IMF-driven plasmasphere erosion of 10 July 2000

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[1] On 10 July 2000, the IMAGE EUV imager observed erosion of the nightside plasmasphere that occurred in two bursts during 5–8 UT. The plasmapause radial velocity \( V_{\text{pp}} \) at 2.4 MLT was extracted from the time sequence of EUV images. We show that intervals of \( V_{\text{pp}} < 0 \) (i.e., erosion) are correlated with intervals of southward (\( S_{\text{sw}} \)) interplanetary magnetic field (IMF), if the solar wind and IMF data are time-delayed by 30 minutes (in addition to a 3.7-minute delay for propagation to the magnetopause). This suggests that coupling between the solar wind and the plasmapause, involving processes in the ionosphere and magnetotail, takes about 30 minutes. A 6:40 UT magnetosphere compression may have hurried the onset of the second erosion.

INDEX TERMS: 2768 Magnetospheric Physics: Plasmasphere; 2730 Magnetosphere—inner; 2784 Solar wind/magnetosphere interactions; 2712 Electric fields (2411); 2740 Magnetospheric configuration and dynamics.


1. Introduction

[2] The plasmapause is the outer boundary of the Earth’s plasmasphere, a torus-shaped region of the inner magnetosphere containing cold, relatively dense (\( \geq 100 \text{ cm}^{-3} \)) plasma. To explain why the size of the plasmasphere (i.e., the radial location of the plasmapause) varies inversely with geomagnetic activity, Nishida [1966] and Brice [1967] proposed a simple picture involving the interplay between the magnetospheric convection field (induced by the flow of the solar wind past the magnetosphere) and the coupling of high-altitude plasma to the Earth’s corotating ionosphere. Active periods trigger plasmaspheric erosion, in which the outer layers of the plasmasphere are stripped away by enhanced convection, and the plasmapause moves inward, producing a smaller plasmasphere. One refinement to this picture is the shielding effect. In response to enhanced convection, the earthward edge of the plasmasheet forms partial ring currents (RC) that are completed in the ionosphere; finite ionospheric conductivity creates an electric field that shields the inner magnetosphere from convection. Because the shielding layer takes a finite time (\( \leq 1 \text{ hr} \) [Kelley et al., 1979]) to adjust, a sudden convection increase can penetrate past the shielding layer and erode the plasmasphere. A key contribution to the erosion process may come from intense azimuthal flows dubbed ‘sub-auroral polarizations’ (SAPS) [Foster and Burke, 2002]. SAPS arise via coupling between the ring current and low-conductivity ionosphere regions, and (on average) are strongest in pre-midnight magnetic local time (MLT) during storms.

[3] There have been many non-global measurements of variations in the plasmapause radius with time (see [Lemaire and Gringauz, 1998] and references therein); e.g., polar satellite plasmapause crossings on a time scale of tens of minutes to a couple of hours, and whistler measurements of cross-L drifts. Due to the elusiveness of direct observations of the formation of a new plasmapause, important questions remain unanswered about the details of the erosion process and its effects on the plasmapause [Richmond, 1973; Huang et al., 1990; LeDocq et al., 1994; Carpenter, 1995; Moldwin et al., 1995]. Models for time-dependent position of the plasmapause have been created, both empirical (e.g., Carpenter and Anderson [1992]) and computational (e.g., Chen and Wolf [1972]; Lambour et al. [1997]). Often these models are (at least in part) based on average (i.e., statistical) properties deduced from in situ and/or ground-based data. Simulations can use somewhat arbitrary or unrealistic assumptions for initial and/or boundary conditions. Historically it has been a challenge to reconcile the results of these models with sparse satellite coverage of the plasmasphere.

[4] Recent advances in satellite-based imaging techniques have made it possible to routinely obtain full global images of the plasmasphere. The IMAGE satellite’s extreme ultraviolet (EUV) imager [Sandel et al., 2000], which detects 30.4-nm emissions of the helium portion of the plasmasphere, has provided new evidence of the dynamic and spatially-structured nature of the plasmasphere [Sandel et al., 2001; Burch et al., 2001]. The EUV global pictures fill in some of the observational gaps left by satellites in the past, facilitating comparison with models [Goldstein et al., 2002b]. On 10 July 2000, EUV observed the effects of plasmaspheric erosion in a time series of global snapshots of the plasma-sphere. In this letter, we investigate the timing of this erosion event in relation to conditions in the solar wind (SW) and its imbedded interplanetary magnetic field (IMF).

2. EUV Observations of Erosion Event

[5] Between 4:25–9:32 UT on 10 July 2000, IMAGE EUV produced plasmasphere images from a vantage point near apogee. Figure 1a shows two snapshots of the helium plasmasphere, glowing in 30.4-nm light, taken at 5:06 and 8:00 UT by EUV. In the center of each image, which is a view from above the north pole, the apparent size and location of the Earth are indicated by the black circle. The Sun is to the upper right, in the direction of the white arrow. The bright arc at the Earth’s dayside limb is airglow from neutral helium and O⁺; a faint shadow extends antisunward from the Earth on the nightside. EUV consists of 3 cameras; the fields of view of the three cameras are joined to create a...
single image. The two faint vertical stripes bracketing the Earth are the edges of the cameras. Sunlight contamination in the rightmost camera shows up (especially at 8:00) as a blacked-out area in the upper right corner. (More details on the EUV instrumentation and interpretation of its images can be found in Sandel et al. [2000, 2001] and Goldstein et al. [2002a]). The plasmasphere is the bright red-orange haze of 30.4-nm light that surrounds the Earth. On the nightside, the plasmapause is the outer boundary where these 30.4-nm emissions drop off. On most of the dayside, the plasmapause is either outside the field of view, or obscured by sunlight contamination. Due to imperfect joining at the 3 camera edges, there is a small distortion of the plasmapause, where it crosses the camera edges; this does not affect the results plotted in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

Figure 1. (a) Images of the He+ plasmasphere taken by EUV at two times on 10 July 2000. (b) Plasmapauses from the EUV images above, mapped to the magnetic equatorial plane (Noon MLT to the right).

3. Analysis

[6] In Figure 1b, the plasmapause of each image has been extracted and mapped down to the magnetic equator, with the Sun to the right. Comparing the plots at 5:06 and 8:00 UT, it is clear that the nightside plasmapause has moved inward by almost 2 $R_E$ in 3 hours. Had this inward motion been due to a global compression, the plasmasphere (at a given location) would appear brighter in the 8:00 UT image than in the 5:06 UT image, since compression would make the interior density rise, and the image brightness is proportional to the line-of-sight-integrated helium density [Sandel et al., 2000]. However, no such plasmaspheric brightening is evident, so the inward plasmapause motion must be due to erosion, i.e., stripping away of outer layers of the plasmasphere.

Figure 2. (a) Radial plasmapause velocity $V_{pp}$ at 2.4 MLT. Inward motion occurred in 2 bursts during 5–8 UT. (b) Propagation-delayed IMF $z_{GSE}$-component seen by Geotail MGF, showing 2 intervals of southward IMF. (c) $V_{SW}$, propagation-delayed earthward (GSE) component of solar wind velocity, seen by Geotail CPI.

Figure 3. Electric field parameters $V_{pp}B_{eq}$ (plasmapause motion) and $V_{SW}B_z_{IMF}$ (IMF polarity). Correlation between the two curves was maximized (at 0.65) with 30-min delay added to Geotail data of Figure 2.

[7] Although only two images (‘before’ and ‘after’) of the event are shown in Figure 1a, EUV observed the entire time sequence of the erosion, producing one image every 10–11 minutes. A plasmapause curve was extracted (as in Figure 1b) from each image between 4:25–9:32. Using the 31 plasmapause curves thus obtained, a 31-point time array of plasmapause radii $R_{pp}$ was recorded at 2.4 MLT, the local time where the 5–6 UT plasmapause motion was most pronounced. This spot is unaffected by the camera-edge distortion mentioned in the last section. Centered time differencing of $R_{pp}$ was used to calculate plasmapause radial velocity $V_{pp}$ shown in Figure 2a. Inward plasmapause motion occurred in two distinct bursts within the 3-hour period 5–8 UT. The mean speed was 0.6 $R_E$/hour, and the total displacement $1.8 R_E$. There is some jitter in measured values of $V_{pp}$, caused by finite error in the plasmapause extraction [Goldstein et al., 2002a]; the uncertainty in $V_{pp}$ is about $\pm 0.3 R_E$/hour.

Figure 4. 10 July 2000 substorm index AE and ring current (RC) and solar wind (SW) pressure.
IMF polarity acts as a switch, turning convection on when presented by the E-field parameter of electric (E) fields. Plasmapause motion can be represented in terms of quantities that have the units of cold plasma). Therefore, when correlating plasmapause motion and southward IMF strength, it is meaningful to express them both in terms of the equatorial dipole geomagnetic field strength. The dipole field is smooth, so the variation of $\mathbf{B}$ is qualitatively the same as $\mathbf{E}$. Similarly, $\mathbf{V}_{\text{SW}}$ varies (qualitatively) as $B_{z,\text{IMF}}$. Figure 3 compares $\mathbf{E}$ and $\mathbf{V}_{\text{SW}}$. So that both plots are about the same magnitude, $\mathbf{E}$ has been multiplied by 4. (E.g., the true magnitude of $\mathbf{E}$ at 7:19 UT is about 0.8 mV/m.) To quantify the link between $\mathbf{V}_{\text{pp}}$ and $B_{z,\text{IMF}}$, we calculated the linear correlation coefficient between $\mathbf{E}$ and $\mathbf{V}_{\text{SW}}$, with $\mathbf{E}$ delayed in time by $\Delta t_{\text{C}}$, for values of $\Delta t_{\text{C}}$ between 0 and 90 minutes. The correlation peaks to a value of 0.65 that indeed occurs at 30 minutes. In Figure 3, $\mathbf{V}_{\text{SW}}$ has been plotted with this 30-minute delay; the correlation between $\mathbf{E}$ and $\mathbf{V}_{\text{SW}}$ is visually apparent. Our interpretation of this correlation is that the solar wind is driving the plasmapause motion. The correlation peak at $\Delta t_{\text{C}} = 30$ minutes suggests that the coupling between the solar wind and the plasmasphere can take that long to occur. The close resemblance of $\mathbf{V}_{\text{pp}}$ to $B_{z,\text{IMF}}$ is consistent with the idea that in some sense the IMF polarity acts as a switch, turning convection on when the IMF turns southward.

4. Discussion

Our interpretation is that the first erosion interval ($\approx$5–6 UT) resulted mainly from enhanced convection (triggered by the first $S_{\text{wd}}$ IMF turning) that penetrated past the shielding layer. Convection is driven by the polar cap potential (PCP), which is determined by the response of the ionosphere to changes in the solar wind and IMF. Numerous observational studies have examined this ionospheric response (e.g., Knipp et al. [1991]; Hairston and Heelis [1995]; Ridley et al. [1998]; Huang et al. [2002]). From these results, at least 3 relevant time intervals can be defined. (1) $\Delta t_{\text{f}}$ is the propagation time from solar-wind satellite to magnetopause MP. (2) $\Delta t_{\text{IP}}$ is the propagation time from MP to ionosphere (3–15 min.). (3) $\Delta t_{\text{RC}}$ is the time necessary to completely reconfigure ionospheric convection in response to changes in SW/IMF (10–25 min.). Coronti and Kennel [1973] found theoretical value $\Delta t_{\text{IP}} \approx 20$ min., consistent with these observations. In the previous section we corrected for $\Delta t_{\text{f}}$ and defined $\Delta t_{\text{RC}}$, the time between arrival of $S_{\text{wd}}$ IMF at the MP, and the start of plasmaspheric erosion. If we attribute delay $\Delta t_{\text{C}}$ to ionospheric reconfiguration, then $\Delta t_{\text{C}} \equiv \Delta t_{\text{fp}} + \Delta t_{\text{f}}$; our value $\Delta t_{\text{C}} = 30$ min is consistent with (2) and (3) above. This scenario implies 20–30 min lag between the $S_{\text{wd}}$ IMF turnings in Figure 2b and the maximum value of PCP. Sparserness of DMSP-derived PCP data on 10 July precludes direct determination of the lag $\Delta t_{\text{C}}$, but future work on this event may use alternate techniques for estimating PCP (e.g., mentioned in Ridley et al. [1998]).
very nearly to zero at 6:07 UT. This suggests that even after an hour of steady southward IMF, shielding was still incomplete. Effective shielding can be impeded by buildup of magnetic flux in the tail during an extended period of dayside reconnection [Fejer et al., 1990]; a steady equatorward motion of the equatorward edge of the aurora would accompany this buildup. The general trend in both the auroral boundary index (ABI) [Gussenhoven et al., 1983] and FUV imager data is a decrease from 65° to 60° during 4–8 UT, although there are 2°–4° equatorward excursions at ~5 and ~7 UT, possibly due to inward convective surges of the plasmasheet, in phase with the erosion intervals. Weak shielding may also explain why εₚ seems to follow the gradual southward trend of εₛₑ from 6:07–6:39 UT (Figure 3), which otherwise might be slow enough (compared to the shielding time scale) to be shielded. Effective shielding requires adequate RC pressure. The PRC increase from 5:15–5:50 is roughly in phase with the erosion activity (consistent with a convection interpretation), and its low value compared to the noise level (indicated by PRC at 5 UT) is consistent with weak shielding during this time. Higher PRC after 6:40 UT may have better shielded the plasmasphere, so that erosion began to taper off after 7:10. Weak shielding implies that compression-induced shielding disruption was not the dominant factor in the erosion, although it may have initiated the second erosion interval. Once begun, we suspect enhanced convection dominated the pre-dawn erosion process. Work is underway to quantify the role of pre-midnight azimuthal flows on 10 July.

5. Conclusion

We have shown that the timing of observed inward motion of the plasmapause is significantly correlated to southward IMF turnings in the solar wind, with a time delay of 30 minutes. We suspect convection dominated the 10 July erosion, but the presence of other contributing effects including magnetopause compression, azimuthal flows, substorm activity and shielding suppression highlights the complexity of the coupling of the inner/outer magnetosphere, ionosphere, and solar wind. In principle, EUV data provide a means to estimate the E-field at the plasmapause [Burch et al., 2001]. Analysis in this paper was limited to a single MLT along the moving plasmapause, but preliminary analysis at other MLT clearly indicates that the entire nightside plasmapause motion was correlated with the IMF. In future papers, we shall examine the global properties of plasmaspheric erosion and investigate more fully the importance of azimuthal flows at the flanks. The EUV observations of erosion events like 10 July will allow us to re-examine the simple long-standing ideas of plasmapause dynamics, including the global distribution of inner magnetospheric electric and flow fields.

References


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