THE BASICS OF ELECTRIC WEAPONS AND PULSED-POWER TECHNOLOGIES

By Stuart Moran

WHAT ARE ELECTRIC WEAPONS?

Most conventional weapons rely on chemical energy (explosives) as their destruction mechanism, either to explode on target, like bombs, or to create kinetic energy, like a bullet. Electric weapons are different. Electric weapons use stored electrical energy, rather than explosives, to attack or destroy the target. Electric weapons generally fall into two categories: directed-energy weapons (DEWs) and electromagnetic (EM) launchers. DEWs send energy, instead of matter, toward a target, and can be separated into three types: laser weapons, particle-beam weapons, and high-power microwave (HPM) or radio-frequency (RF) weapons. EM launchers use electrical energy to throw a mass at a target, thus making them distinct from directed energy. There are also three types of EM launchers: rail guns, coil guns, and induction drivers. All involve the use of strong magnetic fields to push against projectiles. While electric guns are an electric weapon, they are not a DEW.

High electrical powers and large energies are needed for all these weapons. Technologies for storing and controlling electric power are needed and are commonly called pulsed-power technologies. Electric guns are often associated with DEWs due to their common reliance on pulsed-power technology. The types of electric weapons are shown in Figure 1.

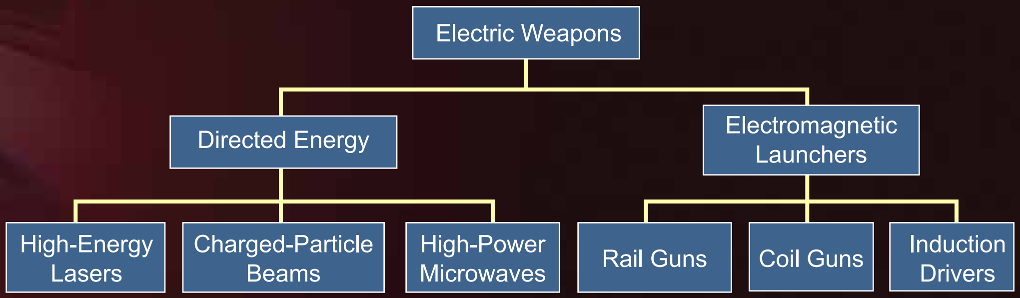

Figure 1. Types of Electric Weapons

Report Documentation Page	*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*

1. REPORT DATE **2012**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **The Basics of Electric Weapons and Pulsed-Power Technologies**	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Naval Surface Warfare Center, Dahlgren Division,Corporate Communication, C6,6149 Welsh Road, Suite 239,Dahlgren,VA,22448-5130**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR’S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR’S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

See also ADA556728.

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**8**	

There are a number of powerful advantages of electric weapons over conventional explosives:

- DEWs have a near-zero time of flight compared to conventional ordnance, allowing longer decision times and quicker reaction times.
- Electric weapons have a large "magazine" capacity, often limited only by the ability of the power source to recharge the system. The firing rate depends on how fast the system can be recharged, which in turn, depends on the available power source.
- The cost of engagement is greatly reduced. With increasingly sophisticated conventional weapons, the cost of practice rounds, such as a missile, can be millions. For an electric weapon, the cost per engagement is greatly reduced, making the attack of small targets (the asymmetric threat) less costly and training much more affordable.
- There is the potential for variable lethality, where the weapon effects can be controlled or attenuated to provide a warning or nonlethal effect. Otherwise, a full-power setting can be used to destroy the target.
- Electric weapons have the benefit of increased safety since less ordnance needs to be stored. Logistics costs less, and underway replenishment is easier since explosives are reduced or eliminated.
- Electric weapons can be used in conjunction with conventional weapons to heighten overall combat system effectiveness, such as knocking out electronics before engaging with a kinetic weapon.

Historically, the key Navy scenario for using directed-energy technologies has been close-in protection of naval vessels from antiship cruise missiles, particularly in a littoral environment. The ability of a DEW's speed-of-light engagement is particularly attractive under conditions of short warning times from supersonic stealthy missiles. However, increasingly difficult and problematic threats from nonmilitary aircraft and surface ships, countersurveillance platforms, fast patrol boats, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and terrorist inflatable boats or jet skis present different challenges. The threat has shifted from small numbers of expensive targets in open water to large numbers of small and cheap targets among neutral forces. The unique characteristics offered by DEWs, when compared to traditional weapon systems, allow them to be applied across a spectrum of threat roles, particularly in friendly or neutral-rich regions where precision pointing or less-than-lethal capability is paramount. The potential for HPM to counter electronics at levels below human effects makes them ideal nonlethal weapons. Electromagnetically launched projectiles allow longer range, shorter flight times, reduced reliance on air strikes and missiles, and safer storage and replenishment. With military budgets being squeezed, the low cost of directed-energy engagements, which often require just a few gallons of fuel, cannot be overemphasized. Instead of million-dollar missile shots, electric weapons allow new tactics, warning shots, and continual fire against large and small targets. They also allow inexpensive practice and training for improved readiness.

Pulsed Power for Electric Weapons

A useful rule of thumb is that a stick of TNT contains about a megajoule (MJ) of chemical energy, and this amount is often needed to destroy a military target. To destroy a target with an electric weapon, the electrical energy must also be deposited quickly. Surprisingly, a candy bar also has a megajoule of chemical energy, but it is released very slowly when we eat it. Many electric weapons require peak powers of more than a gigawatt (GW) or energies more than a megajoule. The time scales for delivery range from milliseconds to nanoseconds. As an example, delivering 1 MJ of energy in 10 μs requires 100 GW of power, which is more than a commercial power plant can produce. It is not practical to build continuous power supplies to directly drive most electric weapons. Consequently, pulsed-power technologies are needed to store energy at low power rates and release it quickly for weapon use. A pulsed-power system takes electrical power from a prime source (like a motor), stores it, and transforms the power to meet specific user requirements. The importance of a pulsed-power system is often underappreciated. For most electric weapon systems, the system size, weight, volume, and reliability are dominated by the pulsed-power chain. Pulsed-power components must be improved along with the weapon technology to make electric weapons systems practical. A block diagram of a pulsed-power system is shown in Figure 2.

Electrical energy can be stored in many ways, such as a battery (actually a chemical storage). A car battery has about a megajoule of energy, but it takes many seconds to drain it. A much faster method of storing electrical energy is in a capacitor, which can be discharged in milliseconds or faster. Inductive methods store the energy in the magnetic fields of a coil. This has the potential of achieving higher energy density than capacitors, but

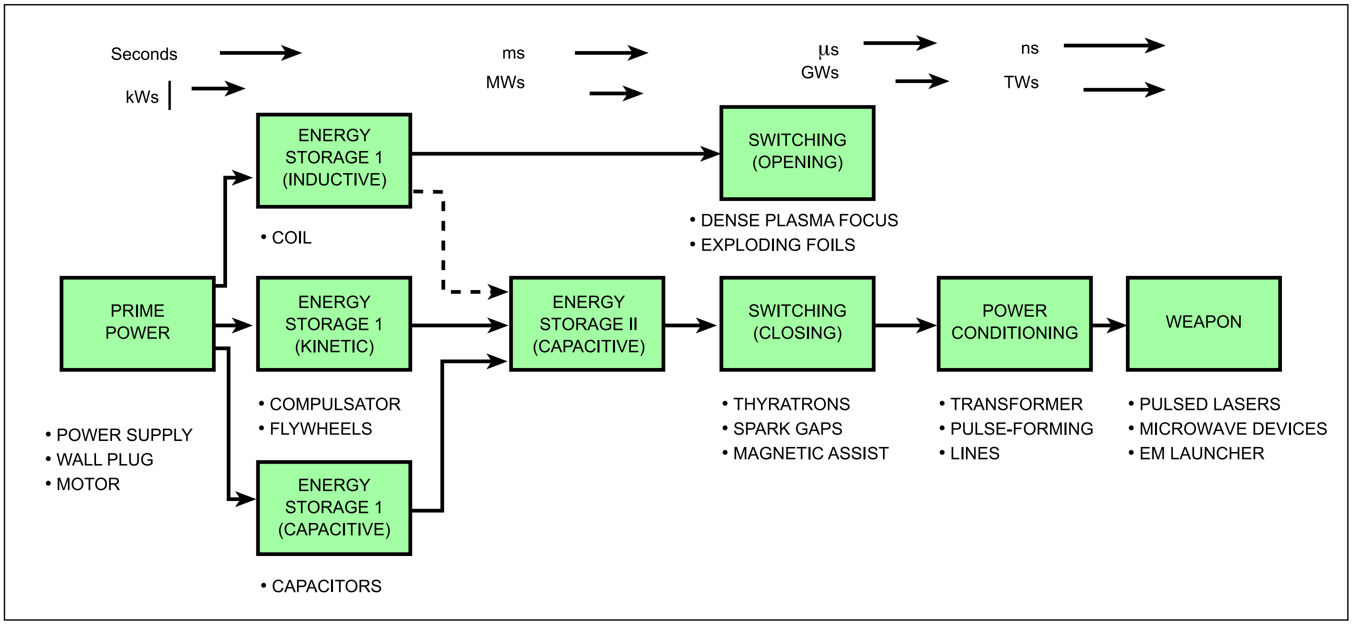

Figure 2. Block Diagram of a Pulsed-Power System

when the supporting systems are considered, the technology becomes less attractive. Energy storage for electric weapons can also be done with chemical explosive energy, where an explosive force is converted into electrical energy using techniques such as flux compression. Energy can be stored in the inertia of rotating machines and flywheels, but the energy can be released only as fast as the flywheel or motor can be stopped, usually in seconds. In many cases, several stages of energy store are used where each stage is faster than the last. Once the energy is stored, it must be released quickly using a high-power switch. There are many types of switches. Perhaps the most common type for electric-weapon applications has been the spark gap. Many types of controlled spark gaps exist, including pin-triggered, laser-triggered, field distortion, and simple overvolted. To achieve high repetition rates, flowing oil or gas can be used to flush the hot spark products, or sealed gaps using special fast-recovery gases, such as hydrogen, can be employed. Other switches, such as vacuum tubes and solid-state switches, can be used if they can handle the voltages and currents needed. Solid-state technologies, such as thyristers, have become very capable in recent years. Once the energy is switched out, there is usually some additional power conditioning, where transformers or pulse-forming networks are used to provide the desired pulse shape, voltage, and current required for the weapon. For rapid firing rates or continuous use, high average input powers are needed.

All-Electric Ship

One of the major impediments to the development of electric weapons systems for Navy ships has been a lack of electrical prime power. Current surface combatant designs employ up to 90 percent of engine power mechanically dedicated solely to propulsion. These designs are unable to provide the tens to hundreds of megawatts (MW) of electrical power capacity required for many electric weapons. The solution is an electric-drive ship that uses all the engine power to generate electricity, enabling it to allocate power to weapons or propulsion as needed. In recent years, the Navy has been investigating cost-effective power-system options to meet future platform requirements.

High-Power Microwave (HPM) and RF Weapons

Microwave weapons are generally considered to use frequencies above a gigahertz, whereas lower frequencies are generally called RF weapons. These weapons are more powerful than electronic warfare systems and are designed to create extended disruption or permanent damage. An HPM weapon is considered to have a peak power of more than 100 MW, or energies above 1 J. The energy can enter a target through intended RF paths, such as target antennas (front door), or unintended paths, such as housing joints, cavities, and circuit wires (back door). Pulses ranging from a few nanoseconds to microseconds in duration can be sufficient to reset computers, cause loss of stored data, or cause microprocessors to switch operating modes. Nonlinear circuits and components can rectify signals and absorb energy outside of their normal operating parameters. Figure 3 illustrates some of the vulnerability areas on a missile body.

RF or HPM devices can be divided into narrowband or wideband systems, dependent upon the employed pulse length. Narrowband systems are similar to high-power radar pulses and produce RF radiation with a very narrow bandwidth (frequency coverage). The damage concept is to create enough energy in a target to overheat or overload electronic components. Wideband systems generally produce very short pulses (nanoseconds) and typically operate in lower frequency ranges. Wideband systems produce much lower average powers and rely on high-peak electric fields to produce reset or arcing of digital components. Creating short pulses—often only a few RF cycles long—generates a very broad frequency output to take advantage of a target's weak point. But, it also means that the energy is spread over many frequencies, so there may be very little energy at a specific vulnerable frequency. Vulnerability data is critical to estimate the effectiveness of HPM weapons. Ultimately, air breakdown will limit the amount of energy out of an antenna to around 1 MW/cm^2.

HPM devices can produce effects that range from denying the use of electronic-based equipment to disrupting, damaging, or destroying such equipment. HPM weapon advantages include all-weather capability, low precision pointing requirements, and effects persistence after the radiated EM energy "beam" has been turned off. One major advantage of HPM is that electronics are generally more vulnerable to high fields and high energies than humans. This provides the ability to attack electronics without harming people, which makes HPM an ideal choice for nonlethal applications.

Two major challenges of implementing HPM technologies into an operational weapon systems platform are:

1. Fratricide, or self-destruction, can be a problem because of the large areas affected by the sidelobes and near field of any meaningful HPM weapon system. Therefore, when attacking a target of interest with an HPM weapon, there is a greater risk of disruption to systems that were not intended to be targeted but fell within the sphere of influence. Host platforms, therefore, may need to undergo interference hardening.
2. With regard to battle damage assessment, kinetic weapons have the advantage of typically leaving visual evidence. HPM weapon systems do not leave large holes in a target but create more subtle influences as a result of attacking critical electronic components. Consequently, it can be more difficult to ascertain whether a target's capabilities have been sufficiently degraded or destroyed—and for how long—in determining whether a mission was successful.

For HPM system development, a fundamental challenge is the understanding of what it takes to affect the target. Coupling mechanisms, where EM energy enters and affects the target system, are extremely complex. The vulnerability of components is often vastly different if it is outside or inside a circuit board or enclosure. Effects depend upon the interactions with other components, connectors, and nearby conductors. The effects on a component can vary many orders of magnitude depending on frequency, orientation, cracks and seams, protective circuits, pulse energy, and duration. Research regarding effects on missiles has shown large variations not only between designs, but also between different serial numbers due to assembly methods, cable routing, and component variations. With the increasing use of commercial equipment by the military, such as computers and radios, effects are difficult to predict due to constant design and component changes. In general, electronics are getting smaller and operating at lower voltages, making them more sensitive to high fields. But smaller components often have lower pickup areas, and the proliferation of interfering signals has increased the amount of shielding on modern electronics. When

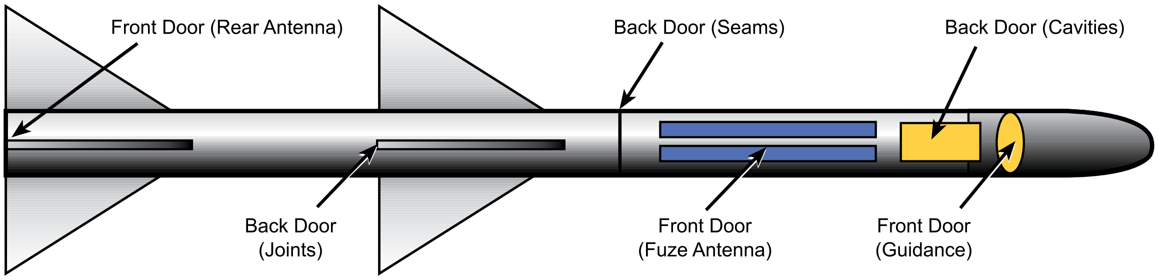

Figure 3. HPM Coupling Paths on Missile Body

target systems are located inside structures or buildings, it becomes even more difficult to predict. Efforts to predict reflections and interference inside complex structures become extremely complicated. Accordingly, generic electronics kill using universal waveforms is not likely. There continues to be a lot of hype about what RF weapons can do, but the idea that a backpack device can wipe out all electronics in a city is no more realistic than a hand-held laser cutting through a bank vault door.

High-Energy Lasers (HELs)

A laser generally produces a beam of coherent light at a specific wavelength dependent on the atomic structure of the lasing substance. Only certain substances have the atomic properties appropriate for producing laser light, and these are often limited in power. Lasers are characterized by the substance being lased (gas, liquid, or solid) and the "pumping" process (light energy, electricity, or chemical reaction). A resonant optical cavity provides the means for aligning the energy in the beam and extracting that energy. A military laser system also includes beam processing or beam-path conditioning, beam pointing and control and—for long-range applications—adaptive optics to compensate for the atmosphere.

Until recently, HELs have been driven by chemical energy, so very little electrical power or pulsed power was needed. Chemical lasers use the reactions of gases or liquids to create the excited energy states necessary for laser emission. Large chemical lasers and beam directors have been developed by the Navy in recent decades and have successfully ruptured fuel tanks and downed supersonic missiles. However, these lasers required high-velocity, chemical-reaction chambers and emitted hazardous gaseous by-products. They often operated at wavelengths where the atmosphere absorbed much of the energy. Absorption creates thermal blooming, whereby absorbed energy in the air creates a negative lens that defocuses the beam. Increasing the power of the laser increases the energy absorbed and worsens the problem. The Army and Air Force are developing chemical lasers for airborne applications, where atmospheric absorption is less of a problem. Recent Navy interest in HELs has concentrated on lasers that are electrically powered, rather than chemically powered, and that operate at shorter wavelengths to allow smaller optics and more efficient propagation near the water.

Small semiconductor (or diode) lasers use current flow through an electrical junction to excite electrons and create laser light. These lasers are very limited in power, so research has focused on using large numbers of lasers assembled into a coherent array. Semiconductor lasers also create efficient light to excite or "pump" other types of lasers. Solid-state lasers (SSLs) use crystalline materials mixed (doped) with elements needed for proper lasing. SSLs show strong promise for compact, medium-power HEL weapon systems. Scaling these systems up to megawatt levels creates extreme heat in the crystal material, making it very difficult to prevent internal damage. Forced cooling and the heat capacity of large masses are under study.

Fiber lasers—which use semiconductor diode lasers to pump a flexible, doped crystalline fiber (similar to a fiber-optic line)—have demonstrated high efficiency and relatively high power. The technology is being used in the welding and cutting industries. Methods of pumping large numbers of fiber-optic lasers and combining them are being investigated. An example is shown in Figure 4.

The free-electron laser (FEL) operates differently from a conventional laser. An FEL uses a high-voltage electron accelerator to push electrons through a magnetic "wiggler" to create light radiation across a tunable band of frequencies. The FEL is extremely complex and large, but scaling to very high powers may be possible. Perhaps the biggest promise of the FEL is the ability to design the laser at an ideal atmospheric propagation wavelength. Significant technical hurdles remain in reaching the status of a deployable FEL, in scaling the beam to megawatt powers and in providing the necessary engineering to turn a laboratory device into a weapon system of reasonable size. For Navy application, FELs will require improvements in areas of radiation shielding, high vacuum, high-current photoinjectors, and probably cryogenic cooling—all of which must be integrated into a ship's basic design.

Fiber lasers and SSLs are the leading-candidate Navy lasers for medium power, as FELs are for high power. All are electrically driven and can meet the requirement for shorter wavelength, capable of transmitting at the "maritime window" of approximately 1 μ.

HEL weapons' advantages include a highly directional and narrowly focused beam, providing:

- Minimal collateral damage
- Speed-of-light delivery
- Rapid retargeting
- Low cost of engagement

Disadvantages center on:

- Limited range due to atmospheric attenuation
- Weather limitations
- Low efficiency (often less than 10 percent)
- Need for eye protection
- Relatively large size and weight requirements

Figure 4. Drawing of Laser Weapon System (LaWS)

Long dwell times (seconds) will be needed for most targets. As with RF systems, there is a potential nonlethal or variable lethality capability since the energy can be easily defocused. A critical challenge is the understanding of a laser beam's propagation through a maritime boundary layer environment, where the sea and air interface creates turbulence and moisture gradients. Measuring the atmosphere and compensating for variations in real time may require adaptive optics or "rubber mirrors" that can be constantly adjusted to compensate for changes. Focusing a small spot at long range will require high beam quality and large optics, probably meter-size mirrors that are very highly reflective and very clean.

HELs in the future are expected to be able to focus energy to a spot size of much less than a meter at ranges of kilometers. This will necessitate very accurate target tracking systems, and precise stabilization and beam-pointing systems, both of which are difficult but should be feasible in the near term. Real-time atmospheric measuring systems will be needed for compensation techniques. Methods to protect the sensitive optical system from salt spray and corrosion will also be needed.

From a lethality perspective, three considerations need to be better understood before a HEL can be deemed a true weapon system:

1. Achievable spot size of beam on target at range
2. Amount of coupling into the target material
3. Subsequent effects of the damage inflicted

For the more severe threats, such as high-speed, antiship cruise missiles, HELs face the difficult task of engaging maneuverable, stealthy, inbound missiles. As such, a better quantitative understanding of the interactions among a laser beam's energy deposition, target material, and flight dynamics is needed.

PARTICLE BEAMS

A particle-beam weapon is a directed flow of atomic or subatomic particles. These particles can be neutral or electrically charged. Neutral beams need to be used outside the atmosphere (in space), where charged particles would repel and fly apart. Charged-particle beams (CPBs) are easier to make and are used within the atmosphere, where air molecules can constrain the beam. A CPB weapon transmits matter—not just EM waves—like lasers and microwave weapons. The particles are near the speed of light and deposit their kinetic energy deeply into any target material. They have the potential to be highly destructive weapons and are very difficult to shield against.

Charged particles are produced by applying a strong electric field near a material that emits electrons. These electrons then pass through accelerating stages with high voltage gradients (often megavolts), which increase the electron's velocity. As the electrons pass each stage, the velocity increases until they approach the speed of light (become relativistic), at which point they have substantial energy to penetrate a target. The accelerating systems can be linear, but a recirculating design is more compact and can reuse stages. These systems are basically high-current versions of scientific particle accelerators.

Once the electron beam is produced, it must propagate to the target. High-velocity electrons will not go far before they collide with air molecules and lose energy. The fact that air molecules struck by the beam are heated and moved out of the way for a short period of time creates a rarified "hole" in the atmosphere through which a second pulse can travel farther. In this manner, a fast series of pulses can "hole-bore" to the target, each pulse going farther than the last. The final pulse must have enough energy to damage the target. The deceleration of electrons in the atmosphere causes

Bremsstrahlung radiation in the forward direction toward the target, creating gamma rays that, in turn, create X-rays and RF radiation.[a] These effects can cause electronic upset and "soft-kill" mechanisms even if the beam slightly misses the target.

The beam of electrons is typically a few centimeters in diameter. When a beam strikes a target, the energy is deposited deep in the material (the collision cross section is small because of the relativistic speeds) in microseconds (much faster than a laser), creating thermal shock that is very difficult to shield against. For an explosive target, there is also the possibility of causing a deflagration or low-order burn, disrupting the normal warhead mechanism.

Scientists studying CPB weapons made significant technical advancements in the 1980s, but the weapons are still far from being practical. A CPB weapon is technically very challenging and expensive to build. Studies project that the volume requirements necessary for a CPB system could be on the order of a 5-inch gun system. Advantages of a CPB weapon include rapid penetration, a deep magazine, all-weather capability, and soft-kill mechanisms for a near miss. Problems include complexity, size, limited range, and the need to demonstrate compact accelerators and propagation mechanisms.

Electromagnetic (EM) Launchers

A number of technology concepts to launch projectiles exist using electrical energy. These systems rely on large currents in conductors, creating strong magnetic fields that drive a projectile. The velocity of a normal powder gun projectile is limited by the expansion speed of the explosive powder, and present military guns are reaching that limit. With an electric gun, the fields can push projectiles much faster, providing longer ranges and increased kinetic energies. The simplest version is an EM rail gun, shown in Figure 5.

In any conducting loop, the generated magnetic field tries to expand the loop. If everything is held in position, the only movable item is the conducting projectile, which moves down the rails in an attempt to expand the loop. Since megajouoles of projectile energy are needed for EM rail guns, energy storage

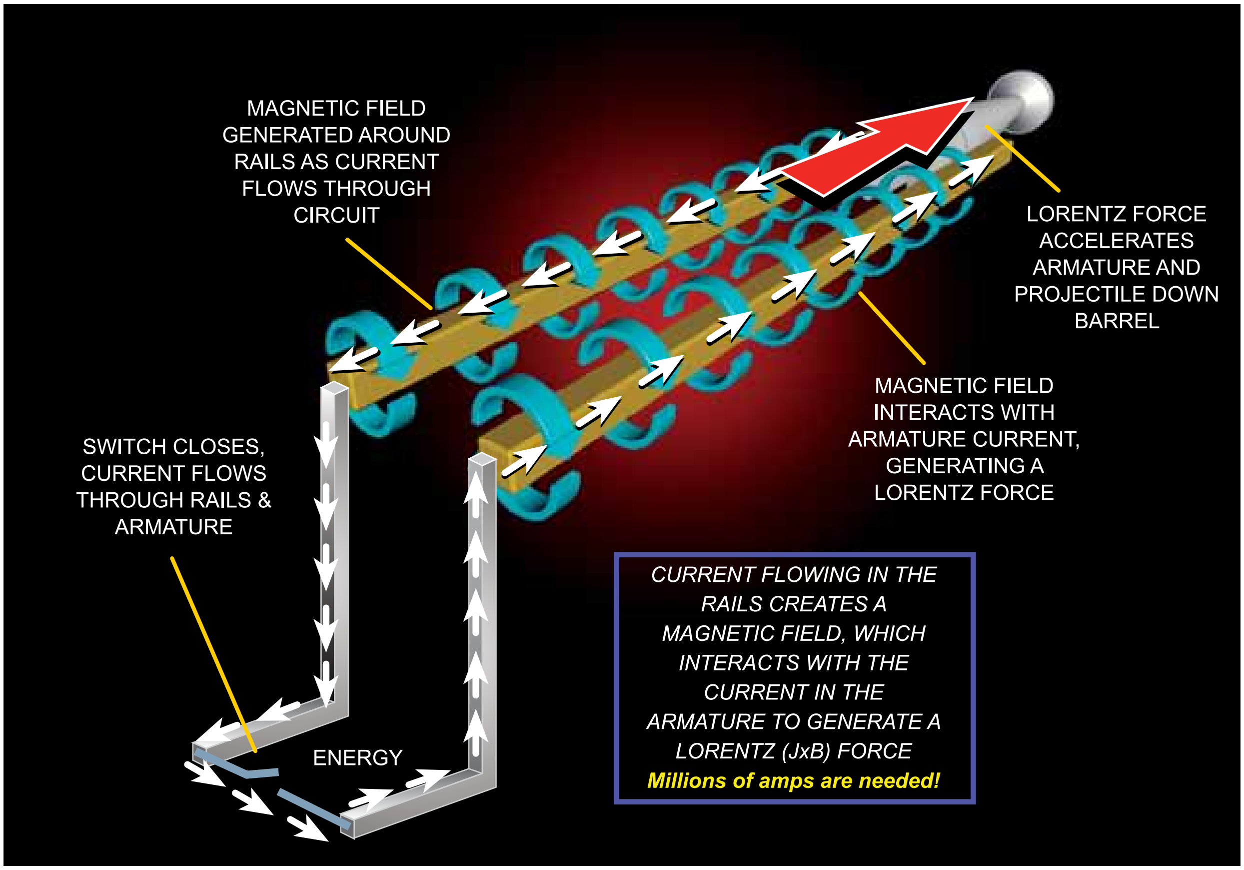

Figure 5. Electromagnetic (EM) Rail Gun Concept

mechanisms that can store about 100 MJ are needed, along with the ability to discharge the energy in milliseconds. To generate useful forces, millions of amps of current are needed—a major challenge and significant loss mechanism. Large capacitor banks with very high-current switches are required. Spark gap switches have historically been the only option, but new high-current solid-state switches are now becoming available. Capacitor energy densities, too, have improved an order of magnitude in the last few decades. Rotating machines have also been considered because they are smaller than equivalent capacitor banks, but extracting the energy quickly, without tearing the machine apart, has been problematic. The launch energy of various projectiles is shown in Figure 6.

- 20 mm --0.1 Megajoules
- 76 mm --1 Megajoule
- 5”/54 --10 Megajoules
- 8”/55 --40 Megajoules
- 16” gun --300 Megajoules
- Aircraft --50 Megajoules (30,000 kg @ 50 m/sec)

Kinetic Energy of Conventional Launch Packages

Figure 6. Launch Energy of Various Projectiles

A rail gun is probably the most compact form of electric launcher. However, it requires direct electrical contact between the projectile and barrel rails, creating the potential for arcing, melting, and erosion. Coil guns use a series of sequentially fired coils around a “barrel” to push the projectile in stages. This does not require direct electrical contact, so it avoids rail erosion but requires a series of fast timed switches and more space. Linear induction motors are basically unrolled electric motors and have been used on electric trains and roller coasters, typically with magnetic levitating systems to avoid contact erosion. This concept is being developed by the Navy for launching aircraft. The energy to launch an aircraft is similar to a large-caliber projectile—more weight but less speed. The slower speeds are more suitable for rotating machines since the launch times are seconds rather than microseconds.[1] Electrothermal guns and electrothermal-chemical (ETC) guns use a combination of electricity and chemicals. Electrical energy is used to initiate chemical reactions that can produce lightweight driving gases, like steam, or allow more energetic propellants that are difficult to ignite in a conventional fashion.

Some advantages of electrically driven projectiles include:

- Higher projectile velocity (over conventional explosives)
- Very long range (>100 miles) with lower cost than missiles
- Time-critical delivery (because of shorter time of flight)
- Safer projectile stowage (minimal explosives)
- Potentially adjustable velocity levels, for better accuracy and controllable damage

The potential of having nonexplosive rounds and magazines is very attractive for the Navy. For long-range, large-caliber EM projectiles, the kinetic energy from the projectile velocity is greater than the chemical explosive energy in a conventional round traveling much slower. Therefore, damage can be equivalent even without explosives. System size and lifetime are still behind conventional systems, but getting close.

OUTLOOK

Challenges remain for many electric weapon concepts. These weapon systems appear promising to meet the increasingly important asymmetric threats with low-cost precision rounds. They also can be employed across the energy spectrum for nonlethal targeting. Electric weapon systems will, in many cases, continue to supplement existing kinetic weapon systems in the near term. Despite technology challenges, directed-energy and electric weapons hold great promise in offering the future warfighter unique combat capabilities not currently available.

ENDNOTE

a. Bremsstrahlung—a type of radiation emitted when high-energy electrons are decelerated. (German for ***braking radiation***)

REFERENCE

1. Shope, S. et al., *Long-Range Naval Fire Support with a Coilgun*, Sandia Report 2001-3832, February 2002.