Photoconductive switching of a high-voltage spark gap

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We have demonstrated photoconductive switching of a gas-filled spark gap. A femtosecond Ti:sapphire laser was focused in a 1 mm spark gap biased at 4.5 kV. There is a clear transition between triggered operation, when only part of the path between the electrodes is ionized, and photoconductive switching, when the entire length of the gap is ionized directly by the laser. The measured standard deviation of the time fluctuations between the rising edge of the transmitted electrical pulse and the laser was less than 15 ps. © 2005 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.1866227]

High-voltage applications (above ~1 kV) that require accurate timing use laser triggering of gas-filled spark gaps to switch electrical pulses. In these spark gaps, a laser is focused between the electrodes or on one of the electrodes to create a small amount of ionization. The free electrons are accelerated in the gap and cause additional ionization. The free electrons are focused between the electrodes or on one of the electrodes to create a small amount of ionization. The free electrons are accelerated in the gap and cause additional ionization (avalanche, streamer formation) and, eventually, a conducting (arc) channel is formed between the electrodes. Typical rise time and jitter of these switches in the 1–100 kV range is of the order of 100 s of picoseconds. A recent improvement in this field was reported by Luther et al., who used a femtosecond Ti:sapphire laser to trigger the breakdown of a pressurized high-voltage air spark gap at 10 kV and obtained jitter as low as 35 ps. A different technique, namely laser-driven photoconductive switching, has been used to produce pulses with sub-picosecond risetime, albeit at lower voltages (below ~1 kV). In these switches, a high-resistivity semiconductor separates two electrodes or transmission lines. When a laser pulse illuminates the semiconductor, free carriers are generated and the semiconductor becomes conducting. The switch is closed if a full path between the electrodes is illuminated with sufficient laser intensity. Motet et al. have reported the generation of 825 V pulses with a rise time of 1.4 ps using low-temperature grown GaAs, illuminated by a 150 fs, 2 µJ dye laser at 620 nm wavelength. The basic difference between laser triggering of a spark gap and photoconductive switching is that in the former only part of the path between the electrodes is ionized, whereas in the latter a complete conducting path is created directly by the laser. In this letter we report the results from a switch designed to combine the benefits of both techniques: The high-voltage, high current capabilities of a gas filled spark gap and the fast response of a photoconductive switch.

With today’s high power femtosecond lasers it is possible to ionize a complete path between the electrodes of a gas-filled gap by tunneling ionization. If the intensity of the laser is high enough (around 10^14 W/cm^2) along the whole path between the electrodes, plasma fills the entire gap and the switch is effectively closed on the time scale of a few femtoseconds. To demonstrate this principle, a spark gap was constructed, shown in Fig. 1, integrated in a coaxial transmission line. The inner conductor of the transmission line has a diameter of 6 mm and the inner diameter of the outer conductor is 15 mm (55 Ω impedance). The transmission line is interrupted by a gap of 1 mm. The laser is focused in the gap using two cylindrical lenses, to ionize a slab of plasma between the electrodes. The gap is filled with air at 1 atm. Our Ti:sapphire laser system produces pulses of approximately 200 fs at 800 nm with energy up to 35 mJ at a repetition rate of 10 Hz. The incoming beam has a diameter of 7 mm (full width at half maximum). The two cylindrical lenses have focal distances of 150 and 200 mm and are positioned at 150 and 186 mm from the center of the gap, respectively. This produces a line focus between the electrodes of the spark gap (in the focal plane of the 150 mm lens) with a width of 20 µm and a length, along the axis of the spark gap of 0.5 mm (both dimensions are full width at half maximum of the intensity). At maximum laser power, the intensity along the axis of the spark gap varies from 10^16 W/cm^2 at the center to 10^13 W/cm^2 at the electrode surfaces, comparable to the intensities used by Luther et al. and above the threshold for tunnel ionization (Keldysh parameter γ < 1) along 80% of the path between the electrodes. A slit is used at the entry port of the spark gap to prevent the edges of the laser pulse from hitting the electrodes.

The 30-cm-long transmission line at the primary side of the switch is charged to a maximum of 5 kV (the self-breakdown voltage of the gap). The pulse in the secondary line is measured capacitively through a small gap in the transmission line and the signal is integrated digitally by the oscilloscope (HP Infinium, 1.5 GHz). The absolute value of the measured output pulses is an estimate based on the ca-

![FIG. 1. Cut view of the switch.](image-url)
The stages of avalanche and/or streamer formation are omitted, but the impedence of the plasma is high compared to the transmission lines. As the current starts to run, an arc channel is created by the laser pulse connecting the electrodes. The free electrons initiate an avalanche which eventually causes breakdown of the gap and closes the switch. At higher energy (above approximately 2 mJ) a small step appears just after the laser pulse. A narrow plasma channel is created by the laser pulse connecting the electrodes. The results of the switching experiments are shown in Fig. 2 at a charging voltage of the primary line of 4.5 kV (90% of the self-breakdown voltage). At low energy (around 1 mJ) only a small amount of plasma is produced, in the center of the gap. In this case the switch is triggered in the classical sense. The free electrons initiate an avalanche which eventually causes breakdown of the gap and closes the switch. At higher energy (above approximately 2 mJ) a small step appears just after the laser pulse. A narrow plasma channel is created by the laser pulse connecting the electrodes. The stages of avalanche and/or streamer formation are omitted, but the impedence of the plasma is high compared to the transmission lines. As the current starts to run, an arc channel starts to develop, gradually reducing the impedence of the plasma. The same effect, but more pronounced, is visible at

In conclusion, we report the demonstration of a photoconducitively switched gas-filled spark gap. There is a clear transition between triggered and photoconductive operation of the switch. In the photoconductive mode, this technique enables switching far below the self-breakdown voltage, which greatly extends the range of voltages that can be controlled by a single switch.

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