Propulsion Technologies: A Review of Current and Emerging Concepts

Jinil Patel; Austin Mardon*; Jenna Banks; Peter Johnson; John Christy Johnson; Jonathan Harline; Jean-Luc Leong-Sit; Haadiya Chaudhry; Ashwin Mathew; Eric Hodgson; Youssef Khalid; Zara Hasan; and Catherine Mardon

*University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada.

E-mail: aamardon@yahoo.ca*;
jinil1@ualberta.ca
jennabanks.00@gmail.com
paj1@ualberta.ca; jcj2@ualberta.ca
jonathanharline@gmail.com
jsleongs@ualberta.ca
haadiya5978@gmail.com
ashwinmathew79@gmail.com
emhodgso@ualberta.ca
ucfkhalid03@gmail.com
zarahas3@gmail
ccmardon@yahoo.ca

ABSTRACT

Efficient propulsion systems are essential to enable space exploration missions capable of reaching interstellar distances within practical timescales. This article presents a summary review and comparative analysis of existing and next-generation propulsion systems, examining their potential to achieve deep-space and interstellar missions. Specifically, nuclear thermal rockets, fusion propulsion systems, electric propulsion, and beamed power propulsion concepts are compared and evaluated based on thrust efficiency, specific impulse, energy requirement, and technological readiness.

Emerging concepts with potential, such as pellet-beam propulsion that employs high-velocity pellet streams to transfer momentum, are also discussed because they offer the potential of spacecraft velocities much greater than those of today. Our analysis indicates that nuclear thermal propulsion represents the best near-term hope for deep-space missions, while fusion propulsion and beamed energy systems hold greater promise for more distant future missions.

By systematically assessing the strengths, limitations, and readiness of each technology, this review aims to provide definitive strategic direction for planning future research and development of propulsion systems. Future studies may investigate hybrid propulsion systems integrating beamed power with onboard nuclear or fusion technologies, potentially allowing faster acceleration, higher efficiency, and improved mission flexibility.

(Keywords: space exploration, nuclear thermal, fusion propulsion, electric propulsion, beamed power propulsion)

INTRODUCTION

Human space exploration in deep space and eventually in interstellar space is among the most ambitious scientific and technological aspirations of mankind. Central to this endeavor are propulsion technologies capable of generating sufficient thrust and efficiency to traverse vast distances within reasonable timeframes.

Traditional chemical propulsion methods, while adequate for short-range missions, fall short for interplanetary and interstellar voyages. Hence, researchers are continuously exploring advanced propulsion concepts, aiming to meet the demanding requirements of deep-space travel [1]. This article talks about current and prospective concepts of propulsion technology and critically contrasts their performance metrics and technological maturity.

REVIEW OF CURRENT AND EMERGING PROPULSION CONCEPTS

Nuclear Thermal Rockets (NTR)

Nuclear thermal propulsion systems leverage the heat generated by nuclear fission to heat a propellant, typically hydrogen, which is expelled through a nozzle to produce thrust [2]. NTRs have demonstrated a relatively high thrust-to-weight ratio and specific impulse approximately double that of chemical rockets, making them highly suitable for near-term deep-space missions. NASA's renewed focus on NTR systems underscores their potential for crewed Mars missions and other deep-space endeavors [3].

Fusion Propulsion

Fusion propulsion involves harnessing nuclear fusion reactions, releasing substantial amounts of energy by fusing light atomic nuclei. The primary attraction of fusion propulsion is its exceptionally high specific impulse and considerable thrust potential, allowing spacecraft to reach significant fractions of the speed of light. However, technological readiness remains low, with considerable challenges in fusion reactor miniaturization, sustained fusion reactions, and effective energy extraction [4].

Electric Propulsion (EP)

Electric propulsion encompasses technologies such as ion thrusters and Hall-effect thrusters, relying on electrical energy to accelerate propellant ions to high velocities. Electric propulsion provides very high specific impulses, significantly enhancing fuel efficiency for long-duration missions. Nevertheless, its thrust levels remain modest, limiting its application to missions requiring sustained acceleration over extended periods, such as asteroid rendezvous or deep-space probes [5].

Beamed Power Propulsion

Beamed power propulsion transmits energy from external sources, such as lasers or microwaves, to propel spacecraft. The concept enables significant weight reduction by eliminating onboard fuel and propellant storage. Recent advances in laser technology have revitalized interest in this approach, highlighting potential applications for rapid interstellar probe missions, such as the Breakthrough Starshot initiative, proposing lightweight sailcraft propelled by intense laser beams [6].

Pellet-Beam Propulsion

Pellet-beam propulsion represents an innovative propulsion method involving the acceleration of solid pellets to ultra-high velocities directed towards spacecraft equipped with magnetic fields or electromagnetic funnels to capture the momentum. This method theoretically enables extremely high thrust and velocity gains without onboard propellant mass. Despite promising early-stage research, significant technological hurdles remain, especially in accurately aiming pellet streams and efficiently capturing pellet momentum [7].

CONCLUSION

The analysis of propulsion technologies underscores that nuclear thermal rockets offer a practical, near-term solution, whereas fusion and beamed energy propulsion technologies present significant potential for the future, especially in interstellar contexts. Further technological advancements, improved energy efficiencies, and the resolution of current scientific barriers are essential to realize these ambitious propulsion strategies fully.

Future research efforts should focus on developing hybrid propulsion systems, integrating multiple propulsion technologies to leverage their respective strengths, thus ensuring greater mission flexibility, enhanced acceleration profiles, and ultimately, the feasibility of deep-space exploration.

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