Sustainable Laser Propulsion System for Satellites

Bhaswati Das[1], Soumyajit Chatterjee[2], Dr. Rakhi Bhattacharjee[3]

[1,2]Student, Electronics And Comminucation Engineering, Calcutta Institute Of Engineering And Management
[3]Associate Professor, Electronics And Comminucation Engineering, Calcutta Institute Of Engineering And Management

Abstract
This research explores a **sustainable** approach to satellite self-propulsion through **laser propulsion**. The proposed self-contained system features an onboard high-powered laser directed at a large, reflective sail deployed by the satellite. Thrust is generated by the momentum transfer of reflected laser photons, enabling gas-free operation and potentially extending mission lifespans. This innovative use of **laser propulsion** opens possibilities for new, **sustainable** space missions, including station-keeping, delicate orbital changes, and even interplanetary travel for smaller spacecraft.

Keywords: Sustainable, Laser Propulsion

1. Introduction

This idea introduces a novel concept for satellite self-propulsion that entirely circumvents the limitations and mass expenditure associated with traditional gas-based propellant systems. The core innovation lies in a self-contained propulsion mechanism wherein a high-powered laser source, integrated directly onto the satellite platform, generates thrust without expelling any mass. This is achieved by directing the laser beam towards a large, highly reflective sail, also deployed by the same satellite. The fundamental principle underpinning this technology is the transfer of momentum from the laser photons upon reflection from the sail's surface. This continuous transfer of momentum generates a sustained thrust force, enabling the satellite to maneuver in space. By completely eliminating the need for chemical propellants, this gas-free propulsion method promises significantly extended mission lifespans, unburdened by fuel constraints. Furthermore, the fine control and sustained thrust achievable through this approach unlock the potential for innovative space missions, including precise station-keeping, delicate orbital adjustments, and even the possibility of interplanetary travel, particularly for smaller spacecraft where propellant mass is a significant limiting factor.

2. Components of Our Preliminary Concepts of LASER Satellite :

- **Reflective Sail/Antenna:** Acts as both the satellite's communication dish (transmitting and receiving signals) and the reflective surface for the laser propulsion system, generating thrust by reflecting laser photons.
- **Solar Panel:** Collects sunlight and converts it into electrical energy to power all satellite systems, including the laser propulsion and communication functions.

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- **Laser Ring:** An array of small lasers that emit focused beams towards the reflective sail/antenna; adjusting the intensity of individual lasers controls the direction and magnitude of the thrust for satellite maneuvering.

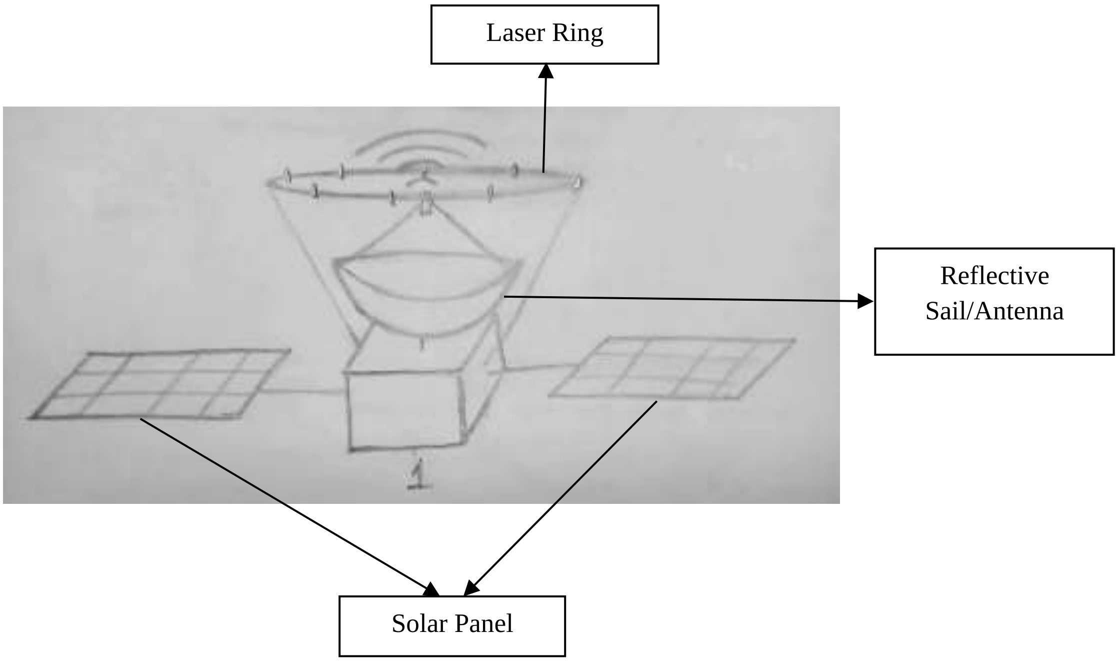

Fig : 1 ; Preliminary Design of Laser Sattelite

3. Drawbacks of This Preliminary Concept :

- **Complex Dual-Use Dish :** The seemingly elegant solution of combining the communication antenna and the reflective sail into a single physical structure introduces significant engineering complexities that demand extensive research and development. Designing a surface that is simultaneously optimized for both efficient electromagnetic wave transmission/reception and high reflectivity across a specific laser wavelength presents a formidable material science challenge. The ideal surface for radio waves might have different properties than what's needed for maximum photon reflection. Achieving both simultaneously could necessitate intricate multi-layered materials or surface treatments that add to the manufacturing cost and complexity. Furthermore, the structural requirements for a large, precisely shaped reflective sail that can also withstand the stresses of deployment and potential laser impingement might conflict with the design considerations for an optimal communication antenna in terms of shape, rigidity, and thermal management. The deployment mechanisms for such a large, dual-purpose structure would also be more intricate and potentially more prone to failure compared to deploying separate, simpler components. Precise alignment and pointing requirements for both communication and propulsion might also be harder to achieve and maintain with a single, multi-functional dish.
- **Potential Efficiency Drop :** The inherent compromise in forcing a single component to serve two distinct functions could lead to a reduction in the efficiency of both communication and propulsion. For communication, the surface properties optimized for laser reflection might not be ideal for radiating or receiving electromagnetic waves with maximum gain and minimal signal loss. This could result in weaker communication links, requiring more power for transmission or leading to lower data rates. Similarly, the shape and surface finish optimized for communication might not be the absolute best for reflecting the laser beam to generate maximum thrust. Imperfect reflection would mean wasted

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laser power and reduced propulsive efficiency. The need to constantly reorient the dish for either communication or thrust vectoring could also lead to periods where one function is temporarily unavailable or operating sub-optimally. For instance, while communicating with a ground station, the satellite might not be able to generate thrust in the most optimal direction, and vice versa. This trade-off between functionality could ultimately limit the overall performance and mission effectiveness of the satellite compared to a design with dedicated, optimized components for each task. Thorough analysis and careful design would be needed to quantify and mitigate these potential efficiency losses.

To mitigate the complexities and potential efficiency compromises associated with a dual-use dish (Reflective Sail/Antenna), we propose a modified version of this idea.

4. The Modified Design :

To address the complexities and potential performance trade-offs of a combined communication and propulsion dish, our refined design incorporates distinct, dedicated systems for each function.

- **Communication Dish:** This dedicated antenna serves as the satellite's primary interface for all communication-related activities. Its design is meticulously optimized for the efficient transmission and reception of electromagnetic signals to and from ground control stations and other orbiting satellites. The shape, size, and material composition of the dish are carefully chosen to maximize signal gain, minimize interference, and ensure reliable data transfer across designated frequency bands. This allows for the seamless exchange of telemetry data (information about the satellite's health and status), command signals from ground control, and the transmission of any mission-specific payload data. By separating this function from the propulsion system, the communication dish can be designed without any compromise to its ability to establish and maintain strong, clear communication links, crucial for the successful operation and utilization of the satellite. Its pointing mechanisms are solely dedicated to tracking communication targets, ensuring continuous connectivity.
- **Reflective Sail:** This component is the linchpin of the novel laser-based propulsion system. It is conceived as a large, lightweight, and highly reflective surface strategically positioned on the satellite to intercept the beam emitted by the onboard laser system. The sail is engineered with a surface that exhibits maximum reflectivity across the specific wavelength of the laser light, ensuring that the majority of the photons are reflected rather than absorbed. Importantly, the reflective sail is designed to be movable and precisely controllable. This maneuverability is critical because by adjusting the angle and orientation of the sail relative to the incoming laser beam, the direction of the reflected photons – and consequently, the direction of the thrust generated – can be precisely controlled. When the high-energy photons from the laser strike the sail's surface, each photon imparts a tiny but measurable amount of momentum upon reflection. The cumulative effect of this continuous transfer of momentum from a high-powered laser beam to the large surface area of the reflective sail results in a sustained thrust force acting on the satellite. The ability to articulate the sail allows for vectoring this thrust, enabling the satellite to perform a range of orbital maneuvers, including station-keeping, attitude adjustments, and even more significant orbital changes over time, all without the consumption of traditional chemical propellants.

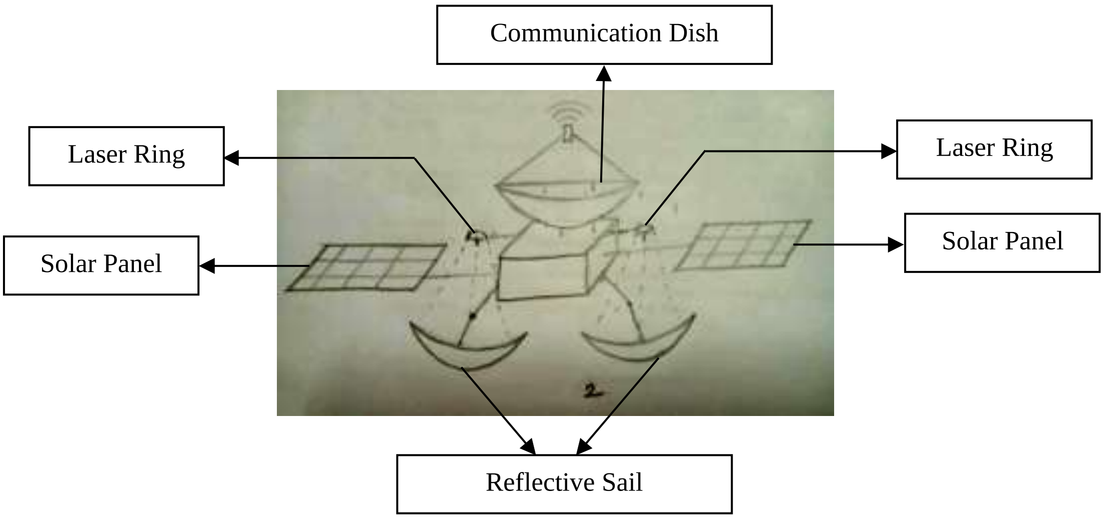

Fig : 2 ; Modified Design

5. Advantages of Separate Communication Antenna and Reflective Sail

- **Eliminates Dual-Function Complexity:** By employing distinct structures for communication and propulsion, the significant engineering challenges associated with designing a single, complex dual-use dish are completely avoided. This simplifies design, manufacturing, and testing processes, potentially reducing development time and costs.
- **Maximizes Functional Efficiency:** Separating the antenna and the reflective sail allows each component to be individually optimized for its specific task. The communication antenna can be designed with surface properties, shape, and materials that ensure maximum gain and minimal signal loss for electromagnetic wave transmission and reception. Simultaneously, the reflective sail can be crafted with the ideal surface finish and shape to achieve the highest possible reflectivity for the specific laser wavelength, leading to more efficient thrust generation and utilization of laser power.
- **Simplifies and Enhances Directional Control:** Utilizing independently movable reflective sails provides a more straightforward and responsive method for controlling the satellite's direction. Thrust vectoring can be achieved by precisely adjusting the orientation of the sail without compromising the pointing requirements or performance of the communication antenna. This separation of functions allows for simultaneous and optimized execution of both communication and propulsion maneuvers.

6. Conclusion

The transition from a preliminary concept featuring a complex dual-use reflective sail/antenna to a modified design incorporating separate, dedicated components for communication and laser propulsion offers significant advantages. By decoupling these critical functionalities, the modified approach mitigates substantial engineering complexities, enhances the efficiency of both communication and propulsion systems, and provides a more streamlined and responsive method for satellite directional control. This refined architecture paves the way for a more robust and effective implementation of sustainable laser propulsion for satellites, unlocking the potential for extended mission lifespans and novel orbital maneuvers.

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