Laser Compression of Matter to Super-High Densities: Thermonuclear (CTR) Applications

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Hydrogen may be compressed to more than 10,000 times liquid density by an implosion system energized by a high energy laser. This scheme makes possible efficient thermonuclear burn of small pellets of heavy hydrogen isotopes, and makes feasible fusion power reactors using practical lasers.

**Thermonuclear** burning occurs extraterrestrially in stars and terrestrially in nuclear explosions. The specific thermonuclear burn rate is proportional to density

\[ \dot{\phi} \sim \rho \frac{\Delta V}{\rho} \]

where \( \dot{\phi} \) is the fractional burnup, \( \rho \) is the density, and \( \Delta V \) is the Maxwell velocity-averaged reaction cross-section. Consequently, except at high fuel depletions, the thermonuclear energy production at a fixed ion temperature is proportional to the Lawson number, a product of density and confinement time. In conventional controlled thermonuclear reactor (CTR) approximations, the density is limited by material properties, and the objective is to achieve sufficiently long confinement times by the use of electromagnetic fields. In the laser-fusion approach to CTR, the objective is to achieve sufficiently high fuel densities, while the confinement time is determined by the inertia of matter. Spherical compression of \( 10^4 \)-fold via the laser implosion scheme described here reduces the laser energy required for CTR by more than one thousand-fold, from more than \( 10^8 \) to \( 10^6 \) J—which is so large as to be currently impractical—to \( \sim 10^4 \) J, assuming laser and thermal/electric efficiencies of 10% and 40%, respectively. One kJ of laser energy may be sufficient to generate an equal thermonuclear energy.

**Compression**

Hydrogen in the centre of the Sun is believed to exist at more than one thousand times liquid density, and at pressures greater than \( 10^{11} \) atmospheres (temperature \( \sim 1-2 \) keV). These pressures are maintained gravitationally by the overwhelming solar mass, \( \sim 10^{33} \) g. Matter in the cores of white dwarf stars is believed to exist at more than \( 10^9 \) g cm\(^{-3}\), and at pressures greater than \( 10^{15} \) atmospheres.

The electrons in white dwarf cores are Fermi-degenerate, so the pressure is a minimum determined by the quantum mechanical uncertainty and exclusion principles. The pressure of dense hydrogen with Fermi-degenerate electrons is

\[ P = \frac{2}{3} n_e \epsilon_F \left[ \frac{3}{5} + \frac{\pi^2}{4} \left( \frac{kT}{\epsilon_F} \right)^2 \right] ^{3/4} \]

where \( n_e \) is the electron density; \( \epsilon_F = \frac{h^2}{8m} \left( \frac{3}{\pi} n_e \right)^{2/3} \) is the Fermi energy; \( kT \) is the thermal energy; \( h \) is Planck's constant, and \( m \) is the electron mass. At \( 10^4 \) times liquid density \( n_e = 5 \times 10^{24} \), the minimum hydrogen pressure occurs when \( kT \ll \epsilon_F \), and is \( \sim 10^{12} \) atmospheres.

**Pressure: Implosion, Ablation**

To compress hydrogen on Earth to these stellar densities, the required pressures must be generated by means other than gravitational. The pressures generated mechanically or chemically are generally limited to \( \lesssim 10^6 \) atmospheres by the strengths of chemical bonds, although chemical explosive pressures have been multiplied from less than \( 10^6 \) to more than \( 10^7 \) atmospheres by implosion. The pressure applied to an implosion system does \( PdV \) work generating kinetic energy which is converted near isentropically to internal energy concentrated in the compressed volume. Because pressure is energy per unit volume, the maximum average pressure equals the applied pressure multiplied by the compression ratio. Additional pressure multiplication occurs near the centre because of convergence effects. The pressure multiplication factor may be increased by implosion of hollow spheres, since the externally applied pressure acts over a larger volume.

Laser light has been focused to intensities greater than \( 10^{17} \) watts cm\(^{-2}\) (ref. 11). At such intensities the "light pressure" (momentum flux) is almost \( 10^8 \) atmospheres (\( P \approx I/c \) where \( I \) is the intensity, and \( c \) the velocity of light). Much higher pressures can be generated with intense light by a combination of ablation and implosion. The momentum flux (and pressure) associated with laser-driven ablation is much greater than that of the light for the same reason that matter-ejecting rockets develop greater thrust than photon-drive rockets of equal power. Typical matter velocities associated with laser intensities of \( 10^{17} \) W cm\(^{-2}\) are \( 10^8 \) cm s\(^{-1}\) (\( \sim \) sound speed at temperature of 10 keV), or \( \sim 3 \times 10^{-3} \) c. Hence the momentum flux and pressure, which are proportional to laser energy flux.
divided by reaction velocity, can be increased by several hundred-fold to more than $10^{16}$ atmospheres. The ablation pressure can then be further multiplied to more than $10^{12}$ atmospheres by a laser-driven ablative implosion in which high compressions occur.

**Pulse Shape**

The Fermi-degenerate state—which minimizes the required implosion pressure—may be achieved by shaping the laser pulse in time. When implosion begins, laser power is set so that the initial shock speed in the imploding matter is comparable to sound speed (pressures of $10^5$ to $10^6$ atmospheres) and subsequently so that the compression is near-isentropic; the hydrodynamic characteristics intersect only near the centre of the sphere. Owing to the extreme convergence effects, and by adjusting the pulse shape so that the characteristics intersect just before the centre is reached, a small fraction of the pellet mass in the central region is compressed and strongly heated, producing thermonuclear ignition. The laser power history which generates an optimal, isentropic compression of a degenerate hydrogen sphere is approximately

$$E = E_0 \tau^{-\gamma}$$

where $\tau = 1 - t/t'$, $t'$ is time, $t'$ (which is $> t$) is the transit time to the centre of the sphere of the initial shock (generated by application of $E_0$), $s = \frac{3\gamma}{\gamma - 1} = 15/8$ for dense hydrogen with degenerate electrons ($\gamma = 5/3$). Such a pulse shape may be generated with sufficient accuracy with a practical laser system. Implosion calculations show that the optimal power history can be satisfactorily approximated by a sequence of about ten pulses. Starting with the final shortest, most intense pulse (which need not be accurately shaped) the preceding pulses can be generated with sufficient accuracy with beam splitters, attenuators, and optical paths of various lengths. More sophisticated pulse shaping schemes are probably feasible.

**Symmetry**

To implode matter to high densities the implosion pressure must be applied with sufficient symmetry, both spatially and temporally, and hydrodynamic instabilities must be adequately controlled. In compression of a sphere by $10^6$ times, the radius decreases rather more than 20 times. If, after compression, spherical symmetry is required to within $1/2$ the compressed radius—or $1/40$ the initial radius—then the implosion velocity (and time) must be spatially uniform (and synchronized) to better than one part in 40, or a few per cent. In general, for a spherical implosion in which the ratio of initial to final volumes is $\eta$, and in which the tolerable error in the final radius $r$ is $\eta r$, the associated tolerable fractional error in the product of velocity and time is

$$\frac{\Delta(\eta r)}{\eta r} \approx \frac{\eta}{1/3} \sim \eta \gg 1$$

Implosion errors may be reduced to 10–20% by a many-sided irradiation system, consisting of beam splitters, mirrors, lenses, and other optical elements. For example, the entire surface of a sphere may be irradiated—with an intensity variation less than ±20%—by 6 beams oriented along the 6 Cartesian directions, each focused with f/1 optics to a point about one radius beyond the centre of the sphere, and with overlapping edges blocked out. The intensity variation may be reduced by use of more beams. The error of 10–20% can then be reduced to less than 1% by means of an atmosphere (generated by ablation with a laser prepulse) extending to several pellet radii with density slightly greater than the critical density (at which the laser frequency equals the plasma frequency). Laser light is absorbed and heats electrons in the outer atmosphere by inverse bremsstrahlung and plasma instabilities. Asymmetries are reduced during energy transport by electrons through several mean free paths of atmosphere to heat the surface of the pellet. In addition, each point on the relatively small pellet is heated by, and averages over, a large fraction of the hot absorbing region in the outer atmosphere.

**Stability**

The implosion of the pellet by diffusion driven ablation-generated pressures is hydrodynamically stable, except for relatively long wavelength surface perturbations which grow too slowly to be damaging. The amplitude of a perturbation on the droplet surface grows during implosion as $A \propto e^{-\alpha t}$, where $A_0$ is the initially present amplitude of surface roughness, and $\alpha = \gamma k^2 P / \rho$ for acceleration $a$, wavelength $\lambda = 2\pi / k$, ablation pressure $P$, and density $\rho$. The first term $ak$ is associated with the well-known Rayleigh-Taylor instability. If $\Delta x$ is the thickness of a shell of matter, then using $\bar{a} = \dot{F} / \rho \Delta x$ (from $F = ma$), $\sigma^2$ is positive (implying stable acceleration) for $\lambda \lesssim 2\pi \Delta x$. In part, ablation stabilization occurs because the peaks of surface perturbations are effectively closer to the heat source (radius at which the critical density occurs) so that the temperature gradient is steeper. Consequently more rapid ablation occurs, and higher pressures are generated which reduce the amplitude of the perturbation. “Fire polishing” may also be a significant mechanism.

In the compression scheme which has been described, the spherical pellet is accelerated inwardly by the reaction forces associated with the outwardly expanding ablated material. In effect, this scheme is a spherical ablation rocket implosion system, externally energized by an optimally power-programmed high energy laser.

**Thermonuclear Burn**

The inertial confinement time of a sphere of hot plasma is proportional to the radius divided by the sound speed. Therefore since the burn rate is proportional to density, the burn efficiency is proportional to the product of the density and radius, $pr$. In spherical compression $pr$ increases because the density increases more rapidly than the radius decreases. At constant $pr$, the spherical mass is inversely proportional to the density squared.

Spherical compression reduces the minimum pellet mass and laser energy required for efficient thermonuclear burn. In addition, very high spherical compressions produce a product of radius and density so large that the energetic charged particles from the fusion reaction are absorbed within the dense pellet, and the ion-electron coupling time becomes

$$\tau < 10^{-12}$$

In DT at 10 keV electron temperature, the effective range of the 3.6 MeV alpha particles produced by DT fusion is $\sim 0.3$ g cm$^{-2}$. A liquid density DT sphere with this $\tau$ has a mass of 3 g, and requires $3 \times 10^{19}$ J to heat to 10 keV. At $10^4$× liquid density and the same $\tau$, the mass and energy are reduced by $10^5$-fold.
Computer calculations of a 10,000-fold compression of a fusion pellet and the resulting thermonuclear microexplosion are shown in Fig. 1. In these calculations a 60 kJ, 1 μm laser is assumed to impel a 0.4 mm radius sphere of deuterium-tritium. Laser power, a; Electron temperature, b; Pressure, c; Velocity, d; Density of shell, e; Ion temperature (---) and ion temperature (- - -) during thermonuclear ignition. f; Energy production; →, fusion; ..., laser. The light signal is absorbed in the outer atmosphere, heating electrons. In this calculation, the electrons are assumed to be strongly coupled by possible plasma instabilities to form a near Maxwellian distribution. These hot electrons heat the atmosphere to electron temperatures which increase from ~10⁷ to ~10⁹ K during the implosion (Fig. 1b). The surface of the pellet is heated and ablated, generating pressures which increase optimally from ~10⁶ to ~10¹² Ns⁻¹ (Fig. 1c). The many orders of magnitude increase in implosion pressure occurs during the transit time of the initial shock to the droplet center, so that the unablated outer part of the pellet is gradually compressed into a spherical shell with density >10⁴ g cm⁻³, while at the same time this shell is inwardly accelerated to velocities which increase from 10⁷ to 3 x 10⁷ cm/s (Fig. 1d). The internal pressures become larger than the ablation pressures, the rapidly converging shell slows down and is compressed, still near-isentropically at sub-degeneracy temperatures, to densities greater than 1,000 g cm⁻³. At the center, the low density non-Fermi degenerate central region is compressed by the shell to densities approaching 1,000 g cm⁻³, and heated in the process to electron and ion temperatures greater than 10⁷ K, initiating thermonuclear burn (Fig. 1e). About 1,800 kJ of fusion energy is produced in less than ~1 x 10⁻¹ s (Fig. 1f). Since a 60 kJ input of laser light was used, net electrical energy production would be possible with a 10% efficient laser and a 40% thermal-electric efficiency.

Calculations with non-Maxwellian electrons and linear electron coupling show that suprathermal electrons generated by laser plasma instabilities heat the fuel during compression and effectively decouple from the atmosphere. Decoupling of thermal electrons may also occur. These effects are worst with long wavelength lasers, such as CO₂, because absorption occurs at a lower density. Generation of suprathermal electrons can be minimized by using inverse bremsstrahlung absorption of the laser light. The instability thresholds can be increased, and inverse bremsstrahlung absorption enhanced, by use of ultraviolet lasers and by seeding the pellet with small amounts of high Z material (~0.1 atom%). Decoupling limits the maximum ablation pressure. This can be compensated for by use of hollow pellets if suprathermal electron preheat is avoided. In non-Maxwellian linearly coupled calculations with ultraviolet lasers and seeded pellets, results similar to those described above have been achieved.

Fig. 2 shows the scaling of the gain, Gₑ (ratio of fusion energy to laser light energy) with compression and laser light energy. Gains approaching 100 are predicted for laser energies of 10⁶ J. At compressions less than ~10², the gain increases strongly with increasing compression because of increasing burn efficiency and alpha particle self-heating of the fuel. The gain decreases with compressions much greater than ~10⁴ because of depletion (of the DT) and because ablative energy losses increase and the energy of compression (against degeneracy pressures) becomes dominant.

The electrical gain, Gₑ (ratio of electrical energy output to electrical laser pumping energy), is

\[ Gₑ = Gₑₚφₑφₑₚ \]

where \( φₑ \) is the power plant thermal efficiency and \( φₑₚ \) is the laser pumping efficiency. If \( φₑ = 40\% \) and \( φₑₚ = 10\% \), \( Gₑ > 1 \) if \( Gₑₚ > 25 \), which occurs for a laser energy, \( L \), less than 100 kJ for \( η = 10^4 \).
The explosive impulse from a small fusion explosion is much smaller than that from a TNT explosion of the same energy, because the fusion explosive weight is $< 10^{-6}$ that of the TNT explosion, and the impulse generated is proportional to the square root of the explosion debris mass. A specially designed explosion chamber is required, however, to withstand the neutrons, X-rays, and hot plasma generated by the fusion explosion. Such an explosion chamber appears to be feasible.\(^1,2,18\)

Conventional thermal cycles may be used to generate electricity if fusion neutrons are absorbed in lithium blankets, and the hot plasma cooled to manageable temperatures\(^1,7,18\). If relatively large DT pellets or essentially pure deuterium pellets are burned (requiring a multi-megajoule laser energy), the fusion neutrons will deposit much of their energy in the fuel plasma, which may be expanded against a magnetic field, to convert much of the fusion energy directly to electricity\(^1,9,20\), achieving very high electricity generation efficiencies. With deuterium pellet burning, lithium utilization and tritium storage and cycling may be greatly reduced. Net tritium is generated by deuterium burn. Hybrid reactors, in which the 14 MeV DT neutrons which escape from the explosion chamber are used to fission natural uranium, or thorium, may generate more energy than used to pump the laser even with low efficiency, low energy lasers, such as 1% efficient, 10 kJ Nd glass lasers.

Problem of Realization

Important areas requiring further study include suprathermal electron coupling and pellet preheating; effects of magnetic fields generated by laser driven gradients in the plasma temperature and density; engineering design of a sufficiently cheap reactor system which will function for more than $10^{10}$ microexplosions; and development of the required lasers.

We thank Edward Teller for critical discussions, and C. Haussmann, P. Moulthrop, A. Biehl and R. Hirsch for advice, support and encouragement. J. DeGroot and J. Katz have made important contributions to our understanding of laser-plasma interactions and plasma transport phenomena. J. Nuckolls and L. Wood wish to dedicate their portion of this work to the memory of their young colleague, Robert Dennis Wilson.

Received July 31, 1972.

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