

## **Inter-Agency Space Debris Coordination Committee**



Attitude motion characterization of LEO upper stages  
using different observation techniques

IADC Action Item 38.2

Working Group 1

## Abstract

Active debris removal is one of the most promising solutions to clean up space for leftovers of activities in the past. Understanding the motions of the rocket bodies, which are the potential targets of the active debris removal, in the low earth orbits is necessary for the research and development of the active debris removal system. As a result of the AI31.2, a number of LEO upper stages presenting unexpected attitude motion were identified. The causes have not yet been fully explained and deserve further investigation. These particular objects should be analyzed by fusing data collected from different sensors to better characterize their attitude motion and evolution of this motion with time. In this AI38.2, 9 objects were selected as the targets of the campaign observation that show the unexpected attitude motion. Six space agencies joined the campaign observation and a lot of lightcurve data were obtained. These data will be shared with all the space agencies of IADC and will be analyzed for future investigation in the near future.

## 1 Introduction

Space debris is becoming a serious problem in low earth orbit (LEO). It is thought that a chain reaction of cascading collisions, in which many pieces of space debris created by a collision become sources of other collisions, have begun in the 1000 km region. Humanity must cope with this situation as soon as possible to protect its space programs. The active debris removal (ADR) systems which remove relatively large objects such as rocket bodies and inactive satellites from the precious orbits, is one of the most promising solutions because it reduces the risk to create enormous amounts of debris. Many space agencies are studying and developing various method for the ADR system. Rocket bodies will be good targets since their shapes are relatively simple which help the ADR system to access them. Understanding the motions of the rocket bodies are very important to design the ADR system. As AI31.2, the working group 1 (WG1) of IADC performed the observation campaign targeting 137 rocket bodies to understand the overall situations of the rocket bodies in LEO. As a result, the visual inspection of the light curves showed 6.6% of the objects indicated clear periodic brightness variations and 8.3% did ambiguous ones. Large part of the objects indicating clear periodicity get and/or lose their periodicities arbitrarily. The understanding of this phenomenon would be of great use for the future ADR missions and could also be useful for the improvement of the reentry predictions. In order to understand the phenomenon, WG1 selected 9 objects as the observation targets which include a subset from the previous AI32.1 that showed the phenomenon. Five space delegations (ASI, CNES, ESA, JAXA, SSAU) had joined the campaign observation and provided the lightcurves. The detail of the observations of each agency is described in the section 2. The obtained lightcurves are shown in the section 3.

## 2 Observation

WG1 selected 9 rocket bodies (SSC number: 11804, 18340, 23088, 23405, 25637, 39198, 40879, 41847, 41858) for the campaign observation targets which include a subset from the previous AI32.1 that showed the phenomenon. Five delegations, ASI, CNES, ESA, JAXA and SSAU joined the campaign observation. We did not set the detailed observation and analysis strategies since each

delegation has different equipment, observation method, and analysis processes. Unifying these parameters is very time-consuming and ruin the main objective of the campaign observation sometimes. The details of the observation of each delegation are described in the section 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5 respectively. CSA has a very unique observation asset, NEOSSat in the orbit. Although CSA could not joint the campaign observation, the satellite will provide great contribution to this kind of campaign in the near future. The details of the NEOSSat are shown in section 2.6.

## 2.1 Observation and data analysis at ASI

The light-curve presented for this AI were acquired with the Remote Space Debris Observation System (RESDOS) and the Sapienza Coupled University Debris Observatory (SCUDO) observatories, located in Rome (RM) and Collepardo (FR), respectively. In both systems, a scientific Complementary Metal-Oxide Semiconductor (sCMOS) sensor is installed integrally with the main telescope and its mount, so the systems can track the satellite and acquire the video in real time. Both systems are equipped with the same sCMOS sensor and mount. The sCMOS have a resolution of 5.5 Mpx and a sensor diagonal 22 mm. The maximum fps achievable is 100. The optical tube has a focal length of 750 mm and a diameter of 150 mm. The mount type is equatorial. These two observatories were used also to produce simultaneous light-curve.



**Figure 1. RESDOS observatory (left) and SCUDO observatory (right)**

The light-curve of the object is retrieved starting from the computation of the object and stars intensity (i.e. the luminous flux) for each frame. In the frame, all the objects (stars and satellite) are identified, and a preliminary position is assigned through the use of a segmentation algorithm. This preliminary position is corrected evaluating the proprieties of the object (shape, flux, background, etc.) not in the whole frame but in a small region of interest (ROI). Once the object is correctly discriminated from the background, an aperture photometry procedure is applied to calculate the object position (centroid) and intensity.

Once the centroid and the intensity of the stars and of the object in each frame are extracted, the

magnitude is calculated comparing the intensity of the object respect to each star in the FoV. The magnitude of the object is evaluated respect to all the stars in the frame, so a vector of possible values is obtained, and it is assumed that the object's magnitude is equal to the median of these values and the error is the standard deviation of these magnitudes. Some positions can be affected by a wrong segmentation procedure due to the star crossing of the object or to the overexposure of the object itself. These data are excluded. All the relevant data (datetime, pixel position, celestial coordinates, brightness intensity, magnitude, background) for each frame are then stored in the Tracking Data Message (TDM) standard.

## 2.2 Observation and data analysis at CNES

CNES contributed to AI38.2 using the TAROT Réunion telescope located on Reunion Island in Indian Ocean. TAROT Réunion is owned and operated by CNRS.

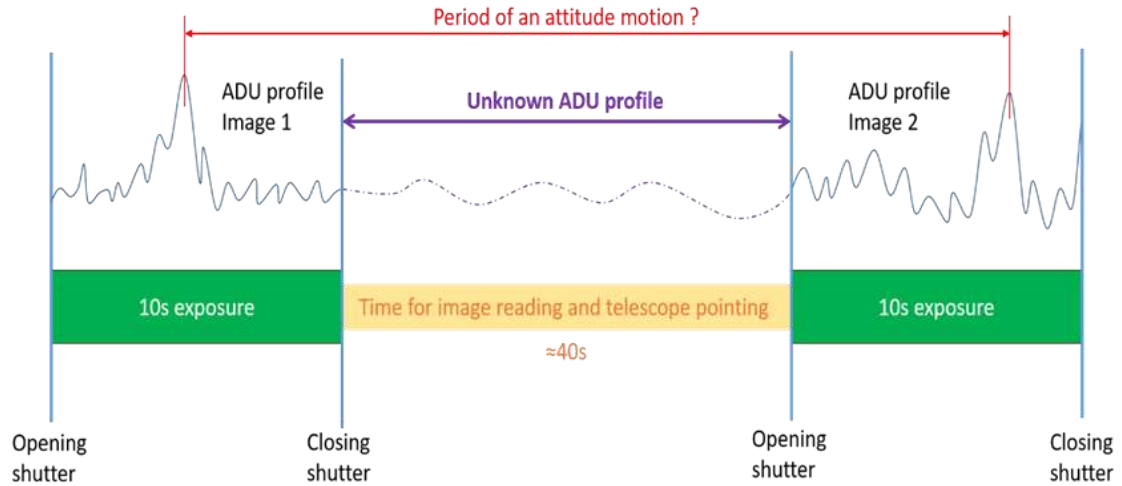


**Figure 2. TAROT telescopes**

### 2.2.1 Cnes Images capture method

The TAROT telescopes are observing higher orbits every night as part of the French and European Union Space Surveillance and Tracking programs. As we optimized the telescope command and control software for these operational activities, we had few possibilities of adaptation of the observation scheme for this new type of activity. So, the best observation method we found in the context of those constraints was to make a sidereal picture of 10 seconds at an approximate pace of one every 40 to 90 seconds.

As the information we can provide with this system is very fragmented (see figure below), we decided to make a few observation to better understand the constraints and needs of this type of observations but not to use a lot of telescope time for so few information. In consequence, we limited this campaign to 4 light curves of norad 39198 and 31 light curves of norad 23405.



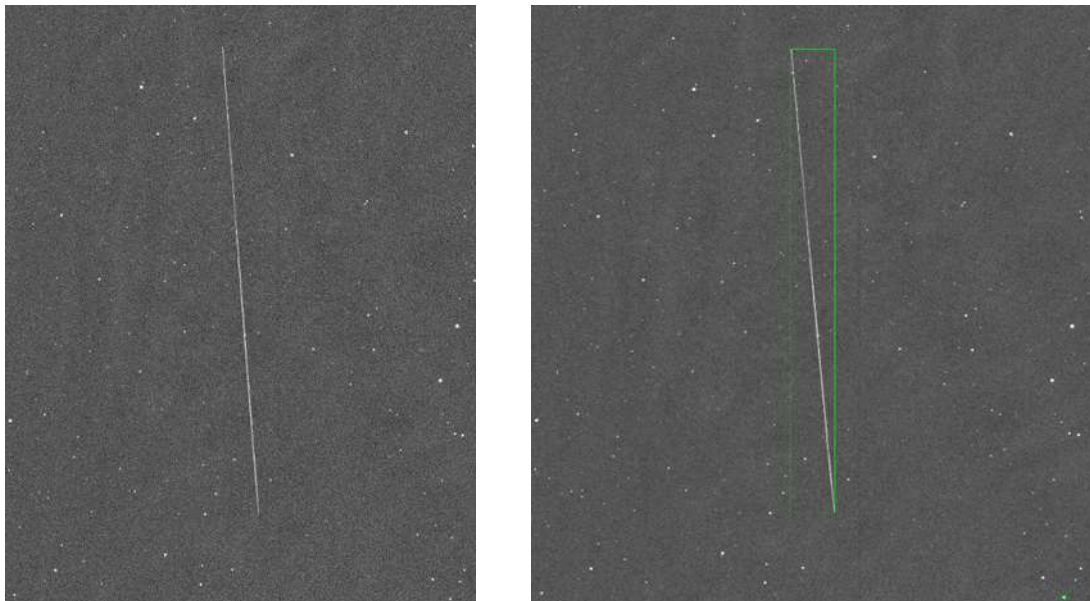
**Figure 3. Image sequencing schema**

### 2.2.2 Cnes images analysis

To extract the light curves from the images, our extraction software followed the following scheme:

- detection of the ends of the trail,
- fitting of a curve linking both ends of the trail,
- performs a bilinear interpolation to extract the ADU value of pixels surrounding the curve.

This gives us the ADU variation over the 10 seconds of the picture.



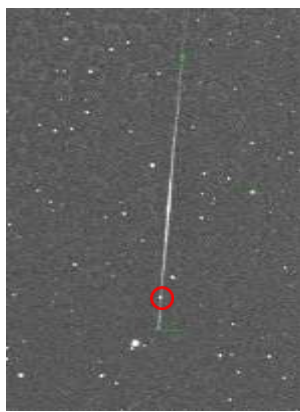
**Figure 4. Light trail detection**

### 2.2.3 Cnes observations of PEGASUS R/B NORAD 39198

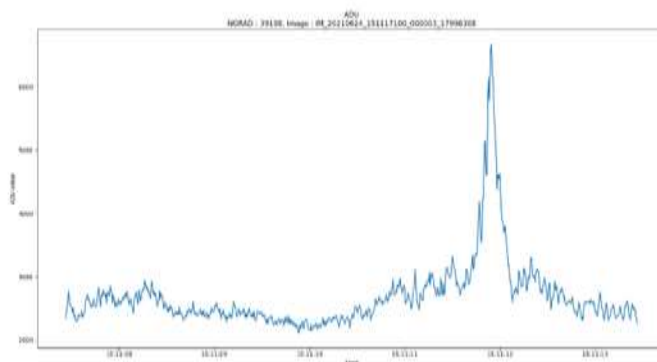
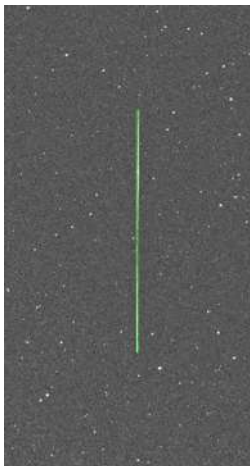
The norad 39198 object is very interesting as its light curves presents very bright peaks. This object is the third stage of the PEGASUS XL rocket that launched the satellite IRIS (SMEX 12, Explorer 94).



**Figure 5. Image of an Orion 38 (Pegasus XL third stage, source <http://www.b14643.de>)**



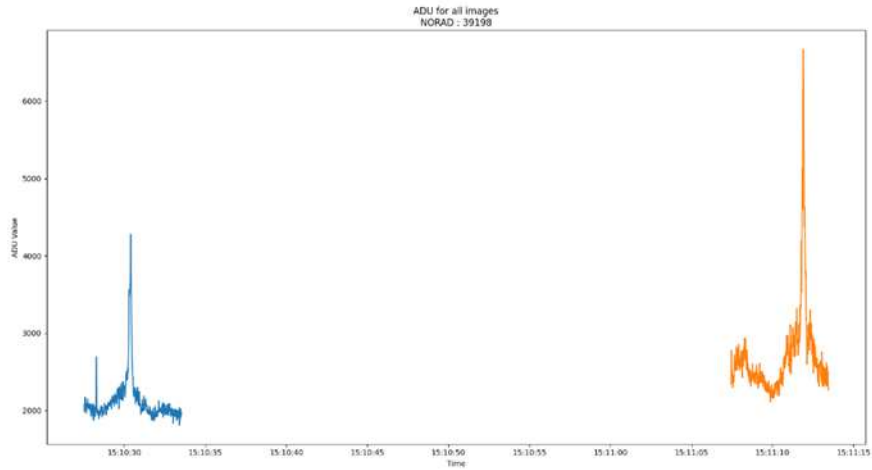
**Figure 6. First image of PEGASUS light trail and its ADU profile**



**Figure 7. Second image of PEGASUS light trail and its ADU profile**

We took the two images presented consecutively as shown in the following graph:





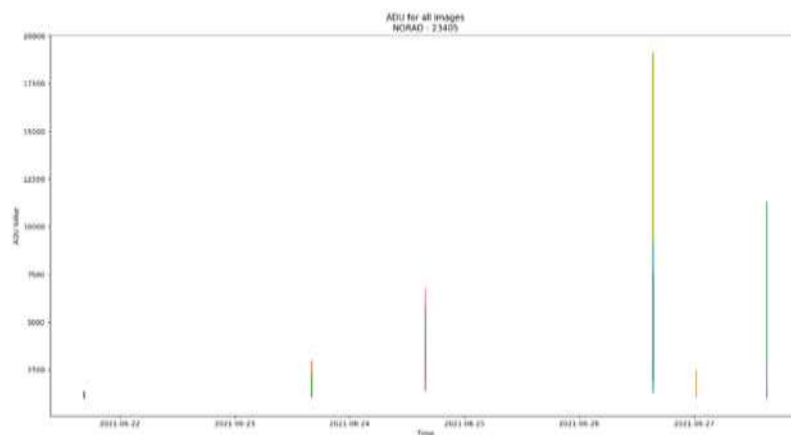
**Figure 8. ADU profile in sequence**

As the interval of time between the two light curves is too long, we cannot infer a periodicity from this sequence of light curves.

#### 2.2.4 Observations of norad 23405

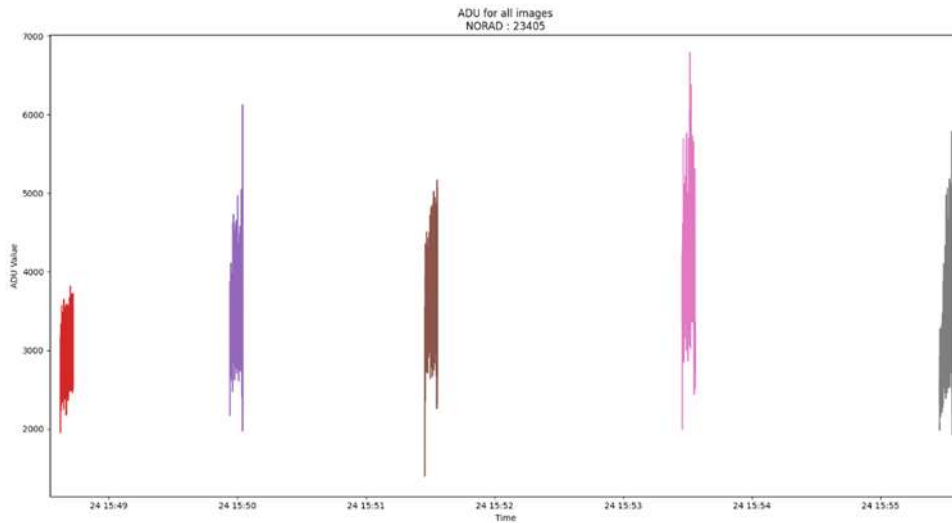
The figure below shows the dates when we obtained lightcurves from norad 23405 object. During those 6 passes of the satellite above TAROT Réunion, we extracted 31 light curves of 10 seconds.

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**Figure 9. dates of the N23405 observed passes**

The figure below shows an example of a lightcurves series taken during a pass of the satellite.



**Figure 10. example of a sequence of light curves during a pass of norad 23405**

For this second object, we did not observe any bright peak on the lightcurves. Some of the variations seen on the light curves have been interpreted by the analyst as the partial masking of the streak by a cloud during a part of the exposure time.

#### 2.2.5 Conclusions on the Cnes campaign

The OSMOSE/TAROT system is able to provide ADU profiles from long exposure images. As of today, the information provided is very fragmented because of the lack of versatility of the current observatory's supervision software which is optimized for higher orbits observation.

The informative content of the lightcurves sequences we can produce being poor, we decided not to use much telescope time for this activity and limit the production to about 30 lightcurves. In 2023, our new observatory supervision software named PyROS and the use of CMOS Camera will give us the ability to produce more informative lightcurves.

One of the lessons learned during this campaign is that variability of the brightness of the detection can be due to a variability of the brightness of the object observed, but also to clouds attenuating the light crossing the atmosphere. Attenuation varying both temporally and spatially, the correction of this effect on the lightcurves seems not easy. This fact should be taken into account when using lightcurves.

### 2.3 Observation and data analysis at ESA

ESA data in support of A138.2 was collected in the time frame from March 2021 to March 2023. For some objects archive data from previous years has been added. All observations were acquired by the Astronomical Institute of the University of Bern (AIUB) at the Swiss Optical Ground Station and Geodynamics Observatory Zimmerwald, Switzerland. The photometric light curves were obtained using either a CCD camera with frame rates of about 0.3 frames/s or a sCMOS camera with frame rates of up to 70 frames/s. The CCD light curves were acquired at the 1-m Zimmerwald Laser and Astrometry Telescope ZIMLAT (see Fig. 10), and all the CMOS data was taken at the 0.8-m Zimmerwald Multiple Applications Instrument ZimMAIN (see Fig. 11).



Light curves with the ZIMLAT CCD camera are obtained by taking series of small sub-frames (200x200 pixels or 2.60' x 2.60') centered on the objects. Real time centroiding of the target object is used to feed an active tracking loop to prevent the object from leaving the sub-frames due to poor orbit predictions. The exposure time may be chosen from 0.2s (due to the shutter limits) on upwards, and filters can be used (e.g. B- and V-filter), depending on the brightness of the object. The sampling interval is about twice the exposure time. After 500 sub-frame images are acquired, a full frame with 2064x2048 pixels (26.6' x 26.6') is acquired for photometric recalibration purposes, resulting in a gap of around 20s between every two series of 500 sub-frames. The observation data is stored in form of the original images. The intensity of the object is measured on the sub-frames in an automated real-time process. Some images are excluded, e.g. if a star is present in the sub-frame or if the object is over- or underexposed. A text file containing the measured intensities and epochs, as well as additional information from the photometric reduction, is generated from the data of the remaining sub-frames and used for further analysis of the light curve.

For targets which show high frequency signals or which are clearly under-sampled in the CCD observations, a high frame rate Andor Neo sCMOS-camera may be used. In this case series of full frames of 2560 x 2160 pixels (7.5' x 6') with frame rates between 5 to 100 frames/s are acquired. No active tracking is performed.



Fig.10. AIUB's 1-meter Zimmerwald Laser and Astrometry Telescope ZIMLAT jointly used for passive optical measurements (photometry and astrometry) and satellite laser ranging (SLR).

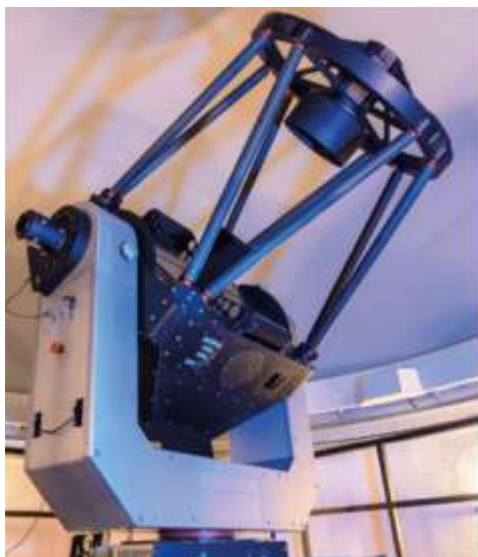


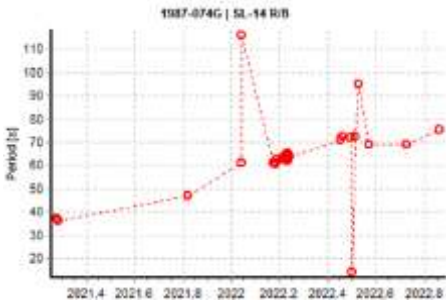
Fig.11. AIUB's 0.8-meter Zimmerwald Multiple Applications Instrument ZimMAIN used for passive optical measurements (Astrometry, photometry, and spectroscopy).

A summary of the observations acquired for the various targets of interest is presented in Table 1. In this table, the stability of a light-curve is defined as “Stable” or “Slow-tumbler” for objects which show no clear signs of rotation within the time interval of observation (length of the pass). For a rotating object, the range of estimated periods is listed. Periods have been determined with a phase dispersion minimization method.

A “stable” light-curve refers to the case where the observed pattern of the brightness is simple enough that it appears to be a function of the target’s orbital motion around the Earth only. On the other hand, a “slow-tumbler” light-curve refers to the case where the pattern is not as simple as in the previous case and it appears to be a function of the target’s attitude motion along with its orbital motion.

However, it should be noted that such a classification into these two categories is purely empirical. It is based on the inspection of several parameters such as the object’s elevation, sky-background (presence of clouds), object’s entry into Earth’s shadow etc. Moreover, a “stable” light-curve for an object does not indicate that the object is always stable. It merely indicates that the estimated behaviour of the object based on that particular light-curve is stable. On some occasion, it is possible to observe a light-curve for the same object that has "slow-tumbler" nature.

Table 1

Target No.	COSPAR ID	NORAD	Target name	Light-curves details	
				# of light curves Observation interval	Comments on the period / Light-curve / stability of the light-curve
2	1987-074G	18340	SL-14 R/B	29 light curves 12 Apr 2021 - 16 Mar 2023	<p><i>periodic</i> period = 36 to 95 sec</p> 
3	1994-023B	23088	SL-16 R/B	28 light curves 14 Dec 2014 – 15 Feb 2023	<p><i>periodic in 2014 and 2015!</i> <i>slow-tumbler or stable else</i></p>

4	1994-077B	23405	SL-16 R/B	10 light curves 06 Apr 2021 – 11 Jul 2022	<i>slow-tumbler or stable</i>
5	1999-008D	25637	DELTA 2 R/B	3 light curves 06 Apr 2021 – 11 Jul 2021	slow-tumbler
6	2013-33B	39198	Pegasus R/B	17 light curves 9 Jan 2021 – 20 Mar 2023	<i>slow-tumbler or stable</i>
7	2015-040B	40879	CZ-4C R/B	6 light curves 13 Apr 2021 – 6 Jul 2022	<i>slow-tumbler or stable</i>
8	2016-066G	41847	CZ-11 R/B	19 light curves 14 Apr 2021 – 19 Jul 2022	<i>slow-tumbler or stable</i>
9	2016-068B	41858	CZ-2D R/B	12 light curves 14 Apr 2021 – 5 Mar 2022	<i>slow-tumbler</i>

Individual light curves are provided in Section 3.3. The figures are annotated with labels like “azimuth = [xx yy zz]” where xx, yy, zz are the values for the beginning, the middle, and the end of the light curves. Values are given for the azimuth, elevation, phase angle, exposure time, and range. All observations were performed without filters and the magnitudes are instrumental magnitudes, i.e. not individually calibrated.

## 2.4 Observation and data analysis at JAXA

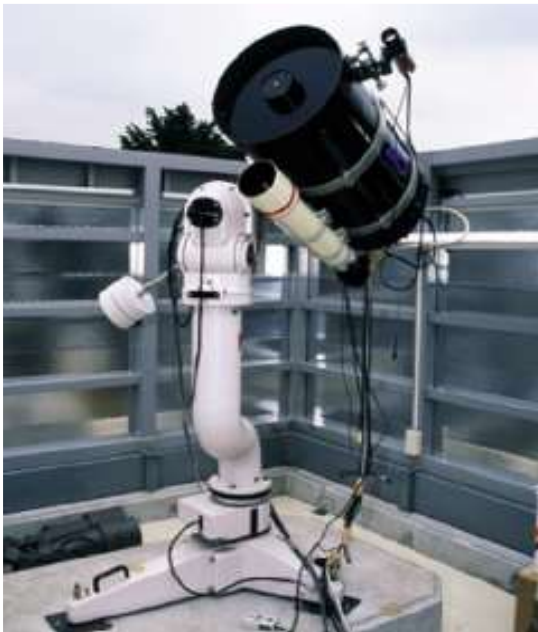


Fig.5. JAXA's 35cm telescope for LEO object. A Schmidt Cassegrain telescope with diameter of 350 mm and focal length of 3910 mm with a tri-axial equatorial mount. Mounted at the focal plane is a fast-readout CCD camera (NIL ICC-40M) able to take 10 images every second.

The 35 cm LEO observation telescope at the Aerospace Center of JAXA in Chofu, Tokyo was used for the campaign. Fig.5 shows the telescope, which is a 35 cm Schmidt–Cassegrain

telescope on a tri-axial equatorial mount. Since the tri-axial equatorial mount does not have any singular points in the sky it can easily track any type of orbit. A fast-readout CCD camera (NIL ICC-40M) that can acquire 10 images per second is mounted at the telescope's focal plane. The observations were carried out for 55 days from July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 to February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 totaling 55 light curves. Between 500 and 1000 images were acquired during each pass depending on the observable time. The LEO observation telescope shown in Fig.5 can start observations automatically by calculating the target's position from up-to-date orbital elements. The difference between the calculated and actual orbits was corrected for manually using the guide telescope attached to the main telescope.

From the image data acquired from the telescope, the brightness of a target on each image is measured and a light curve is created. Measuring the brightness of a target in a few thousand images manually would be extremely time-consuming, so an algorithm was developed to recognize a target and measure its brightness automatically. The algorithm identifies a group of pixels in an image with a value higher than a threshold as the target. It then sums the value of 100 pixels around that group of pixels and subtracts 100 times the median value of the surrounding pixels to correct for the sky value. The brightness of the target in each image is measured automatically by these processes. The algorithm can avoid false detection of thermal noise and cosmic ray events that manifest as isolated high-value pixels. As the field of view of the telescope is relatively narrow (6.7 by 8.9 arc minutes) and the telescope tracks at high speed the probability of stars entering the field of view is very low. Even if this should occur the light from the stars would be spread along lines parallel to the telescope's motion, which would usually result in star streaks dimmer than the target. For safety, single "spiky" events whose values exceeded those of neighboring points by more a factor of two were discarded.

## 2.5 Observation and data analysis at SSAU

In total, since the beginning of the campaign, Ukrainian observers (the location and characteristics of telescopes were given earlier) have received 153 light curves (LC) for 8 objects of the campaign (1 LC from Astronomical Observatory of Lviv National University, 14 LC for 4 objects from Wide FoV telescope of SSAU Quantum Optical Station (QOS) in Khmelnytskyi region, other LC from KT-50 telescope of RI "Astronomical Observatory", Odessa National University (AO ONU)). The largest contribution (138 LC) was made by observations with the KT-50 (Fig. 6) telescope of the Odessa Astronomical Observatory. Since the main results were obtained at the AO ONU, and the results of the QOS observations generally correspond to them, here the main attention will be focused precisely on the results of the AO ONU.



Fig. 6 KT-50 telescope of AO ONU. A Maksutov telescope with diameter of 500 mm and focal length of 2000 mm with an alt-azimuth mount. Mounted at the focal plane is a TV-CCD camera Watec-902H2 able to take 50 TV halfframes every second.

KT-50 is a Maksutov telescope on a semi-automatic alt-azimuth mount (maximum slew rate is 4

deg/s). It is equipped with a TV-CCD camera Watec-902H2. This setup runs at a fixed rate of 50 TV half-frames/s. All processing of the received data is carried out using software developed in AO ONU. The brightness values were taken taking atmospheric extinction into account and recalculated to a single topocentric distance (1000 km).

The analysis of the light curves of the observed objects, made by the specialists of AO ONU, made it possible to detect only one relatively rapidly rotating object - USSC ID 18340 (COSPAR ID 1987-074G). This analysis was sent separately. To save space, here in Section 3.5 only those light curves that were shown in this report, as well as all the light curves of the object 18340, are presented.

## 2.6 Contribution of CSA

The Canadian Space Agency (CSA) owns and operates, in collaboration with Defence Research & Development Canada (DRDC), the Near-Earth Object Surveillance Satellite (NEOSSat). NEOSSat is a 75-kg microsatellite space telescope, launched in February 2013 to a 780km sun-synchronous low-Earth orbit. The satellite's primary payload is a 15-cm aperture Maksutov telescope with  $0.8^\circ$  field of view and associated read-out electronics providing 3 arcsecond/pixel resolution on a E2V 1024x1024 charge-coupled devices (CCD). NEOSSat splits its observation time evenly between two core missions: space astronomy (e.g., near-Earth asteroids/comet astrometry and exoplanet transit photometry) and space surveillance (e.g., space situational awareness, tracking of resident space objects in various orbit regimes). NEOSSat was originally designed track deep space geosynchronous space objects but was adapted to track LEO objects in 2017.

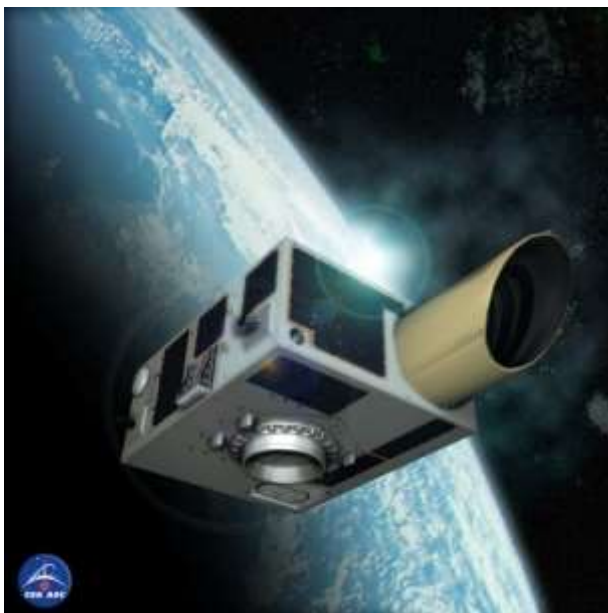


Fig.7. Artists rendition of Canada's NEOSSat space telescope on-orbit. NEOSSat provides a 15-cm aperture Maksutov telescope with  $0.8^\circ$  field of view and 3 arcseconds/pixel.

LEO to LEO tracking is possible from NEOSSat as long as the target object's relative angular rate is within the control authority of NEOSSat's attitude determination and control system (ADCS). The target object must also be at least 11 degrees above the illuminated portion of Earth's limb for NEOSSat's co-boresighted star tracker to detect background stars for its fine slew tracking. There is

no constraint on tracking over the dark limb if guide stars are available for NEOSSat's ADCS. Typically, the angular rate and Earth limb angle constraints on NEOSSat limits tracking of objects to ~2-4 minute intervals in LEO depending on target altitude.

While rocket bodies tend to be large making them well-suited for detection by NEOSSat, light curves detailing rocket body rotational motion are more challenging for NEOSSat to achieve. NEOSSat's frame rate when tracking LEO objects is approximately 1 image / 15 seconds (0.067 Hz). This sampling rate suboptimal for characterizing fast-rotating bodies to support light curve analysis tools such as light curve folding, Fast Fourier Transforms or Lomb-Scargle periodograms. Given that NEOSSat can only really perform 1-2 tracks on LEO space objects due to ADCS constraints, full rotational characterization of rotating rocket bodies is challenging. In this experiment, NEOSSat collected range normalized photometric characterization of select rocket bodies in both time, phase angle and time during track.

NEOSSat collected tracks on selected rocket bodies shown in Table 2.

Table 2. NEOSSat rocket body targets for IADC AI 38.2 campaign

SSN ID	Object Name	Int. Number	Country	Launch Date	Period (mins)	Incl. (deg)	Apogee (km)	Perigee (km)
11804	SL-8 R/B	1980-039B	CIS	1980-05-20	104.62	82.94	992	962
18340	SL-14 R/B	1987-074G	CIS	1987-09-07	114.69	82.57	1472	1411
23088	SL-16 R/B	1994-023B	CIS	1994-04-23	101.78	71	844	842
23405	SL-16 R/B	1994-077B	CIS	1994-11-24	101.74	70.98	845	838
39198	PEGASUS R/B	2013-033B	US	2013-06-28	97.22	97.94	642	610
40879	CZ-4C R/B	2015-040B	PRC	2015-08-27	108.01	100.41	1204	1065

Figure 8 shows the tracks on rocket bodies detected from orbit by day of year in 2020. Range normalization uses a 1000 km range as a comparison basis for LEO objects when observed from orbit. This helps compare ground-based observers which have a different perspective on the orbiting targets. The range normalized magnitude range of detection spans magnitude 2 through magnitude 8. In this view, rotational motion is not inferable. However, the span of the brightness observations exceeding 1 magnitude or more, is often an indication of rotational motion of space objects.

Figure 9 shows the phase angle vs range normalized behavior of the space objects detected in LEO. Note that several observations were collected over the dayside of the Earth where the phase angle (the angle subtending Sun/target/observer) exceeds 90 degrees. In such cases, back-reflected sunlight from the Earth onto the rocket body acts as a secondary illumination source making the object somewhat brighter than if it were observed over Earth's night side. This effect is somewhat small compared to the brightness of the Sun but may have the impact of brightening the rocket bodies. NEOSSat's space-based perspective adds the ability to observe such objects over the dayside of the Earth where ground-based observers normally cannot.

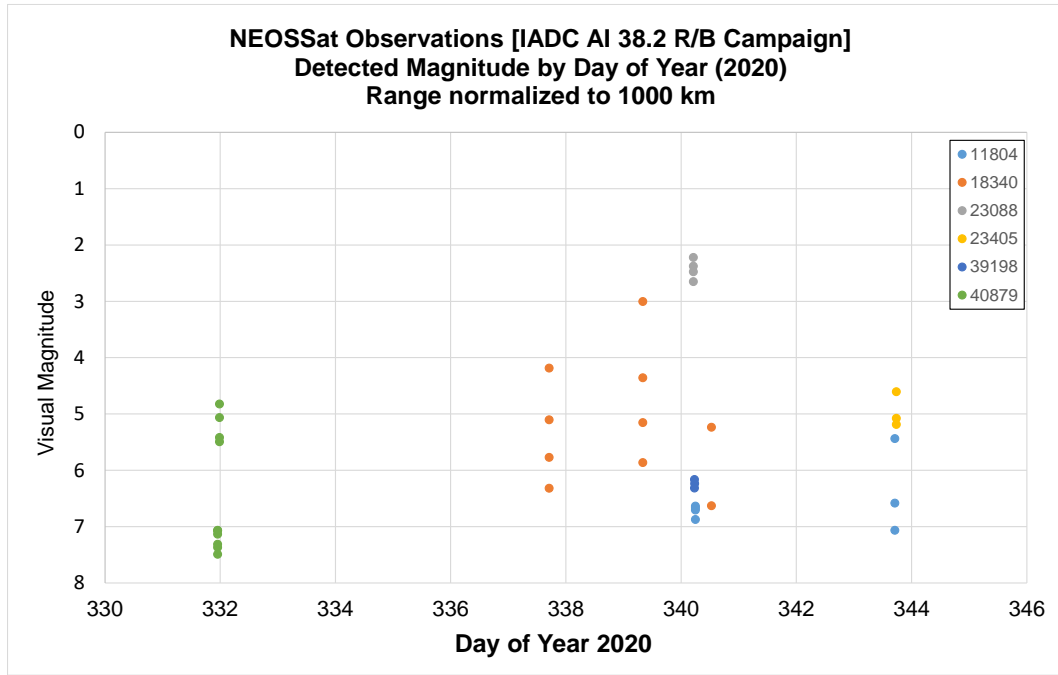


Figure 8. Time vs magnitude of AI 38.2 rocket bodies detected by NEOSSat in 2020.

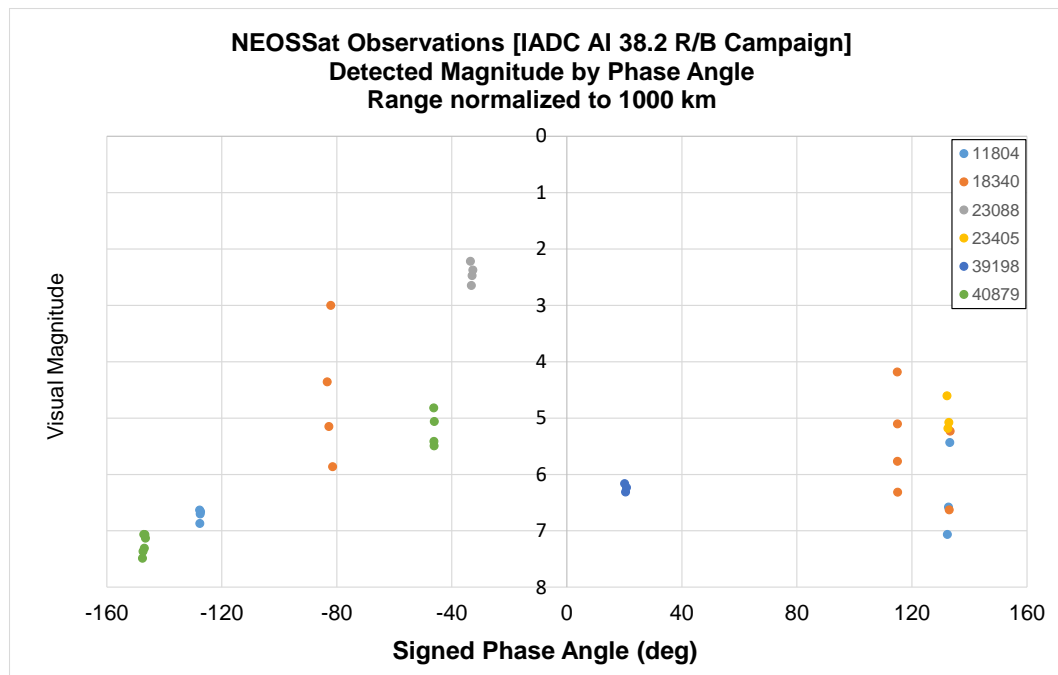


Figure 9. Phase angle versus magnitude of AI 38.2 rocket bodies detected by NEOSSat in 2020.

Figures 10 and 11 show the time during track of the rocket bodies for objects suspected to have slow to little rotational motion. Slow rotation is typically identified by the degree of variability of the target's photometry where objects exhibiting less than 1 magnitude of variation are generally considered to be slowly rotating. Objects with variability greater than 1 magnitude are generally considered to be faster rotating. Figure 10 also shows that the majority of NEOSSat tracks are short



duration ( < 75 seconds) with few samples per track. While NEOSSat is not optimal for light curve analysis, some degree of target angular motion of the detected objects can be inferred by the degree of variability of the target's photometry when tracked from orbit.

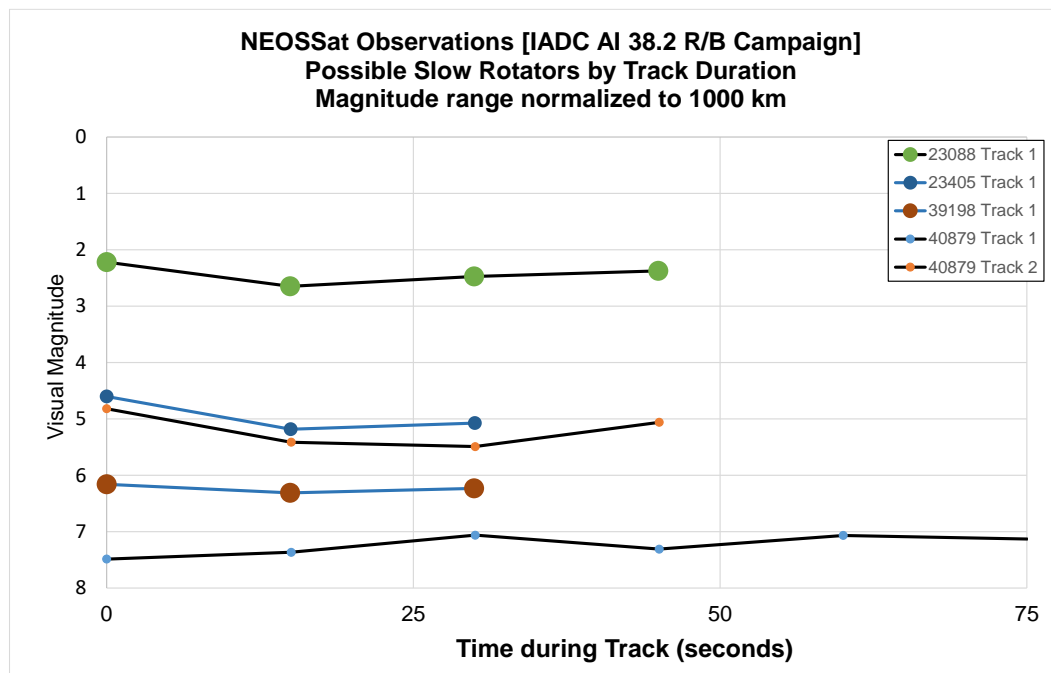


Figure 10. Time within track vs magnitude of AI 38.2 objects (suspected slow rotators).

Figure 11 shows a similar plot, but with objects suspected of having rapid rotational motion and contrasts the behavior of objects in Figure 10. Figures 10 and 11 give some indication of their prospective attitude motion based on their photometric behavior.

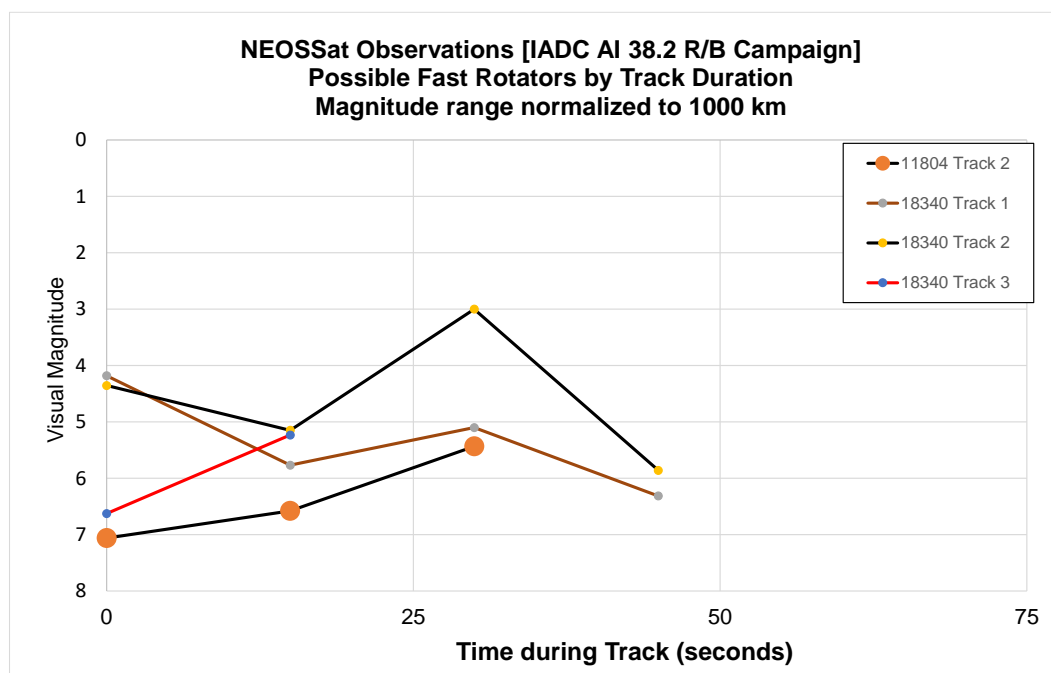


Figure 11. Time within track vs magnitude of AI 38.2 objects (suspected fast rotators).

- 3 Lightcurves from each delegation
  - 3.1 Lightcurve graphs from ASI
  - 3.2 Lightcurve graphs from CNES
  - 3.3 Lightcurve graphs from ESA
    - 3.3.1 Norad 11840
    - 3.3.2 Norad 18340
    - 3.3.3 Norad 23088
    - 3.3.4 Norad 23405
    - 3.3.5 Norad 25637
    - 3.3.6 Norad 39198
    - 3.3.7 Norad 40879
    - 3.3.8 Norad 41847
    - 3.3.9 Norad 41858
  - 3.4 Lightcurve graphs from JAXA
  - 3.5 Lightcurve graphs from SSAU



Please insert all the lightcurve  
graphs in SCC number order