity fluctuations.

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