

**Satellite Orbital Conjunction Reports Assessing Threatening
Encounters in Space (SOCRATES)**

T.S. Kelso and S. Alfano

**15th AAS/AIAA Space Flight
Mechanics Conference**

Copper Mountain, Colorado January 23-27, 2005

AAS Publications Office, P.O. Box 28130, San Diego, CA 92198

Satellite Orbital Conjunction Reports Assessing Threatening Encounters in Space (SOCRATES)

T.S. Kelso[†] and S. Alfano[‡]

As a service to the satellite operator community, the Center for Space Standards & Innovation (CSSI) offers SOCRATES—Satellite Orbital Conjunction Reports Assessing Threatening Encounters in Space. CSSI runs a list of all satellite payloads on orbit against a list of all objects on orbit using the catalog of all unclassified NORAD two-line element sets (TLEs) to look for satellite conjunctions for the coming week. The runs are made using, STK/CAT and the NORAD SGP4 propagator. This paper will discuss how SOCRATES works and how it can help satellite operators avoid undesired close approaches through advanced mission planning.

INTRODUCTION

As of 2005 January 11, NORAD regularly tracks 9,231 in earth orbit, of which 2,927 are designated as payloads. While not all of these payloads are still active, about a third are and they perform a variety of important tasks—many vital to the global economy. Since these payloads tend to operate in a limited orbital regime (i.e., they are not randomly distributed) and share that regime with the rocket bodies, upper stages, and associated debris which put them in orbit, the potential exists that any of these payloads might collide with another object on orbit. At relative velocities up to 15 km/s, the results of such a collision would be catastrophic. In the geostationary belt, such a collision would generate debris which would drift around the belt indefinitely, putting at risk all other payloads in that orbit.

While many satellite operators are aware of the possibility of a collision between their satellite and another object in earth orbit, most seem unaware of the frequency of near misses occurring each day. Until recently, no service existed to advise satellite operators of an impending conjunction of a satellite payload with another satellite, putting the responsibility for determining these occurrences squarely on the satellite operator's shoulders. This problem has been further confounded by the lack of a timely, comprehensive data set of satellite orbital element sets and computationally efficient tools to provide predictions using industry-standard software. As a result, hundreds of

[†] T.S. Kelso, Technical Program Manager, Center for Space Standards & Innovation, 7150 Campus Drive, Suite 260, Colorado Springs, CO 80920-6522. E-mail: tskelso@centerforspace.com, Phone: (877) 292-CSSI, Web Site: <http://www.centerforspace.com>.

[‡] S. Alfano, Technical Program Manager, Center for Space Standards & Innovation, 7150 Campus Drive, Suite 260, Colorado Springs, CO 80920-6522. E-mail: salfano@centerforspace.com, Phone: (877) 292-CSSI, Web Site: <http://www.centerforspace.com>.

conjunctions within 1 km occur each week—with little or no intervention—putting billions of dollars of space hardware at risk, along with their associated missions.

As a service to the satellite operator community, the Center for Space Standards & Innovation (CSSI) offers SOCRATES—Satellite Orbital Conjunction Reports Assessing Threatening Encounters in Space. Each day (limited only by data availability), CSSI runs a list of all satellite payloads on orbit against a list of all objects on orbit using the catalog of all unclassified NORAD two-line element sets (TLEs) to look for conjunctions over the next seven days. The runs are made using STK/CAT—Satellite Tool Kit's Conjunction Analysis Tools—together with the NORAD SGP4 propagator in STK.

BACKGROUND

Beginning in May of 2004, CSSI began providing daily reports of likely conjunctions for the upcoming week for all payloads in earth orbit using the full catalog of unclassified NORAD TLEs available to the public. Those reports are provided in a special section of the Celestrak web site (<http://celestrak.com/SOCRATES/>) and are available to all users. There are no fees or restrictions for this service. As of this writing, no comparable service has ever been provided to the public.

The goal of this service is to provide a reliable tool for satellite users to use to help them assess whether their payloads might have predicted conjunctions which could require further analysis. For that tool to be considered reliable, it would have to use a comprehensive database of orbital data, along with standard orbital models, and be generated using accepted techniques. It would also have to be provided on a regular basis to allow incorporation of the results into daily operational planning.

To meet this goal, SOCRATES uses the most comprehensive orbital database currently available—the NORAD two-line element sets. For the most part, these data are regularly updated and made available electronically via the NASA Orbital Information Group (OIG) web site. That database is not fully comprehensive, however, because it intentionally omits those satellites deemed vital to US national security—about 184 payloads along with the associated rocket bodies and upper stages which delivered them to orbit. Even so, current orbital data is available for 8,478 of the 9,231 objects (about 92 percent) cataloged by NORAD. Not all of these missing objects are for restricted objects, though. Some are considered 'lost' since they have not been tracked for the past 30 days. It should also be noted that this database does not include those objects too small to be detected or regularly tracked by the US Space Surveillance Network (SSN).

Since TLEs are generated from SSN observations using the SGP4 (Simplified General Perturbations) orbital theory which uses mean elements, the same version of SGP4 must be used for predictions in order to minimize modeling errors. While a version of SGP4 was released to the public in 1980 in *Spacetrack Report Number 3*, subsequent modifications were made in 1990 and 1992 which were not released and are considered US export controlled. Most of these changes were to correct errors in the original code for handling special cases in the deep-space portion of the model and other researchers

have independently found and corrected these errors in their implementations of SGP4. Extensive testing of the version of SGP4 implemented in STK against known ‘hard’ cases has shown that it matches the official NORAD version quite well. However, without a standard released version of SGP4 along with a version control history, there will always be some level of modeling error in these predictions.

The final requirement for a reliable tool is to have a systematic way to search for all relevant conjunctions in as computationally efficient a manner as possible. With current searches comparing about 2,700 payloads against 8,500 total objects over a one-week period, an inefficient search strategy could be so computationally intensive that it would be impossible to produce a timely report on a daily basis. STK/CAT implements a number of standard pre-filters (out-of-date TLE, apogee/perigee, orbit path, and time) to reduce the overall computational complexity of this task. This allows current runs to be made on a 2 GHz, Pentium 4 with 1 GB of RAM in just over 5 hours. Efforts are currently underway to further improve the efficiency of STK/CAT’s filters to provide even more timely results.

Not only does STK/CAT calculate the minimum distance at the time of closest approach (TCA) for all conjunctions matching the user-specified criteria, it also provides calculations of the true probability and the maximum probability of collision. Because the minimum-distance method ignores position covariance information (which is not spherically uniform) and can lead to an exaggerated assessment of the true risk, CSSI believes the probability-based methods provide a more reasonable assessment of the true risk. For those cases where the actual covariances for the conjuncting objects are known, STK/CAT calculates the true probability of collision for that event.

For cases where no covariance data exists or data quality is insufficient, STK/CAT calculates the maximum probability of collision. More detail on the maximum probability method may be found in Alfano’s paper titled “Relating Position Uncertainty to Maximum Conjunction Probability” (AAS 03-548). Unfortunately, the generation of TLEs does not produce covariance data and the maximum-probability method is, therefore, the only way to generate a stochastic assessment of the probability of collision.

It is possible, however, to estimate the covariance associated with a given TLE by examining recent historical TLEs for the same object. The method currently under investigation by CSSI takes the historical TLEs for a particular object for the period of twice the prediction interval prior to the current date. A pairwise comparison of all TLEs is performed to generate predictions at the epoch of each TLE. The TLE associated with the epoch prediction time is considered the primary TLE and the relative position of the secondary TLE is calculated in the VNC (velocity-normal-conormal) coordinate system for the primary TLE. The VNC components are then plotted against the difference in epoch times to illustrate how prediction error grows over time in each dimension. The presumption here is that the prediction error at the TLE epoch is minimal. An example of such a plot is shown in Figure 1.

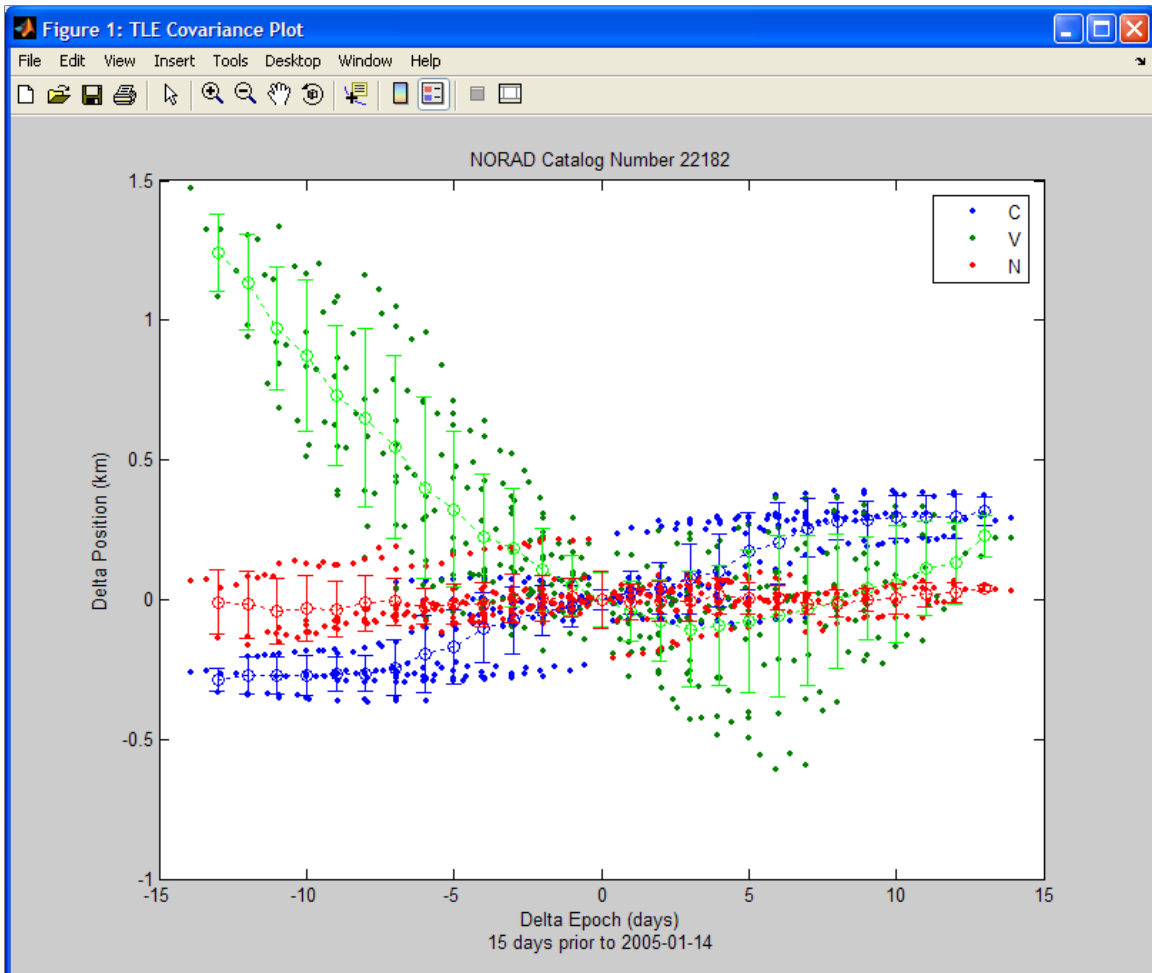


Figure 1 VNC Error vs. Delta Epoch Time

An estimate of the covariance value at the epoch and its growth over time can be developed by binning the VNC ‘errors’ and calculating the sample mean and standard deviation for each bin. A time-varying bias can be calculated by simply interpolating between the mean bin values and then subtracted from the predicted position to produce a zero-bias mean. The resulting sample standard deviations (which are now smaller because we did not assume zero bias) then show the expected growth in prediction error.

CSSI currently plans to enhance the daily SOCRATES runs by generating pseudo-covariance data for each object, with the approach just described, and using that data within the true probability calculations in STK/CAT to provide a more realistic assessment of the probability of collision. Until then, satellite operators can selectively apply the same approach for the specific objects in a particular conjunction to refine their estimate of the risk of collision.

METHODOLOGY

Each day's SOCRATES run begins with the release of a new database from the NASA OIG web site. Within an hour of its release, the data is downloaded and processed into CelesTrak's historical TLE archives (at the same time, that data is also used to update the current TLE files on CelesTrak). The historical archives are then used to extract TLEs for all objects on orbit that have an epoch within the past 30 days. Data close to this cutoff has limited value due to the prediction error that far out, but practical experience to date rarely shows prediction intervals (look-aheads from the TLE epoch) of more than 8-9 days over a 7-day forecast.

The data is partitioned into two sets—payloads only and all objects—to facilitate setup for STK/CAT. Searches are currently limited to conjunctions involving payloads to give satellite operators an opportunity to plan—or obtain planning services—to move their satellites out of harm's way (if their satellite is maneuverable), or to take other appropriate measures. Since there currently is no way of knowing which payloads are still active, all payloads still on orbit are considered in the daily analysis. STK/CAT is set to look for all conjunctions which are within 1 km at the time of closest approach and reports minimum distance and the maximum probability for each conjunction. Maximum probability is calculated assuming an aspect ratio of 1 and using a developmental database of object sizes obtained from publicly available sources compiled by The Aerospace Corporation. An effort is underway to provide an even more robust and extensively validated database of sizes using References 3, 4, and 5.

The actual STK/CAT run for SOCRATES is kicked off at 1800 Eastern Time each day. This delay is due to the limited computational facilities currently available within CSSI for this task, but plans are in development to provide a dedicated server specifically to support SOCRATES soon. Once the new server is in place, SOCRATES runs will begin immediately upon receipt of new data. Each day's run finishes shortly after 2300 Eastern Time and the conjunction advisory reports and associated data are uploaded to CelesTrak at 2330.

Each upload includes Top 10 lists sorted by maximum probability (see the example in Figure 2) and minimum distance at TCA, together with a fully searchable set of all predicted conjunctions matching the input criteria. Searches can be conducted using common name or NORAD Catalog Number and sorted by maximum probability and minimum distance at TCA. Each report shows basic information defining which satellites are involved in the conjunction along with the specific time and circumstances of the event.

