

# Partial Key Overwrite Attacks in Microcontrollers: a Survey

*CASCADE 2025*

**pcy Sluys, Lennert Wouters, Benedikt Gierlichs, Ingrid Verbauwhede**

# Outline

- ① Introduction
- ② PKO Attacks
- ③ Survey
- ④ Conclusion

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# What are PKO attacks?

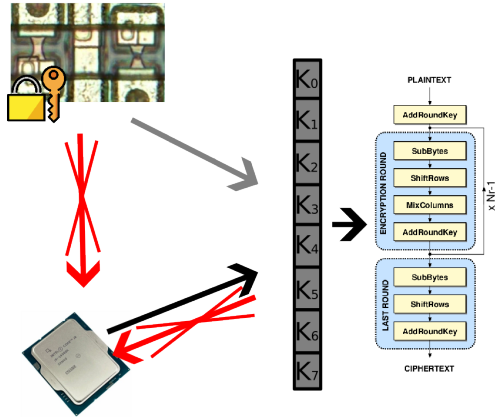
- ▶ Chips often have cryptographic accelerators<sup>CITATION NEEDED</sup>
- ▶ In some implementations, the key is kept separate from the CPU
  - PUF
  - OTP/fuses
  - ...
  - Hardware KDF
  - TEE



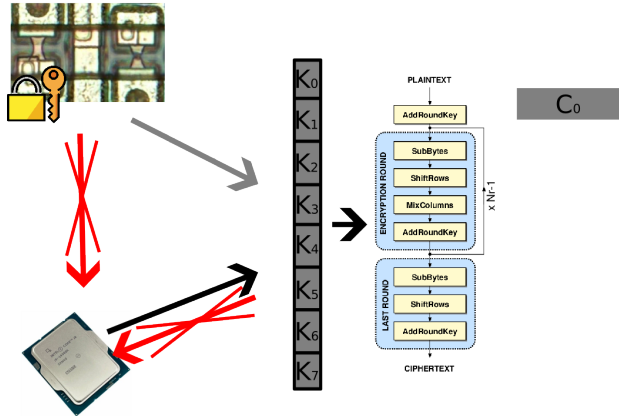
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  - ...
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- ▶ If **partial** overwrite of a **write-only** key register allowed: key leakage!
  - ⇒ **P**artial **K**ey **O**verwrite attack

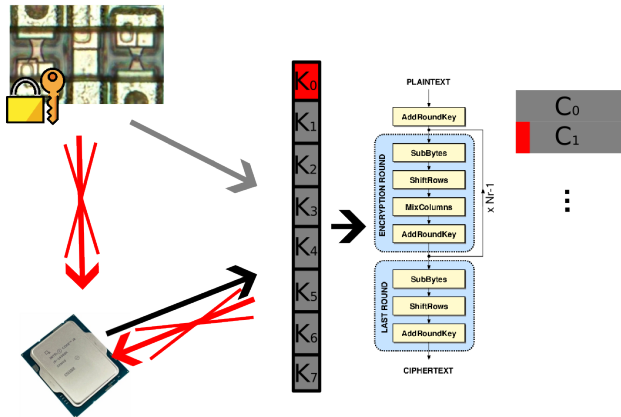
## An example



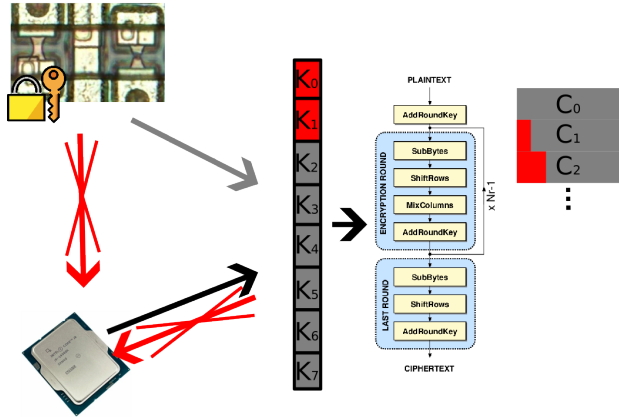
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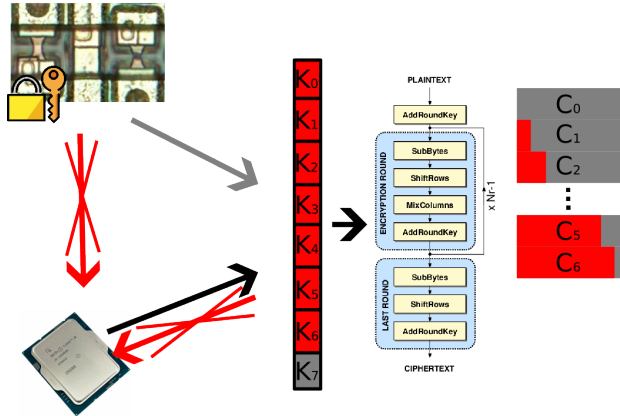
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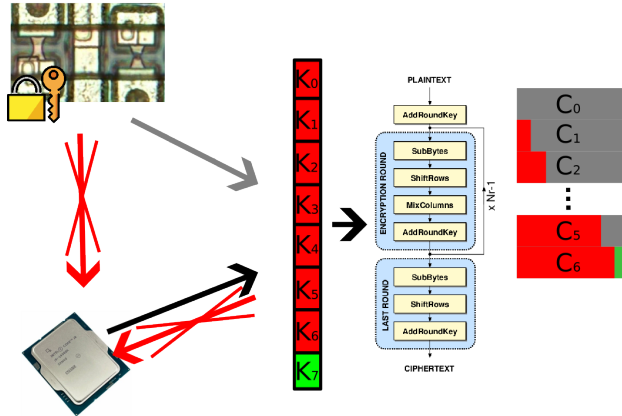
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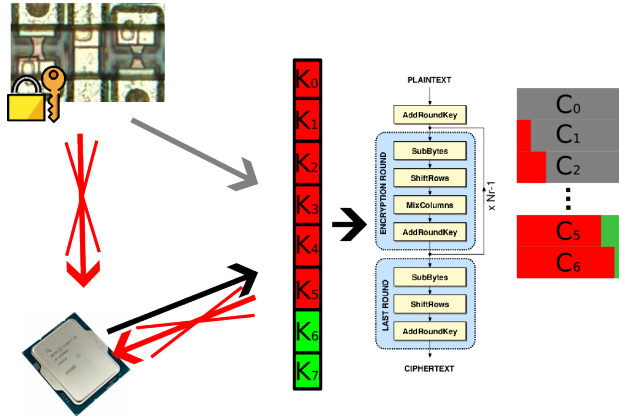
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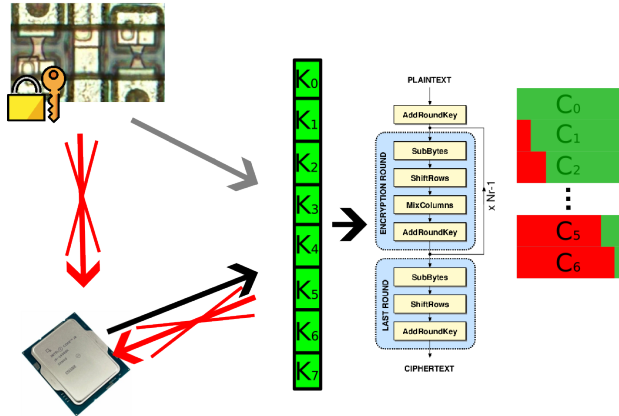


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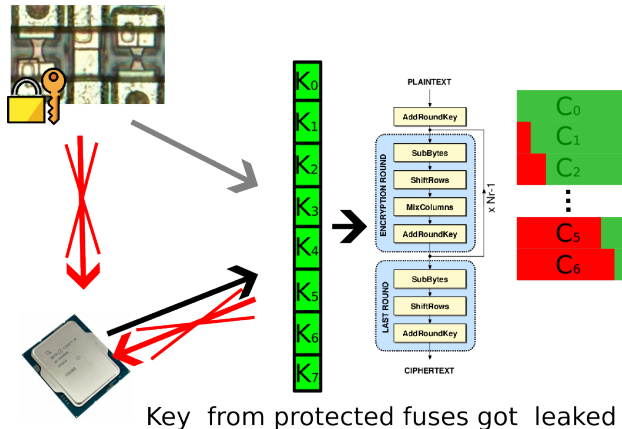




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- 2 PKO Attacks
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# Attacker model

- ▶ Attacker can query cryptographic module
- ▶ Key not exposed to attacker
- ▶ Attacker can overwrite **parts of** the key

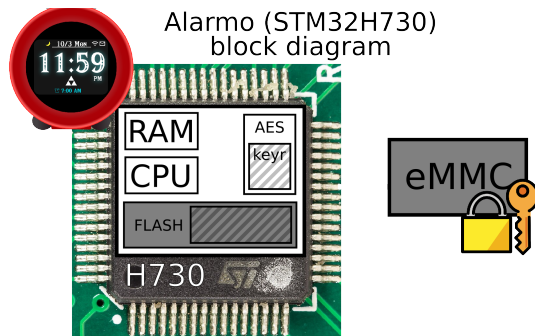
# Attacker model

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Embedded context:

- ▶ Query cryptographic module using low-privilege code execution or debug access
- ▶ Key secured using TEE, protected fuses, boot ROM, ...

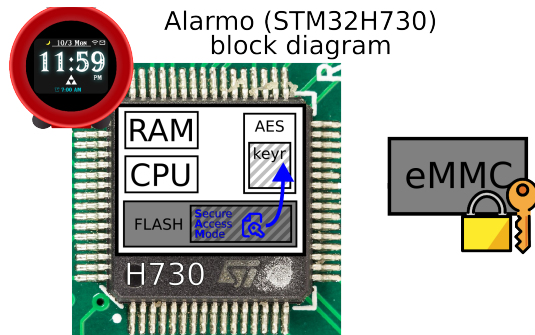
### Example: Alarmo<sup>1</sup>



Based on CC BY-SA 4.0 images by Raimond Spekking and PantheraLeo1359531

<sup>1</sup><https://garyodernichts.blogspot.com/2024/10/looking-into-nintendo-alarmo.html>

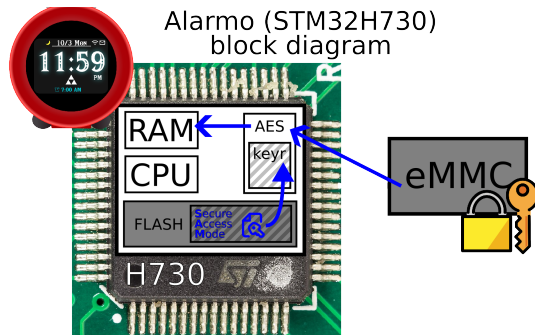
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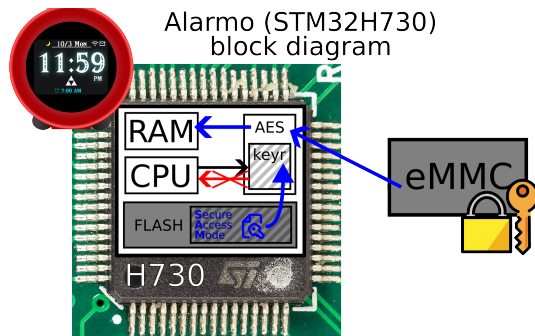


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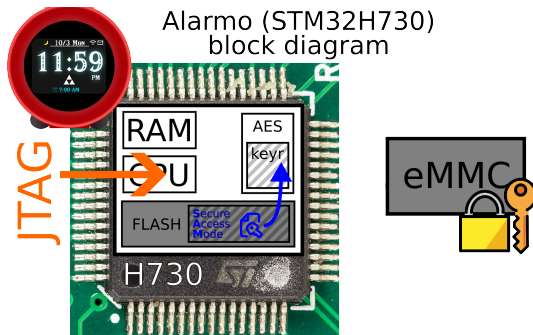
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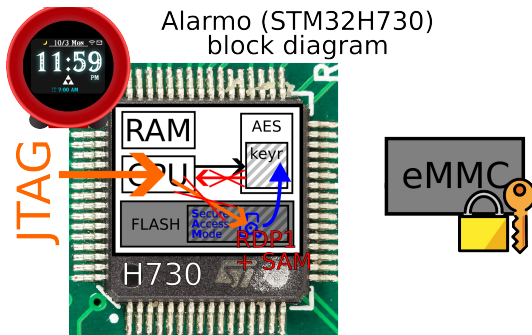
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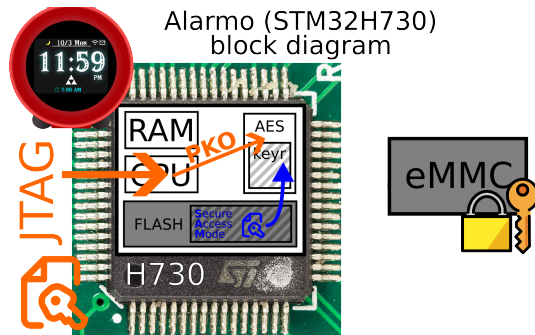
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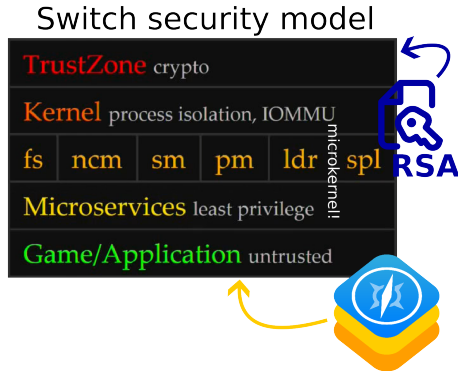
## Switch security model



Based on slide from "Console Security - Switch" by plutoo, derrek and naehrwert. CC BY 4.0

<sup>2</sup>[https://switchbrew.org/wiki/Switch\\_System\\_Flaws#TrustZone](https://switchbrew.org/wiki/Switch_System_Flaws#TrustZone)

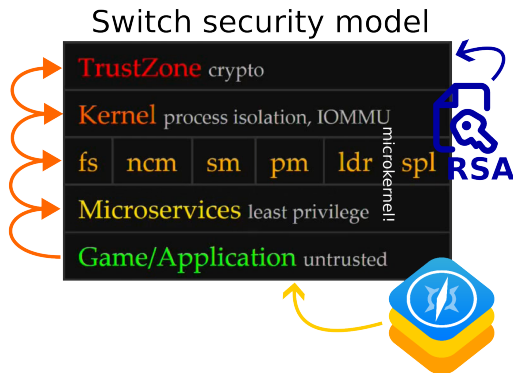
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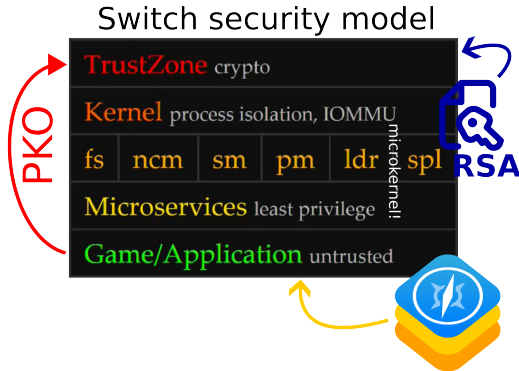
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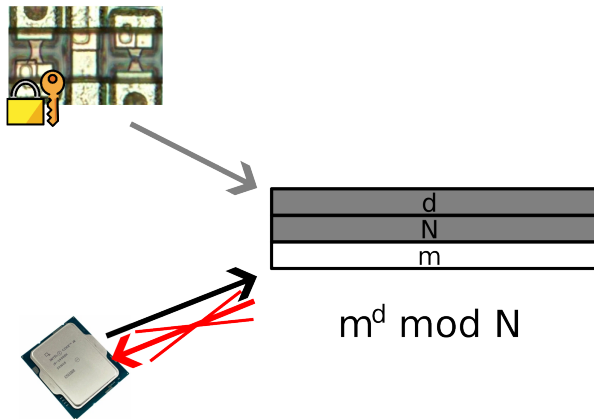


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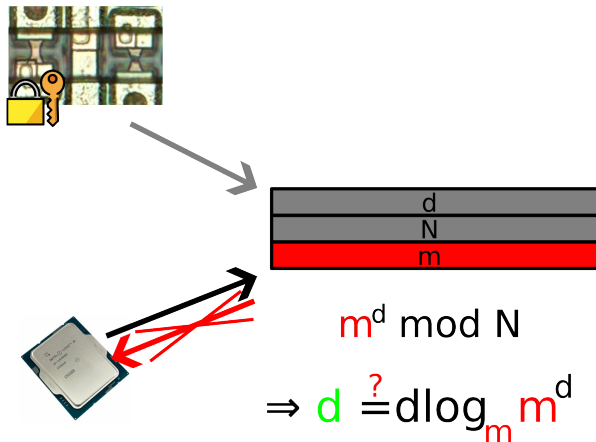
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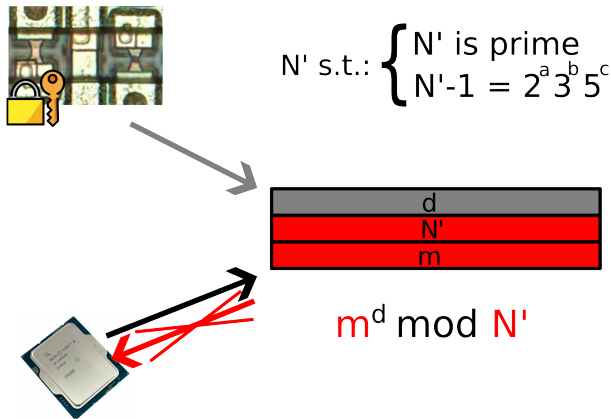
## Not just block ciphers



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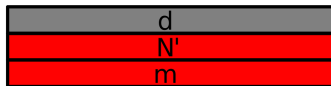
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$N'$  s.t.:  $\begin{cases} N' \text{ is prime} \\ N'-1 = 2^a 3^b 5^c \end{cases}$   
 $\Rightarrow$  Pohlig-Hellman to calculate dlog

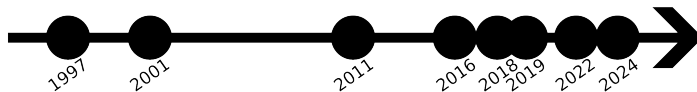


$$m^d \bmod N'$$

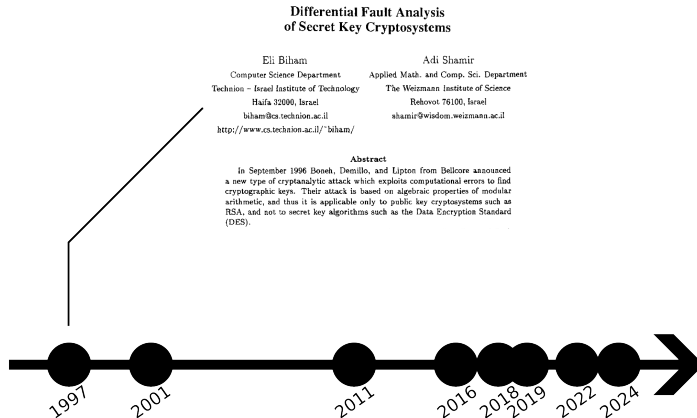
$$\Rightarrow d = \text{dlog}_m m^d \bmod N'$$



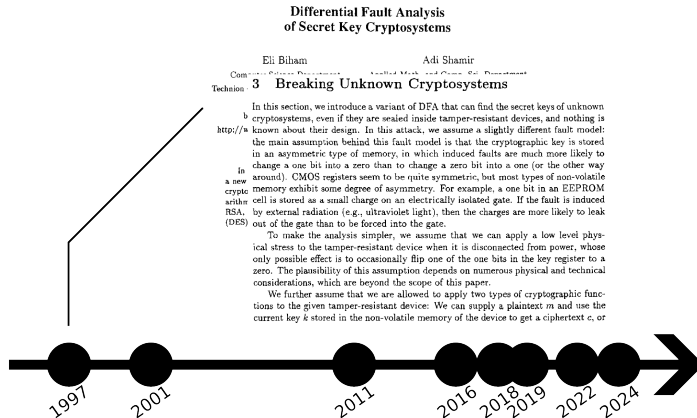
# Timeline of PKO attacks



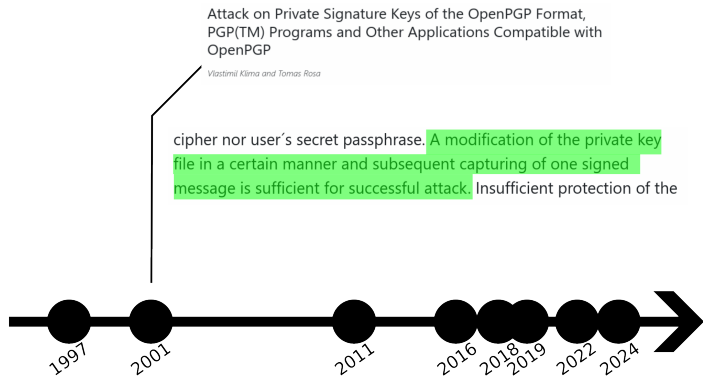
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Myria, 2016

RSA keyslots don't  
clear exponent when  
setting modulus

The RSA keyslots are set by boot ROM to have four private RSA keys. The exponent value in the RSA registers is write-only and not readable.

However, when setting a keyslot's modulus, the RSA hardware leaves the exponent alone. This allows retrieving the exponent by doing a discrete logarithm of the output.

By setting the modulus to a prime number whose modular multiplicative order is "smooth" (that is,  $p-1$  is divisible by only small prime numbers), discrete logarithms can be calculated quickly using the [Pohlig-Hellman algorithm](#). If the prime chosen is greater than the modulus, but the same bit size, the discrete logarithm is the private exponent.

This exploit's usefulness is limited: RSA keyslot 0 is only used in current firmware for deriving the 6.x save and 7.x NCCH keys, which were already known, and the other three keyslots are entirely unused. Additionally, with a boot ROM dump, this exploit is moot; these private keys are located in the protected ARM9 boot ROM.

[https://www.3dbrew.org/wiki/3DS\\_System\\_Flaws](https://www.3dbrew.org/wiki/3DS_System_Flaws)



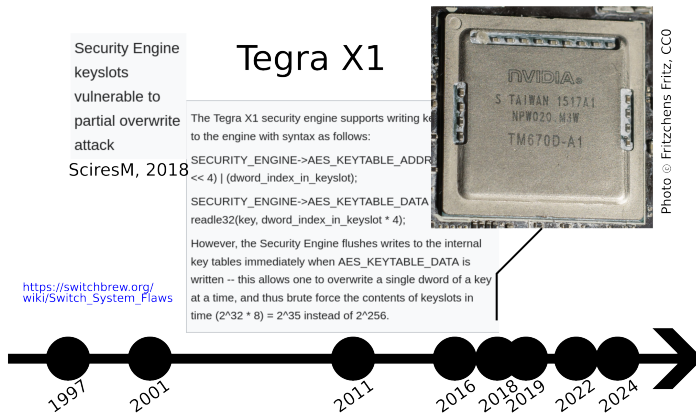
3DS photo © Evan Amos, PD



# Timeline of PKO attacks



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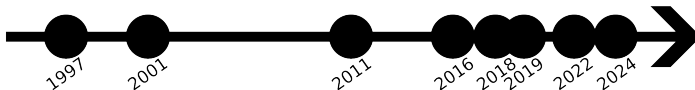
## Fault Attacks on Secure Embedded Software: Threats, Design and Evaluation

Bilgiday Yuce  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA  
[bilgiday@vt.edu](mailto:bilgiday@vt.edu)

Patrick Schaumont  
Virginia Tech  
Blacksburg, VA  
[schaum@vt.edu](mailto:schaum@vt.edu)

Marc Witteman  
Riscure – Security Lab  
Delft, Netherlands  
[witteman@riscure.com](mailto:witteman@riscure.com)

original secret value can be detected. For this reason, for example, write-only cryptographic key registers should never allow partial update, otherwise the attacker can test a partial key guess by detecting these collisions.



# Timeline of PKO attacks

TrustZone allows using imported RSA exponents with arbitrary modulus  
SciresM, 2019

TrustZone supports "importing" RSA private exponents encrypted with TrustZone only keydata in console that has compromised userland calculations with them offline. In practice and SSL (console client cert communicate). However, the actual SMC API only imports separately by userland in each call. This that userland can pass in any message private exponent) % modulus back from the userland.

By choosing a prime number modulus  $P$  such that  $P$  has "smooth" order (totient  $\phi(P)$  only by "small" primes), one can efficiently use the [Pohlig-Hellman algorithm](#) to calculate the discrete logarithm of such a result directly, and thus obtain the private exponent.

This is mostly useless in practice, given the general availability of other exploits to obtain these decrypted exponents.

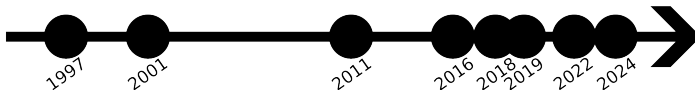
This was fixed in 10.0.0 by importing the modulus in addition to the exponent for the ES device key and ES client cert key. For backwards compatibility reasons the SSL key and Lotus key still only import the exponent.

StorageExpMod also now validates that the exponentiation of "DDDD..." about the provided modulus by the imported exponent and then the fixed public exponent returns "DDDD...", and returns invalid argument if validation fails.

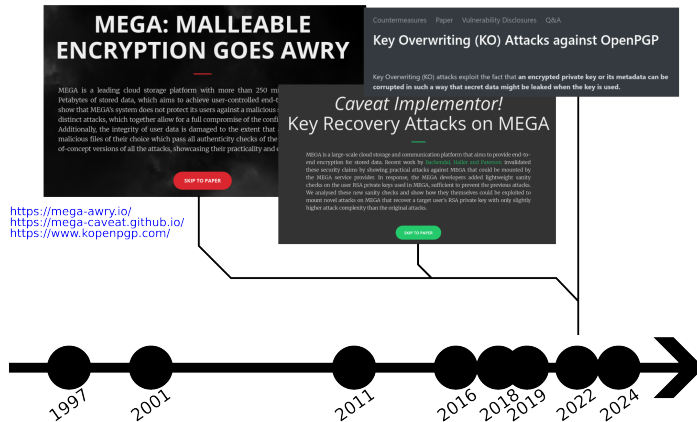


Switch photo © Evan Amos, PD

[https://switchbrew.org/wiki/Switch\\_System\\_Flaws](https://switchbrew.org/wiki/Switch_System_Flaws)



# Timeline of PKO attacks





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<https://garyodernichts.blogspot.com/2024/10/looking-into-nintendo-alarmo.html>

## Bonus: Obtaining the Key

When configuring the CRYPT interface, the key is placed into four 32-bit registers. Unfortunately reading out the key from those registers isn't possible, since they are write-only. Brute-forcing also isn't a viable option since there are  $2^{128}$  different possible combinations.

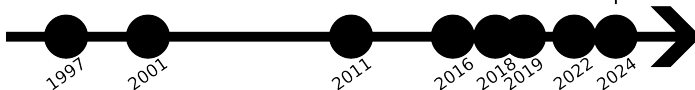
While Spinda was already looking into the contents of the eMMC (She found lots of interesting stuff, keep an eye on her [Twitter!](#)), I started talking with hexkyz about the findings. Hexkyz noticed that the CRYPT interface is vulnerable to a partial overwrite attack. And indeed, since the key is split up into 4 different registers it's possible to only update 32 bits of the key and then try out all  $2^{32}$  different possibilities until matching output is produced by the crypto processor. This needs to be done for all four parts of the key, so we need to test for a total of  $4 \times 2^{32}$  different combinations, which is possible to do in a few hours. After writing a small payload to perform this, I let it run overnight. The next morning I checked the progress and it was done, I had successfully obtained the AES-128-CTR key used to encrypt and decrypt the Alarmo content files.

## Gary's hacking stuff

Tuesday, October 25, 2024

### Looking into the Nintendo Alarmo

While everyone was waiting on news for the successor of the Nintendo Switch, Nintendo released the plastic alarm clock that can wake you up with sounds from your favorite Nintendo. I was hesitant to buy one at first, I eventually decided to get one and look deeper into how



## Timeline of PKO attacks



# Attack comparison and context

- ▶ Mounted using software exploits:
  - PGP attacks
  - MEGA attacks
- ▶ Mounted using invasive circuit-level attacks:
  - Partial EEPROM wipe in [1]
- ▶ Mounted using fault injection:
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- ▶ Mounted using [???]:
  - PKO in microcontroller

# “Mounted using [???” ?

Exact attack method?

- ▶ Not software vuln: attacking bug in **hardware** state machine
- ▶ Not side channel or fault attack
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Examples:

- ▶ Flash readout protect circumvention using instruction fetches [6]
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Nameless...

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(with help from people on Mastodon...)

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**VRISKA** (from *Homestuck*)

Nameless...

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Is this still a problem nowadays?

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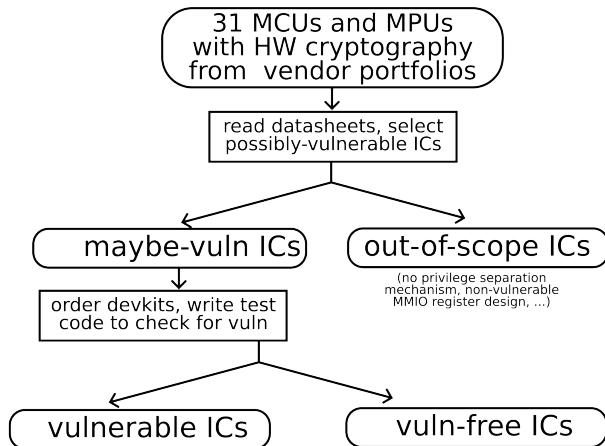
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How many off-the-shelf chips are vulnerable?

⇒ **Time for a survey**



## Method



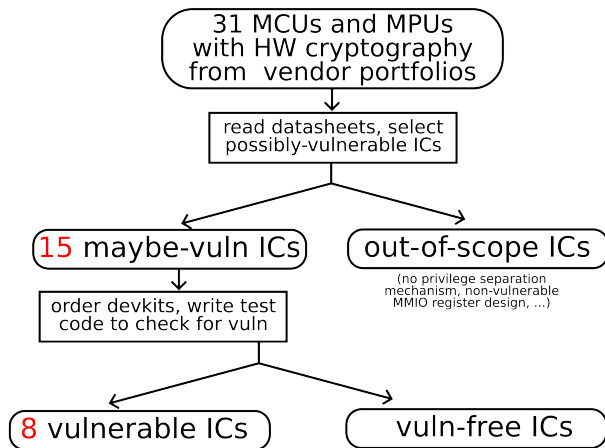
## Focus

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  - Please publish documentation
  - Attempted reverse-engineering two anyway (Renesas RA2E1, Microchip SAML11)

## Focus

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  - Please publish documentation
  - Attempted reverse-engineering two anyway (Renesas RA2E1, Microchip SAML11)
- ▶ Survey of **SoCs**, not *end-user products*
  - Latter not practical

## Results



# Results

31 MCUs and MPUs  
with HW cryptography  
from vendor portfolios

- ▶ 3 different vendors with vulnerable devices
- ▶ For every vendor: also have a product **with** countermeasures
- ▶ RSA accelerators: hardware bugs??

order devkits, write test  
code to check for vuln

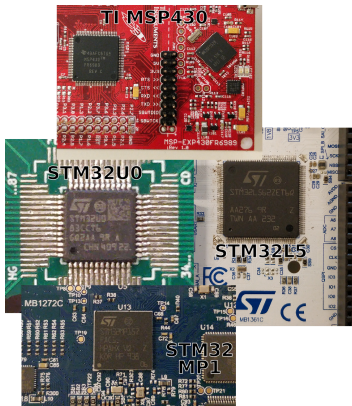
(no privilege separation  
mechanism, non-vulnerable  
MMIO register design, ...)

8 vulnerable ICs

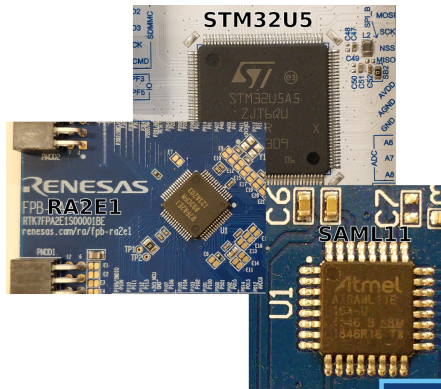
vuln-free ICs

## Details

### Vulnerable

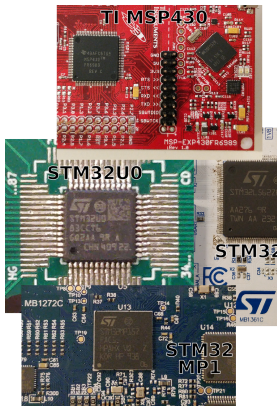


### Not vuln.



## Details

Vulnerable

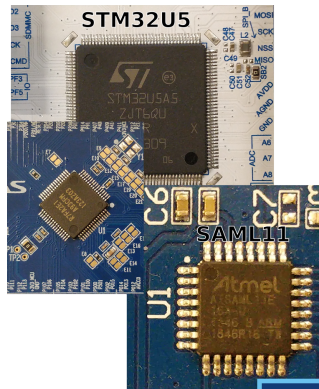


ESP32x3:



It's Complicated

Not vuln.



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# Conclusion

- ▶ 'Simple' but overlooked attack
- ▶ Caused not by single faulty component, but complex interaction between components
- ▶ Still important to real-world attackers
- ▶ Seems to be *slowly* on its way out?  
(Correlation with introduction of Arm PSA Certified?)

Questions?

# Bibliography

- [1] Eli Biham and Adi Shamir. "Differential Fault Analysis of Secret Key Cryptosystems". In: *Proceedings of the 17th Annual International Cryptology Conference on Advances in Cryptology*. Ed. by Burton S. Kaliski. CRYPTO '97. Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1997, pp. 513–525. ISBN: 978-3-540-69528-8. URL: <https://doc.lagout.org/security/Papers/DFA%20of%20Secret%20Key%20Cryptosystems.pdf>.
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