Making Laser Weapons a Reality

Figure 1. The Boeing HEL MD has demonstrated the ability to destroy a 60 mm mortar round in flight. (Photo courtesy of Boeing Defense)

Directed energy weapons first took a step towards reality in the 1980s under President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), dubbed "Star Wars" by the media. But, the technology didn't really materialize at that time and the cessation of the Cold War largely removed the immediate impetus to develop it. Since then, lasers have become widely used in military applications, particularly for target designation and aircraft countermeasures, but there is still no significant deployment of lasers as offensive weapons. Now, advances in high power fiber laser technology, particularly in the efficiency, compactness and weight of their pump diode lasers, are poised to make laser weapons a practical reality.

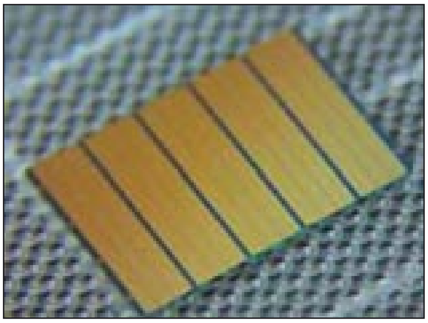

Figure 2. A Coherent | DILAS T-Bar chip contains five emitters, outputs about 50 W, and is 5 mm wide.

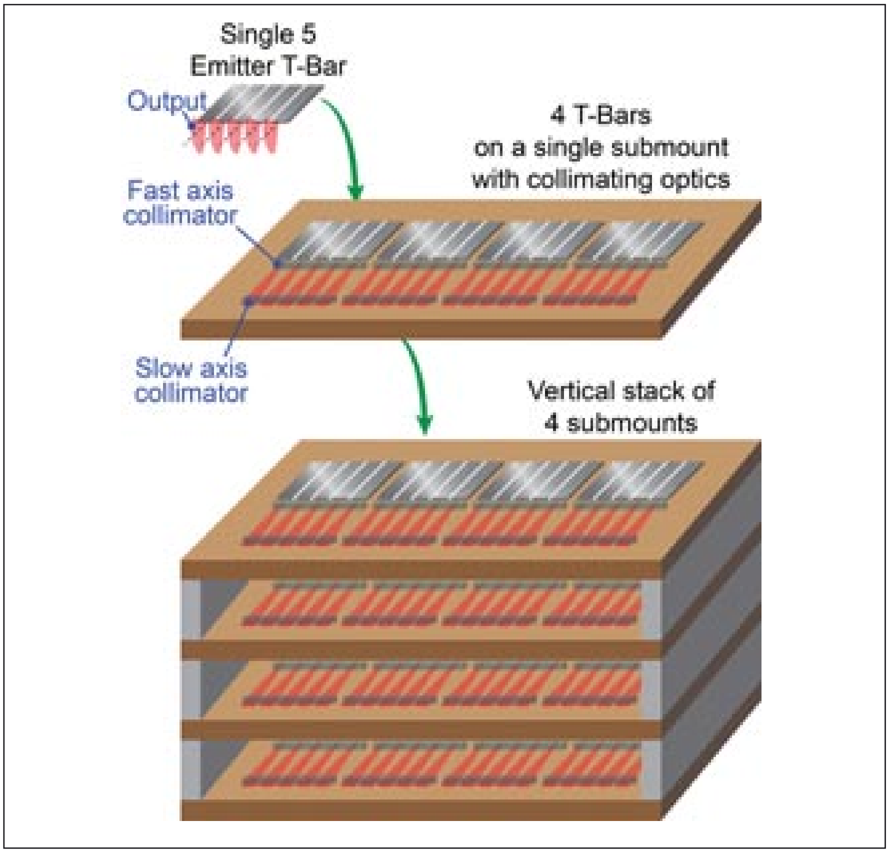

Figure 3. Progression from a single T-Bar die to an 80-emitter stack. The light from all these emitters can be efficiently coupled into a single 225 μm core fiber with a 0.22 NA.

Laser Weapons Overview

The concept behind Reagan's SDI was to protect the United States behind a "missile shield" that would prevent nuclear weapons, delivered via either intercontinental or submarine-launched ballistic missiles, from reaching North America. Part of the SDI was to be lasers, or other directed energy weapons, placed in permanent orbit, which could rapidly knock out a nuclear missile already in flight towards its target. Lasers, in particular, were a promising technology for this application because they can be quickly "charged up" (i.e. be made ready to fire), and their output can reach a fast-moving target nearly instantaneously.

Because these lasers were intended to be deployed primarily in space, or in fixed locations, and used either never (hopefully) or just once, there wasn't much concern about their cost, physical size, weight or operational efficiency. The key goal was simply that they would work when needed, delivering the required knock-out punch.

The offensive laser weaponry under development today is intended to serve almost the exact opposite purpose than the SDI, and therefore has very different goals in terms of its design and functionality. For example, one major laser weapons initiative is for C-RAM (Counter Rocket, Artillery and Mortar). These are systems intended to be deployed in the battlefield to protect troops and equipment from incoming projectiles. Currently, these are envisioned to be single, vehicle mounted lasers, with output powers in the 10 kW to 50 kW range.

Boeing has already successfully prototyped such a system, which they call the High Energy Laser Mobile Demonstrator (HEL MD). This consists of a 10 kW solid state laser installed on an Oshkosh Tactical Military Vehicle, along with all the necessary targeting and control systems. HEL MD has proven the ability to lock on to and destroy a mortar round of about 10 inches in length, traveling at hundreds of miles per hour, from several miles out. The system is also effective against Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs or drones); in this case, it may be sufficient to damage the drone's navigation and targeting systems, rather than completely destroy it. Similarly, other offensive laser weapons systems are being designed to deliver "swarm defense," that is, to protect a ship or base from attack by a large number of inexpensive drones.

Thus, today's laser weapons are meant to defend against swarms of inexpensive mortar rounds, drones and other projectiles, and are intended to be mounted on platforms which are mobile and self-contained (meaning they may not have ready access to an external source of power). This gives rise to several design imperatives. First, they must deliver a low cost per engagement; it's simply not economically feasible to employ an expensive weapon (such as a missile costing over $100,000) to knock out a drone which costs $1,000, or a mortar round which might cost less than $100. The laser weapon must also be capable of rapid fire so that it can't just be overwhelmed by a large number of simultaneous incoming rounds. Also, rapid fire reduces the number of individual laser weapons systems needed to protect a given number of troops. But, the ability to deliver rapid fire also necessitates that the system be electrically efficient. Otherwise the laser weapon will require access to a large quantity of fuel, which is difficult (and dangerous) to transport into a battlefield. Finally, it's desirable that laser weapons be physically compact, especially for airborne use.

SWaP Optimization

The push to optimize the size, weight and power (called SWaP in military parlance) of field deployed laser weapons has driven a progression in the technology of the gain material used from chemical (e.g. deuterium fluoride), to solid state, and, most recently, to fiber. One reason for this is because fiber lasers offer inherently higher efficiency, in terms of converting input pump energy to usable output, than nearly any other laser type, except diode lasers. However, diode lasers by themselves don't provide the necessary brightness or beam quality, while diode-pumped fiber lasers can. And, beam quality is critical because it determines the distance over which the laser can be focused to a spot size small enough to reach the power density necessary to damage its target.

Fiber lasers offer other advantages in terms of SWaP optimization. Chemical and lamp pumped solid state lasers require a significant overhead in terms of the equipment and power supplies required to run them. In contrast, both solid state (e.g. slab and rod) and fiber lasers can be diode pumped, and diode power supplies and pump modules themselves are electrically efficient and lend themselves to miniaturization. This efficiency, in turn, reduces the cooling requirements, and all its attendant equipment (pumps, heat exchangers, etc.).

But, as laser weapons evolve towards ever higher powers, fiber laser technology becomes increasingly attractive over solid state. Currently, individual fiber lasers can deliver up to about 2 kW of power, but multiple units can be combined to deliver around 10 kW in a single beam with extremely good mode quality. It's a bit more difficult to scale up the power of a solid-state laser, especially while maintaining good mode quality. This is because scaling up and/or increasing the pump power to a traditional solid state laser typically excites higher order modes, and introduces other issues related to thermal lensing.

Of course, there are also challenges to increasing the power of a fiber amplifier. And, because the optical efficiency of their pumping is already so high (~85%), there's not much room for improvement there. So, the focus is on raising the pump power itself, without increasing package size and weight, as well as on methods for low loss beam combining of multiple single mode lasers, all while still maintaining good beam quality.

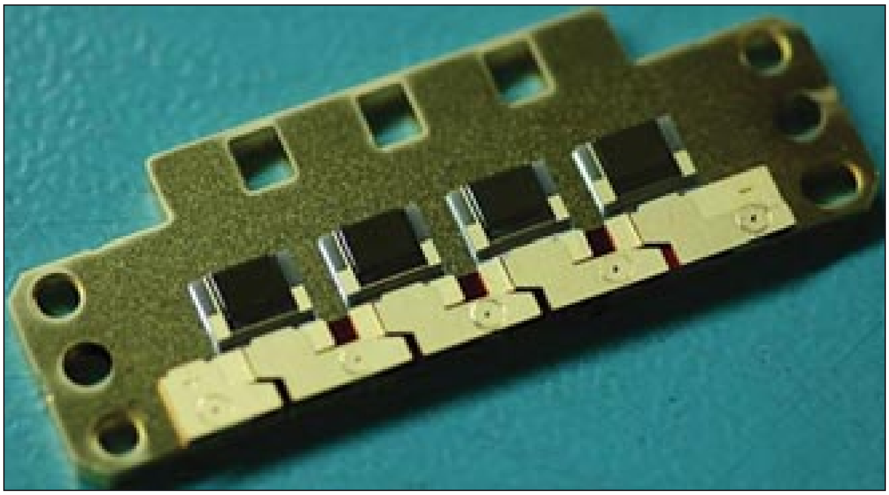

Figure 4. Four T-Bars mounted on a macrochannel cooler with collimating optics.

Pumping Technology Advances

In terms of SWaP optimization of pump diodes for laser weapons, a current benchmark is to achieve a weight to output power ratio of 1 kg/kW. Coherent | DILAS has developed several advances in diode laser technology to reach this goal, and, in fact, is already working on devices that will attain the next level of performance – 0.5 kg for 1 kW of output.

One key to reaching the SWaP benchmark has been the company's introduction of T-Bar (for "tailored" bar) construction, a design approach intended to combine the high total output power of traditional diode laser bars with the relaxed cooling requirements of single emitters. The basic unit of the T-Bar is a diode laser mini-bar having five emitters on a single, 5 mm wide substrate which outputs about 50 W total. In contrast, traditional diode laser bars are usually 10 mm wide, contain at least 19 emitters, and can output over 200 W, depending on the number of emitters and type of heatsink.

For military applications, four of these T-Bar dies are mounted on to a single substrate, yielding a total of 20 emitters. Then, up to four of these substrates are stacked vertically, bringing the total number of individual emitters in this compact assembly to 80, with a total output of about 800 W.

The key optical characteristic of the T-Bar design is that the combination of wide emitter spacing, low divergence and relatively low beam parameter product (in both fast and slow axes) is tailored to enable the light from all 80 of these individual emitters to be efficiently co-linearized and coupled into a single 225 µm core fiber having a numerical aperture of only 0.22. This, in turn, permits highly efficient coupling into the pumping mode volume of the gain fiber. And, this light collection can be accomplished using a relatively simple and compact optical system. This is how output power per unit volume is maximized.

In contrast, the high divergence and poor mode quality of traditional diode laser bars necessitate the use of complex optics for light collection, and still make it impossible to couple all their output into a single, low numerical aperture fiber. Furthermore, high power diode laser bars often suffer from a problem called "smile." This is a sagging or bending alignment error in emitter position along the bar which makes it quite difficult to collimate and co-linearize its output.

Besides the advantage of producing the largest amount of fiber coupled light out in a given system volume, T-Bar construction also offers significantly improved cooling characteristics over traditional bars. In a traditional diode laser bar, the small emitter spacing causes significant thermal crosstalk between the individual emitters, and a very high efficiency cooling system must therefore be employed. This is usually in the form of a so called "microchannel" cooler, in which water is rapidly circulated through channels within the heatsink. But the small bore of the microchannels (tens of microns) makes it easy for them to be clogged by particulates. Thus, the water must be stringently conditioned and filtered, and large, heavy, high pressure pumps must be employed to circulate it rapidly enough to achieve the required level of cooling in these traditional bars.

Furthermore, traditional diode bars are usually placed directly on the heatsink in order to achieve good thermal contact. However, this makes the microchannel cooler part of the electrical circuit, thus necessitating the use of deionized water in order to avoid a short circuit. This imposes yet another requirement that increases cost and complexity.

The larger emitter spacing of the T-Bar largely eliminates this thermal crosstalk, and greatly relaxes the attendant cooling requirement. As a result, Coherent | DILAS has been able to introduce a "macrochannel" cooler. This is a system which uses substantially larger bore channels, thus allowing the use of less stringently filtered tap water, and eliminating the need for high pressure pumping. Also, the reduced cooling requirement enables the laser bar to be placed on a submount, rather than in direct electrical contact with the cooler, which avoids the necessity of using deionized water.

T-Bar construction also delivers better cooling characteristics than single emitter diode lasers. This is because single emitters are typically supplied already packaged. Since the diodes are mounted within the package, there is an extra thermal interface which makes it more difficult to efficiently cool them.

In conclusion, after decades of imagining, offensive laser weapons are nearly ready for deployment on the battlefield. Advances in diode laser pumping technology are proving to be a key enabling factor in this development. And, these military grade pump diode lasers can be constructed using the same automated, high volume fabrication equipment used for industrial product manufacturing, meaning they can be readily delivered at competitive prices.

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