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Design of an intake and a thruster for an atmosphere-breathing electric propulsion system

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Received: 27 October 2021 / Revised: 11 April 2022 / Accepted: 6 May 2022
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Abstract

Challenging space missions include those at very low altitudes, where the atmosphere is the source of aerodynamic drag on the spacecraft, that finally defines the mission's lifetime, unless a way to compensate for it is provided. This environment is named Very Low Earth Orbit (VLEO) and it is defined for $h < 450\text{km}$. In addition to the spacecraft's aerodynamic design, to extend the lifetime of such missions, an efficient propulsion system is required. One solution is Atmosphere-Breathing Electric Propulsion (ABEP), in which the propulsion system collects the atmospheric particles to be used as propellant for an electric thruster. The system could remove the requirement of carrying propellant on-board, and could also be applied to any planetary body with atmosphere, enabling new missions at low altitude ranges for longer missions' duration. One of the objectives of the H2020 DISCOVERER project, is the development of an intake and an electrode-less plasma thruster for an ABEP system. This article describes the characteristics of intake design and the respective final designs based on simulations, providing collection efficiencies up to 94%. Furthermore, the radio frequency (RF) Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) is hereby presented as well, while its performances are being evaluated, the IPT has been operated with single atmospheric species as propellant, and has highlighted very low input power requirement for operation at comparable mass flow rates $P \sim 60\text{w}$.

Keywords ABEP · Intake · VLEO · Birdcage · Helicon

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Abbreviations

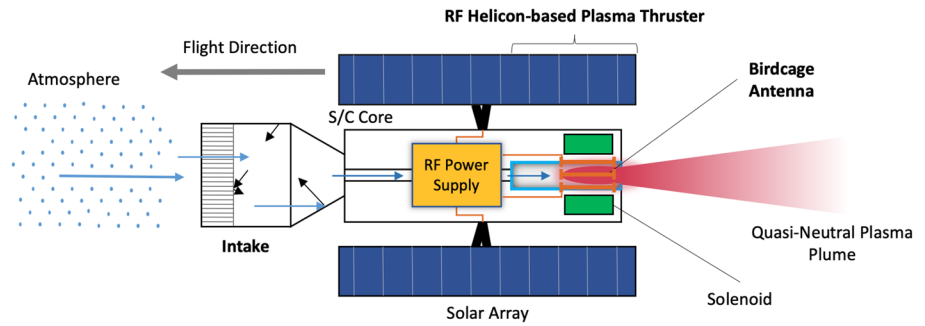
ABEP	Atmosphere-breathing electric propulsion
DSMC	Direct simulation Monte Carlo
FMF	Free molecular flow
GSI	Gas-surface interaction
IPT	RF Helicon-based plasma thruster
VLEO	Very low earth orbit
SC	Spacecraft

1 Introduction

1.1 ABEP concept

An atmosphere-breathing electric propulsion system (ABEP), see Fig. 1, is mainly made of two components: the intake and the electric thruster. The system is designed for spacecrafts (SCs) orbiting at very low altitude orbits, for

Fig. 1 Atmosphere-breathing electric propulsion concept using the RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) [26]



example in very low Earth orbit (VLEO), defined for altitudes $h < 450\text{km}$ [1]. The ABEP system collects the residual atmospheric particles encountered by the SC through the intake and uses them as propellant for the electric thruster. The system is theoretically applicable to any planetary body with an atmosphere, and can drastically reduce the on-board propellant storage requirement, while extending the mission's lifetime [2]. Many ABEP concepts have been investigated in the past based on radio frequency ion thrusters (RIT) [3–11], ECR-based thruster [12–16], Hall-effect thrusters (HET) [17–24], and plasma thrusters [25]. The only laboratory tested ABEP systems to date are the ABIE developed in Japan, composed of an annular intake and an ECR-based thruster into one device [12–15], and the RAM-HET system developed in Europe, comprised of the intake and a HET assembled into one device [19–23]. Current research in Europe is developed within the H2020 DISCOVERER and AETHER projects.

1.2 Very low Earth orbit

The ABEP operational environment is the VLEO altitude range, that can be described by mainly density and composition over altitude and location based on atmospheric models. Among the several available, the NRLMSISE-00 is used as it accurately accounts for the lower thermosphere atmospheric conditions, as well as for being used for previous work on ABEP systems [2, 27, 28]. In Fig. 2, the averaged particle number densities are plotted in VLEO for an equatorial orbit—an aspect that fosters relevant verifications on level of the comparison between different studies.

The solar activity is set to moderate with a respective $F10.7 = 140$, the solar radio flux at a wavelength of $\lambda = 10.7\text{cm}$, and the geomagnetic index $Ap = 15$. The ABEP altitudes range is set to $h = 150 - 250\text{km}$. The lower limit is due to aerodynamic drag, as it increases exponentially leading to large power requirements [28] and also heating of the SC [2]. The upper limit is set by the limited propellant collection, that can become lower than conventional thruster requirements by a typical sized SC, and is where a conventional electric propulsion system becomes preferable against an ABEP

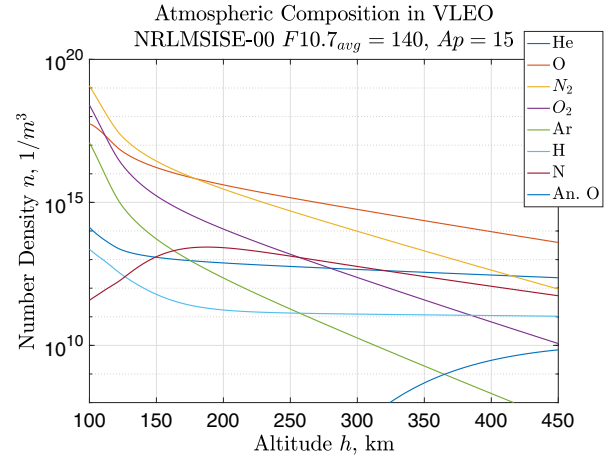


Fig. 2 Atmospheric Composition in VLEO, NRLMSISE-00 Atmospheric Model: $F10.7 = 140$, $Ap = 15$, Moderate Solar Activity

system [3]. The dominant gas species in the selected altitude range are N_2 and atomic oxygen (AO).

It is very important to mention, that an ABEP system must be able to perform in a wide operational envelope of parameters. Indeed, a variable incoming propellant composition and flow is expected, that also translates in larger or lower values of aerodynamic drag. This is in particular due to the non-uniformity of VLEO environment because of temporal (time), seasonal (solar activity), and geographical (latitude and longitude) variations. Also, one must take into account for more exceptional space weather events, such high energetic particle fluxes coming from the Sun due to, for example, UV or X-ray flares. Such effects would change the drag, therefore the thrust requirements, as well as the propellant composition and, therefore, the power requirements, and need to be taken into account for the system's design. A more detailed analysis can be found in [29, 30].

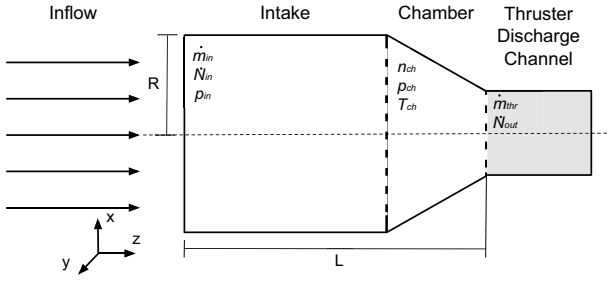


Fig. 3 Intake general design including the Thruster's Discharge Channel [31]

2 ABEP intake

2.1 Intake working principle

The intake is the device of an ABEP system that collects and drives the atmospheric particles to the thruster. The general schematics is shown in Fig. 3. The intake shall ensure the efficient collection of atmospheric particles and provide the required conditions of density, pressure, and mass flow for thruster's operation while, at the same time, minimizing the required frontal area and, therefore, the resulting drag.

The number density is n and \dot{N} is the particle flux. The collection efficiency $\eta_c(h)$ is defined in Eq. 1, where \dot{N}_{out} is the collected particle flux, and \dot{N}_{in} is the incoming one. The subscript i refers to each different particle species $i = [1, N_s]$, where N_s is the total number of species.

$$\eta_c(h) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N_s} \dot{N}_{out_i}}{\sum_{i=1}^{N_s} \dot{N}_{in_i}} \quad (1)$$

The resulting mass flow to the thruster \dot{m}_{thr} is obtained as shown in Eq. 2, where m_p is the particle mass.

$$\dot{m}_{thr}(h) = \sum_{i=1}^{N_s} m_{p_i} \dot{N}_{out_i}(h) \quad (2)$$

It shall be noted that each intake design needs to be tailored to the thruster applied, its requirements, and the mission profile. The latter, in terms of orbit (altitude and inclination), and total mission duration to account for solar activity variations.

Intake design, due to the free molecular flow condition in VLEO, is mostly driven by gas-surface interaction (GSI) properties of the materials [32]. Based on the Maxwell's model, upon particle impact with a surface, an exchange of momentum and energy takes place. In this model, two types of surface-particle interactions are modelled: specular and diffuse reflections. In specular reflections, particles are reflected without energy exchange, the angle of reflection equals the incident angle, and the

velocity vector undergoes a complete inversion. In diffuse reflection, instead, particles reach thermal equilibrium with the surface and are reflected according to a Rayleigh distribution corresponding to the wall temperature T_{wall} with only thermal velocity.

The accommodation coefficient α is defined in Eq. 3, where the energy of the incident particle is E , and E' the energy of the reflected particle, while E_W is the energy which a particle would have after full accommodation to T_{wall} . For specular reflections, $\alpha = 1$, while for diffuse ones is $\alpha = 0$.

$$\alpha = \frac{E - E'}{E - E_W} \quad (3)$$

The intakes hereby presented have been designed using the PICLas tool, which is a three-dimensional numerical tool for simulating non-equilibrium gas and plasma flows [33, 34]. For the intake design, the DSMC module with the Maxwell model for surface interactions is used [31]. Details on the inflow parameters, that are based on NRLMSISE-00 model at moderate solar activity, can be found in [29, 31].

2.2 Diffuse Intake

Based on the analysis of the intake concepts using diffuse scattering $\alpha = 0$, this design provides a homogenous pressure distribution in front of the thruster's discharge channel as shown in Fig. 4. The intake has a hexagonal shape and it features a front section of hexagonal ducts with different area ratio AR : larger ducts in front of the thruster's discharge channel to increase A_{in} , and narrower ones in the outer intake region to reduce the backflow. At the rear there is a conical section with a chamber angle of 45° terminating on the thruster's discharge channel diameter. In Fig. 5 the isometric render view of the diffuse intake is shown. This design provides a theoretical maximum of $\eta_c = 0.458$ [31].

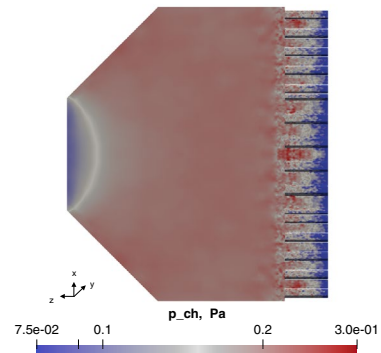


Fig. 4 Diffuse Intake Pressure Distribution [31]

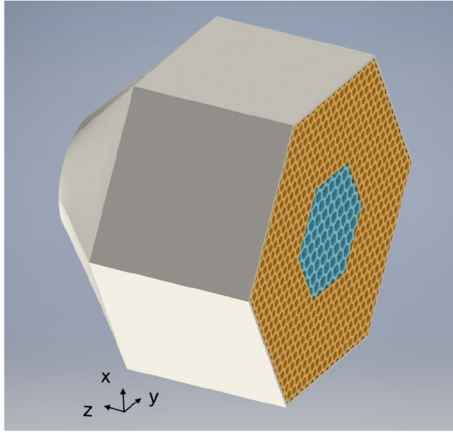


Fig. 5 Diffuse Intake Render [31]

2.3 Specular Intake

Based on specular scattering properties $\alpha = 1$, a parabolic scoop with its focus inside the thruster discharge channel provides a theoretical $\eta_c = 0.94$ [31]. This design also outperforms the diffuse intake in terms of sensitivity to flow misalignment leading to a limit of $\alpha = 15^\circ$ resulting in $\eta_c < 0.6$. The isometric render view of the specular intake is shown in Figs. 6 and 7 [31].

3 ABEP thruster

3.1 Thruster working principle

The thruster concept is based on an antenna fed by a RF power which ionizes and accelerates the propellant. In particular, the antenna surrounds a dielectric discharge channel, in which the propellant is injected. The RF-fed antenna launches electromagnetic waves within the discharge channel exciting the propellant particles: it ionizes them and, in combination with an externally applied magnetic field, that

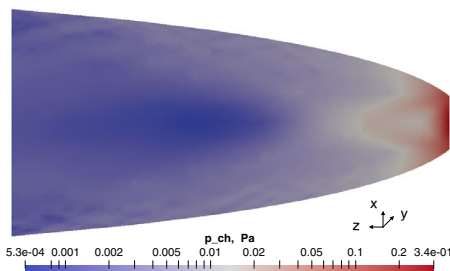


Fig. 6 Specular intake pressure distribution [31]

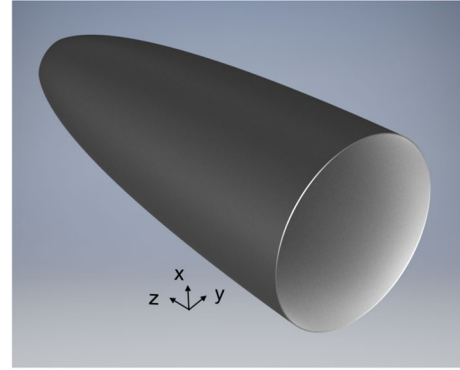


Fig. 7 Specular intake render [31]

is provided by either a solenoid or a system of permanent magnets, accelerates them through the exhaust producing thrust, see Fig. 8.

Furthermore, the applied magnetic field also provides one of the required boundary conditions for helicon waves to develop in the plasma, therefore improving the discharge efficiency [35].

3.2 RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT)

The RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) is a contactless device based on a novel antenna type, the birdcage antenna. Such an antenna has the advantage of operating at a specific resonance mode that provides not only an already matched load to the RF circuit, but also a linearly polarized magnetic (and electric) field within the IPT's discharge channel. The first property leads to an optimum electrical performance by maximizing the power transfer efficiency, therefore, minimizing losses and heating. The second, the linearly polarized electric and magnetic field, theoretically provides a drift velocity to both ions and electrons along the axial direction due to the $\mathbf{E} \times \mathbf{B}$ product that is independent of the particle charge [26, 29]. The IPT is protected/and protects the outer environment from RF waves by means of a Faraday cage made by of brass placed around the birdcage antenna itself. Around the IPT, in the antenna region, a solenoid provides up to $B < 70\text{mT}$ of static magnetic field at the axis, that enhances the plasma discharge by providing one of the boundary conditions for the formation of helicon waves within the plasma itself [29, 35]. Furthermore, the magnetic field divergence at the exhaust of the IPT provides a magnetic nozzle effect for thrust production, along with the drift velocity given by the birdcage antenna. The RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) has been simulated, designed, and built for an operational frequency of $f = 40.68\text{MHz}$. The experimental set-up is composed by an Advanced Energy CESAR 4040 $f = 40.68\text{MHz}$ RF generator, an Advanced Energy Navigator 4040-L70 automatic

matching network, the electromagnet is fed by a GENSYS 750W DC power supply, and the IPT itself is flanged to the vacuum chamber. The vacuum chamber has a diameter of $D = 1\text{m}$ and a length of $L = 2.75\text{m}$. The vacuum pumping system provides a final base pressure of $p < 0.01\text{Pa}$.

The electrical performances have been verified experimentally against simulations in terms of impedance and resonance frequency [26, 29], and the IPT was successfully

demonstrated to operate on Ar as well as atmospheric gases such as N_2 and O_2 , in particular ignition, operation at minimum reflected power, and formation of a visible collimated plasma plume in the vacuum chamber after applying the external magnetic field [29]. The assembled IPT is shown in Fig. 9, and its operation on Ar, N_2 , and O_2 is shown in Fig. 10, where the particle flux, power input, and applied magnetic field are equal for the three cases. The three

Fig. 8 RF Helicon-based Plasma Thruster (IPT) Concept [26]

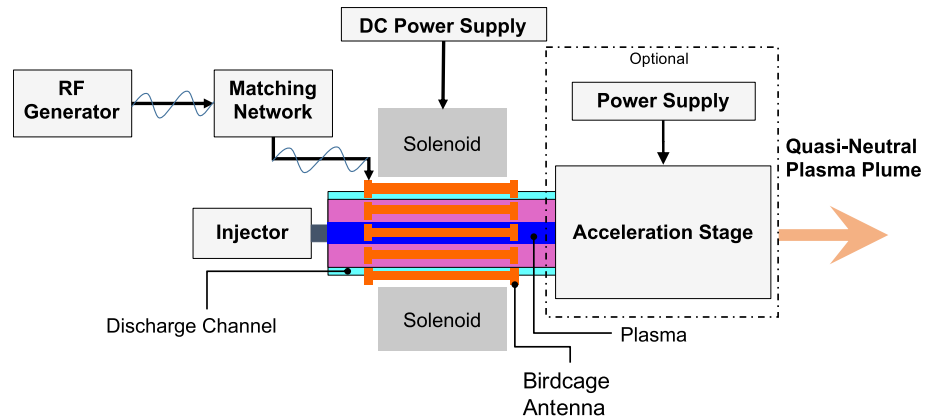


Fig. 9 RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) prototype

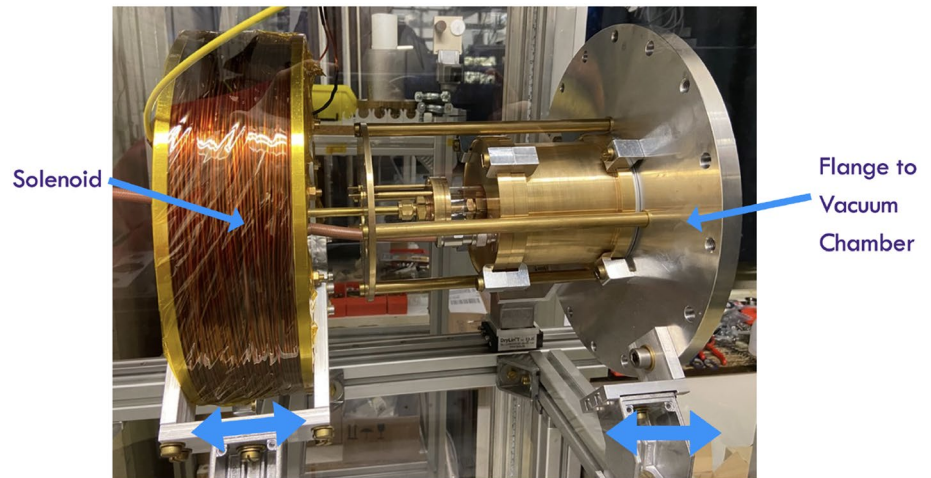
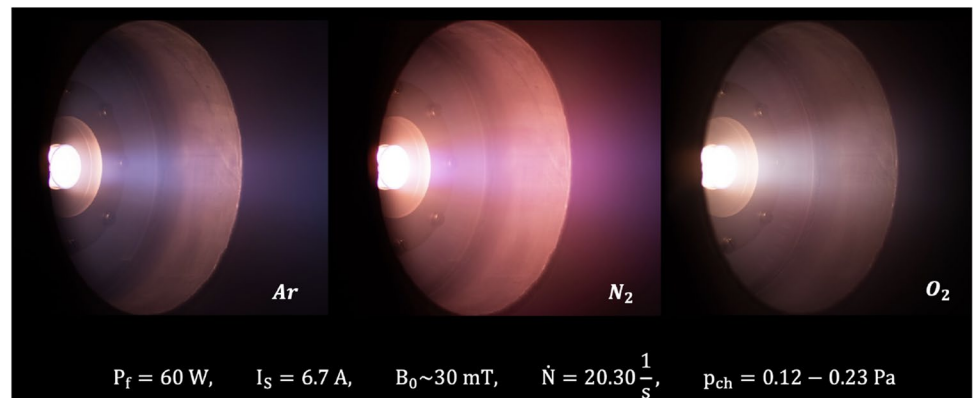


Fig. 10 RF Helicon-based plasma (IPT) in operation



pictures are taken through an optical window with identical camera settings.

4 Diagnostic for thruster development

To further develop the IPT, specific diagnostics are required to evaluate the discharge behaviour as well as to determine the thrust produced. First, a scientific evidence of formation of helicon waves is of high interest to highlight the effective operation of the IPT in the helicon regime [36, 37]. This can be achieved by employing a 3-axis magnetic-inductive B-dot probe that is currently undergoing calibration at IRS. Such probe allows the measurement of the rotating magnetic field that is typical of helicon waves in the plasma plume [29, 38].

The probe shown in Fig. 11, is made of three small $N = 5$ turns coils with $\phi = 0.2\text{mm}$ wire, and a coil area respectively of $A_x = 16\text{mm}^2$, $A_y = 25\text{mm}^2$, and $A_z = 36\text{mm}^2$, that can detect the time-varying magnetic fields as they induce a voltage V at an angular frequency $\omega = 2\pi f$, see Eq. 4.

$$V = -NA \left| \frac{dB_{tot}}{dt} \right| = -NA\omega |B| \quad (4)$$

The probe material is mainly PEEK due to mechanical strength and relatively high melting temperature. An additional quartz cover is added to shield the probe from the direct plasma bombardment. The signal measured by each coil is sent to RF power combiners (one per axis) to remove capacitive pick-up that arises between plasma and coils, see Fig. 11.

To directly measure the produced thrust, instead, a thrust/force balance is required.

Such device is a mechanical structure that is capable to isolate the thrust force from the external forces, and to translate it into a displacement that can be measured. A schematic of a typical pendulum-type thrust balance set-up is shown within Fig. 12. The pendulum-type is made by the thruster (e) mounted at the bottom of an arm (d) that can oscillate around its center thanks to a bearing (b). On the other side

of the arm there is a damper (a), whereas a translation sensor (c) is mounted close to the center of the arm to measure the movement due to the thruster operation.

To perform such measurement, the current version of the IPT needs to be upgraded and optimized to allow vacuum operation and mounting on the thrust balance, therefore reducing the weight, in particular of the solenoid for the applied magnetic field.

5 Conclusion

This article provides the design of the intake and the thruster for an ABEP system. The working principle ABEP intakes based on diffuse and specular-based GSI properties is presented, and highlights the advantages of the specular intake in terms of both intake efficiency, $\eta_c = 0.94$, and robustness of its performance to misalignment with the free stream [31]. However, the diffuse intake design providing $\eta_c = 0.458$, is still applicable due also to its larger higher-pressure region provided. Finally, the selection always depends on the mission requirements [31].

The RF Helicon-based plasma thruster (IPT) is based on RF contact-less technology using an innovative bird-cage antenna that allows to minimize power requirement while enhancing thruster operation. The IPT does not have any component in direct contact with the plasma that could erode, critical for ABEP application due to the presence of atomic oxygen (AO), and it does not require a neutralizer as the plasma plume ejected is quasi-neutral. The IPT electrical properties have been experimentally verified [26, 29], and its proof of concept achieved by operating it on Ar as well as on N_2 and O_2 [29, 38, 40].

Currently, a set of sub-scale intake prototypes are being prepared to test in the Rarefied Orbital Aerodynamics Research facility (ROAR) at The University of Manchester [41] developed within the H2020 DISCOVERER project, creating relevant VLEO AO flow conditions. Also, the future incoming results on the measurements of aerodynamic coefficients from the Satellite for Orbital

Fig. 11 Magnetic inductive B-dot probe

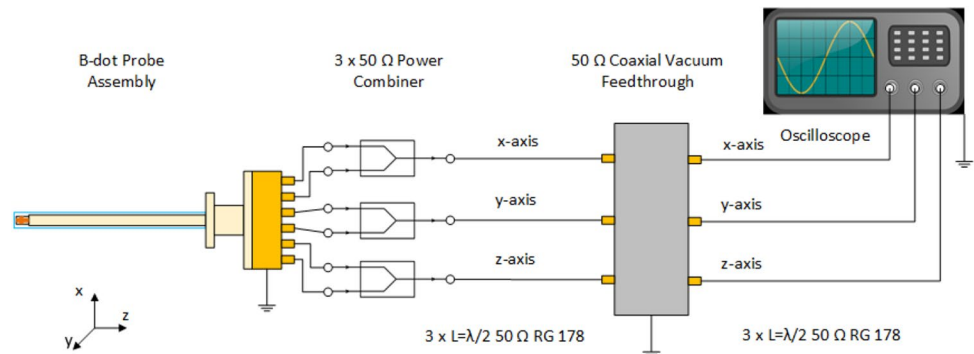
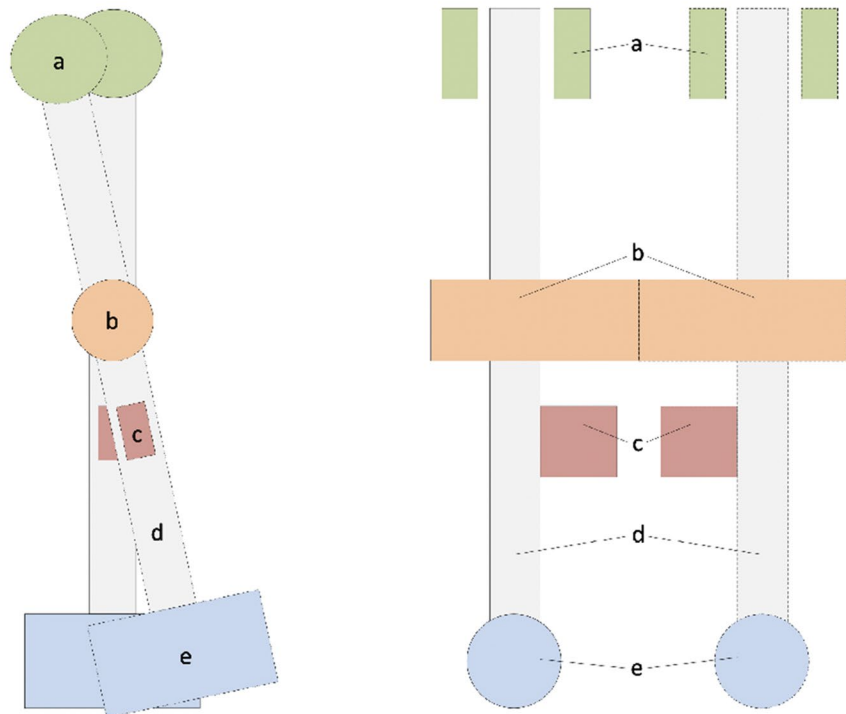


Fig. 12 Example of a pendulum-type thrust balance: **a** damper, **b** bearing, **c** translation sensor, **d** pendulum arm structure, **e** thruster [39]



Aerodynamics Research (SOAR) [42] will be used as well. The application of real material GSI properties to the simulations is necessary to reach the first full intake prototypes.

The IPT will undergo a first set of diagnostics to provide a first thrust measurement by a momentum flux probe that is in the development phase. In parallel the detection of helicon waves within the plasma plume is to be performed by applying a magnetic inductive 3-axes B-dot probe that is currently undergoing calibrations [29, 38, 40]. A full RF-compensated plasma diagnostic measurement is to be performed for fully characterise the IPT. In the near future, a vacuum-capable IPT version is to be developed for later performing direct thrust measurement by means of a thrust pendulum.

Finally, the intake design work is strongly linked (and iterated) with the thruster design work, to ensure their operation in a common range of pressures, mass flows, and efficiencies. Therefore, both intake and thruster development will mutually feed into each other for the final ABEP complete system design that, once again, is strongly linked to the detailed mission profile as well, but must always allow the operation in a variable environment.

Acknowledgements This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 737183. This reflects only the author's view and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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