Optical control of single-photon negative-feedback avalanche diode detector

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We experimentally demonstrate optical control of negative-feedback avalanche diode (NFAD) detectors using bright light. We deterministically generate fake single-photon detections with a better timing precision than normal operation. This could potentially open a security loophole in quantum cryptography systems. We then show how monitoring the photocurrent through the avalanche photodiode can be used to reveal the detector is being blinded.

I. INTRODUCTION

Quantum key distribution (QKD) allows two parties, Alice and Bob, to share a secret key. The first proposal of QKD was done by Bennett and Brassard in 1983. Since then, this field has evolved rapidly. Unlike classical cryptography that makes assumptions on the computational power of an eavesdropper Eve, security proofs in QKD are based on the laws of quantum mechanics.

However, imperfections in practical systems can open loopholes that can be used by a malicious third party to get some information on the key. Attacks of various types have been proposed, for example photon number splitting (PNS) attack, detector efficiency mismatch attack, Trojan-horse attack, and time-shift attack. In this paper, we are interested in a detector blinding attack, which belongs to the class of faked-state attack. In this attack, Eve uses bright light to take control of the detectors in the QKD system to force the outcome of the measurement to be the same as her own. Such blinding on individual detectors has been demonstrated for single-photon avalanche diodes (SPADs) and for superconducting nanowire single-photon detectors (SNSPDs).

Here, we show that negative-feedback avalanche diode (NFAD) detectors can be controlled with bright light. Such detectors are promising thanks to their high efficiency and low afterpulsing probability. We also show that diode current monitoring can be used to uncover the presence of blinding. We have tested 4 diodes made by Princeton Lightwave. Two of them are integrated in a commercial single-photon detector from ID Quantique (model ID220) and two are used with a custom readout circuit made at the University of Waterloo.

II. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP

The characteristics of the four NFAD devices are given in Table I. The electronic circuit of the detectors is shown in Fig. 1. It is similar for both setups except for the coupling to the amplifier, which is capacitive in D1 and D2, and inductive in D3 and D4. This differing part of the circuit is shown in dashed boxes. Under normal conditions, the NFAD works in Geiger mode, i.e., the avalanche photodiode (APD) is biased with a voltage $V_{bias}$ greater than the breakdown voltage $V_{br}$. When a photon is absorbed, it creates an avalanche generating an electrical pulse. This analog signal is then converted into a digital signal by using a comparator with a threshold voltage $V_{th}$. To take control of the detector, Eve needs first to blind it so it becomes insensitive to single photons. To do so, she sends continuous bright light on the APD,
FIG. 1. Scheme of the electrical readout. After detection of a photon by the APD, the avalanche signal is coupled to an amplifier (Amp) through a capacitor in ID220 or a pulse transformer in custom readout (Waterloo). Then it goes through a comparator (Comp). The hold-off circuit outputs a gate with a pre-set width. The feedback loop is used to quench the avalanche by applying a +5 V (ID220) or +4 V (custom readout) voltage to the anode of the NFAD for deadtime \( \tau_d \). By applying this voltage, we reduce the voltage across the APD below its breakdown voltage. \( R = 1.1 \, \text{M}\Omega \) is a resistor integrated into the NFAD \(^{11}\). In ID220, \( R_1 = 1 \, \text{k}\Omega \) and \( R_2 = 50 \, \Omega \); for Waterloo, \( R_1 = 1 \, \text{k}\Omega \) and \( R_2 = 100 \, \Omega \).

which then generates a photocurrent. As the APD is connected in series with resistors \( R \), \( R_1 \), and \( R_2 \) (see Fig. 1), the voltage across the APD will be reduced. If Eve sends enough light she can then bring the voltage across the APD below \( V_{br} \) and put the detector into a linear mode. In this mode, the detector is no longer sensitive to single photons but instead works as a linear photodetector. Eve can now force the detector to click at the time of her choosing by superimposing optical pulses (trigger pulses) to her blinding laser.

To test for blinding and control, we use a setup shown in Fig. 2. For the attack, we use two lasers at 1550 nm \(^{11}\). The first laser (blinding laser) is working in continuous-wave mode to make the detector enter its linear mode and hence become insensitive to single photons. The second laser is generating optical pulses of 33 ps full-width at half-maximum (FWHM) for the tests on detectors D1 and D2 and 161 ps for the detectors D3 and D4. The two laser signals are then combined on a 50:50 beam splitter.

III. DETECTOR CONTROL

A. Blinding

First, we test our four devices to see if they are blindable. For that, we increase the continuous-wave optical power \( P_{\text{binding}} \) arriving on the APD and we measure the rate of detection. Once it reaches 0, the detector is blinded. For our four devices, this happens at an optical power of a few nanowatts and we have tested that they stay blinded up to several milliwatts.

B. Forced detections

Once Eve has blinded the detector, she can send optical trigger pulses to generate electrical pulses. The amplitude of the signal will be proportional to the energy of the trigger pulse \( E_{\text{pulse}} \). As there is a comparator in the readout circuit, not all pulses are necessarily detected. If the amplitude of the signal is below the comparator threshold, no click will be registered. Therefore, by controlling \( E_{\text{pulse}} \), Eve can force the detector to click with a probability \( p \in [0, 1] \). We can then define \( E_{\text{never}} \) as the maximum energy of the optical pulse that never generates a click, and \( E_{\text{always}} \) as the energy above which the detector always clicks. To avoid introducing errors in the key, Eve must carefully choose the energy of her pulse. In the case of the BB84 protocol \(^{11}\), if Eve and Bob measure in different bases, the pulse energy will be divided equally between Bob’s two detectors \(^{11}\). In this case, Eve does not want Bob’s detectors to click, thus she must choose her \( E_{\text{pulse}} \) so that \( E_{\text{pulse}} < 2E_{\text{never}} \). If Eve’s and Bob’s bases are the same, all the light will be directed to one detector, which will click with a probability \( p \). For short distances, Bob will expect a high detection rate. Eve must then force Bob to click with a high probability, hence the transition region between \( E_{\text{never}} \) and \( E_{\text{always}} \) must be sufficiently narrow. On the other hand, for long-distance QKD, Bob expects a low detection rate, so Eve can afford to have Bob’s detector clicking with a low probability.

Figure 3 shows the probability to get a detection depending on the energy of the trigger pulse for various blinding powers. For this experiment, we set the deadtime \( \tau_d \) of the detector at 18 \( \mu \)s (20 \( \mu \)s), which corresponds to a maximum detection rate of \( \sim 55 \, \text{kHz} \) (50 kHz) for detectors D1 and D2 (D3 and D4), and send trigger pulses at a rate of 40 kHz. As we can see in Fig. 3 there is a transition region where the detection probability monotonically increases from 0 to 1. The changing width of this transition region can be seen in Fig. 4 for...
D1 and D2 and in Fig. 3 for D3 and D4.

For high blinding power, the detector is in the linear mode and the APD gain decreases with the optical power, because the voltage across the APD drops. In order to get the same amplitude of signal at the input of the comparator and get a click, we then need to increase the energy of the trigger pulse. For low blinding power, the detector is in the transition between the linear mode and the Geiger mode. In this region, the probability to generate a macroscopic signal even with a low energy pulse is non-zero, which explains why $E_{\text{never}}$ decreases when we reduce the blinding power. As seen in Fig. 4a, when we increase the efficiency of D1 from 10% to 20%, the curves are shifted to the right. This is because the bias voltage is higher for 20% efficiency hence we need higher $P_{\text{blinding}}$ to reduce the voltage across the APD to the same value. The detector D3 exhibits a similar effect as seen in Fig. 5a. Now, if we compare detectors D1 and D2 with the same efficiency, we see in Fig. 4b that both of them have similar triggering energies. The main difference is in the minimum blinding power, which is higher for D2 by a factor of 3. The detectors D3 and D4 require higher triggering energy. This can come from the fact that the detection threshold was set to a higher value due to higher noise in the circuit. We also note that D4 has $\approx 14$ times higher minimum blinding power than D3 (Fig. 5b). Thus for both pairs of detectors, higher minimum blinding power correlates with larger active area.

For low blinding power, the transition is too wide for an eavesdropper to attack the entire key in a short distance BB84 protocol. Eve has then two possibilities: either she increases the blinding power to have a transition region sufficiently narrow, or she attacks only a small part of the key such that Bob’s detection rate is not impacted.

C. Timing jitter

Another important parameter for Eve is the jitter of the detector’s response to her trigger pulse. Ideally, it should be narrower than single-photon detection jitter. For our measurements, we use a time-correlated single photon counting with the trigger signal for the pulsed laser as a time reference. We perform timing measurements with single photons and bright pulses. For detector D2, we use a 33 ps FWHM laser for bright pulses and single-photon jitter measurement; for detector D3,
we use 161 ps FWHM bright pulses and 147 ps FWHM attenuated pulses for single-photon jitter measurement. Results are shown in Fig. 5.

As we can see, under control, the jitter of the detection is greatly reduced compared to single-photon detection. Eve is then able to perfectly control in which time bin she wants to make Bob’s detector clicks. In order to reproduce the larger jitter of single-photon detections, Eve can artificially increase the jitter of her bright pulses.

The detector response to the trigger pulse is probably slightly time-shifted relative to its single-photon response. We have not measured this time shift. However this should not hinder Eve in most situations, because she controls the arrival time of her trigger pulse.

**IV. COUNTERMEASURES**

It is a general assumption in cryptography, called Kerckhoff’s principle, that Eve knows everything about the cryptographic setup and its parameters (detector characteristics under the bright-light control, daytime, etc.). We therefore have to design a countermeasure that detects the attack even if Eve knows about our countermeasure and tries her best to circumvent it.

One possible way to detect this attack is to monitor the current through the APD. A monitoring circuit is already implemented in ID220. A voltage converter chip biasing the APD has a monitoring pin giving a current equal to 20% of the average current flowing through the APD, thanks to a current mirror. This current is measured using a 24-bit analog-to-digital converter. In the actual implementation, its value is sampled once per second. We have performed tests of this current monitoring using detector D2 with $\tau_{d}$ set at 18 $\mu$s. We have first only blinded the detector without sending trigger pulses.

In normal conditions, the mean current through the APD is very small since the only contribution comes from avalanches due to the detection of a photon. Under control, the blinding laser forces the APD to be continuously conductive. In this case, the mean current should
FIG. 7. Dependence of the detector D2 count rate and bias current on the incident photon rate. Unlike measurements done with Si detector in Ref. 10, here we observe a plateau for the count rate due to the deadtime.

TABLE II. Current values measured for detector D2 under blinding for different efficiencies and trigger pulse rates.

| Efficiency (%) | Pulse rate (kHz) | Current (µA) |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------|
| 10            | 40              | 0.87        |
| 10            | 50              | 0.38        |
| 10            | 55              | 0.15        |
| 20            | 40              | 2.39        |
| 20            | 50              | 1.23        |
| 20            | 55              | 0.71        |

be greater than under normal use. This can be seen in Fig. 7. At more than $10^{10}$ incident photons per second, the count rate of the detector drops and reaches 0 (the detector is blinded) while the mean current $I$ increases significantly.

We have then tested the countermeasure while fully controlling the detector. For that, we used CW blinding and the 33 ps FWHM pulsed laser to generate the forced detections. In this case, we see that the mean current through the detector is reduced and depends on the rate of the trigger pulses (see Table II). The explanation comes from the working principle of the detector. Indeed, after a detection, the voltage across the APD is reduced to limit the afterpulsing. During this deadtime (18 µs in our case), the gain of the APD is smaller so the current due to the blinding is reduced. This gives a mean current smaller than that with only the blinding laser.

The lowest current we could reach was 150 nA by saturating the detector. This is still higher than the values measured with up to $10^8$ incoming photons per second, which never exceed 100 nA (Fig. 7). By setting the threshold of the current to a proper value (which would depend on $\tau_d$ and detection rate), Bob can thus detect the blinding of his detector by Eve. However this countermeasure is only guaranteed to work provided the blinding is continuous as in our tests, and not a more advanced pulsed one.

In order to reduce the impact of her attack on the mean photocurrent, Eve has the possibility to take advantage of the detector deadtime to minimize the overall illumination. Indeed, during the deadtime, the voltage across the detector is reduced below $V_{br}$ but is still several tens of volts and the blinding laser will unnecessarily generate a current. Hence, by stopping the blinding while the detector is inactive and forcing the detection shortly after its recovery, we can reduce the mean current slightly below 100 nA, making the attack hardly distinguishable from the normal conditions. To detect these short periods of blinding and keep the system secure against the blinding attack, a high-bandwidth measurement is necessary. For that, we use an oscilloscope probe to monitor the output of the bias voltage source (point marked $V_{bias}$ in Fig. 1). Due to photocurrent generated by the attack and non-zero output impedance of the bias voltage source, small voltage drops are observed at this point.

Figure 8 shows the deviation of $V_{bias}$ from its nominal value for detector D2. On each curve, we see two peaks (one positive and one negative) separated by the duration of the deadtime. These are due to high-frequency components of the applied quenching voltage. After the deadtime, we see a voltage drop but only in the case where we blind the detector. This drop comes from the photocurrent induced by the blinding of the detector and lasts as long as the detector is blinded. The deviation of the voltage from its nominal value gives us then information on the state of the detector in real time. The detection of this voltage drop may be used to unveil the presence of an eavesdropper even in the case of more sophisticated attacks such as the one proposed here, and could give Bob information on the bits potentially compromised by this attack.
V. CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated the control of four free-running single-photon NFAD detectors by using bright light, which could be used to attack QKD. Mean current monitoring allows us to detect the presence of continuous blinding but might be insufficient in the case of blinding with varying intensity. In the latter case, we have shown that a high-bandwidth measurement of the current flowing through the APD can be used to monitor the state of the detector in real time. This is a step towards constructing a hack-proof single-photon detector for QKD.

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