

Interactive comment on “Quality assessment of the TOPAZ4 reanalysis in the Arctic over the period 1991–2013” by Jiping Xie et al.

Anonymous Referee #1

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This paper describes the result of a 23-year reanalysis (1991-2013) of the Arctic, as obtained from the TOPAZ4 coupled ocean and sea ice data assimilation system. The paper mainly provides a detailed comparison between the reanalysis and available observation datasets (sea level anomaly, sea surface temperature, in situ temperature and salinity profiles, sea ice concentration, sea ice drift and sea ice thickness). In its present form, the paper is essentially descriptive; it does not provide really new scientific ideas; and the method used to assess the ensemble reanalysis (statistics of the difference between ensemble mean and observations) is quite crude and not very original. Nevertheless, as I understand, this paper is meant to be the reference paper to an important new reanalysis product describing the Arctic Ocean (delivered by the Arctic component of the MyOcean system). As such, I think that this paper could deserve publication in Ocean Science.

C1

I have however a few concerns concerning the manuscript that I believe should be taken into account in a revised version.

1. The main purpose of the paper is the assessment of the reanalysis using all available observations. However, to compare the reanalysis to observations, the authors just compute the average and RMS difference between the ensemble mean and observations. This method looks very crude to me, and does not make justice to the advanced method that is used to perform data assimilation. The ensemble data assimilation system provides a probability distribution for the reanalysis, which is described by an ensemble of model states. Why then assessing the reanalysis using the ensemble mean only? Probabilistic tools exist to perform an objective comparison between ensemble simulations and observations (see for instance Toth et al., 2003, or Candille et al., 2007). Why performing an ensemble reanalysis if the probabilistic information is discarded to study the performance of the system? Would it be possible to include some kind of probabilistic assessment, or at least explain better why using such a crude assessment method?
2. In assessing the performance by computing the difference with observations, the paper implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) assumes that the closer to the observations, the better the reanalysis. This amounts to completely neglecting observation errors in the assessment of the reanalysis, which is usually not an appropriate approximation. This incorrect assumption is for instance made explicitly in:
 - p. 13, l. 4, where the misfit to observations is called "error" on the reanalysis;
 - p. 14, l. 21, where the reanalysis is said to be improved if difference to observations is smaller;
 - p. 16, l. 6-7, where it is said that an RMSD with observations of 5% is good

C2

whereas the accuracy of the observations is said to be about 10%. In my view, this just mean that the reanalysis is excessively close to observations.

I think that it would be important to better explain the limitations of this simple approach for assessing the performance of the reanalysis; to explain why more sophisticated comparison metrics were not applied (see my previous comment) and avoid the misleading expressions listed above.

3. In the introduction, the authors provide several arguments to support the idea that ensemble methods are an appropriate way to apply the dynamical model constraint in the estimation process. However, this is not discussed anymore in the assesment of the performance of the reanalysis. Only quantitative difference to observations are provided and analysed. I think that the quality of the paper would be enhanced if more explicit evidence of what is stated in the introduction was provided in addition to the simple description of the distance between reanalysis and observations.

References:

Candille, G., Côté, C., Houtekamer, P. L., and Pellerin, G.: Verification of an ensemble prediction system against observations, *Mon. Weather Rev.*, 135, 2688–2699, 2007.

Toth, Z., Talagrand, O., Candille, G., and Zhu, Y.: Probability and ensemble forecasts, in: *Forecast Verification: a Practitioner's Guide in Atmospheric Science*, edited by: Jolliffe, I. and Stephenson, D. B., Wiley, UK, 137–163, 2003.

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