Highly periodic stormtime activations observed by THEMIS prior to substorm onset


1. Introduction

[2] The magnetosphere exhibits quasi-periodic convection at a wide range of timescales, from tens of minutes to several hours. At the longest timescales are sawtooth events, which have characteristics of substorms, and may occur under moderately active driving approximately every 2–3 hours [Henderson et al., 2005]. Substorms that exhibit a periodicity of the local activations was established by periodic perturbations with a source in the nightside plasmasheet.

[1] On March 24, 2007 THEMIS observed near the dusk flank several 10 minute quasi-periodic flow and magnetic field oscillations followed by the onset of a strong substorm (AL ~ −1000 nT). The substorm occurred during an interval of strongly southward IMF, near the start of the recovery phase of a small storm (SYM-H near −80 nT). Each magnetic oscillation was accompanied by a rapid flow variation, auroral intensification, energetic particle injection, and Pi2 pulsations. For several hours both prior to and following the substorm THEMIS observed highly periodic flow oscillations, with the same 10 minute periodicity. The average of these flow oscillations was non-zero and positive, indicating net sunward transport. We suggest that the long interval of oscillatory flow constituted a periodic convective mode of the magnetosphere, and further suggest that the quasi-periodic activations were associated with reconnection near the THEMIS location. Citation: Kepko, L., et al. (2008), Highly periodic stormtime activations observed by THEMIS prior to substorm onset, Geophys. Res. Lett., 35, L17S24, doi:10.1029/2008GL034235.

2. Observations

[4] The THEMIS spacecraft were launched February 16, 2007 into the pre-midnight sector with a string of pearls configuration. For this study we examine data from the fluxgate magnetometer [Auster et al., 2007, 2008] and the plasma analyzer [McFadden et al., 2008]. Plasma data were available in 3 forms: full distribution functions at 384 s, omnidirectional spectra at 3 s, and onboard calculated plasma moments at 3 s. Unfortunately, a table loading error caused the THEMIS on-board moments to be incorrectly calculated for the first few months of the mission (D. Larson, private communication, 2008). These 3 s moments can be partially recovered through a comparison with ground calculated moments determined from the full distributions. A linear fit between onboard moments and ground moments. Copyright 2008 by the American Geophysical Union.

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determines fitting parameters that can correctly rescale the onboard $X$ and $Z$ components of the 3-s velocity moments with a high degree of fidelity.

Solar wind data propagated to the dayside magnetopause are shown in Figures 1a–1d. IMF $B_z$ (Figure 1a) was negative for the majority of the day and was relatively steady at $B_z \approx -8$ nT for several hours prior to 0900 UT. During the interval 0500 to 0900 UT AL (not shown) remained near $-500$ nT, indicating strong convection. Figure 1e shows the $X$ component of the velocity measured by THEMIS-A, which was located near the equatorial dusk flank near $(X,Y) = (-4.5, 13.5) R_E$ GSE. Between 6 and 14 UT $V_x$ oscillated with a period of $\sim 10$ minutes. The 30-minute average (black line in Figure 1e) shows that sunward transport was non-zero during this interval, near 30 km/s. THEMIS-A $B_z$ GSE and $|B|$ are shown in Figure 1f. Dipolarizations occurred just prior to 0800, 1000 and 1300 UT. Note that $V_x$ continued to oscillate through the first two dipolarizations. Near 1320 UT IMF $B_z$ turned northward, and both the flow oscillations and net sunward transport ceased soon thereafter.

At 0900 UT the THEMIS probes were located near the equatorial dusk flank, with C near ($-5.7$, 12.8), A, B and D near ($-4.5$, 13.5), and E near ($-3.3$, 13.5) $R_E$ GSE. The LANL-97A spacecraft was near the same local time (19 LT). Between 0900 and 1000 UT THEMIS observed a series of large amplitude velocity and magnetic field oscillations (Figures 2b and 2c). Data from other THEMIS spacecraft show qualitatively the same features (Figure 2e). Ground stations near the same local time observed Pi2 packets at 0908, 0918, 0928, and 0938 UT (Figure 2a). Each Pi2 was associated with nearly dispersionless geosynchronous particle injections at 19 LT (Figures 2f and 2g). An electron injection so near dusk is rarely observed, and implies that activity was centered near the local time of LANL-97A. The LANL-02A (14 LT) energetic proton data (Figure 2h) indicate a series of drift echoes near local noon, strong evidence that the flux increases observed by LANL-97A were injections and not simply boundary oscillations.

The THEMIS all-sky imager (ASI) stations in Alaska, near 19 LT, captured auroral activity associated with each of the activations. The imagers observed multiple arcs drifting equatorward with a brightening approximately every 10 minutes, although the arcs did not fully break up until after 0940 UT. Snapshots bracketing the Pi2 onsets are shown in Figure 3. The first brightening was observed near 0901:06 in the southwest FOV of Kiana (KIAN, middle of the west coast of Alaska). The arc quickly dissipated and was no longer visible by 0902:18. While no Pi2 were observed at this time, THEMIS observed the start of flow and field variations. The next brightening occurred near 0909:21 UT, again along the southern edge of the KIAN FOV. The arc similarly dissipated in a few minutes. The third brightening occurred around 0918 UT, and appeared in both the KIAN and McGrath (MCR, southwestern Alaska) FOVs. By 0923 UT the arc had dimmed and a new arc had formed and started to move equatorward. Near 0928 UT over MCR a small swirl developed on a preexisting arc and quickly moved westward. The arcs continued to brighten slowly for the next 10 minutes until a large auroral breakup and substorm near 0938 UT. This breakup started eastward of Gakona (GAKO, southeastern Alaska) and then spread into MCR and then northward. The magnetic field at the THEMIS location reconfigured at this time, consistent with expectations of a magnetospheric substorm.

### 3. Discussion and conclusions

THEMIS observed two types of periodic activity during the interval discussed here. Between 0600 and 1400 UT THEMIS observed a persistent 10-min oscillation in the flow velocity, with a non-zero, net sunward average. Between 0900 and 0945 UT a series of periodic 10-min activations occurred, closely associated with a brief, but significant, decrease in IMF $B_z$ (Figure 1a). Each Pi2, particle injection and auroral brightening was a manifestation of short-lived, impulsive magnetospheric activity. Only the last activation near 0938 UT exhibited the magnetic field...
reconfiguration, large-scale auroral expansion and strong geosynchronous particle injection consistent with substorm expansion. Despite the unusual local time (19 LT), several hours away from the nominal location of such activity, the activations exhibited characteristics similar to those observed on the nightside. Although the exact details of substorm onset are still subject to debate, nightside substorm activity is well understood to be related to unloading of tail plasma through magnetic reconnection. The combined THEMIS observations of strong thinning, dipolarization, and fast flows at the flank, along with geosynchronous dispersionless injections and auroral activations, are qualitatively similar to nightside substorm activity, and suggests that one or more reconnection sites existed near the meridian of 19 LT.

While it is rare to observe such strong substorm activity very near the dusk flank [see, e.g., Gelpi et al., 1987], it can be understood as a consequence of the IMF conditions. The 12-hour interval prior to 1300 UT occurred under heavy solar wind driving, and is characterized by AL as an SMC or by SYM-H as a small storm. During an SMC, reconnection occurs close to the Earth to facilitate rapid convection [Sergeev et al., 1996]. In addition, for several hours prior to the event both IMF $B_y$ and $B_z$ were negative. Under this orientation reconnection at the dayside magnetopause occurs preferentially pre-noon in the northern hemisphere and post-noon in the southern [Crooker, 1979; Luhmann et al., 1984]. This asymmetric flux loading twists the geomagnetic tail such that the plane of the plasmasheet is rotated clockwise viewed from Earth. This is evident in the THEMIS magnetic field data (Figure 2c). Prior to the substorm, the magnetic field at the location of THEMIS was dominated by negative $B_y$, which placed the spacecraft above the current sheet. After the substorm the spacecraft were located in the central plasmasheet, an indication that the substorm lead to an untwisting of the dusk plasmasheet. During current sheet crossings, $B_z$ was near zero until after the substorm near 0945. This untwisting of the plasmasheet and topological reconfiguration of the magnetic field is further evidence for magnetic reconnection near the dusk flank.

During the activations the magnetic field oscillations in Figure 2 propagated towards the dayside with a speed of a few 100 km/s [Gabrielse et al., 2008]. We note that the oscillations continued through the dipolarizations at 0800 and 1000 UT, consistent with a non-local source. Later in the day THEMIS observed magnetic field oscillations for several hours after the convective flow had ceased and the IMF had turned northward (Figure 4). Timing obtained from cross-correlation analysis is consistent with propagation away from midnight, towards the flanks, at a speed of ~40 km/s. This suggests that the periodicity was established somewhere in the nightside plasmasheet, near the midnight meridian. We suggest that the periodicity of the activations was not established locally. Rather, periodic perturbations propagating from the nightside likely modulated local dusk dynamics.

The source of the 10-minute periodicity is unclear. Kelvin-Helmholtz seems unlikely on the basis that the perturbations appeared to propagate away from midnight. The solar wind number density increased slightly during the interval, and contained periodicities similar to those observed by THEMIS (Figure 1d). While several papers have argued for the existence of periodic solar wind number density variations [e.g., Kepko et al., 2002], in this case there is little evidence of number density oscillations prior to or after the event to sustain such a conclusion here. Still,
without measurements in the immediate upstream solar wind, we cannot rule out completely this possibility.

[12] We have examined magnetometer data from a variety of ground stations, but have not found sustained signatures of a 10 min periodicity. Magnetometers near the same local time of THEMIS measured currents associated with the multiple arcs, but no clear signature of a 10 min periodicity. Magnetograms from the IMAGE chain showed 10-minute oscillations between 0500 and 0600 UT, when IMAGE was located near dawn. There is little evidence in other ground magnetometers of similar periodicities. The lack of a persistent ionospheric signature suggests that the source of the periodicity is either highly localized or else decoupled from the ionosphere. The ASI observations of temporally stable arcs argues for the existence of magnetospheric flow shears and ionospheric electric potentials which could decouple any magnetospheric oscillations from the magnetosphere.

[13] Periodicities were intermittently observed at geosynchronous orbit by several spacecraft. Between 0600 and 0900 UT variations in the electron flux at the 10-minute timescale were observed by LANL-89, near 2130 LT. Periodic injections quite similar to those observed by LANL-97A were measured by LANL-94 between 0600 and 0700 UT near 2030 LT. Spacecraft located on the dayside did not observe this periodic activity. We are unable to ascertain if the observations represent a local time effect or a radial dependence of activity. A combination of both is likely. Geotail was located in the midtail plasmasheet near ($-18, -1$) $R_E$. Geotail observed short intervals of 10-minute oscillations, most clearly between 0545 and 0630 UT in $B_x$. But, as with the geosynchronous and ground data, the oscillations were intermittent.

[14] The apparent discrepancy between the THEMIS observations of semi-continuous oscillations and the lack of consistent signature in other magnetospheric locations is likely explained by the location of THEMIS. The flank magnetosphere acts as a funnel of nightside convection, and activity that occurs on the nightside must eventually pass through the flank to reach the dayside. The non-zero average of $V_x$ for several hours indicates net sunward transport, and suggests that the oscillations represent a periodic sloshing of the magnetosphere. The observations further indicate that this periodic convection was sporadic and localized to the pre-midnight sector. For the interval 0900–0945 UT, substorm activity occurred near the local time of THEMIS and LANL-97A, near the 19 LT meridian. The strong flows, dipolarization and particle injections are consistent with loading of magnetic flux near the dusk flank and unloading through a substorm and magnetic reconnection. The periodicity of the duskside activations was likely determined by sunward propagating impulses from further downtail.

Figure 3. All sky imager data bracketing the times of Pi2 onsets from THEMIS ground stations. Field-of-view is (a–c) Kiana, Alaska, (d) McGrath, Alaska, and (e) Gakona, Alaska. Arrows mark the locations of activations.

Figure 4. Magnetic field data from THEMIS D, B and A. The spacecraft were near ($-6.6, 10.5$) $R_E$ at 1600 UT, separated by $\sim 0.4 R_E$ in the $y$ direction. Probe D was located closest to midnight, Probe A furthest. Data from probes B and A have been time-shifted based on cross-correlation analysis by $-24$ s ($R = 0.96$) and $-60$ s ($R = 0.85$) respectively.
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References