FASE: An Open Run-Time Reconfigurable FPGA Architecture for Tamper-Resistant and Secure Embedded Systems

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Abstract

The Run-Time Reconfigurable (RTR) feature is highly desirable for flexible and fast self-contained systems. RTR can be achieved on some commercial FPGA platforms. We propose an open solution, called FASE, that allows for fine-grain RTR, designed to be more intuitive than currently available solutions. The issues of initializing RTR soft IP-cores and a design flow to manage the dynamics of RTR are presented.

In the context of secure embedded systems, there is a need for both flexibility and tamper-resistance. However, the robustness level for security constraints is difficult to get and to prove because of the proprietary hidden structures. The FASE architecture addresses these issues. It makes it possible for any designer to implement custom and arbitrary dynamic strategies. We illustrate two case studies: an implementation-level counter-measure against side-channel attacks and an efficient strategy to thwart fault injection attacks against cryptographic functions.

1. Introduction

The hardware reconfigurability is considered when applications are constrained by a high degree of both flexibility and performance. Many academic projects studied RTR architectures, to speed up reconfiguration time and increase the flexibility for reconfigurable computing [1][2][3]. Some commercial FPGAs provide dynamic reconfigurability features. XILINX offers partial reconfigurability by columns in its VIRTEXII offer [4]. ATMEL proposes the AT40K and an embedded FPGA in the FPSLIC family based on AVR microcontrollers [5]. Many academics studied optimized tools for fast reconfiguration [6][7]. However, most innovative architectures like the ATMEL AT6000 and XILINX XC6200 did not get any commercial success and disappeared. With new emerging challenges like security, reconfigurable architectures could have a second wind.

Reconfigurability is a good strategy to secure cryptographic accelerators, that are targets of side-channel or fault injection attacks. We suggest, for instance, that a permanent and random change of the configuration is able to conceal side-channel information from the attacker. The main drawbacks of existing reconfigurable architectures are twofold:

1. The architectures are proprietary with many unknowns in the routing structure and reconfiguration hardware.

2. The proposed methods and tools appear to be very constrained by the architecture without improvement possibility.

The XILINX architectures are the most constrained because of their coarse-grain column-wise approach. The ATMEL has a fine-grain approach with a reconfiguration at the cell level. However, their legacy Place/Route tool (FIGARO [8]) imposes a static placement of the reconfigured area. Therefore, it seems quite challenging to evaluate the robustness of FPGAs and propose tamper resistant circuits without a close collaboration with the manufacturer.

In the security context, the FASE “FPGA Architecture for Secure Embedded systems” project aims at designing an FPGA architecture with RTR capability which meets these requirements:

- A fine grain architecture which allows the designer to place/route dynamically the reconfigured area anywhere and at cell boundaries.

- An open architecture with detailed and exhaustive specifications of the routing and logic resources.

- A simple configuration interface which allows the programmer to build his own reconfiguration strategy.

FASE is an offshoot of the SAFE (Secured Asynchronous FPGA for Embedded systems) project [9] which takes profit of asynchronous cells to increase the robustness against side-channel attacks. This project specifies
that the partial and dynamic configuration has to accommodate several modules possibly implemented in different styles of asynchronous logic [10]. It should also be able to modify the design on-the-fly on detection of intrusion. By contrast, FASE is a synchronous FPGA, thus intrinsically unsafe against side-channel attacks. However, its dynamic reconfiguration capability also enables it to implement both preventive and resilience strategies (that are not built-in.)

The rest of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the main principles of FASE functional and configuration architecture. Section 3 addresses the issues involved in reconfiguration and presents a typical design flow. In Section 4 two applications requiring a high level of security are presented. Finally, Section 5 draws the conclusion.

2. FASE Architecture

2.1. FASE Overall Architecture and Principles

As an embedded FPGA, FASE is designed to be connectable to a system bus. It thus features a VCI interface. The general architecture of FASE comprises of a functional array (FASE ARRAY) and of a configuration controller (FASE_CONF), as shown in figure 1.

FASE has a generic architecture described in the sequel as per the VPR (Versatile Place-and-Route tool [12] [13]) nomenclature. However, for the sake of illustration, fixed valued are given to some structural parameters. The FASE array (FASE ARRAY) is a reconfigurable embedded architecture based on four hierarchical objects:

1. The logic element (LE) is composed of a look-up table (LUT) and a D-flip-flop (DFF). A reset mask RST_MASK indicates whether the DFF reset line is active or not.

2. The compound logic block (CLB) is composed of several LEs (only one in the sequel.)

3. The configurable tile (CT), depicted in figure 2, is composed of one CLB plus, at its periphery, the following switching components:
   - The connection box CBOX_IN (resp. CBOX_OUT) permits the CLB input (resp. output) connections.
   - The switch box (SBOX) allows the routing between CLBs.

4. And finally, the array FASE ARRAY is an $N \times N$ square set of CTs surrounded by $4 \times N$ CTs dedicated to the I/Os (IOBs.)

The configuration controller (FASE_CONF) is in charge of configuring and initializing any area of the FPGA. The RTR in FASE is based on two configuration levels:

1. first of all, the selection of a specific set of CTs or IOBs amongst the array, and

2. secondly, the CT internal components: CLB (with the RST_MASK), CBOX_IN, CBOX_OUT and SBOX.
A configuration zone corresponds to a set of CT, not necessarily rectangular. The RTR can be applied by re-configuring subsets of objects inside a subset of CT. For instance, only the RST_MASK of the configured area is cleared (so that it is properly initialized) while the rest of the FASE_ARRAY remains unaffected by the global reset (because the RST_MASK is set.) Detailed examples are given in Sec. 3.

2.2. Functional Architecture

The FASE architecture presentation does not insist on any particular performance improvement. The reason is that most optimizations and trade-offs published in the literature can be transposed in a straightforward way to FASE simple and generic structure.

2.2.1. CLB. In addition to the LUT mask, a configuration point SET/CLEAR selects whether the flip-flop should be set or cleared when RST is active. The configuration point SEQ/COMB selects between the “LUT only” or the “LUT + DFF” functionality. The RST_MASK is added to selectivly initialize CLBs in FASE. This configuration point is addressable independently of the CLB configuration chain. Figure 3 illustrates a CLB composed of one 4 → 1 LE with maskable reset. In all the figures, a solid dot (●) represents a configuration memory point.

2.2.2. Routing Resources. To simplify this section, all the routing tracks are segments of unity length and use a uniform channel width W. We design the input and output connection box flexibilities to be 50% (i.e. the CLB inputs and output connect to 50% of the routing tracks) and we use a Wilton switch box [14] to achieve greater routability. The IOB flexibility is unitary. The global signals RST and CLK are routed separately on dedicated tracks.

2.2.3. Functional Interface. FASE_ARRAY is linked to the external world via the VCI interface which contains a dual-port RAM accessible by both FASE_ARRAY and VCI. Four IOBs are dedicated to control signals:

- CMD is used by the VCI interface to start an operation.
- EOC is set by FASE_ARRAY to signal the operation end.
- RAMEN indicates that FASE_ARRAY currently accesses the RAM.
- WE indicates that FASE_ARRAY writes into the RAM.

4 × N - 4 IOBs are available as address and data lines to access the dual-port RAM. For instance if \( N = 8 \), 12 IOBs pads could compose the address word and 16 could be the data (8 inputs and 8 outputs). The details of the functional interface is depicted in figure 4.

2.3. Configuration

The configurable memory points are programmed via a set of shift registers inside each CT. From a configuration viewpoint, an IOB is considered as being a CT subset. This is because the IOB has no CLB and the number of CBOX and SBOX depends on the IOB location. At power up, the power on reset signal (denoted PO_RST) permits to start with all the configuration points inactive.

2.3.1. Configuration Architecture. In FASE, each CT and IOB is addressable by the ADDR_ROW and ADDR_COL lines, as illustrated by figure 5.

Inside a CT, there are four configuration chains selected by the signals ADDR_INTRA_CT[1:0]. Each chain corresponds to specific CT components:
Figure 5. Address lines and global configuration signals.

Figure 6. Separately addressable configuration chains of FASE.

1. CBOX_OUT,
2. CBOX_IN + CLB,
3. SBOX and
4. RST_MASK.

To avoid electrical conflicts due to shifting of configuration bits along the chain, the CBOX_OUT is disabled during the CT configuration period, except if the RST_MASK is being configured. This will allow the designer to split dynamically active blocks and inactive blocks without any conflict or operation interrupt.

The chain input is CONF_DATA and the chain clock is CONF_CLK.

Figure 7 depicts the architecture of the four configuration chains.

The configuration points drive logic directly inside the CLB or drive pass-transistors for the connection boxes and the switch box. To save a few configuration bits, the connexion boxes use multiplexer switches. The output connection boxes use tri-state buffers rather than pass-transistors to allow high fan-out drive. Figure 7 shows the connection box configuration points.

If we consider one LE per CLB, the number of configuration points as in figure 3, the number of configuration points is as follows:

- CLB: 18 (M0 – M15, SEQ/COMB, SET/CLEAR),
- RST_MASK: 1,
- CBOX_IN: \((W \times Fc_{in})\) \times number of inputs,
- CBOX_OUT: \((W \times Fc_{out})\) \times number of outputs,
- SBOX: 6 \times W,

where: W is the number of tracks per row or column, Fc_in and Fc_out are respectively the flexibilities of the CBOX_IN and CBOX_OUT.

2.3.2. Configuration Interface. FASE_CONF is in charge of the configuration and of the delivery of global signals that are CLK and RST. Like FASE_ARRAY, it is connected to the external world via a VCI interface. FASE_CONF generates the signals described in table 1.

All the signals are global, except ADDR_ROW and ADDR_COL that are decoded and associated with respectively a specific row and column as shown in figure 5.

The FASE_CONF reads the instructions and configuration data from the RAM and sends a serial bitstream to the proper address in FASE_ARRAY. The basic instruction set is given in table 2.

3. Run-Time Reconfiguration

RTR soft IPs or DHPs [7] can be called any time into FASE at the presence of already active blocks. This can be
Table 1. Interface between FASE_CONF and FASE_ARRAY.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signal</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RST</td>
<td>Global reset. It can be masked for each the CT by the RST_MASK bit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLK</td>
<td>Global clock. The clock frequency can be adjusted in FASE_CONF to satisfy the timings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDR_ROW</td>
<td>Row address. Selects a row among $N + 2$ for configuration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDR_COL</td>
<td>Column address. Selects a column among $N + 2$ for configuration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDR_INTRA_CT[1:0]</td>
<td>2 bits CT component address. Selects a specific component set inside a CT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONF_DATA</td>
<td>Configuration Data. One bit data to enter the configuration chains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONF_CLK</td>
<td>Configuration clock.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Instruction set for FASE_CONF.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SET_ROW &lt;ROW_ADDR&gt;</td>
<td>Selects cell address.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SET_COLUMN &lt;COL_ADDR&gt;</td>
<td>Selects cell address.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFIG_C_OUT &lt;CONFIG_DATA&gt;</td>
<td>Configures input connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFIG_C_IN &lt;CONFIG_DATA&gt;</td>
<td>Configures output connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFIG_SBOX &lt;CONFIG_DATA&gt;</td>
<td>Configures switch-box connections.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENABLE_RESET</td>
<td>Enables/Masks the RST_MASK register.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DESELECT</td>
<td>Deselects everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>START</td>
<td>Generates a reset.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8. Design flow outline.

achieved by meeting specific RTR rules and methods at 3 hierarchical levels: application, circuit and block.

3.1. RTR at Application Level

Dynamic resource management [15] is necessary to efficiently use RTR. RTR modules should be “allocated” before their configuration and “freed” once they are no more in use. This alloc/free information is passed on to the FPGA compilation tool during run-time. This step is necessary as new incoming block depends on the present occupation status of the FPGA. Incidentally the synthesis/place/route tool is analogous to the compiler/linker for microprocessor based systems.

3.2. RTR at Circuit Level

The circuit design flow needs to integrate specific interfaces between blocks in order to allow flexibility for the RTR. For this purpose, dedicated CT have to be used as internal IO pads. At the RTL level, they correspond to the entity inputs and outputs as shown in figure 8.

This netlist is then placed/routed with VPR. The simulated annealing algorithm in VPR [16] may generate an arbitrary shaped placement in order to minimize the routing resources. However, we constrain the placement such that the CLBs configured as internal pads are always placed at the frontier and the placement avoids the cells already in use as depicted in figure 9.

Synchronization issues at initialization between active soft IPs and a newly loaded module is left to the top level RTL designers, for the sake of flexibility. Whether the new incoming block is “ready” or “not ready” can be commu-
nicated to the active blocks by many protocols. For example, it can consist in polling the status of the new IP block written into RAM, or one of the active IPs may initiate the configuration of this new block.

An overview of the RTR design flow is described in the following sequence:

1. RTL code is synthesized to generate soft IP cores connected by CTs configured as internal pads.

2. Block_1 is configured into FASE and initialized, all the internal pads are constrained to be placed at the boundary of Block_1.

3. The placer/router loads the current occupation status of the FPGA and then Block_2 is placed and routed. It is constrained to avoid the already occupied CTs. This can be done in many ways in VPR. One simple method is to set the cost functions of already occupied CLBs equal to infinity. During the placement/routing of Block_2 the router takes into account the positions of the internal pads.

4. Block_2 is configured into FASE and the internal pads are configured to connect it to Block_1.

5. Block_2 is selectively initialized.

Figure 9. Block_1 (black) active, CLBs configured as internal pads are placed at the boundary.

Figure 10. Block_2 (gray) is configured, internal pads are configured to connect to Block_1.

3.3. RTR Rules at Block Level

3.3.1. Timing closure. For timing closure placement/routing, a simple strategy consists in considering a safety margin greater than the worst case clock period for the entire system. This basic approach will no more be necessary for future FASE release which will use asynchronous CLBs. The self-timed property of asynchronous calculation will remove this constraint intrinsic to synchronous circuits.

3.3.2. Initialization. Soft IPs have be selectively initialized in FASE without interrupting others. The way to send the RST only to the block which has to be initialized is to use the RST_MASK configuration point. While configuring new RTR blocks into FASE, the RST_MASK of all active CLBs is masked so that only new configured blocks are initialized.

3.3.3. RTR Sequence. To avoid conflicts during the shifting of the bitstream, each time one of the four chains is selected for configuration, the outputs of the configured CT are disabled. Only the RST_MASK configuration point can be programmed without disabling the outputs. Let us assume that Block_1 is active and Block_2 is being programmed.

The sequence of reconfiguration of Block_2 is illustrated in figure[1]. Block_2 could have a greater or smaller size or even be at
The smartcard industry is thus facing a dilemma: the devices are either cost-efficient or interoperable. The most viable solution thus consists in enabling an applicative agility within the smartcard, using an ad hoc e-FPGA. This way, virtually any algorithm can be implemented with hardware acceleration support: only the credentials (key, seed, etc. material) need to be resident into the smartcard, the algorithms being either downloaded or programmed on-the-fly from an internal ROM. The FASE architecture enables pervasive reconfigurability by the use of hardware accelerated mobile code.

In addition, security hardware must also protect itself from implementation-level malicious attacks. The security environment is indeed harsh for embedded systems. Embedded system cannot afford tamper protection used otherwise for critical equipments. It must thus be assumed that invasive attacks \cite{17} are likely to be used against those systems. The security requirements are becoming very stringent: the two examples of sub-sections 4.2 and 4.3 illustrate how RTR can provide an elegant solution to the otherwise difficult problem of mixed passive/active threats \cite{18}.

4.2. FASE Usage for DPA-proof Hardware Accelerators

The side-channel attacks \cite{19} consist in monitoring the instant power or electromagnetical emissions of a device in order to extract information from the computation internals. The typical protections against those attacks basically boil down to doubling either the execution time (in the case of software) or the implementation area (in the case of hardware) \cite{20}. We propose to use FASE random-access RTR capability to modify the algorithm implementation at every invocation. This strategy makes it impossible for an attacker to collect consistent traces, thus discarding the DPA fundamental hypothesis that execution symptoms can be accumulated for statistical treatments. The implementation mutations can be, in this example of DPA protection, controlled by a random number generator (RNG.) A snapshots of an example DPA protected applications is depicted in figure 12: the fitting function (RNG) is constant and always active and the evolving portion (DPA-proof crypto-process) is reconfigured continuously.

4.3. FASE Usage for FA-proof Hardware Accelerators

Fault attacks (FA) \cite{21} intentionally disturb a cryptographic algorithm so as to extract information from the faulty executions. Usual counter-measures against this class of attack consist in adding redundant hardware to detect and possibly correct the faults. However, the main drawback of this approach is that the additional hardware is useless if no
fault or light attack occurs. We propose to take advantage of
FASE RTR to implement a graded and adaptative faults de-
tection capability. This strategy allows for a cost-effective
survivability strategy: as the environment becomes more
aggressive, the algorithm implemented in FASE improves
its detection codes. In figure 13 a memory management
unit (MMU) interfaces a FA-resistant core with the rest of
the SoC. The MMU is always active whereas RTR soft IP
cores (e.g. DES, RSA using a Montgomery Modular Multi-
plier) can be loaded into the system on demand.

5. Conclusions and Future Research

FASE is a different approach towards implementing run-
time reconfigurability in FPGAs. In FASE the soft IP cores
are not constrained to fit in rows/columns, and there is no
necessity of explicit reset signals in the RTL design other
than the global reset. However, such explicit initialization
could also be done and, in that way, FASE is compatible
with applications developed for existing RTR platforms.

Although this high granularity of reconfiguration may
be used for better utilisation of resources, it may also re-
sult in fragmentation, and increases the reconfiguration la-
tency. Possible enhancements could solve the issue of de-
fragmentation and reducing the reconfiguration latency.

A FASE planned improvement is to replace synchronous
CLB by asynchronous ones in order to cancel the timing clo-
sure constraints. Moreover, with regard to security aspect,
asynchronous logic coupled with RTR capability would
greatly improve the robustness.

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