X-Ray Flares from Postmerger Millisecond Pulsars

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Recent observations support the suggestion that short-duration gamma-ray bursts are produced by compact star mergers. The X-ray flares discovered in two short gamma-ray bursts last much longer than the previously proposed postmerger energy release time scales. Here we show that they can be produced by differentially rotating, millisecond pulsars after the mergers of binary neutron stars. The differential rotation leads to windup of interior poloidal magnetic fields and the resulting toroidal fields are strong enough to float up and break through the stellar surface. Magnetic reconnection–driven explosive events then occur, leading to multiple X-ray flares minutes after the original gamma-ray burst.

Gamma-ray bursts (GRBs) are flashes of gamma rays occurring at the cosmological distances. They fall into two classes (1): short-duration (< 2 s) hard-spectrum bursts and long-duration soft-spectrum bursts. Long GRBs result from core collapses of massive stars (2), and short GRBs appear to be produced in mergers of neutron star binaries or black hole-neutron star
binaries (3-9). Recently thanks to accurate localizations of several short GRBs (3,6,8) by Swift and High Energy Transient Explorer-2 (HETE-2), the multi-wavelength afterglows from these events have been detected and the associated host galaxies have been identified. The observations provide a few pieces of evidence in favor of the binary compact object merger origin of short GRBs (10-12). Because it takes $\sim 0.1 - 1$ billions years of gravitational wave radiation before the binary coalesces, at least some short GRB host galaxies should contain a relatively old stellar population. Because neutron stars in the binary system usually receive a very high natal velocity, the merger site is preferably at the outskirt of the host galaxy, and the circumburst medium density is likely low. These characteristics have been revealed by recent observations: First, the identified elliptical galaxies associated with GRB 050509B (3,4) and GRB 050724 (8,9) suggest that these hosts are early type galaxies with a low star-formation rate, ruling out progenitor models invoking active star formation. Second, the nondetection of any supernova signal from GRB 050709 indicates that short bursts are not associated with collapses of massive stars (5,7). Third, afterglow modeling of GRB 050709 suggests a low density environment (13), which is consistent with that of the outskirt of the host galaxy or that of an intergalactic medium.

However, the above merger origin was recently challenged by the discovery of X-ray flares occurring after two short bursts. X-ray flares were discovered to occur at least $\sim 100$ s after the triggers of the short GRB 050709 (5) and GRB 050724 (8). These flares require that the central engine is in long-lasting activity. This requirement conflicts with the current models involving neutron star-neutron star mergers (14,15) or neutron star-black hole mergers (16), because all these models are attached to a common postmerger picture that invokes a black hole surrounded by a torus. The predicted typical time scales for energy release are much shorter than $\geq 100$ s as observed in GRBs 050709 and 050724. Therefore, understanding the origin of X-ray flares from short bursts is currently of great interest. Here we show that such flares can be produced
by differentially rotating, millisecond pulsars with typical surface magnetic fields that occur after the mergers of binary neutron stars.

In the conventional scenarios of short bursts (10-12), after the merger of a neutron star binary, a stellar-mass black hole is formed with a transient torus of mass $\sim 1 - 10\%$ of the total. These scenarios are valid if the total mass ($\sim 2.5 - 2.8 M_{\odot}$, where $M_{\odot}$ is the solar mass) of the postmerger object is larger than the maximum mass of a nonrotating Tolman-Oppenheimer-Volkoff neutron star, $M_{\text{max},0}$. This is valid if the nuclear equation of state (EOS) is soft to moderately stiff (17). However, the total mass of the postmerger object is smaller than $M_{\text{max},0}$ for very stiff EOSs (e.g., as predicted by mean field theory) (17). Timing observations of the millisecond pulsar J0751+1807 in a circular binary system with a helium white-dwarf companion (18) reveal the existence of a neutron star with mass of $2.1 \pm 0.2 M_{\odot}$ (at the 1$\sigma$ confidence level). This measurement implies that the maximum mass of nonrotating neutron stars must be larger than $2.1 M_{\odot}$ so that stiff EOSs are favored. Furthermore, recent general relativistic numerical simulations (17,19) have shown that for stiff to very stiff nuclear EOSs, the postmerger object is indeed a differentially rotating massive neutron star with period of $\sim 1$ ms, because uniform rotation and differential rotation can support a maximum mass $\sim 20\%$ and $\sim 50\%$ higher than $M_{\text{max},0}$, respectively. It is therefore reasonable to assume the existence of a differentially rotating millisecond pulsar after a double neutron star merger. Such a pulsar should also be surrounded by a hot torus with mass $\sim 0.01 - 0.1 M_{\odot}$. Similar to the previous scenarios, a short burst may be produced by the Parker instability in the torus (11) or the annihilation of neutrinos emitted from the torus (12).

After the GRB trigger, differential rotation starts to wind the interior magnetic field into a toroidal field (20,21). To represent physical processes of windup and floating of the magnetic field, we consider a simple two-component model in which the star is divided into two zones with a boundary at the radius $R_c \approx 0.5 R_*$ (where $R_*$ is the stellar radius): the core and the shell.
components. Their moments of inertia are $I_c$ and $I_s$ and their angular (rotation) velocities are $\Omega_c$ and $\Omega_s$, respectively. The differential angular velocity is then $\Delta\Omega = \Omega_c - \Omega_s$ and its initial value (marked by a subscript zero) is taken as $(\Delta\Omega)_0 = A_0\Omega_{s,0}$ (where $A_0$ is the ratio of the initial differential angular velocity to the shell’s initial angular velocity). If the radial magnetic field component is $B_r$, then the toroidal field component $B_\phi$ increases as

$$\frac{dB_\phi}{dt} = (\Delta\Omega)B_r.$$  

(1)

There is a magnetic torque, $T_m = (2/3)R_c^2B_rB_\phi$, acting between the core and shell (22). This torque opposes the differential rotation. Another torque results from magnetic dipole radiation, $T_d = 2B_s^2R_s^6\Omega_s^3/(3c^3)$, where $c$ is the speed of light and $B_s = \epsilon B_r$ (here $\epsilon$ is defined by the ratio of the effective surface dipole field strength to the radial field strength). Under action of these two torques, the angular velocities of the shell and the core components evolve according to

$$I_s\frac{d\Omega_s}{dt} = T_m - T_d$$  

(2)

and

$$I_c\frac{d\Omega_c}{dt} = -T_m,$$  

(3)

respectively. The torque from magnetic dipole radiation can be neglected if $B_\phi \gg B_r\epsilon^2(R_s/R_c)^3 \times (R_s\Omega_s/c)^3$. This condition is easily satisfied at the time $t \gg t_0 \equiv \epsilon^2A_0^{-1}\Omega_{s,0}^{-1}(R_s/R_c)^3$ (where $t_0$ is $\sim 0.2$ ms for typical parameters). Thus, from equations (1-3), we obtained

$$\frac{d^2\Delta\Omega}{dt^2} = -\frac{2I}{3I_cI_s}R_c^2B_r^2(\Delta\Omega),$$  

(4)

where $I = I_c + I_s$ is the total moment of inertia of the star. Letting

$$\tau = \left(\frac{2I}{3I_cI_s}R_c^2B_r^2\right)^{-1/2} \simeq 2.3 \times 10^5(\epsilon/0.3)B_{s,8}^{-1}s,$$  

(5)

where $I_c \simeq I_s = 10^{45}$ g cm$^2$ and $R_s = 10^6$ cm are taken and $B_{s,8}$ is in units of $10^8$ G, we found a solution of equation (4),

$$\Delta\Omega = A_0\Omega_{s,0}\cos(t/\tau).$$  

(6)

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This indicates that differential rotation would behave as a resonator if there is no energy dissipation.

The increasing toroidal field becomes unstable because of the buoyancy effect when \( B_\phi = B_b \approx 10^{17} \text{ G} \) (20). This corresponds to the time,

\[
t_b = \frac{B_b}{B_r A_0 \Omega_{s,0}} \simeq 4.8 \times 10^4 (\epsilon/0.3) B_{s,8}^{-1} A_0^{-1} P_{s,0,\text{ms}} \text{s,}
\]

where \( P_{s,0,\text{ms}} \) is the initial spin period of the shell component in units of milliseconds. Comparing equations (5) and (7), we see that \( t_b \) is substantially less than \( \tau \) for \( A_0^{-1} P_{s,0,\text{ms}} \leq 1 \) and that the differential angular velocity \( \Delta \Omega \) is approximately constant until the time \( t_b \). At this time, the buoyant force is just equal to the force from antibuoyant stratification existing in the star. As the time increases, the buoyant force acting on the toroid would begin to exceed the antibuoyant force and the toroid will float up toward the stellar surface. The net force density acting on this toroid is given by

\[
f_b = \frac{B_r B_b A_0 \Omega_{s,0} (t - t_b)}{4\pi c_s^2 g},
\]

where \( c_s \) is the speed of sound of the embedding medium and \( g \) is the surface gravity. In terms of equation (8) and Newton’s second law, we obtained the buoyancy timescale for the toroid to float up and penetrate through the stellar surface:

\[
\Delta t_b = \left[ \frac{12 \pi \rho R_s c_s^2}{B_r B_b g A_0 \Omega_{s,0}} \right]^{1/3} \simeq 0.26 (\epsilon/0.3)^{1/3} B_{s,8}^{-1/3} A_0^{-1/3} P_{s,0,\text{ms}}^{1/3} \text{s,}
\]

where \( \rho \approx 10^{14} \text{ g cm}^{-3} \) is the mass density of the embedding medium, and the typical values of the speed of sound and the surface gravity are \( 10^{10} \text{ cm s}^{-1} \) and \( 10^{14} \text{ cm s}^{-2} \), respectively. This timescale is much shorter than \( t_b \), suggesting that the toroid, after its field strength reaches \( B_b \), would rapidly float up to the stellar surface.

Once penetrating through the surface, the toroidal fields with different polarity may reconnect (20), giving rise to an explosive event. Its energy is

\[
E_b = \frac{B_b^2}{8\pi} V_b \simeq 1.6 \times 10^{51} \text{ ergs} \left( \frac{V_b}{V_*} \right),
\]
where \( V_b \) and \( V_\star \) are the toroid’s volume and stellar volume, respectively. This energy depends on the toroid’s volume rather than on the initial magnetic field and the stellar spin period. An upper limit to the outflow mass ejected is estimated by

\[
M_{b,\text{max}} = f_b V_b / g \approx 0.9 \times 10^{-7} M_\odot (\epsilon/0.3)^{-2/3} B_{s,8}^{-2/3} A_0^{-2/3} P_{s,0,\text{ms}}^{-2/3} \left( \frac{V_b}{V_\star} \right) .
\] (11)

Because of an initial huge optical depth, the outflow will expand relativistically and its minimum average Lorentz factor is

\[
\Gamma_{b,\text{min}} \approx 1.0 \times 10^4 (\epsilon/0.3)^{2/3} B_{s,8}^{-2/3} A_0^{-2/3} P_{s,0,\text{ms}}^{2/3} .
\] (12)

The X-ray flares observed at \( t_{\text{flare}} \sim t_b \approx 100 \) s after GRBs 050709 and 050724 require that the surface magnetic field of a central pulsar \( B_s \sim 4.8 \times 10^{10} (\epsilon/0.3) A_0^{-1} P_{s,0,\text{ms}} (t_{\text{flare}}/100 \text{ s})^{-1} \) G. For typical values (19,22) of the model parameters (i.e., \( A_0 \sim 1, P_{s,0} \sim 1 \) ms, and \( \epsilon \sim 0.3 \)), this field strength is in the range of the surface magnetic fields of isolated pulsars. Furthermore, it is characteristic of the stellar magnetic field that has decayed in \( \sim 0.1 - 1 \) billion years before the merger of a neutron star binary (23). Inserting this field into equation (12), we found the minimum average Lorentz factor of the outflow from a magnetic-reconnection-driven explosion, \( \Gamma_{b,\text{min}} \sim 160 (t_{\text{flare}}/100 \text{ s})^{2/3} \), showing that the outflow is ultrarelativistic. After the end of this event, a similar windup of the interior magnetic field with \( B_r \) would start again following the same processes described above, leading to another explosion.

Collisions among the outflows with different Lorentz factors would produce late internal shocks and X-ray flares (24,25). These shocks must produce lower energy photons than did the earlier internal shocks during the prompt GRB phase. For the internal shock model, the characteristic synchrotron frequency is \( \nu_m \propto L^{1/2} R_{\text{sh}}^{-1} \propto L^{1/2} \Gamma_b^{-2} \delta t^{-1} \) (where \( L \) is the luminosity, \( R_{\text{sh}} \) is the shock radius, \( \Gamma_b \) is the bulk Lorentz factor, and \( \delta t \) is the time interval between two adjacent energy shells that the central engine ejects). The late, soft flare is the result of the combination of a lower luminosity and a longer time interval (than that of the prompt emission, where \( \delta t \sim t_b \)).
in our flare model). In addition, as the stellar differential rotation weakens (i.e., $A_0$ decreases), the time interval $\delta t$ and the outflow’s Lorentz factor $\Gamma_b$ increase (see equations 7 and 12). Because the maximum flux density of the synchrotron radiation scales as $F_{\nu,\text{max}} \propto \Gamma_b^{-3}$ (24), the flux density at frequency $\nu$ is $F_\nu = F_{\nu,\text{max}} \left(\frac{\nu}{\nu_m}\right)^{-\frac{p-1}{2}} \propto \Gamma_b^{-(2+p)\delta t^{-\frac{p-1}{2}}}$ for $\nu > \nu_m$ in the slow-cooling case (where $p$ is the spectral index of the shock-accelerated electrons) (26). Thus, the flare occurring at later times has a smaller flux density because of the larger Lorentz factor and longer time interval. This result is consistent with the observed reduced flaring activity of GRB 050724. Therefore, our model can provide a self-consistent explanation for all the observations including the energetics (see equation 10) and the temporal and spectral properties of the X-ray flares.

Generally speaking, the surface magnetic field of the postmerger pulsar could have a wider range than the preferred value invoked here to interpret the $\sim 100$ s flares in GRBs 050709 and 050724. For stronger fields, this would give rise to multi-peaks in the prompt phase (as observed in some short GRBs) or, if the flares are not bright enough, they may be masked by the steep decay component of the prompt emission tail (25). For weaker fields, the putative flares occur much later and are energetically insignificant. This would give rise to smoother X-ray afterglow lightcurves as observed in several GRBs observed by Swift (e.g. GRB 050509B) (3).

X-ray flares were observed in nearly a half of long Swift bursts (27,28). Even though the two classes of bursts have different progenitors (namely collapsars for long bursts and binary neutron star mergers for short bursts), similar temporal properties (e.g. peak times and temporal indices before and after the peaks) suggest that the X-ray flares may have a common origin. Therefore, we suggest that some long bursts may originate from moderately-magnetized millisecond pulsars with hyperaccreting accretion disks after the collapses of massive stars and their X-ray flares are the result of strong interior differential rotation of these pulsars. The differences in duration, energetics and spectrum for the two classes of bursts would be due to
different accretion disks, e.g., a transient torus for short bursts (10-12) and a fall-back accretion disk for long bursts (29,30). When the surface magnetic fields are strong enough, the spin down of this central engine pulsar would provide energy injection to the postburst relativistic outflow (31), which could interpret the late X-ray humps detected in many GRBs (25,28).

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33. We thank P. F. Chen and M. D. Ding for helpful discussions about solar flare models that have motivated us to consider X-ray flare mechanisms and Y. F. Huang for valuable suggestions. This work is supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (grant numbers: 10221001, 10233010, 10403002, and 10503012). B. Z. is supported by NASA (grant numbers: NNG05GB67G, NNG05GH92G, and NNG05GH91G).