



NAVAL DIRECTED-ENERGY WEAPONS — NO LONGER A FUTURE WEAPON CONCEPT

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Directed-energy weapon (DEW) technologies typically take the form of high-energy lasers (HELs), high-power microwaves (HPMs), and charged-particle beams. This article focuses on the first two technology areas, as they have reached the point of being ready for operational testing and evaluation, and in some cases, operational use on the battlefield. DEWs have been popularized in science-fiction writings for over a hundred years. The Department of Defense (DoD) has been investing in their development since the 1970s. This article will not go into technical depth regarding the various directed-energy (DE)-related efforts currently underway in the Navy, but rather, it will overview DE areas under development and relate recent Navy leadership activity. Other articles in this issue of *The Leading Edge* magazine will provide the reader with much greater technical and programmatic details on various DE efforts.

HIGH-ENERGY LASER WEAPONS

HEL weapon systems have been envisioned for a great many years, to include being referred to as Martian “Heat Ray” weapons in H.G. Wells’ epic novel *The War of the Worlds*, originally published in 1898. In reality, a high-average-power laser weapon system is very similar to a “heat ray”, or even a blow torch. During the early years of DoD investments in DE technology, the Navy led the development of HEL with the creation of the world’s first megawatt-class, continuous-wave, Mid-Infrared Advanced Chemical Laser (MIRACL), located at White Sands Missile Range (WSMR). Roughly 80 years after the work of H.G. Wells, the U.S. Navy tested the MIRACL laser and ultimately used that laser system to engage static and aerial targets in the desert of WSMR in the following years. While that laser proved to be the wrong choice for the Surface Navy’s self-defense mission, it did spawn work by the Air Force on the Airborne Laser (ABL), and the Army on the Tactical High-Energy Laser (THEL). In 2000 and 2001, the THEL successfully shot down 28 supersonic Katyusha artillery rockets and 5 artillery shells.

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In 2010, the ABL successfully engaged and destroyed tactical ballistic missiles during the boost phase of their flight. All three of these laser systems—the MIRACL, the ABL, and the THEL—are chemical lasers that utilize toxic chemicals and operate in less than optimal wavelengths that make them a poor choice for most naval applications. The MIRACL is shown in Figure 1.

Recent advances in solid-state lasers, to include fiber lasers, have moved these electric lasers to the forefront of the Department’s research and development (R&D) for near-term HEL applications in the services. The Navy has particular interest in electric lasers, to include the free-electron laser (FEL), for shipboard self-defense and force protection applications. The speed-of-light delivery of HEL energy can defeat the high-g maneuvers of newly developed foreign antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs). Thus, the Office of Naval

Research (ONR) started an FEL Innovative Naval Prototype (INP) program in FY10, with a goal of reaching the output power of 100 kW. The eventual goal of the FEL program is to reach the multi-megawatt power level with wavelength selectivity. The Naval Sea Systems Command (NAVSEA) Directed Energy and Electric Weapons Program Office (PMS 405) has been actively developing a fiber laser-based Laser Weapon System (LaWS) that could be a retrofit to augment the current capabilities of the Close-In Weapon System (CIWS) currently deployed on many surface combatants. The Naval Surface Warfare Center, Dahlgren Division (NSWCDD), is the Technical Direction Agent and lead system integrator for PMS 405 on the LaWS program. The Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) has interest in compact, solid-state HEL systems for aircraft self-protect and air-to-ground engagements, and will be starting a



Figure 1. Mid-Infrared Advanced Chemical Laser (MIRACL)



fiber laser-based ONR Future Naval Capability effort in FY12. LaWS is shown in Figure 2.

HIGH-POWER MICROWAVE WEAPONS

Like lasers, microwave weapons have been fantasized about ever since the invention of microwave power generators. In fact, in 1932 it was generally recognized by the British government that bombers, ostensibly German bombers, would be able to penetrate British air space and bomb its civilian population and infrastructures. In 1934, the Air Ministry initially asked Robert Watson-Watt, of the National Physical Laboratory, if he could build a “death ray” that could kill enemy pilots or detonate bombs while they are still on the planes of enemy aircraft. Such a “death ray” had been proposed to the Air Ministry by Harry Gindell-Mathews 10 years earlier in 1924. Watson-Watt, a former

meteorologist who had become an expert on radio signals, suggested that energy reflected from an aircraft could be used to locate it. His experiments were successful and RADAR (radio detection and ranging), a name coined by the U.S. Navy in 1940, was born. While RADAR is not a DEW in the way they are thought of today, its roots can clearly be traced to the military’s desire for such capabilities.

The Navy’s HPM, or high-power radio-frequency (RF) systems, have been progressively increasing in power density to the point where it is now feasible to integrate the technology into weapon systems for deployment. While initial HPM applications suffered from their inability to obtain militarily useful outcomes, either due to technology limitations, difficult concept of operations (CONOPS), or inherent robustness of potential target systems, many feasible military applications for using HPM



Figure 2. Laser Weapon System (LaWS)

devices have surfaced over recent years to include nonlethal, antipersonnel weapons and nonkinetic, antimateriel weapons. While these concepts offer unique capabilities to the warfighter due to the nonkinetic effects they generate, other warfighting concepts—such as stopping vehicles, or countering hidden roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—are difficult to achieve by any other means. The multifrequency Radio-Frequency Vehicle Stopper (RFVS) system is shown in Figure 3.

In addition, the difficulty in overcoming the propagation losses associated with HPM has driven some concepts into platforms such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or cruise missiles that deliver the HPM device to the target for a close-in engagement. Over the past 10 years, field-testable prototypes have been developed to demonstrate the operational utility of these concepts, and in some cases, those prototypes have or will be deployed operationally to support our troops in

theater. It is only through the hard work and perseverance of the Naval Research Enterprise (NRE), as well as other DoD laboratories, that concepts that were once only laboratory curiosities are now making their way onto the battlefield and contributing to the fight.

FOREIGN DIRECTED-ENERGY WEAPON (DEW) DEVELOPMENT

While the United States has been very active in this warfighting area, significant foreign DEW development also has elevated the need for the Navy to afford these threats a higher priority. This can be done either by incorporating the necessary DEW countermeasures into weapon systems, platforms, and critical infrastructures, or by adapting the CONOPS and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by our armed forces to properly account for those foreign DEW systems. Materiel developers need to understand how this threat



Figure 3. Multifrequency RF Vehicle-Stopper (RFVS) System



is evolving and properly address it during the design of their systems. They also need to address DE in the development of their system threat assessments. There has been movement on the HPM side to modify existing military standards, such as MIL STD 464¹ and others, to now include information on potential HPM threats. For example, in the HEL arena, work has been accomplished in the development of protective measures for eyes; however, this threat needs to be considered during the system development process. It is well known that building in countermeasures is much cheaper during the initial development of a system, vice trying to retrofit systems with countermeasures once a new threat is on the battlefield. As analysts evaluate the foreign development of DE technologies, and the trends become clearer, it is the responsibility of the acquisition community to take this threat into consideration and ensure that weapon systems, platforms, and infrastructures will be available and at full capability when needed. By accounting for foreign threat developments, assessing blue force susceptibilities and vulnerabilities, and adopting appropriate measures to negate or counter these threats, naval forces will avoid technological surprise on the battlefield in the future.

REQUIREMENTS

The DE programs briefly mentioned in this article, and covered more deeply in this and other publications, offer warfighters unique capabilities not currently found in their arsenal. The continuing problem, however, is matching those unique capabilities to vetted operational requirements. The DE technical community has made great strides in helping the operational community understand the capabilities of DE weapons and their potential military effects on targets. The lack of formal requirements, however, has yielded more of a technology push—rather than an operational pull—of various DE capabilities. Progress has been made, but more effort is required if DE capabilities are to be developed and transitioned between science and technology (S&T), and formal programs of record. Notwithstanding, the current outlook and trends are positive.

A RESURGENCE OF NAVY INTEREST IN DIRECTED ENERGY

The Navy's interest in DEWs for future maritime operations has increased in recent years due to a number of weapons development successes. Recognizing the importance and value of DEWs, NAVSEA reestablished the Navy Directed Energy Weapons Program Office (PMS 405) in 2004.

Accordingly, PMS 405 was designated as the point of contact for matters related to DE and electric weapon systems (EWS) development and acquisition initiation for NAVSEA, and for matters being coordinated with other federal agencies and military services. PMS 405's mission is to transition technology from the laboratory to prototype/advanced development/testing for operational development and use.^{2,3}

The Navy also established its first formal executive position for DE (ST-level), the Navy's Distinguished Engineer/Scientist for Directed Energy, at NSWCDD in August 2004. Following the establishment of this position, NAVSEA then formally established a Technical Authority Warrant for Directed Energy and Electric Weapon Systems (DE&EWS)—Surface Ships in July 2008. The scope of the warrant includes the transition of S&T development to weapon system development of lethal and nonlethal capabilities associated with the DE&EWS for Surface Ships.⁴ This included, but was not limited to, the following:

- Laser Weapon Systems
 - ◆ High-Energy Lasers
 - ◆ Solid-State Lasers
 - ◆ Free-Electron Lasers
 - ◆ Femtosecond Ultrashort Pulse Lasers
 - ◆ Laser-Induced Plasma Channel
 - ◆ Lethality/Vulnerability
- Electromagnetic Rail Gun Weapon System
- High-Power Microwave
 - ◆ Active Denial System
 - ◆ Laser-Guided Energy
- Maritime Directed Energy Test Center
- Electromagnetic Launch of Weapons (excluding the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS))

Then, within the NAVSEA Warfare Center Enterprise, Warfare Center leadership established two technical capabilities (TCs): an NSWCDD TC for DE systems research, development, test, and evaluation (RDT&E); and a Naval Surface Warfare Center, Port Hueneme Division (NSWCPHD) TC for in-service engineering, test and evaluation (T&E), and integrated logistics support to DE systems. NSWCDD leads all S&T and RDT&E for the development and weaponization of DE systems for surface, air, and ground environments. It also leads the development of offensive and defensive DE technologies needed to characterize and exploit vulnerabilities, provide weapons, and protect against attack. NSWCDD provides the technologies, devices, and systems designed to create or control electromagnetic energy used to cause persistent disruption or permanent damage by attacking target materials,

electronics, optics, antennas, sensors, arrays, and personnel, including nonlethal applications. NSW-CPHD provides in-service engineering, T&E, and integrated logistics support to DE systems throughout the system life cycle.

The Navy further demonstrated increased interest in DE when Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development & Acquisition (ASN(RDA))) designated NAVAIR offensive and defensive leads for naval aviation DE activities:

- Program Executive Officer for Unmanned Aviation and Strike Weapons (PEO(U&W)), assigned as the offensive DE lead for naval aviation
- PEO for Tactical Aircraft Programs (T), assigned as the defensive lead for naval aviation

Concerning future initiatives, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) tasked the Strategic Studies Group (SSG) to examine a topic entitled “Maritime Operations in the Age of Hypersonic and Directed-Energy Weapons.”²⁵ The intent of the study was to provide Navy leadership with an understanding of where DE technologies and weapons are today and how they might influence future maritime operations. The theme of the study was completed during FY10, the results of which discuss many DE concepts, as well as tactics for the employment of DE capabilities. The study’s findings are currently under review and consideration by senior Navy leadership.

CONCLUSION

While H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* novel and television programs like *Star Trek* popularized the notion of using DE for weapons in years past, today— through persistent DEW RDT&E— Navy leadership is realizing the great potential that DEWs offer naval warfighters and homeland defenders. The scientific and technical advances the Navy has made in HEL and HPM in recent years have been nothing short of extraordinary. Moreover, future technological and engineering advances undoubtedly will result in profound differences in our nation’s future warfighting capabilities. Naval DEWs, therefore, are no longer just a future weapon concept...they are here today.

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