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Clayton et al.

(54) **FOLDABLE RADIO WAVE ANTENNA DEPLOYMENT APPARATUS FOR A SATELLITE**

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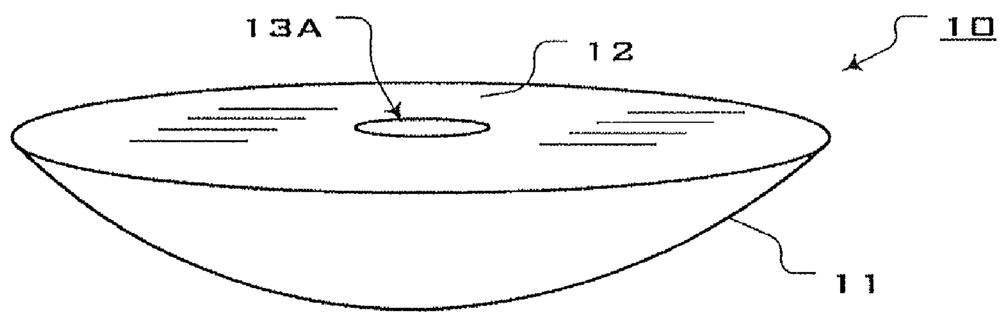
(57) **ABSTRACT**

The present disclosure describes an antenna that has a parabola-shaped, flexible reflector member and one or more radial ribs embedded in the flexible reflector member and arranged to bias the reflector member in an open state.



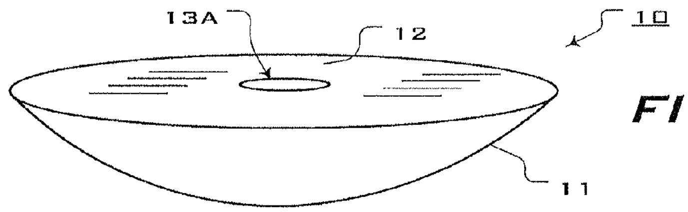


FIG. 1

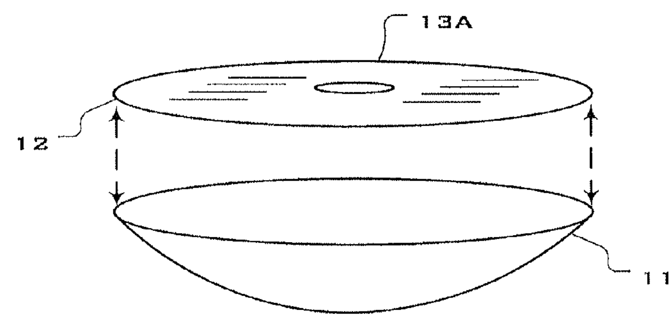


FIG. 2

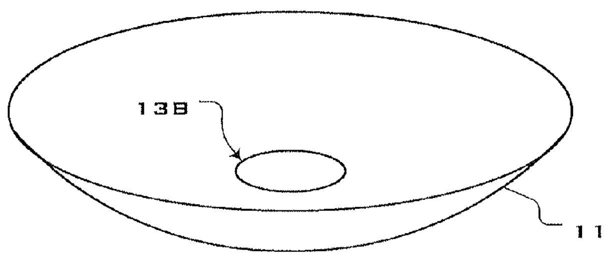


FIG. 3

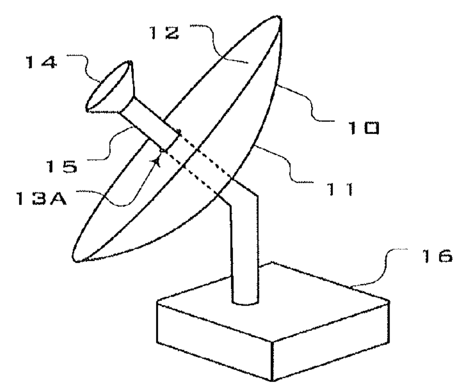


FIG. 4

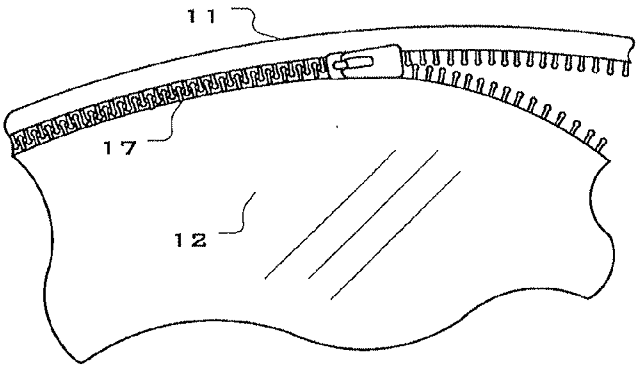


FIG. 5

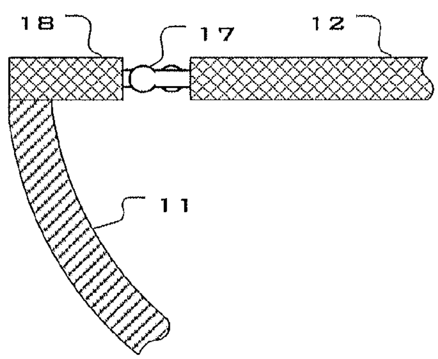
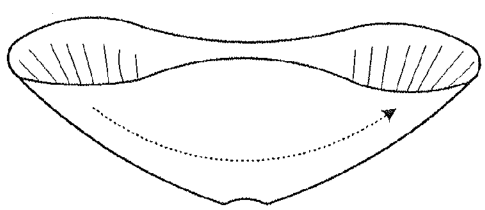


FIG. 6

FIG. 7A



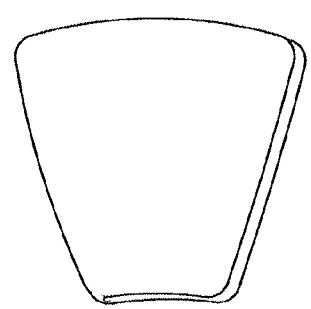


FIG. 7B

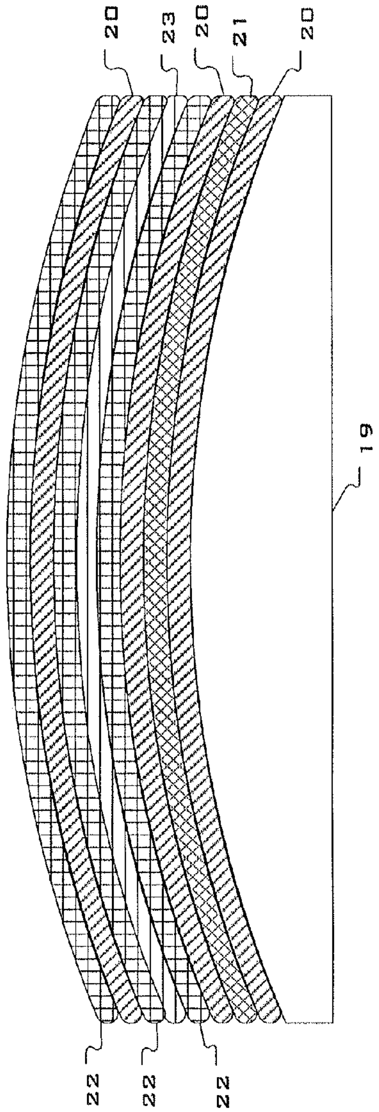


FIG. 8

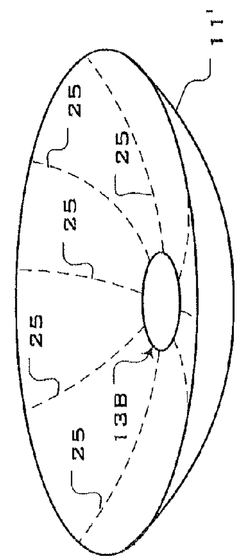


FIG. 9A

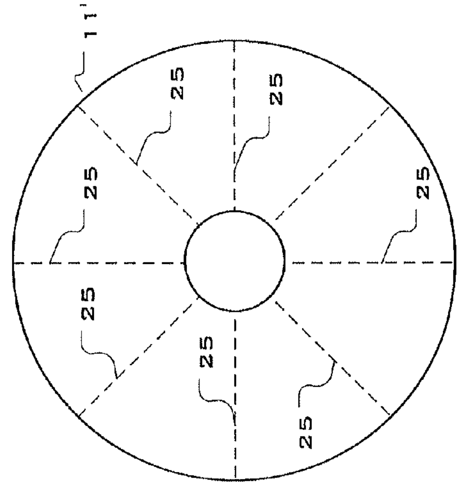


FIG. 9B

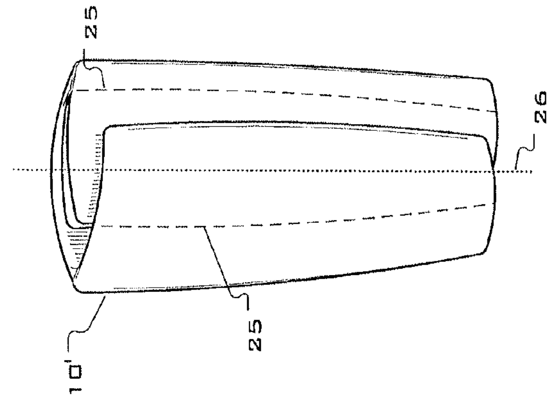


FIG. 9C

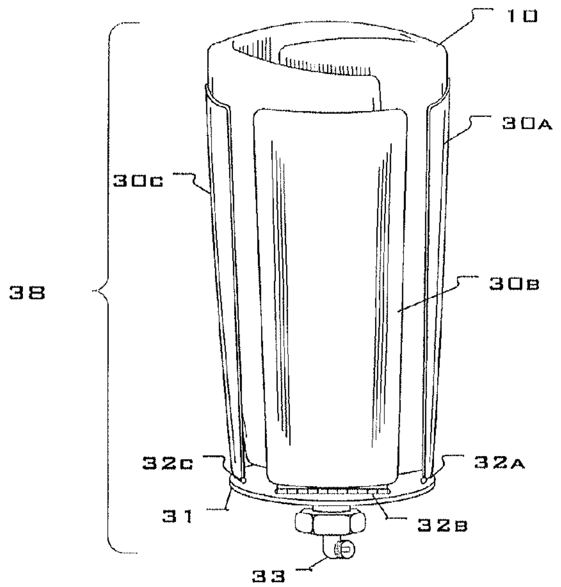
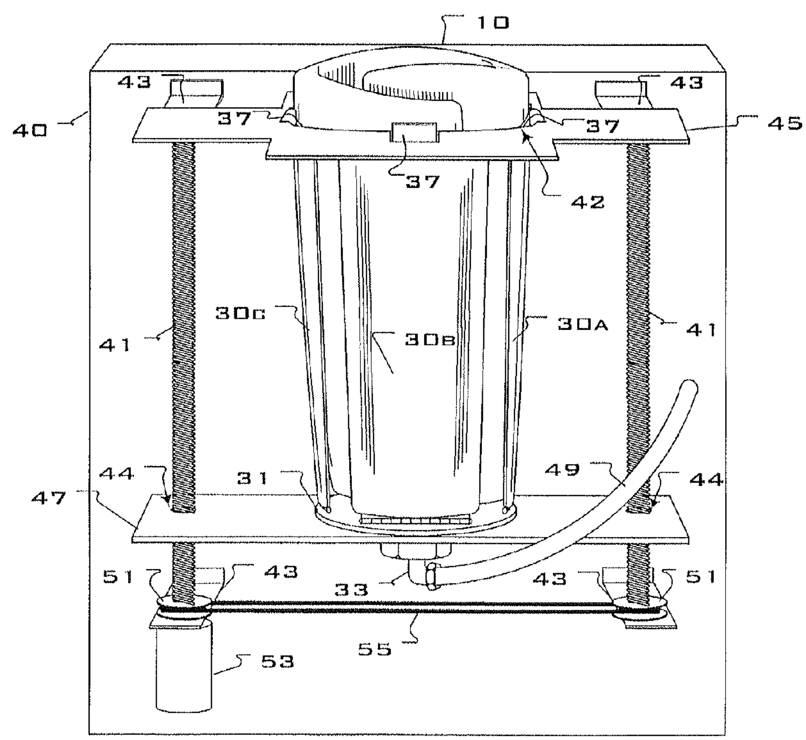

10
30A
30C
38
30B
32C
32A
31
32B
33

FIG. 10


10
43
43
40
37
37
45
37
42
41
30C
30B
30A
41
44
31
49
44
47
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43
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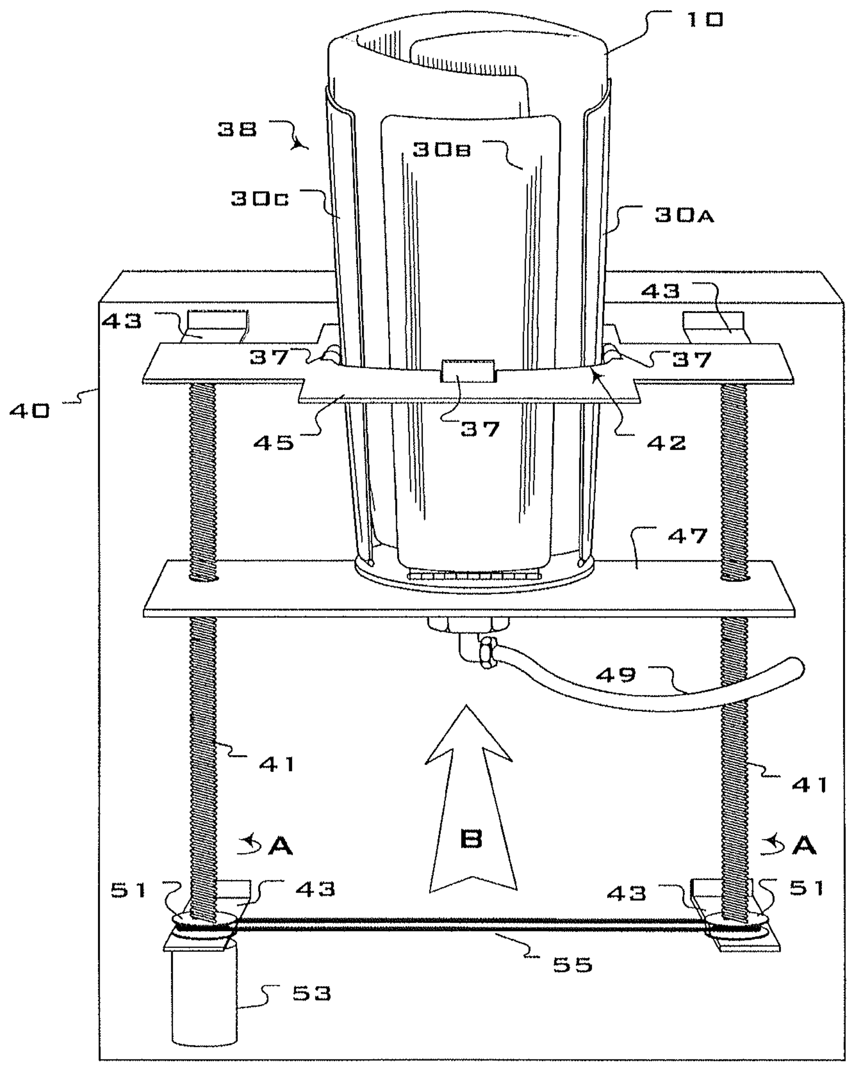
55
53

FIG. 11


10
38
30B
30C
30A
43
43
37
37
40
37
45
42
47
49
41
41
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B
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51
43
43
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55
53

FIG. 11A

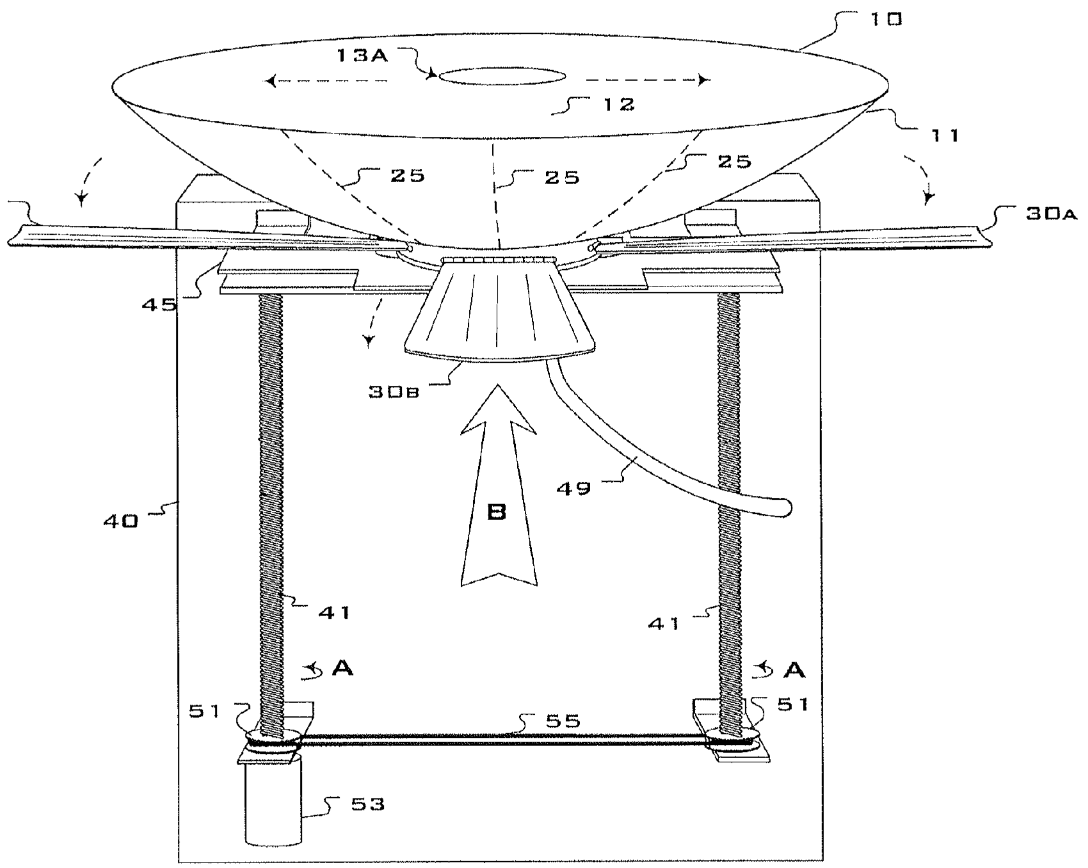

FIG. 11B

FOLDABLE RADIO WAVE ANTENNA DEPLOYMENT APPARATUS FOR A SATELLITE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is a continuation-in-part of, and claims priority to, co-owned and co-pending, U.S. app. Ser. No. 14/334,374, entitled, Foldable Radio Wave Antenna, filed Jul. 17, 2014, and which is incorporated by reference as if fully set forth herein.

BACKGROUND

[0002] 1. Field

[0003] The present disclosure relates generally to a satellite having a radio wave antenna, and particularly to a deployment apparatus for a foldable radio wave antenna installed on such satellite.

[0004] 2. Description of the Problem and Related Art

[0005] Transport of radio wave systems that use some form of electromagnetic reflecting antenna, i.e., radar or communications, is cumbersome, partially because of the antenna. Such antennas require an electromagnetically reflective substance, a metal, to operate, which has meant that the antenna is heavy and not easily stowed for transport. Collapsible metal antennas have often been used. Of course, these antennas are weighty and require complex actuator systems to be deployed.

[0006] Recently, antennas have been formed from lightweight materials such as composites, and polymers. These render the antenna light in weight compared to metal versions, but such antennas need other structures to maintain the shape of the reflector in a parabolic dish when the antenna is deployed in order not to degrade or inhibit the electromagnetic signal.

[0007] Often such antennas include rigid members to maintain the shape of the reflector, for example, a plurality of rigid ribs, as described in U.S. Pat. No. 3,978,490 to Talley, et al.; U.S. Pat. No. 7,710,348 to Taylor, et al.; and U.S. Pat. No. 8,259,033 to Taylor, et al. Other antennas employ other "rigidizing" means, such a rigid toroidal member incorporated in the periphery of the reflector dish shown in U.S. Pat. No. 4,755,819 to Bernasconi, et al. in which the antenna reflector comprises an uncured resin in the undeployed state and a toroidal member, both of which are that configured to be inflated to deploy the reflector. When the resin encounters heat from the sun, the reflector hardens and maintains its shape. U.S. Pat. No. 6,272,449 to Bokulic, et al., also discloses a flexible antenna incorporating an inflating toroid. Still other antennas incorporate some other rigid structures to maintain the reflector's shape. For example, U.S. Pat. No. 6,642,796 to Talley, et al. discloses an antenna that includes a rigid center with bendable sections extending from the edge of the rigid center.

[0008] These rigidizing members of these latter "lightweight" antennas still add weight to the antenna system and require accommodations for space of any non-flexible, or non-folding structures. Even the inflatable versions require systems and plumbing to inflate the structures, adding more weight and complexity to the system.

[0009] Accordingly, a foldable antenna that does not require such rigid components is needed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] The apparatus is described with reference to the accompanying drawings. In the drawings, like reference numbers indicate identical or functionally similar elements.

[0011] FIG. **1** illustrates an exemplary embodiment of a foldable radio wave antenna;

[0012] FIG. **2** is an exploded view of the components of the foldable antenna of FIG. **1**;

[0013] FIG. **3** shows the concave side of an exemplary foldable reflector;

[0014] FIG. **4** illustrates an exemplary foldable antenna installed on an exemplary antenna positioning apparatus;

[0015] FIG. **5** depicts one means of attaching a tension member to a foldable reflector member;

[0016] FIG. **6** is a section view of the zipper depicted in FIG. **5**;

[0017] FIGS. **7**A and **7**B show an antenna folded;

[0018] FIG. **8** illustrates an exemplary laminate comprising the reflector member;

[0019] FIGS. **9**A-**9**C present an alternative embodiment of a foldable antenna;

[0020] FIG. **10** is an antenna folded and stowed in an exemplary retaining assembly;

[0021] FIG. **11** depicts the retaining assembly containing a folded antenna installed in an antenna deployment apparatus and in a stowed position;

[0022] FIG. **11**A shows the retaining assembly containing a folded antenna being moved toward a deployed position; and

[0023] FIG. **11**B shows a foldable antenna in a deployed position.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0024] The various embodiments of the disclosed deployment apparatus and their advantages are best understood by referring to FIGS. **1** through **11**B of the drawings. The elements of the drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon clearly illustrating the novel features and principles of operation. Throughout the drawings, like numerals are used for like and corresponding parts of the various drawings.

[0025] Furthermore, reference in the specification to "an embodiment," "one embodiment," "various embodiments," or any variant thereof means that a particular feature or aspect described in conjunction with the particular embodiment is included in at least one embodiment. Thus, the appearance of the phrases "in one embodiment," "in another embodiment," or variations thereof in various places throughout the specification are not necessarily all referring to its respective embodiment.

[0026] A foldable antenna **10** comprises a flexible reflector member **11** and a flexible tension member **12**. In its unfolded state, reflector member **11** is a generally parabolic dish having an opening **13***b* defined through its wall and centered at the vertex of the parabola. In its unfolded state, tension member **12** comprises a planar, circular member and also includes an opening **13***a* defined through it at its center.

[0027] A suitable antenna **10** is flexible enough to be folded with a low bending radius and with the ability to stay folded under the restraint of a canister, casing, or straps. The reflector member **11** must exhibit a low flexural modulus, and a high tensile modulus in plane, possessing "shape memory", i.e., a tendency of the reflector member **11** to return to its parabolic shape, but with a very low tendency to set when elastically deformed, i.e., creasing along the fold. Thus, the reflector member **11** may be folded and unfolded repeatedly without deterioration of signal quality. The material comprising the reflector member **11** is a composite having a high-elastic-modulus formed of woven fibers, e.g., fiberglass, carbon fiber or aramid, combined with a flexible, but resilient, elastomer binder matrix, for example, silicone resin, polyurethane, or synthetic rubber. The fiber composite layer could also be a composite of any cloth with any flexible resin as would be appreciated by those skilled in the relevant arts.

[0028] The parabolic shape preferably has a relatively high depth-to-diameter ratio, i.e., focal point/diameter (f/d), of between about 0.25 to about 0.30, and confers an automatic increase in short-range and long-range moment of inertia as it unfolds.

[0029] Of course, since it is intended to function as an electromagnetic reflector, the reflector member **11** also comprises an electromagnetically reflective fabric, for example, metal-nylon mesh. In one embodiment, reflector member **11** comprises a laminate of an electromagnetically reflective fabric encased in multiple layers of a fiber composite, an elastomer layer, and an aramid. In order to ensure a uniform flexion in all directions, the fibers of each fiber composite layer may be oriented at an offset with respect to adjacent or nearby fiber composite layers. For example, the fibers of a first fiber composite layer may be oriented in a first orientation. The next fiber composite layer may be oriented such that its fibers are angularly offset by about 45° relative the orientation of the fibers of the first layer. The succeeding fiber composite layer may be oriented such that its fibers are angularly offset by about 45° relative the fibers of the preceding layer, and so on.

[0030] Thickness of the resulting laminate should be sufficient to be resilient and retain shape memory of the parabolic considering the diameter of the reflector, but thin enough to be folded to a low bend radius. For example, if the laminate is not thick enough, it will not hold its shape when it is deployed. If it is too thick, the reflector will not be pliant enough to fold. For a reflector diameter of 0.9 m, a suitable thickness is about 50 mils.

[0031] With reference to FIG. **8**, the reflector member **11** may be formed by laying the multiple layers of material over a mandrel **19** of the desired f/d ratio. The first layer in this example is a fiber composite layer **20** and is overlaid with a metal nylon mesh layer **21**.

[0032] Another fiber composite layer **20** overlays the mesh layer **21** and an elastomer layer **22**. An aramid layer **23** is then placed over which is laid another fiber composite layer **20** sandwiched between elastomer layers **22**. More layers of fiber composite **20** and elastomer **22** may be added. As will be appreciated by those skilled in the art, the layers, in some embodiments, may be bonded together using heat, a vacuum or combinations of both.

[0033] Tension member **12** is also foldable and may also comprise a laminate of layers of fiber composite and an elastomer binder and may be between about **6** to about **8** mils in thickness having a diameter roughly equal to that of the reflector member **11**. In one embodiment, tension member **12** is permanently bonded by its circumferential edge to the peripheral rim of the reflector member **11**. In another embodiment, shown in FIG. **2**, the tension member **12** may be detachable from the reflector member **11**. With reference to FIGS. **5** and **6**, a circumferential zipper **17** may be used to attach tension member **12** to the reflector member **11**. Once attached, the tension member **12** draws the peripheral rim of the reflector member **11** centrally ensuring the edges maintain a circular shape. This reduces warping in the reflector member's **11** dish shape which would otherwise degrade antenna performance.

[0034] Zipper **17** may be installed by attaching a rim **18** that may comprise the same laminate as that of the tension member **12** to the peripheral rim of the reflector member **11** and attaching one side of the zipper to the radially inward edge of the rim **18**. It will be appreciated that preferably zipper **17** comprises an electromagnetically transparent material to avoid interference with the radio wave signals. In addition, other means of attaching the tension member **12** to the reflector member **11**, such as a ring of elastomeric material, which may serve to some extent the functions of the zipper, may be employed as will be appreciated by those skilled in the art.

[0035] FIG. **4** illustrates the antenna deployed with an antenna control system **16**. A mast **15** extends from the control system **16**. The antenna **10** is mounted to the mast **15** by inserted the mast **15** through the openings **13***a, b* in the reflector member **11** and the tension member **12**. A feed horn **14** is located on the end of the mast **15**.

[0036] When the antenna **10** is to be stowed, it is removed from the mast **15** and the tension member **12** is detached from the reflector member **11**. Both the tension member **12** and the reflector member **11** may then be refolded, as illustrated in FIGS. **7**A and **7**B.

[0037] An alternative embodiment of a foldable antenna is depicted in FIGS. **9**A and **9**B in which a flexible reflector member **11'** comprises a plurality of radial ribs **25** that are embedded in the laminate forming the reflector member **11'**, preferably in between layers **20**, **22** on the opposite side of the mesh layer **21** from the focus point of the parabola defining the reflector member **11'**. Ribs **25** comprise a curve corresponding to the curve of the parabola and may be formed from any resilient material that retains a curved shape, for example **32** gauge wire. Owing to the resilience of the ribs **25**, i.e., shape memory, they bias the reflector member **11'** toward an open, parabolic shape. Accordingly, when the reflector member **11'** is not constrained, it will automatically deploy. Of course, those skilled in the relevant arts will appreciate that if ribs **25** comprise a metal substance, care must be taken to locate ribs **25** to avoid unwanted interference with a radio wave signal. For the same reason, ribs **25** may preferably comprise a resilient material with low conductivity such as fiberglass/phenolic composite. Note that FIG. **9**A shows the reflector member **11'** in an "open state." FIG. **9**C shows a foldable antenna **10'** having ribs **25** folded for stowage. In this embodiment, ribs **25** may limit the manner in which the antenna **10'** may be folded. The antenna **10'** may be folded in a rolled arrangement forming a frustoconical arrangement, keeping the ribs **25** roughly aligned with the long axis of the frustum **26**. Note that FIG. **9**C shows the reflector member **11'** in a "closed state."

[0038] It should be noted the reflector member **11'** in FIGS. **9**A and **9**B is shown without the tension member **12**, described above, for clarity of illustrating the present embodiment. It should be understood that a foldable antenna **10'** embodying the reflector member **11'** may advantageously comprise a tension member **12** as well.

[0039] In FIG. **10**, an exemplary retaining assembly **38** using a foldable antenna **10** is shown having a mounting plate **31**, to one surface of which is pivotally attached a plurality of retaining leaves **30***a*-**30***c*. This view depicts the foldable antenna **10** in a folded, stowed condition being maintained in such arrangement by the position of the retaining leaves **30***a*-**30***c*, roughly perpendicular to the mounting plate **31**. However, leaves **30***a*-**30***c* are preferably pivotally attached to mounting plate **31** such that they are biased to rotate outward from the antenna **10**. Mounting plate **31** is configured with an opening (not shown) through which signal feed may be conveyed to the feed horn. A signal feed connector **33** extends from the opposing surface of the mounting plate **31**. In one embodiment, the reflector member is bolted to the feed mast **15**, which is bolted to the mounting plate **31**.

[0040] FIG. **11** shows the retaining assembly **38** of FIG. **9** installed on a satellite **40** in an assembly for deploying the antenna **10**. Mounting plate **31** is seated on one surface of a collar member **47** configured with threaded female openings **44** in which a corresponding number of parallel drive screws **41** are threadably engaged. The drive screws **41** are oriented roughly perpendicularly to the collar member **47** and each screw **41** includes a pulley **51***a, b* mounted to one end that are coupled to one another by a drive belt **55** such that rotation of one pulley **51***a* is imparted to the other pulley **51***b*, and thus, to both drive screws **41**. Pulleys **51***a, b* are both supported by mounting flanges **43** which extend from the satellite body **40**. A motor **53**, which also may be supported by a mounting flange **43**, is coupled to one of the pulleys **51***a* and is configured to drive rotation of the pulley **51***b* either clockwise or counter-clockwise. Drive screws **41** are arranged in parallel such that the threads of both are in a corresponding orientation.

[0041] Bearing plate **45** attached to and supported by mounting flanges **43** extending from the satellite body **40** provides a journal bearing against which the ends of the drive screws **41** opposite the pulleys **51***a, b* are engaged such that the screw **41** ends are allow to freely rotate. Bearing plate **45** also comprises a central opening **42** defined and dimensioned to accommodate the retaining assembly **38** in its stowed configuration. The inner edge of the opening **42** preferably includes a plurality of roller bearings **37** to reduce friction resulting from sliding contact between the leaves **30** and the inner edge of the opening **42**. A signal feed line **49** extends from the satellite body **40** and is coupled to the feed connector **33**.

[0042] FIGS. **11**A and **11**B illustrate deployment of the antenna **10** where, upon command from the satellite control system (not shown), motor **53** drives rotation of pulley **51***a* in one direction which rotational movement is transmitted to the opposite pulley **51***b*, thereby causing drive screws **41** to rotate accordingly. Since the collar member **47** is threadably engaged with both screws **41**, rotation of the screws **41** induces linear movement in the collar member **47**. Further, rotation of the screws **41** in one direction (reference arrow "A") actuates the collar member **47** linearly toward the bearing plate **45** (reference arrow "B") and rotation in the opposite direction actuates the collar member **47** away from the bearing plate **45**. Therefore, as shown in FIG. **11**A, as the collar member **47** moves toward bearing plate **45**, retaining assembly **38** transits through opening **42** in collar member **45**.

[0043] Once the collar member **47** completes its transit along drive screws **41**, the retaining assembly **38** is free of the opening **42** in the bearing plate **45** and retaining leaves **30***a-c* are allowed to rotate outward (FIG. **11**B). In turn, this allows antenna **10** to deploy to its parabolic shape for transmission and reception of radio frequency signals, urged to open by the resilient ribs **25** embedded within the laminate comprising the reflector member **11'**. The ribs are behind the reflective surface and therefore do not interfere with the signal. In typical satellite applications, the antenna does not need to be retracted.

[0044] As described above and shown in the associated drawings, the present invention comprises a foldable radio wave antenna deployment apparatus for a satellite. While particular embodiments have been described, it will be understood, however, that any invention appertaining to the antenna described is not limited thereto, since modifications may be made by those skilled in the art, particularly in light of the foregoing teachings. It is, therefore, contemplated by the appended claims to cover any such modifications that incorporate those features or those improvements that embody the spirit and scope of the invention.

What is claimed is:

1. An antenna, comprising:
a parabola-shaped, flexible reflector member; and
one or more radial ribs embedded in the flexible reflector member and arranged to bias the reflector member in an open state.

2. The antenna of claim **1**, wherein the radial ribs are embedded in laminate forming the flexible reflector member.

3. The antenna of claim **1**, wherein the radial ribs are embedded between a fiber composite layer and a elastomer layer of the reflector.

4. The antenna of claim **1**, wherein the one or more radial ribs are composed of wire.

5. The antenna of claim **4**, wherein the wire is 32-gauge.

6. The antenna of claim **1**, wherein the one or more ribs are composed of a material with low conductivity.

7. The antenna of claim **6**, wherein the material is fiberglass/phenolic composite.

8. The antenna of claim **1**, further comprising a tension member.

9. An antenna system, comprising:
a parabola-shaped, flexible reflector member; and
one or more radial ribs embedded in the flexible reflector member and arranged to be foldable to a closed state.

10. The antenna system of claim **1**, further comprising a retaining assembly adapted for retaining the flexible reflector member in the closed state.

11. The antenna system of claim **10**, wherein the retaining assembly comprises a plurality of retaining leaves pivotally mounted perpendicular to a mounting plate.

12. The antenna system of claim **11**, wherein the retaining leaves are biased to rotate outward from the flexible reflector member.

13. The antenna system of claim **11**, wherein the mounting plate comprises an opening through which signal feed may be conveyed to a feed horn.

14. The antenna system of claim **13**, wherein the mounting plate is moveably coupled to a satellite.

15. The antenna system of claim **14**, wherein upon receiving a signal from a satellite control system of the satellite, the reflector member deploys from its closed state.

* * * * *