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Effect of Solar Radiation Pressure on Geostationary Satellite Stability

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Introduction

Geostationary satellites play a critical role in global communications, weather forecasting, broadcasting, and surveillance by maintaining a fixed position relative to the Earth's surface. Positioned at approximately 35,786 km above the equator, these satellites orbit the Earth at the same angular velocity as the planet's rotation, making them appear stationary to ground observers. While this positioning is ideal for continuous coverage of specific areas, it also makes geostationary satellites susceptible to a variety of perturbing forces. Among these, Solar Radiation Pressure (SRP) the force exerted by photons emitted from the Sun can significantly impacts the orbital dynamics and long-term stability of such satellites. This paper explores how SRP affects geostationary satellite stability, the mechanisms of these perturbations, and how modern engineering and orbital control strategies mitigate these influences [1].

Description

Solar radiation pressure arises from the momentum transfer of solar photons striking the satellite's surface. Though the force from individual photons is minuscule, the cumulative effect on the satellite over time can lead to measurable displacements and attitude changes. For geostationary satellites, which require precise station-keeping to maintain their designated orbital slots, SRP becomes a significant non-gravitational perturbation, especially in the east-west and north-south directions. The magnitude of SRP is dependent on factors such as the satellite's cross-sectional area facing the Sun, its reflectivity or absorption coefficient, and its mass. Satellites with large solar arrays or asymmetric body structures are more affected by SRP, particularly if their area-to-mass ratio is high.

The impact of SRP on geostationary satellites manifests primarily in three ways: longitudinal drift, inclination build-up, and attitude disturbances. Longitudinal drift occurs when SRP exerts asymmetric forces due to the satellite's solar panel orientation or the Earth's shadowing, causing the satellite to move east or west of its intended orbital longitude. Inclination build-up results from a net out-of-plane force component, gradually increasing the orbital inclination over time. This is especially problematic because geostationary satellites are required to stay within tight inclination constraints to maintain fixed ground coverage. Attitude disturbances, caused by torques due to SRP acting off the satellite's center of mass, can also lead to misalignment of communication antennas or solar panels, reducing operational efficiency.

To analyze the stability under SRP influence, engineers often employ perturbation models that incorporate SRP as a function of the satellite's geometry, attitude, and orbit parameters. The standard SRP force model assumes the satellite as a flat plate or composite surfaces with different reflective properties and orientation relative to the Sun vector. These models are integrated into orbital dynamics simulations to predict orbital deviations over time. High-fidelity tools like STK (Systems Tool Kit) or MATLAB-based orbital propagators simulate SRP-induced drift and help mission planners determine necessary correction maneuvers. Seasonal variations in solar angles and the Earth's elliptical orbit further complicate SRP effects, requiring continuous monitoring and predictive analysis [2].

Conclusion

Solar radiation pressure, though subtle in magnitude, exerts a significant influence on the long-term stability and performance of geostationary satellites. It introduces perturbations that can lead to longitudinal drift, inclination build-up, and attitude misalignments, all of which compromise the satellite's ability to deliver continuous and reliable services. Through advanced modeling techniques, continuous monitoring, and efficient station-keeping strategies, the detrimental effects of SRP can be mitigated to preserve orbital stability. As satellite missions become more complex and demand longer operational lives, understanding and managing solar radiation pressure becomes increasingly vital. Future satellite designs and propulsion technologies will likely incorporate more robust mechanisms to counteract SRP, ensuring greater resilience and precision in geostationary operations.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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