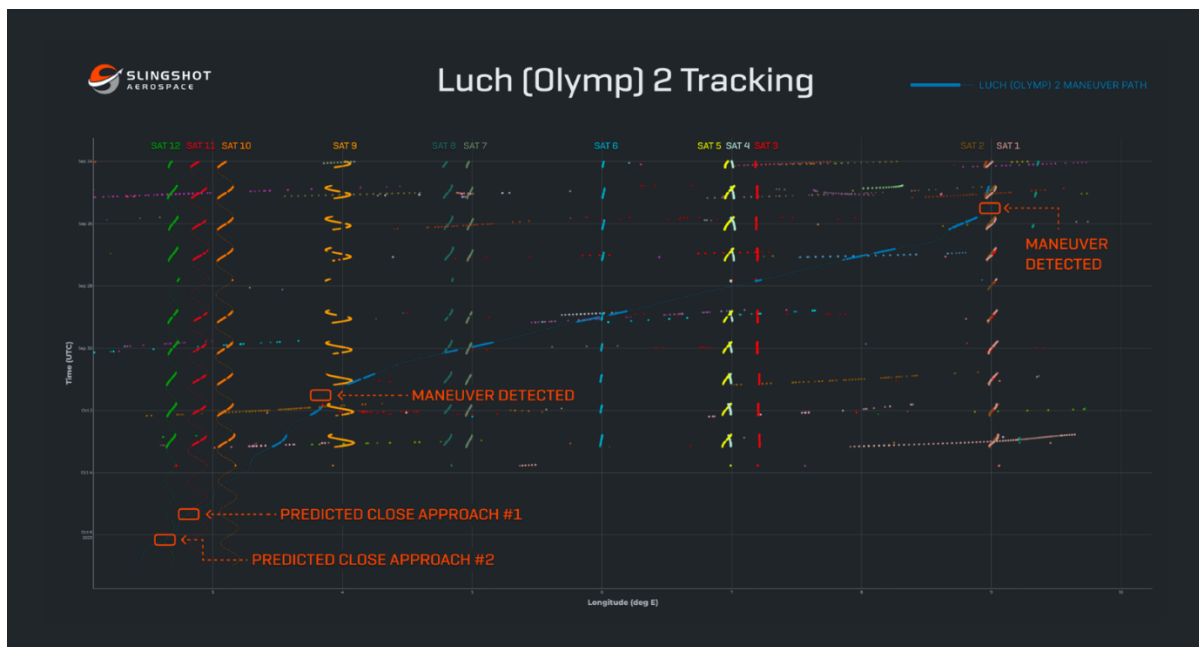


# A Russian spy satellite is inspecting commercial communications assets in space

02 October 2024 Adam Jeffs, Editor, SAE Media Group

A Russian intelligence-gathering satellite could be set to close in on an Intelsat satellite, following 10 close approaches to commercial comms satellites since March 2023.



ML tracking of the Luch 2 satellite's manoeuvres with predicted approaches (Credit: Slingshot Aerospace)

The Russian Luch 2 satellite, believed to be an intelligence-gathering satellite, appears set to close in on yet another communications satellite for an apparent inspection or signal interception. On June 27 the space monitoring company, Slingshot Aerospace, reported on the suspicious activity of the Luch 2 satellite, which it has been [monitoring over the last year](#).

According to Slingshot, the satellite has been making close approaches to a number of communications satellites, potentially as part of an ongoing effort by Russia to gather signals intelligence. The satellite recently executed a

“large manoeuvre” that Slingshot believe will bring it into a close approach with an Intelsat communications satellite.

According to Audrey Schaffer, Vice President of Strategy and Policy at Slingshot Aerospace: “[We have] had eyes on Luch 2 since it was launched in March 2023, and our machine learning algorithms have predicted its next move.”

“The suspected Russian spy satellite has a history of cozying up to communications satellites, and it now appears to be repositioning itself near its next target.”

Slingshot’s data suggests that Luch 2 has made 10 close approaches to communications satellites since its launch in March 2023, eyeing up satellites from providers such as Eutelsat, Astra and SES, coming as close as 20km in some cases.

Slingshot’s data shows that Luch 2 has made approaches to US, European and African communications satellites:

- EUTE KA SAT 9A – (KA SAT) – Approach distance: ~20 km
- EUTELSAT 9B – Approach distance: ~43 km
- EUTE 3B – Approach distance: ~38 km
- RASCOM QAF 1R – Approach distance: ~163 km
- EUTE 3C (HB 10) – Approach distance: ~220 km
- EUTE KONNECT VHTS – Approach distance: ~30 km
- RASCOM QAF 1R – Approach distance: ~137 km
- ASTRA 4A (SIRIUS 4) – Approach distance: ~45 km
- SES 5 – Approach distance: ~154 km
- INTELSAT 3-F7 – Approach distance: ~228 km

At present, it is not known whether Luch 2 has the capabilities to intercept satellite communications, so we can only speculate as to the purpose of these close approaches.

This Russian intelligence-gathering campaign could be spurred on by the role that commercial satellite operators have played in the Russo-Ukraine war. At

the outset of the war Russia's attempts to shut down Ukraine's satellite communications capabilities were thwarted by Space X, who sent thousands of Starlink terminals to Ukraine to get the country back online.

Russia also lost the element of surprise for its initial invasion when satellite images shared by Maxar Technologies and Capella Space showed a Russian convoy heading toward the Ukrainian border. More recently, [Russia has made claims](#) that US satellites were used to guide ATACMS missile strikes on the occupied Crimea region by Ukraine, prompting Putin to declare US and commercial satellites legitimate targets if they assist Ukraine.

**Dr Brendan Mulvaney, Director of the China Aerospace Studies Institute will discuss threats in space alongside a senior representative of the US DoD at the [Global MilSatCom 2024](#) conference, taking place 4 - 7 November.**