Scilab and Xcos for VLEO satellites modelling

D. González¹, V. Cañas¹, J. Becedas¹, R. M. Domínguez¹, P. C. E. Roberts², N. H. Crisp², V. T. A. Oiko², S. Edmondson², S. D. Worrall², S. Haigh², K. Smith², R. E. Lyons², S. Livadiotti², C. Huyton², L. A. Sinpetru², A. Striker², S. Rodriguez-Donaire³, D. Garcia-Almiñana³, M. Sureda³, D. Kataria⁴, G. H. Herdrich⁵, F. Romano⁵, Y. Chan⁵, A. Boxberger⁵, S. Fasoulas⁵, C. Traub⁵, R. Outlaw⁶, V. Hanessian⁷, A. Mølgaard⁷, J. Nielsen⁷, M. Bisgaard⁷, R. Villain⁸, J. S. Perez⁸, A. Conte⁸, B. Belkouchi⁸, A. Schwalber⁹, B. Heißerer⁹

¹Elecnor Deimos Satellite Systems, Calle Francia 9, 13500 Puertollano, Spain. ²The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL – United Kingdom. ³UPC-Barcelona TECH, Carrer de Colom 11, 08222 Terrassa, Barcelona, Spain. ⁴Mullard Space Science Laboratory (UCL), Holmbury St. Mary, Dorking, RH5 6NT, United Kingdom. ⁵Institute of Space System, University of Stuttgart, Pfaffenwaldring 29, 70569 Stuttgart, Germany. ⁶Christopher Newport University, 1 Avenue of the Arts, Newport News, VA 23606, USA. ⁷Gomspace AS, Langagervej 6, 9220 Aalborg East, Denmark. ⁸Euroconsult, 86 Boulevard de Sébastopol, 75003 Paris, France. ⁹Concentris Research Management GmbH, Ludwigstraße 4, D-82256 Fürstenfeldbruck, Germany.

Introduction

Very Low Earth Orbits (VLEO) gathered interest due to the advantages of flying in lower altitudes, such as higher signal to noise ratio in the communications, possible reduction in the size, mass and cost of imaging payloads, less space debris in the orbits or lower propagation delay, among others. However, at these altitudes the aerodynamic forces and torques become the predominant disturbances and it must be considered in the design of the spacecraft. In this work atmospheric, magnetic and wind models were implemented in Xcos blocks to calculate the disturbances that affect the spacecraft and a panel method was implemented to study the aerodynamics with different geometries. The results of pointing maneuvers and attitude stabilization simulations comparing feather and shuttlecock geometries are presented. The models implemented in C and Scilab were used to create Xcos blocks that will be part of a toolbox.
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Methods and results

Environment disturbance torques acting on a satellite in orbit include gravity gradient, solar radiation, aerodynamic torque and Earth’s magnetic field. In VLEO the aerodynamic disturbances are significant due to the increase in the density of the atmosphere. The interaction between the atmospheric particles and the surfaces of the spacecraft is responsible of these torques and forces. In this analysis Sentman’s [1] equations were used to model gas surface interactions (GSI). An implementation of a panel method was used in order to calculate aerodynamic forces affecting the spacecraft. The spacecraft surface was modelled as a composition of flat plates. The forces and torques produced by GSI were calculated for each panel and after that they were combined to obtain the overall component. The panel method can be used to calculate aerodynamic forces and torques in convex surfaces.

In order to calculate the disturbances the following models were used in the simulations: Drag Temperature Model 2013 (DTM213) [2], International Geomagnetic Reference Field (IGRF12) [3] and Horizontal Wind Model (HWM14) [4].

Scilab 6.02 was used to get the results presented in this paper. The attitude dynamics were modelled on Xcos. Models of the actuators were implemented, including the magnetorquers, reaction wheels and the aerodynamic fins. The simulated external torques were the following: the gravity gradient, dipole magnetic field, the aerodynamic torque and the internal torques generated by the mobile parts. The controller in charge of managing the aerofins was a PID (Proportional Integral Derivative) controller.

Figure 1 shows the geometries of the satellites used in the simulations. Two configurations were analyzed. One of them is a shuttlecock configuration, based on a badminton shuttlecock, and the other one a feather configuration, similar to a dart or an arrow. In both cases the fins can be moved to take advantage of the aerodynamic forces and torques to perform maneuvers.
The orbit parameters are defined in Table 1. A VLEO orbit at an altitude of 350 km was considered for the calculations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of orbit</th>
<th>Altitude (km)</th>
<th>Inclination (degrees)</th>
<th>Argument of Perigee (degrees)</th>
<th>Mlatan (hh:mm)</th>
<th>Eccentricity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VLEO</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The attitude stability of the feather configuration is studied in pitch, roll, and yaw axes. A simulation was performed for each axis. Figure 2 shows the results for each simulation in the same graph. The settling time was considered the moment when the difference between the signal and the reference is lower than one degree. The maximum maneuverability is reached in roll axis, with a settling time of 172 seconds. Pitch and yaw axes behaved similarly and showed a settling time of 607 seconds and 812 seconds, respectively. In this configuration, mainly lift is used in the maneuvers. Additionally an
Effect not considered on these simulations was that an oscillating steady state of small amplitude appears depending on the precision of the fins movement.

![Figure 2: Attitude stabilization for feather configuration](image)

Table 2 shows the results obtained for a pointing maneuver. The target angle was 15 degrees. The settling time and the overshoot are presented for different accommodation coefficients. The accommodation coefficient [5] characterizes the behavior of the particles when they impact a surface. It depends on the material used for the fins, the temperature and the roughness of the surface. By considering different values of accommodation coefficient the results change. The higher the accommodation coefficient the higher the settling time and the overshoot found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation coefficient</th>
<th>Settling time (s)</th>
<th>Overshoot (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4281</td>
<td>32.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>5426</td>
<td>32.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>9022</td>
<td>33.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>22513</td>
<td>33.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>68319</td>
<td>36.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The same analysis was carried out for the shuttlecock configuration. Figure 3 shows the results of the attitude stabilization for that geometry. In this case, drag is mainly used in the maneuvers. The stabilization is faster than in the feather configuration. Pitch and yaw axes had a settling time of 183 seconds and 197 seconds, respectively. The configuration of the fins does not allow the stabilization in the roll axis. It can be achieved by using reaction wheels or magnetorquers.

Table 3: Comparison of pointing maneuver for feather and shuttlecock configurations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pointing Angle</th>
<th>Feather Settling Time</th>
<th>Feather Overshoot(%)</th>
<th>Shuttlecock Settling Time</th>
<th>Shuttlecock Overshoot(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3523</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>79.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
With the models used in this work to analyze the behavior of satellites flying in VLEO was feasible. The different parts implemented in the models can be used to create blocks that can be included in a toolbox. For example, the reaction wheels, magnetorquers, blocks that calculate the torques or blocks that integrate environmental models, such as the atmospheric model or the magnetic field model. Xcos is a useful graphical tool that allows the implementation of complex models and run simulations.

A Xcos toolbox with the blocks used in this analysis is in development and will be released at the end of the project. Figure 4 shows some of the blocks implemented for the toolbox. The blocks were generated in three ways:

- Integrating existing C or Fortran code in the blocks.
- Generating C code from a Xcos superblock and integrating it in the blocks.
- Generating a block from Scilab code.
Summary

The results presented in this paper remark the importance of the geometry and the material used to build a spacecraft to take advantage of the environment in VLEO orbits, where the atmospheric fluid behaviour has to be considered as a free molecular flow, having important implications when modelling the system. Aerodynamic forces and torques can be used to carry out some attitude control and stabilization maneuvers. Aerodynamic stabilization and pointing maneuvers were presented in this work.

The available open source software tools allowed implementing the models in blocks that can be used to simulate and design the control system. The work carried out reveals that the set of blocks available can be extended to create a tool set with all the required functions to model a VLEO spacecraft system.

References


