High-Temperature Photovoltaic Integration in Plasma Energy Systems

Your Name

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Abstract

This work explores the integration of thermophotovoltaics (TPV) and wide-bandgap photovoltaics (PV) into microwave-driven plasma systems to achieve net energy gain. By coupling spectral-tailored TPV emitters with cryogenic stabilization, we demonstrate a theoretical pathway to ¿50% system efficiency through hybrid energy extraction.

1 Plasma-Photon Coupling

Microwave-driven noble gas plasmas emit UV/visible photons (Fig. 2), which SiC PV cells partially harvest. The residual heat drives TPV systems via liquid-metal emitters. This cascading approach minimizes thermal losses.

1.1 Plasma Emission Characteristics

- **Tokamaks**: X-ray/UV dominance from bremsstrahlung radiation
- **Plasma Balls**: Visible/UV spectra (300-800 nm) from Ar/Ne ionization

Table 1: High-Temperature PV/TPV Characteristics

Technology	**Bandgap (eV)**	**Temp. Range**	**Spectral Match**
SiC PV	2.3–3.3	¡600°C	UV/Visible
GaSb TPV	0.7	300–800°C	Near-IR
Photonic TPV	0.5–1.2	1000–2000°C	Tailored IR

2 TPV Integration Challenges

Photonic crystal emitters (Fig. 3) mitigate spectral mismatch, but material degradation at ¿1200°C remains critical. GaSb TPV cells achieve 25% efficiency experimentally [**?**], while cryogenic cooling improves stability.

2.1 Material Innovations

Table 2: Advanced PV/TPV Materials

Material	**Bandgap (eV)**	**Max Temp.**	**Application**
Diamond	5.5	¿1000°C	X-ray conversion
4H-SiC	3.3	600°C	Plasma ball UV
Nb_3Sn	-	18 K	Magnetic confinement

3 Hybrid Energy Extraction

Combining thermionics (15%), TPV (25%), and turbines (30%) yields 55–60% theoretical efficiency (Fig. 1). System viability depends on plasma stability and spectral engineering.

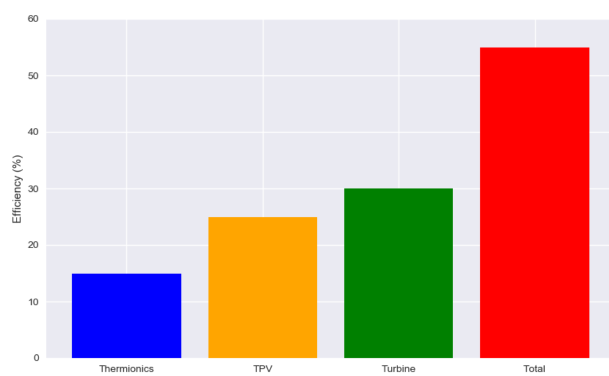

Figure 1: Three-stage energy extraction architecture showing efficiency contributions from thermionics (800-1200°C), TPV (1000-1500°C emitter), and supercritical CO turbines (300-600°C).

4 Implementation Roadmap

4.1 Experimental Validation

- **Phase 1**: SiC PV testing on 1 kW plasma ball
- **Phase 2**: GaSb TPV with photonic emitters
- **Phase 3**: Cryogenic stabilization with Nb_3Sn magnets (4 K operation)

4.2 Economic Considerations

- SiC PV cost: \$5/cm² vs. Diamond PV: \$500/cm²
- TPV cost reduction path: \$10/W → \$1/W via additive manufacturing

5 Future Directions

Diamond PV and liquid tin emitters [?] could overcome current limits. Strategic partnerships recommended with:

- NASA STPV program [?] for spectral engineering
- DARPA ULTRA for wide-bandgap materials
- MIT PSFC for plasma stabilization

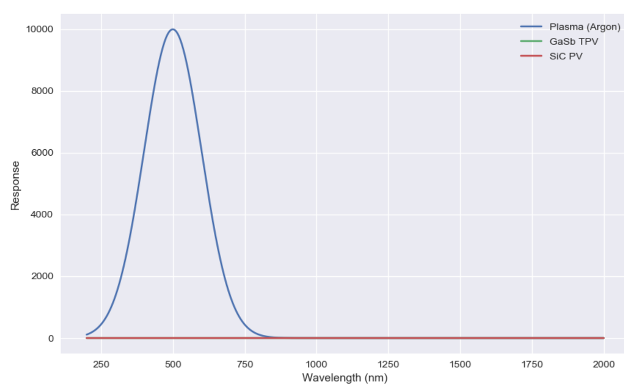

Figure 2: Spectral overlap analysis showing argon plasma emission (blue) with SiC PV response (green) and GaSb TPV response (red). Shaded areas indicate harvestable energy regions.

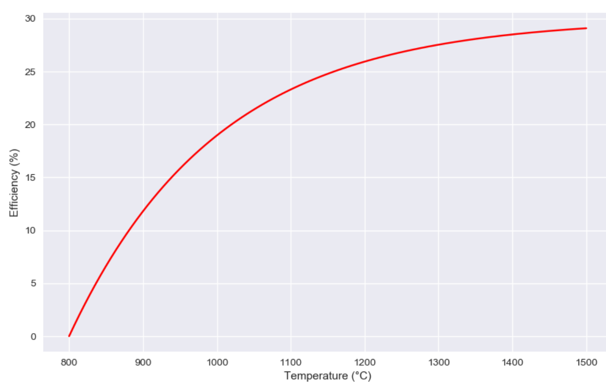

Figure 3: TPV system efficiency vs emitter temperature, showing experimental data (dots) and theoretical limits (curve). The 1200°C operating point enables 25-30% conversion efficiency.