Limits on Anisotropy in the Nanohertz Stochastic Gravitational Wave Background


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Introduction.—Pulsar timing arrays (PTAs) are currently being used to search for, and to eventually characterize, the nanohertz stochastic gravitational wave background (SGWB) by looking for correlated deviations in the pulse times of arrival (TOAs) of multiple radio millisecond pulsars distributed across the sky. The SGWB in the nanohertz regime is thought to be generated by the incoherent superposition of a large number of weak and unresolved GW sources, including supermassive black hole binaries (SMBHBs) [1–7], decaying cosmic-string networks [8–11], or primordial GWs [12,13]. Previous analyses have assumed background isotropy, which emerges as a special case from the more general anisotropy framework presented here. Although GWs have not yet been directly detected, limits on the angular power distribution of a nanohertz SGWB may constrain the distribution of low redshift structure [14], the location of several particularly bright nearby sources dominating the signal strain budget [15,16], and open a new avenue to explore the population characteristics of SMBHBs. Moreover, if a significant fraction of SMBHBs stall rather than merge, or are rapidly driven to merger via strong couplings to the grain binaries (SMBHBs) [1,2].

The paucity of observed supermassive black hole binaries (SMBHBs) may imply that the gravitational wave background (GWB) from this population is anisotropic, rendering existing analyses suboptimal. We present the first constraints on the angular distribution of a nanohertz SGWB from circular, harmonic multipoles \( \lesssim 40\% \) of the monopole value. We expect that these more general techniques will become standard tools to probe the angular distribution of source populations.

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Limits on Anisotropy in the Nanohertz Stochastic Gravitational Wave Background

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galactic nuclear environment, then we may expect a
depleted nanohertz GW signal dominated by only a few
bright sources [17]. As such, the tools implemented here
may provide new and novel insights into the final-parsec
problem (see, e.g., Ref. [18]). This research is a result of the
common effort to directly detect gravitational waves using
pulsar timing, known as the European Pulsar Timing Array
(EPTA) [19,20].

Limits on the SGWB are usually reported in terms of
the characteristic-strain spectrum \( h_c(f) \) of a background
that is composed of purely GW-driven, circular, inspiraling
SMBHBs, which obeys a simple power law
\[
h_c(f) = A_h(f/\text{yr}^{-1})^{-2/3},
\]
where \( A_h \) is the strain amplitude reported at a reference
frequency \( f = \text{yr}^{-1} \) [21]. The correlations induced by a
SGWB in pulsar TOAs can be understood by considering a
perturbation to the space-time metric along the Earth-pulsar
line of sight causing a change in the perceived rotational
frequency of the pulsar [22–25]. The fractional frequency
shift \( \delta \nu(t) / \nu_0 \) of a signal from a pulsar at rest frequency \( \nu_0 \)
is the difference in the metric perturbation at the Solar
System barycenter (SSB), and at the pulsar. This frequency
shift is integrated over time to give the induced timing
residuals, \( r(t) \equiv \int \delta \nu(t') / \nu_0 dt' \), which are cross-correlated
between pulsars in an effort to boost the detection prob-
ability of GW signals at Earth. The expectation value of the
cross-correlated timing residuals between pulsars \( a \) and \( b \) is proportional to the overlap reduction function
(ORF, \( \Gamma_{ab} \))—a dimensionless function that quantifies the
response of a pair of pulsars to the stochastic GW back-
ground [26,27]. In this Letter, we use analytically com-
puted anisotropic ORFs [28,29] and recently developed
Bayesian techniques [30] to constrain the angular power
distribution of the SGWB.

**Fitting a pulsar timing model.**—The average pulse
profiles of millisecond pulsars are remarkably stable and
reproducible. This stability permits high-precision timing,
which is crucial to GW searches: the minimum detectable
GW strain is \( h_c \propto 10^{-15}(\sigma_{\text{rms}}/100 \text{ ns})(T/10 \text{ yr})^{-1} \), where
\( \sigma_{\text{rms}} \) is the root-mean-square of the pulsar timing residuals,
and \( T \) is the total observation time span [5]. Therefore, high
timing precision and long-term observations are required to
distinguish the GW signal from noise, as well as boost the
signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) in a search.

Pulsar observations lead to a catalog of TOAs, which
can then be analyzed to search for GWs. A timing model
describing all deterministic contributions to a pulsar’s
TOAs [rotational frequency, spin-down rate, dispersion
measure (DM), etc.] is iteratively fit with the analysis
package, TEMPO2 [31,32]. The difference between the
measured TOAs and the refined timing model prediction
is the post-fit timing residual, which constitutes the input
data in our GW analysis.

**GW analysis pipeline.**—We use the signal modeling
techniques described in Ref. [33] (from hereon L15).
The posterior probability of the model parameters \( \tilde{\Theta} \), given
the concatenated post-fit timing residuals from all pulsars
\( \tilde{\delta}t \), is a multivariate Gaussian:
\[
p(\tilde{\Theta}|\tilde{\delta}t) \propto p(\tilde{\Theta}) \exp\left(-\frac{1}{2} \tilde{\delta}t^T G(G^T C G)^{-1} G^T \tilde{\delta}t \right) / \sqrt{\det(2\pi G^T C G)},
\]
where \( p(\tilde{\Theta}) \) is the prior probability distribution of model
parameters, and projecting all quantities with the matrix \( G \)
marginalizes this posterior probability over all timing
model parameters (see Ref. [34]). The covariance of the
pre-fit timing residuals is defined as \( C = C_{\text{red}} + N \), where
\( C_{\text{red}} \) includes the SGWB, intrinsic pulsar red noise, and
DM variation components, while \( N \) denotes all white-noise
components. This red covariance is decomposed in terms of
a low-rank approximation such that \( C_{\text{red}} = F \varphi F^T \), where \( F \)
is a block-diagonal matrix of Fourier basis vectors, and \( \varphi \)
is a spectral covariance matrix [35–37]. Intrinsic red noise
and SGWB are expanded in the same Fourier basis, while
the DM-variation signal is expanded in basis functions
that differ only by an extra multiplicative factor of \( \propto 1 / \nu_{\text{g}}^2 \),
where \( \nu_{\text{g}} \) is the observing frequency of the pulses. The
matrix \( N \) is diagonal, with entries given by the squared
TOA errors that have been corrected by previous single
pulsar analyses [33]. We apply a multiplicative factor to all
error bars of a given pulsar (referred to as the GEFAC
parameter) which is searched over here.

The matrix \( \varphi \) has band-diagonal structure, since Fourier
to modes between different pulsars may be correlated due
to the presence of a SGWB or correlated noise. Therefore,
\[
[\varphi]_{i,j} = \Gamma_{ab} r_{i} \delta_{ij} + c_{i} \delta_{ij} + \eta_{i} \delta_{ab} \delta_{ij} + \kappa_{ab} \delta_{ab} \delta_{ij},
\]
where \( i \) and \( j \) index the discretely sampled signal or
noise frequencies in our analysis of pulsar TOAs;
\( \rho = h_c(f^2)/(12\pi^2 f^2 T_{\text{max}}) \) is the power spectrum of
the SGWB, with \( T_{\text{max}} \) equal to the timing baseline of the PTA;
\( c \) is the spectrum of a completely correlated red-noise
process, which may result from modeling inaccuracies due
to drifts in the observatory and global time standards; \( \eta \)
is the spectrum of a common, but uncorrelated, red-noise
process that may originate from common physical pro-
cesses inside the neutron stars, see, e.g., Refs. [38,39]; and
\( \kappa_{a} \) is the individual red-noise and DM-variation spectrum
for pulsar \( a \). All these spectra are modeled with power laws,
\( (A_\alpha/12\pi^2 T_{\text{max}})(f_n/\text{yr}^{-1})^{2\alpha-3} \text{ yr}^2 \), where \( A = A_h \) for
the SGWB; \( \alpha \) is a spectral index that equals \( -2/3 \) for the
SGWB; and \( f_n \) are the \( n \) frequencies at which we sample
the spectra of red-noise processes, where in this analysis
\( n = 50 \).

The ORF \( \Gamma_{ab} \) is the average of the overlap of the pulsars’
antenna response functions \( F_a^\dagger(\tilde{\Omega}) \) (see, e.g., Refs. [28,30]),

\[041101-2\]
over GW propagation directions \( \hat{\Omega} \), and weighted by the SGWB angular power distribution \( P(\hat{\Omega}) \):

\[
\Gamma_{ab} = \frac{3}{8\pi} (1 + \delta_{ab}) \int_S d\Omega P(\hat{\Omega}) \sum_q F^q_a(\hat{\Omega}) F^q_b(\hat{\Omega}),
\]

where \( q \) labels the \( \{ +, \times \} \) GW polarization. An excess in \( P(\hat{\Omega}) \) in a particular region of the sky may indicate a particularly bright single source, or a hot spot of several sources [28,30,40,41]. In the following, we decompose the SGWB angular distribution such that

\[
P(\hat{\Omega}) \equiv \sum_{l=0}^{l_{\text{max}}} \sum_{m=-l}^{l} c_{lm} Y_{lm}(\hat{\Omega}),
\]

with normalization \( \int_S P(\hat{\Omega}) d\Omega = 4\pi \), where \( Y_{lm} \) are the real spherical harmonics. Inserting this decomposition into Eq. (4) and proceeding as in Ref. [28], we expand \( \Gamma_{ab} \) into a sum over anisotropic ORFs, \( \Gamma_{lm}^{(ab)} \), with associated weights \( c_{lm} \) to be constrained by the analysis and which characterize the SGWB angular power distribution. We note that the leading function in this expansion, \( c_{00} \Gamma_{00}^{(ab)} \), corresponds to the ORF applicable to the monopole moment of \( P(\hat{\Omega}) \) (also known as the Hellings and Downs curve [42]). Hence, current analysis strategies for isotropic SGWBs emerge from our fully general anisotropy framework as a special case.

Each pulsar has 5 stochastic parameters to be constrained in a Bayesian analysis: intrinsic red noise \((A, \alpha)\), DM variation \((A, \alpha)\), and a GEFC parameter. The fully correlated red-noise component \( \epsilon \) will contribute 2 power-law parameters, as will the common, uncorrelated process \( \eta \). The spectrum of the SGWB is modeled with a fixed slope of \(-2/3\) and an amplitude \( A_\eta \) to be constrained, while \( l_{\text{max}} > 0 \) analyses will include \( l(l+1)\) additional parameters. The priors on the parameters are \( \log_{10} A \in U[-20, -10] \), \( \alpha \in U[-2.0, 1.5] \), \( \text{GEFC} \in U[0.1, 10.0] \). The \( c_{lm} \) coefficients are constrained by a prior requiring the implied distribution of GW power to be positive at all sky locations [30], called the “physical prior”. The prior on \( A_\eta \) is treated separately from other red-noise components, and is uniform in the range \([10^{-20}, 10^{-10}]\). Applying a uniform prior on \( A_\eta \) with logarithmic priors on the amplitudes of all other red components will provide the most conservative upper limits on the strain-spectrum amplitude of the SGWB.

**Results.**—We parametrize the angular distribution of the SGWB down to the angular resolution of the PTA. The most anisotropic SGWB signal is one dominated by a single source. Hence the angular resolution, and thus \( l_{\text{max}} \), is a function of the number of pulsars, \( N_{\text{psr}} \), which significantly contribute to a single-source detection, and the SNR of that detection [43]. Sesana and Vecchio [43] find that the angular resolution of a PTA for a resolvable GW source is \( \Delta \Omega \propto 50/\sqrt{N_{\text{psr}}}/(10/\text{SNR})^2 \) deg\(^2\), and this resolution sets an upper bound on \( l \) via \( l = 180/\theta \), where \( \theta = \sqrt{\Delta \Omega} \) [29]. We analyze a subset of the six best pulsars in the EPTA [19] that encapsulate \( \sim95\% \) of the full-array SNR in simulated continuous GW searches [44]: PSRs J0613 – 0200, J1012 + 5307, J1600 – 3053, J1713 + 0747, J1744 – 1134, J1909 – 3744, where \( T_{\text{max}} = 17.7 \) years and the GW frequencies with which we characterize red-noise components are \( 1/T_{\text{max}} \). Hence, in our array subset \( l_{\text{max}} \lesssim 4 \). Carrying out searches with the noise characteristics of each pulsar fixed, we find the upper limits on the strain amplitude remain consistent whether we analyze this six-pulsar subset or the full array. Including more pulsars of comparably high timing quality would contribute a larger number of pulsar pairs \( [N_{\text{pairs}} = N_{\text{psr}}(N_{\text{psr}} - 1)/2] \), which would serve to increase the SNR and resolving power \( l_{\text{max}} \) of any search for anisotropy. This comes at the cost of longer likelihood evaluation times, making the systematic study presented here currently intractable. Our goal is to provide the first constraints on anisotropy in the SGWB via a systematic study with current techniques—we do so with the 15 distinct pulsar pairings afforded by a six-pulsar array. All analysis is performed with parallel-tempering Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) analysis.

The 95\% upper limits on \( A_h \) from our analyses are shown in Table I. First, we perform searches with a single set of anisotropy coefficients \( c_{lm} \) across the entire band, which we call the all-band anisotropy parametrization, (cf. Table I). We also perform frequency-dependent searches by parametrizing each frequency with independent \( c_{lm}(f) \) coefficients. We split our band into 5 equal subbands (\( \Delta f = 17.9 \) nHz), and independent \( c_{lm}(f) \) coefficients constrained in each, called the frequency-dependent anisotropy parametrization (i). Finally, motivated by the results of L15—where most of the SGWB constraints were found to come from the lowest three frequencies—we apply independent \( c_{lm}(f) \) coefficients to the lowest four frequencies in our analysis \( (f = 1, 2, 3, 4)/T_{\text{max}} = [1.79, 3.59, 5.38, 7.18] \) nHz), with the remainder of the band \( (f=5,\ldots,50)/T_{\text{max}} = [8.98,\ldots,89.7] \) nHz parametrized by a single set of coefficients. This is reported as frequency-dependent

**Table I.** 95\% upper limits on SGWB strain amplitude \( A_h \). The first column is the all-band anisotropy parametrization, the second and third correspond to the frequency-dependent anisotropy parametrizations (i) and (ii), respectively, described in the text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( l_{\text{max}} )</th>
<th>( A_h; ) all-band</th>
<th>( c_{lm} )</th>
<th>( A_h; c_{lm} = c_{lm}(f)^{(i)} )</th>
<th>( A_h; c_{lm} = c_{lm}(f)^{(ii)} )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>( 3.94 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>( 4.09 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.07 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.02 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.01 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>( 4.06 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 3.98 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 4.01 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 3.99 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>( 4.03 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 3.95 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 3.99 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>( 3.99 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
anisotropy parametrization (ii). The recovered upper limit does not deteriorate through the increased number of parameters in our higher multipole searches. The monopole upper limits do not precisely match those found in L15 due to several variations in the analysis specifics: namely, (i) our prior on the amplitude of red-noise components is uniform in logarithm of the amplitudes, which provides a more conservative upper limit on the SGWB strain amplitude; (ii) we do not consider Solar System ephemeris errors in our correlated noise modeling; and (iii) we employed a pure time-domain likelihood in the initial single pulsar analysis to correct the TOA errors in each pulsar. Hence, our monopole upper limits are higher than in L15 by \( \sim 1 \times 10^{-15} \). However, moving beyond the first analysis presented here, our more general anisotropy framework can be easily incorporated into all existing and planned pipelines to become a standard tool set, since it recovers the isotropic SGWB constraints as a special case. The upper limits on the strain amplitude in each anisotropic multipole of the search are shown in the left panel of Fig. 1, where the constraints on the strain amplitude for the all-band anisotropy parametrization (ii). The recovered upper limit to the SGWB strain amplitude.

The constraints on \( c_{lm} \) values. There is nothing to penalize these large anisotropy coefficients, which lead to highly anisotropic (and possibly negative) GW power distributions and would otherwise be restricted by the physical prior. This supports our claim that the constraints in Fig. 1 (left) are prior dominated.

We also map our recovered cross-correlation samples to a pixel basis with 12288 equal-area pixels on the sky. We supplement our mapping with the additional normalization constraint that \( \int \delta(\hat{\Omega})d\hat{\Omega} \approx \sum_{l=1}^{N_{\text{pix}}} c(\hat{\Omega}_l)\Delta\hat{\Omega}_l = 4\pi. \) The resulting SGWB power in each pixel is marginalized over all other pixels and truncated to obtain the positive 1D-marginalized power PDF before it is integrated over to obtain the upper limit on the strain amplitude in that pixel. The result is shown in Fig. 2, where we see the distinctive overlapping antenna patterns of the pulsars mapping out the sensitivity of the PTA to the background strain amplitude. The constraints on \( A_h \) from each pixel are quite poor, and in some cases are more than an order of magnitude worse than the all-sky upper limit. As we decrease the resolution of the

FIG. 1 (color online). 95% upper limits on the strain amplitude, where \( C_l = \sum_{m=-l}^{l}|c_{lm}|^2/(2l+1) \). Left: all-band anisotropy parametrization and frequency-dependent parametrization (ii). The right axis is the ratio of the upper limit to the monopole. The inset figure shows 95% upper limits on \( (C_l/4\pi)^{1/4} \), which are marginalized over the strain amplitude for the all-band anisotropy parametrization and a constant likelihood analysis. Our limits reflect the constraints of the physical prior. Right: all-band anisotropy parametrization, where the \( c_{lm} \) values are obtained by mapping cross-correlation values to the spherical harmonic basis, without physical prior rejection.
FIG. 2 (color online). 95% upper limits on the GW strain amplitude in each pixel. These limits are obtained by mapping from the Bayesian MCMC-sampled cross-correlation values to a pixelated ORF basis ($N_{\text{pix}} = 12\,288$). White stars show the pulsar locations.

Conclusions.—Our analyses suggest that this data set is not informative enough to update our prior knowledge of the angular distribution of the nanohertz SGWB. Using a prior that enforces a positive SGWB distribution, we find that the 95% upper limit on the strain amplitude in multipoles of the background distribution with $l > 0$ is $\lesssim 40\%$ of the monopole strain. No evolution of these upper limits as a function of GW frequency is found since the constraints are a reflection of the prior. Additionally, we can recover the joint posterior distribution of the cross-correlation values between pulsar pairings, and subsequently map these to a spherical-harmonic or pixel ORF basis. With the only constraint being positive definiteness of the cross-correlation matrix, the strain amplitude in $l > 0$ multipoles is $\lesssim 400\%$ of the monopole value. The strain-amplitude upper limits as a function of location on the sky reflect the overlapping antenna pattern behavior of the full PTA, where the limits can often be more than an order of magnitude worse than the all-sky limit. A full description of all techniques employed here, and their efficacy, will be provided in a follow-up methods paper.

Forthcoming advanced radio instruments such as the Five-Hundred-Metre Aperture Spherical Radio Telescope [49,50], MeerKAT [51], and the Square Kilometre Array [52] will enhance the detection and inference prospects for anisotropic GW skies by detecting large numbers of millisecond pulsars and timing them to unprecedented precision. Upcoming studies will investigate how we can combine galaxy catalogs with frequency-dependent maps of the nanohertz GW sky to probe whether the strain budget is being dominated by a few bright nearby sources, or is more diffuse. We hope that the work presented here, together with these future studies, will provide important insights into the demographics, evolution, and assembly of SMBHBs not accessible by any other means.

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19] G. Desvignes et al. (to be published).