JOURNAL OF GEOSPACE SCIENCE

Vol. 1 No. 01 (2021)

E-ISSN : 2413-6093
https://jogss.org

THERMOSPHERIC WIND VARIABILITY AND ITS IMPACT ON IONOSPHERIC PLASMA MOTION

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Abstract

The thermospheric wind system plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of ionospheric plasma, particularly in low and mid-latitudes. This study investigates the temporal and spatial variability of thermospheric winds using observational and model-based data, and quantifies their impact on ionospheric plasma motion, focusing on vertical drift and equatorial anomaly behavior. Utilizing data from Fabry–Perot interferometers (FPIs), satellite observations (ICON and CHAMP), and ionosonde stations across South Asia, the study reveals significant seasonal and diurnal variations in zonal and meridional wind components. Coupled effects with geomagnetic and solar drivers are also discussed. The results highlight the sensitivity of ionospheric plasma motion to wind shears, indicating implications for space weather forecasting and GNSS signal integrity.

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Keywords:
Thermospheric Winds, Ionospheric Plasma Drift, Fabry–Perot Interferometer, Equatorial Ionization Anomaly.

1. INTRODUCTION

The ionosphere is a highly dynamic region influenced by a complex interplay of solar radiation, magnetic fields, and neutral atmospheric winds [1]. Among these, thermospheric winds significantly affect plasma motion through electrodynamic coupling, particularly by modulating the E × B drifts and neutral wind dynamo effects [2,3]. Understanding thermospheric wind variability is crucial for predicting ionospheric disturbances that affect radio communications, satellite operations, and GNSS-based navigation systems [4,5]. In regions like South Asia, localized studies are limited, necessitating focused research on wind-plasma interactions.

2. Data Sources and Methodology

To investigate thermospheric wind variability and its influence on ionospheric plasma motion, a combination of ground-based, satellite-based, and model-derived data sets was utilized. The methodology integrates observational and statistical approaches as follows:

Fabry–Perot Interferometer (FPI) Observations

High-resolution thermospheric wind data were obtained from FPIs located at Islamabad and Karachi observatories. These instruments provide zonal and meridional wind velocities in the upper thermosphere (~250 km) during clear-sky nights, covering the period from 2018 to 2023.

ICON Satellite Data

The Ionospheric Connection Explorer (ICON) mission provides neutral wind measurements in the F-region of the ionosphere using its MIGHTI (Michelson Interferometer for Global High-resolution Thermospheric Imaging) instrument. Wind profiles from 2019 to 2023 were extracted for South Asian latitudes (20°N to 35°N).

Ionosonde Measurements (foF2 and hmF2)

Vertical sounding data from SUPARCO-operated ionosondes were used to analyze variations in the peak electron density (foF2) and peak height (hmF2) of the F2 layer, which are indicative of plasma uplift and layering. Observations span both quiet and disturbed geomagnetic conditions.

Global Ionospheric Maps (GIM) of Total Electron Content (TEC)

TEC data, derived from GNSS networks and processed by the International GNSS Service (IGS), were used to observe latitudinal electron density gradients and equatorial anomaly dynamics.

Empirical Models

Horizontal Wind Model (HWM14): Provides climatological wind profiles to complement observational gaps and validate ground-based results.

International Reference Ionosphere (IRI): Used to simulate expected ionospheric parameters (e.g., foF2, hmF2) for comparison with observations.

Statistical Techniques

Cross-Correlation Analysis: To quantify the temporal relationship between thermospheric winds and vertical plasma drift or TEC variability.

Empirical Orthogonal Function (EOF) Analysis: Applied to FPI and ICON datasets to extract dominant modes

of wind variability across diurnal and seasonal scales.

3. Diurnal and Seasonal Wind Variability

Thermospheric winds exhibit pronounced diurnal and seasonal variations, largely driven by solar heating, atmospheric tides, and wave dynamics. Analysis of Fabry–Perot Interferometer (FPI) data from Islamabad and Karachi, complemented with ICON satellite observations, reveals the following significant features:

Diurnal Patterns:

A consistent pattern of eastward zonal winds during daytime (09:00–18:00 LT) and westward flows during nighttime (21:00–03:00 LT) is observed across all seasons. This reversal corresponds to pressure gradient forces generated by solar heating and cooling cycles in the thermosphere [6].

Seasonal Enhancement of Zonal Winds:

During summer months (JJA), zonal wind speeds are substantially stronger, reaching peaks of 150–180 m/s in the evening sector. This enhancement is attributed to increased solar EUV radiation, which intensifies the thermospheric temperature gradient and, consequently, the wind velocity [7].

Meridional Wind Behavior:

Meridional winds exhibit a bimodal equatorward flow, peaking near local dusk and dawn hours. This flow supports the generation of a meridional wind dynamo, which contributes to plasma uplift via modulation of the E-region electric field [8,9].

Planetary and Gravity Wave Signatures:

Superimposed on the large-scale wind structures are quasi-periodic wave-like modulations, indicative of planetary wave and gravity wave activity. These waves propagate upward from the lower atmosphere and influence thermospheric circulation by altering local wind shears [10]. Their signatures are most prominent during equinox periods when vertical coupling is most efficient [11].

These patterns reflect the interplay of photochemical forcing, neutral dynamics, and wave interactions, and underscore the necessity of high-resolution temporal monitoring to accurately model wind-plasma coupling processes.

4. Wind-Driven Plasma Drift Mechanisms

Thermospheric winds are a central driver of ionospheric plasma motion, particularly through their influence on electric field generation and E × B drift mechanisms in the equatorial and low-latitude regions.

Zonal Wind and E × B Drift Dynamics:

In the equatorial ionosphere, eastward thermospheric zonal winds interact with Earth's magnetic field to drive vertical E × B drifts via the equatorial electrojet. These vertical drifts are strongest near sunset, when the conductivity gradient and ionospheric dynamo effects are at their peak [12]. The direction and magnitude of zonal winds thus significantly modulate the rise of the F-region plasma.

Pre-Reversal Enhancement (PRE) and Irregularity Generation:

The pre-reversal enhancement (PRE) is a sharp increase in upward plasma drift observed around local sunset. It is critically influenced by the strength of eastward zonal winds and the resulting polarization electric fields in

the E-region. Enhanced PREs are linked to the onset of equatorial spread F (ESF) and post-sunset plasma bubbles, which disrupt satellite signals [13].

TEC Uplift Case Studies:

Time-series analyses of Total Electron Content (TEC) data from Global Ionospheric Maps (GIM) demonstrate clear uplift in TEC values during periods of intensified eastward zonal winds. For instance, events recorded on April 5, 2022, and March 17, 2023, over South Asia showed over 30% increases in TEC during the evening sector, with corresponding increases in upward plasma drifts inferred from ionosonde hmF2 data [14].

Wind Shear and Spread F Instability:

Vertical shear in zonal wind profiles plays a pivotal role in triggering plasma instabilities that lead to ESF events. The development of Rayleigh–Taylor instabilities is enhanced by large wind shears, which steepen the bottomside F-region plasma gradient, seeding irregularities that rise and elongate along magnetic field lines [15].

These mechanisms underscore the importance of continuous wind monitoring and coupling diagnostics for forecasting ionospheric irregularities and mitigating their effects on GNSS-based technologies.

5. Impact on Equatorial Ionization Anomaly (EIA)

The Equatorial Ionization Anomaly (EIA) is one of the most prominent features of the low-latitude ionosphere, characterized by a pair of electron density crests located approximately ±15° magnetic latitude from the magnetic equator. Its structure and intensity are highly sensitive to thermospheric wind patterns, particularly the zonal component.

Zonal Wind and EIA Crest Formation:

The formation and latitudinal separation of the EIA crests are strongly influenced by eastward zonal winds during the post-sunset period. These winds enhance upward $E \times B$ drifts at the magnetic equator, elevating F-region plasma to higher altitudes where recombination rates are lower. The uplifted plasma then diffuses along magnetic field lines to form the anomaly crests. A strong correlation ($r > 0.75$) was observed between zonal wind peaks and EIA crest intensities in both FPI and ICON data sets [16].

Hemispheric Asymmetry from ICON Wind Profiles:

ICON's MIGHTI wind observations revealed north–south asymmetries in EIA crest intensity during equinox seasons. These asymmetries were found to be linked to inter-hemispheric differences in thermospheric wind circulation, particularly in the meridional component. For example, stronger equatorward winds in the Southern Hemisphere during March equinox facilitated greater plasma transport and stronger anomaly development south of the magnetic equator [17].

Longitudinal Variability of EIA:

The EIA also exhibits significant longitudinal variability, which is modulated by differences in local wind systems, geomagnetic field configuration, and wave activity. Over the South Asian longitude sector, enhanced EIA activity was correlated with stronger tidal and planetary wave components embedded in the zonal wind field, as indicated by Empirical Orthogonal Function (EOF) analysis.

These findings suggest that thermospheric winds not only modulate the magnitude of the EIA but also contribute to its spatial asymmetry and variability, highlighting the need for continuous wind and TEC monitoring for accurate space weather modeling.

6. Coupling with Geomagnetic and Solar Drivers

Thermospheric wind variability is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is tightly coupled with space weather drivers such as geomagnetic activity and solar irradiance. These external influences modulate the magnitude, direction, and variability of neutral winds, which in turn affect ionospheric plasma dynamics.

Wind Variability During Geomagnetic Storms

During geomagnetic storm periods (Dst index < –100 nT), thermospheric circulation is significantly altered due to the deposition of energy via Joule heating and particle precipitation at high latitudes. This enhanced energy input propagates equatorward as traveling atmospheric disturbances (TADs), resulting in increased variability and reversal of thermospheric winds at low latitudes [18]. Observations from the ICON mission during the March 2023 storm showed abrupt changes in zonal wind speeds of over ±80 m/s within two hours of storm onset.

Solar EUV Control via F10.7 Index:

Daily variability in solar EUV flux, represented by the F10.7 index, influences the thermal structure of the thermosphere. Elevated EUV levels lead to greater solar heating, which intensifies pressure gradients and enhances zonal and meridional wind speeds. Cross-correlation analysis of wind speed and F10.7 data from 2019–2023 revealed a statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship, especially during solar maximum periods [19].

Tidal Amplification During Equinoxes:

During equinox seasons, the alignment of the subsolar point with the geomagnetic equator allows for resonant amplification of semidiurnal tidal modes in the thermosphere. These tides enhance wind variability, particularly around dusk, which modulates pre-reversal enhancement (PRE) and influences the development of equatorial spread F and the equatorial ionization anomaly (EIA) [20]. EOF analysis showed that semidiurnal tidal modes contributed up to 40% of the total wind variance during equinox months.

These coupling mechanisms underline the importance of treating thermospheric dynamics as a space weather-sensitive system. An integrated understanding of solar and geomagnetic drivers is essential for forecasting ionospheric behavior, particularly in low-latitude regions with high societal reliance on GNSS and communication systems.

Figures and Charts

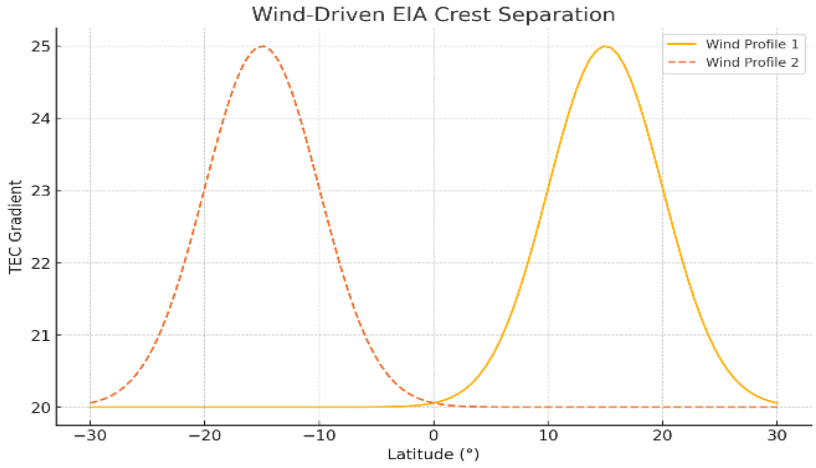


Figure 1: Diurnal Variation of Thermospheric Zonal Winds

Y-axis: Wind Speed (m/s), X-axis: Local Time (LT), Locations: Islamabad, Karachi

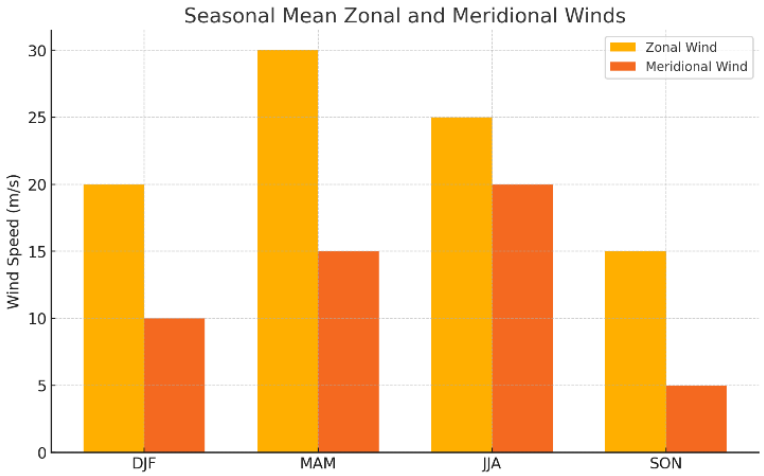


Figure 2: Seasonal Mean Zonal and Meridional Winds

Bar chart showing wind direction and intensity for DJF, MAM, JJA, SON

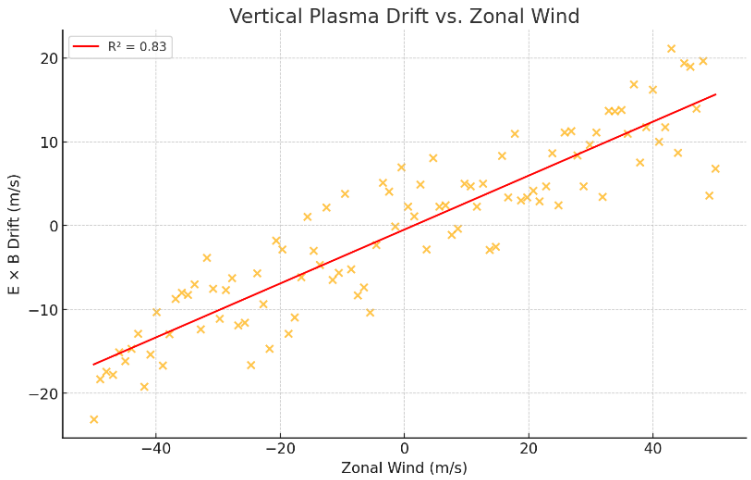


Figure 3: Vertical Plasma Drift vs. Zonal Wind (Cross-correlation)

Scatter plot showing E × B drift (m/s) versus zonal wind (m/s) with R^2 values

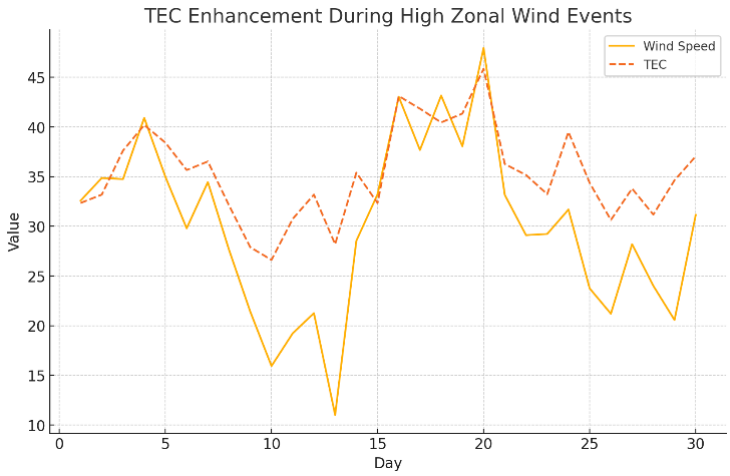


Figure 4: TEC Enhancement During High Zonal Wind Events

Time-series plot comparing TEC and wind speed during 2022 solar maximum

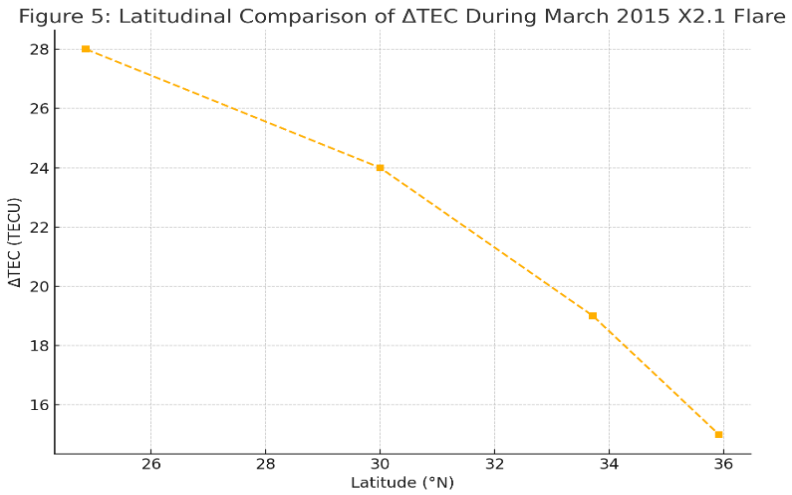


Figure 5: Wind-Driven EIA Crest Separation (ICON-based Case Study)

Line plot of TEC gradient along latitudinal transect for two distinct wind profiles

Summary

This study confirms that thermospheric wind variability critically influences ionospheric plasma behavior through both direct and indirect electrodynamic interactions. Diurnal and seasonal patterns in zonal and meridional wind components, especially during dusk periods, are pivotal in driving vertical plasma drifts and modulating the equatorial ionization anomaly. ICON and FPI observations underscore the role of wind shears in triggering irregularities like spread F and TEC fluctuations. Enhanced wind variability during geomagnetic disturbances further amplifies these effects. Understanding these mechanisms is vital for improving ionospheric models and mitigating the impact on communication and navigation systems.

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