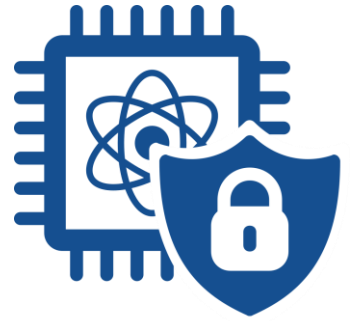


Implementing PQC in Hardware: Performance, Security, and Lessons



Sanjay Deshpande

Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering
Northwestern University

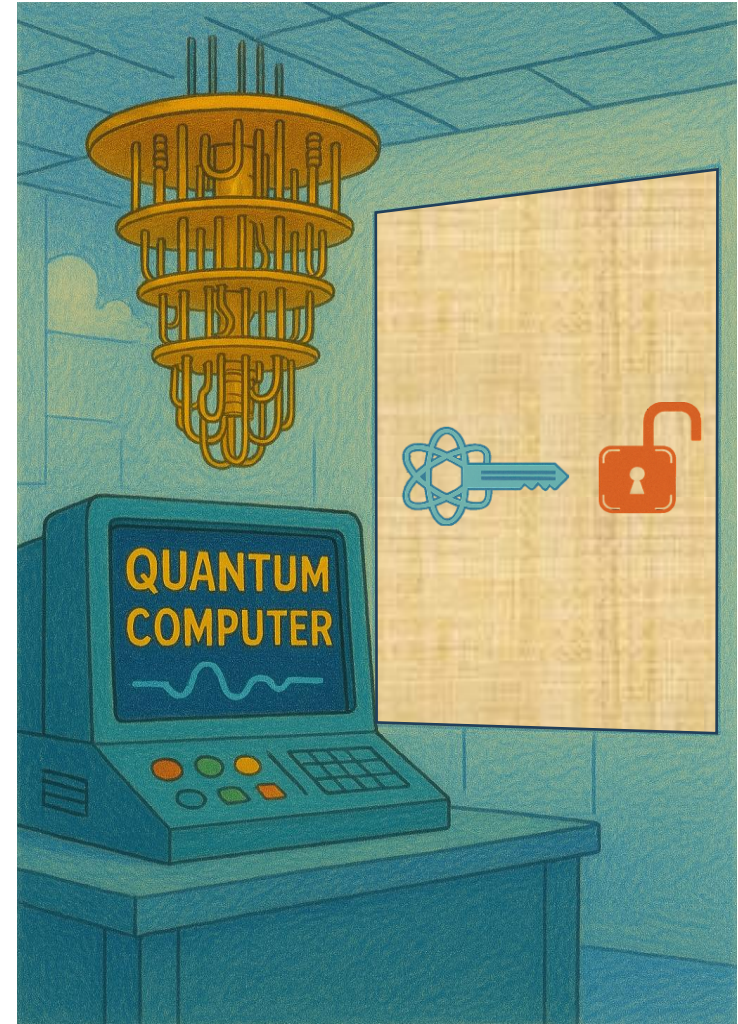


Cedarcrypt 2026
Paphos, Cyprus

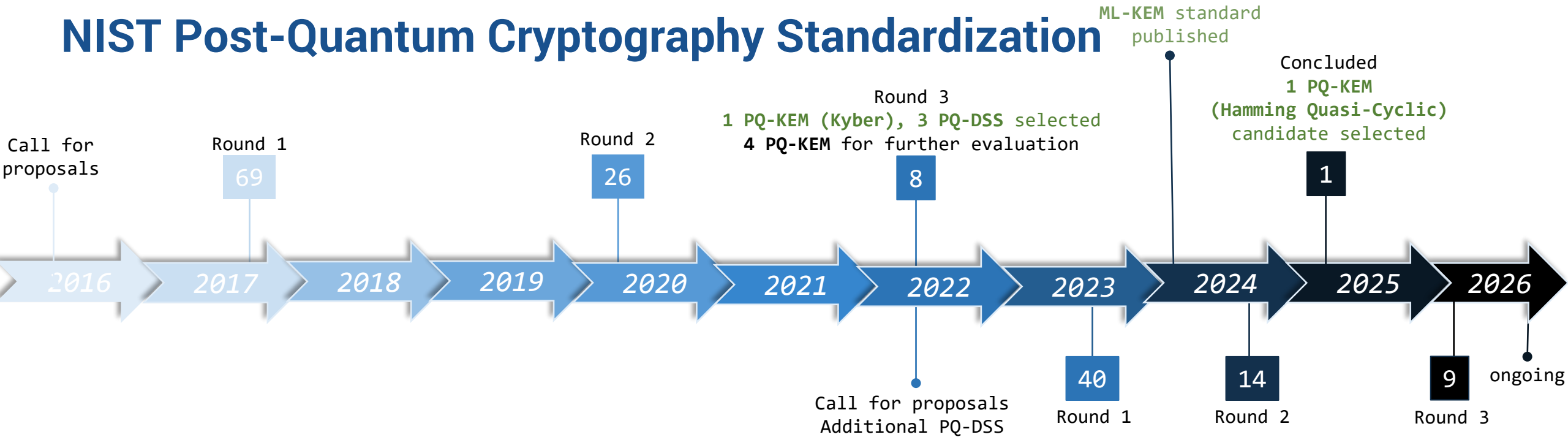
Modern Cryptography

- Symmetric-key cryptography
- Public-key cryptography
 - Shor's algorithm can potentially break existing pre-quantum public-key cryptosystems (e.g., RSA)
- **Post-Quantum Cryptography to the rescue!**
 - Algorithms run on classical computers
- Post-Quantum Cryptography standardization efforts are in progress around the world

NIST



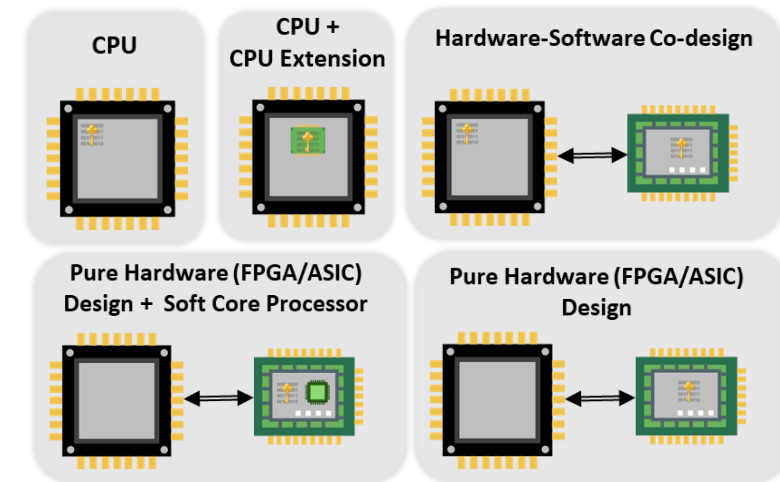
NIST Post-Quantum Cryptography Standardization



- Submitted candidates belong to two categories
 - **PQ-KEM: Post-Quantum Key Encapsulation Mechanism**
 - PQ-DSS: Post-Quantum Digital Signature Scheme
- Evaluation Criteria
 - Security
 - **Hardware and Software implementation efficiency and security**
 - Cost (key size, signature size, etc.)

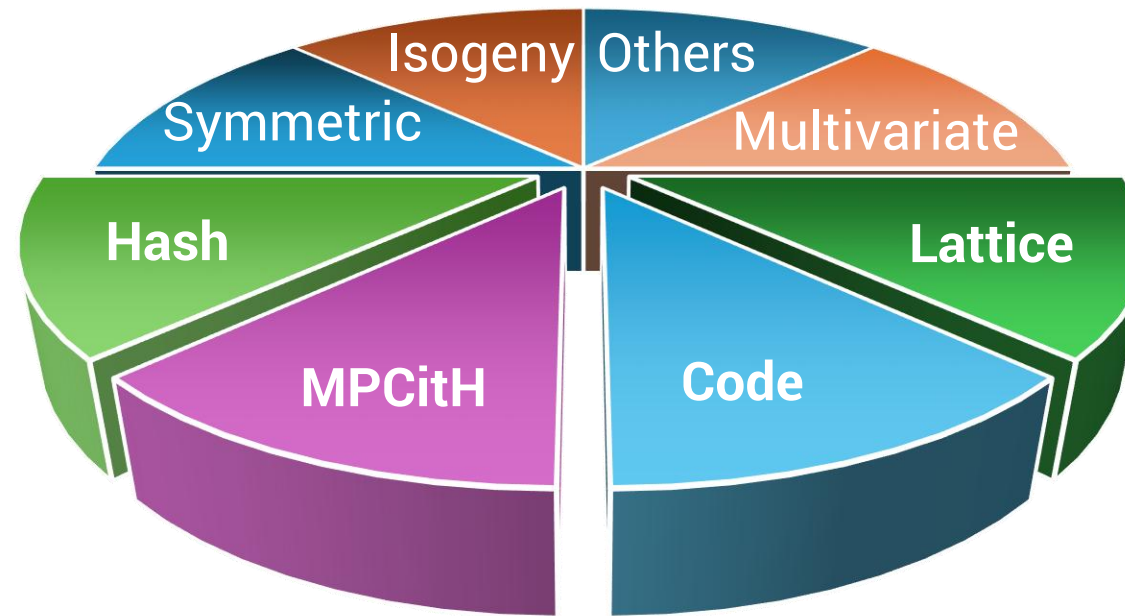
Secure and Efficient Implementations of Cryptographic Algorithms

- Target platforms:
 - CPU
 - Microcontrollers
 - **Field-Programmable Gate Array (FPGA)**
 - Application Specific Integrated Circuit (ASIC)
- Essential in improving security, performance and energy efficiency.



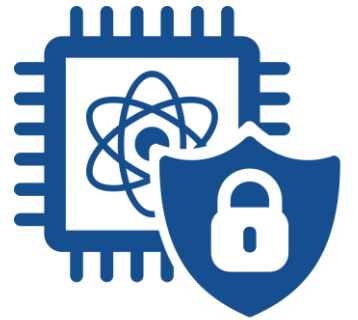
Today's Talk

■ Selected for standardization by NIST

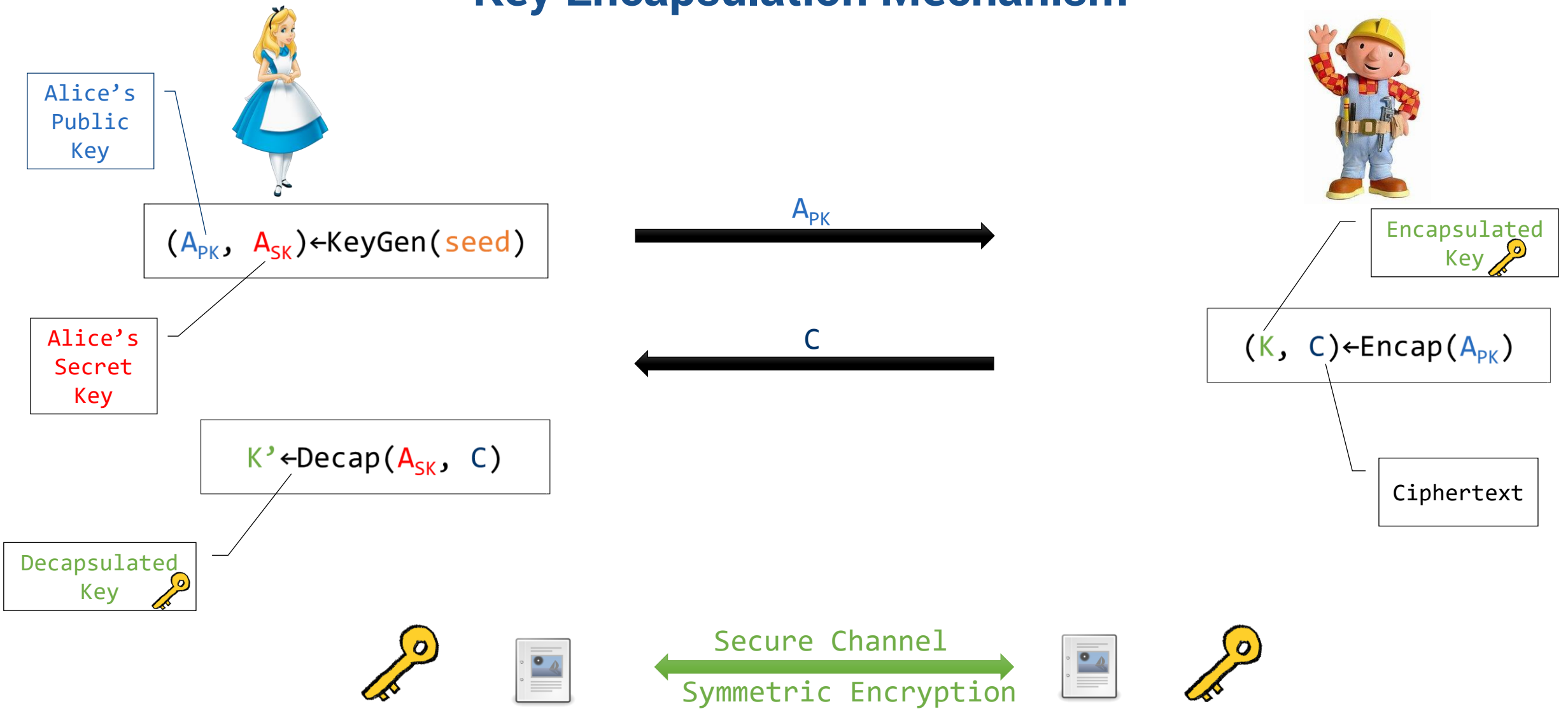


Hamming Quasi-Cyclic (HQC)

Hamming Quasi-Cyclic (HQC)



Key Encapsulation Mechanism



Hamming Quasi Cyclic (HQC)

- A code-based KEM scheme based on the syndrome decoding hard problem.
- Construction is based on concatenated codes:
 - Shortened Reed Solomon code and
 - Duplicated Reed-Muller code

Parameter Set	Security	n	w	$ ek $	$ dk $	$ ct $
HQC-1	128	17,669	66	2,241B	2,321B	4,433B
HQC-3	192	35,851	100	4,514B	4,602B	8,978B
HQC-5	256	57,637	131	7,237B	7,333B	14,421B
X25519	128	–	–	32B	32B	32B

n - degree of the polynomial

w - weight

keypair – (ek,dk)

ct - ciphertext

☐ *Quantum-safe*

☒ *Not Quantum-safe*

Syndrome Decoding Problem

- h, x, y are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$
- Setup:
 - h – sampled from a pseudo-random number generator (PRNG)
 - x, y – fixed weight vectors (sparse polynomials) whose locations are sampled from a PRNG

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} & x & & & h & & y \\ \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare & + & \square \square \square \square \square \square \square \square & \times & \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare & = & S = x + h.y \\ \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare & & & & & & \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \blacksquare \end{array}$$

-  pseudorandom polynomial
-  Sparse fixed-weight polynomial
-  Sparse fixed-weight polynomial

h and S are public
 x and y are secret
Given h and S , finding x and y is
hard!

Key Generation

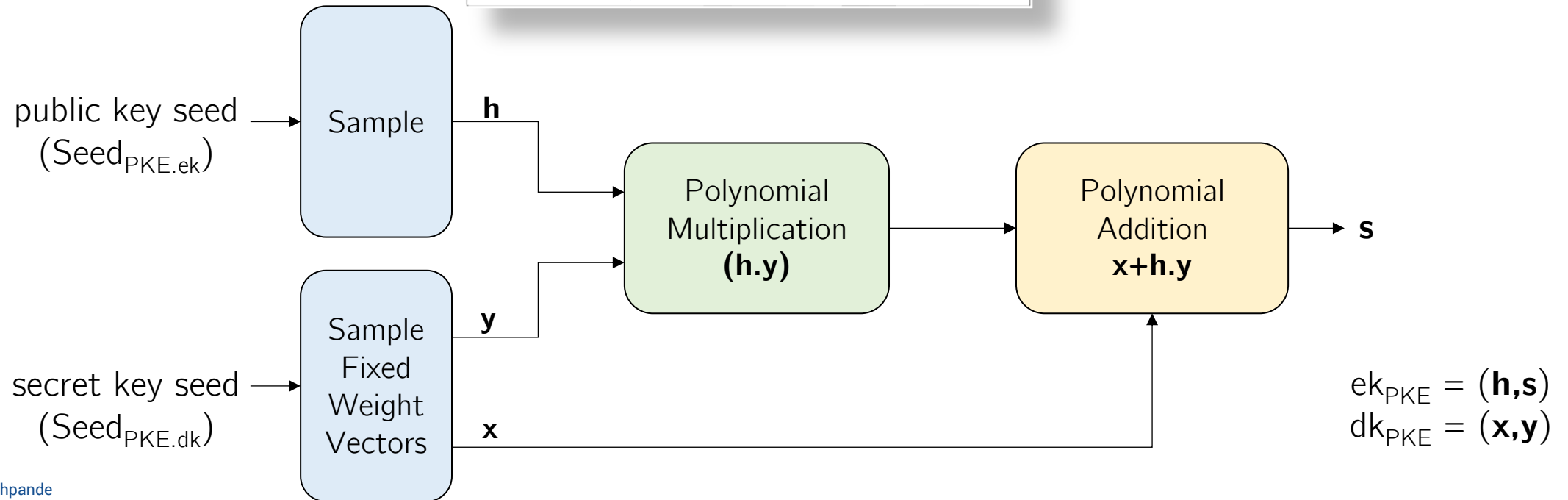
```
HQC-KEM.Keygen()
Input: None.
Output: Encapsulation key  $ek_{KEM}$ , decapsulation key  $dk_{KEM}$ .

▷ Sample  $seed_{KEM}$ 
1.  $seed_{KEM} \leftarrow \mathcal{B}^{|seed|}$ 

▷ Compute  $seed_{PKE}$  and randomness  $\sigma$ 
2.  $ctx_{KEM} \leftarrow \text{XOF.Init}(seed_{KEM})$ 
3.  $(ctx_{KEM}, seed_{PKE}) \leftarrow \text{XOF.GetBytes}(ctx_{KEM}, |seed|)$ 
4.  $(ctx_{KEM}, \sigma) \leftarrow \text{XOF.GetBytes}(ctx_{KEM}, |k|)$ 

▷ Compute HQC-PKE keypair
5.  $(ek_{PKE}, dk_{PKE}) \leftarrow \text{HQC-PKE.Keygen}(seed_{PKE})$ 

▷ Compute HQC-KEM keypair
6.  $ek_{KEM} \leftarrow ek_{PKE}$ 
7.  $dk_{KEM} \leftarrow (ek_{KEM}, dk_{PKE}, \sigma, seed_{KEM})$ 
8. return  $(ek_{KEM}, dk_{KEM})$ 
```



Encapsulation

```
HQC-KEM.Encaps(ek_KEM)
Input: Encapsulation key ek_KEM.
Output: Shared secret key K, ciphertext c_KEM.

▷ Sample message m and salt
1. m ← $ B^{|k|}
2. salt ← $ B^{|salt|}

▷ Compute shared key K and ciphertext c_KEM
3. (K, θ) ← G(H(ek_KEM) || m || salt)
4. cpke ← HQC-PKE.Encrypt(ek_KEM, m, θ)
5. c_KEM ← (cpke, salt)

6. return (K, c_KEM)
```

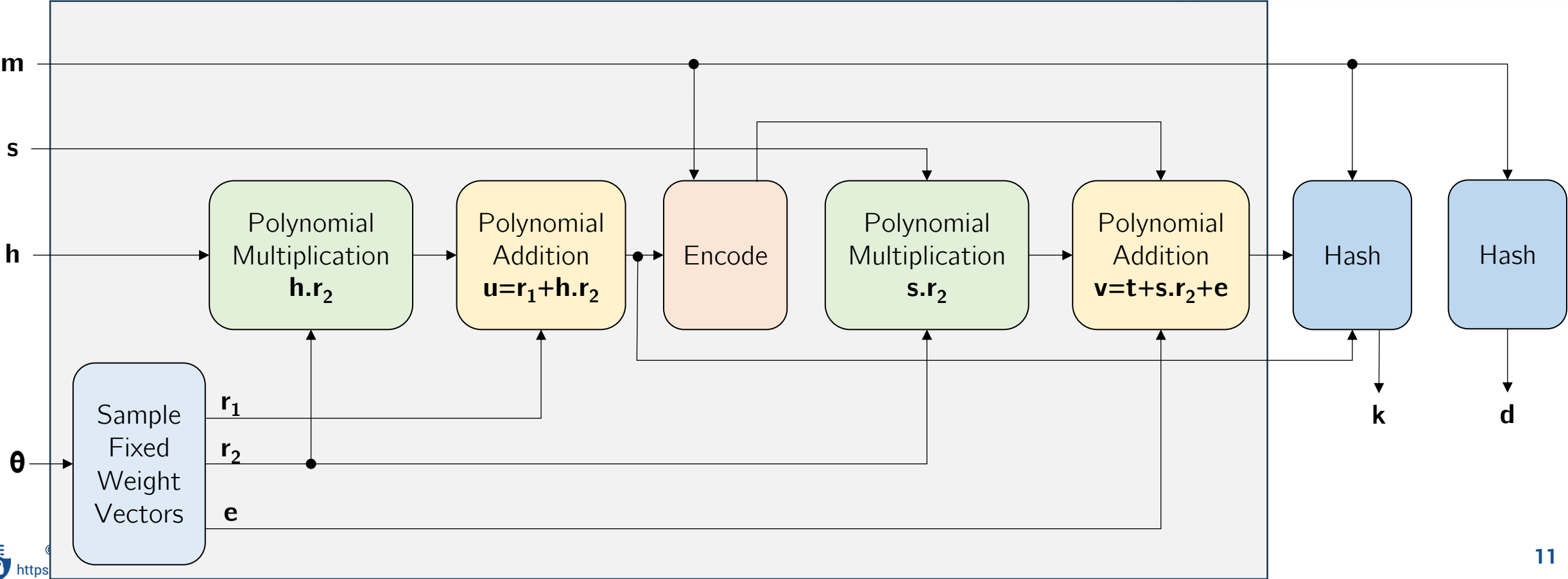
```
HQC-PKE.Encrypt(ek_PKE, m, θ)
Input: Encryption key ek_PKE, message m, randomness θ.
Output: Ciphertext cpke.

▷ Parse encryption key ek_PKE
1. seed_PKE_ek ← ek_PKE[0 : |seed|]
2. ctx_PKE_ek ← XOF.Init(seed_PKE_ek)
3. (ctx_PKE_ek, h) ← SampleVect(ctx_PKE_ek, R)
4. s ← ek_PKE[|seed| : |seed| + |s|]

▷ Compute ciphertext cpke
5. ctx_θ ← XOF.Init(θ)
6. (ctx_θ, r2) ← SampleFixedWeightVect(ctx_θ, R_uv)
7. (ctx_θ, e) ← SampleFixedWeightVect(ctx_θ, R_uv)
8. (ctx_θ, r1) ← SampleFixedWeightVect(ctx_θ, R_uv)
9. u ← r1 + h · r2
10. v ← C.Encode(m) + Truncate(s · r2 + e, l)
11. cpke ← (u, v)

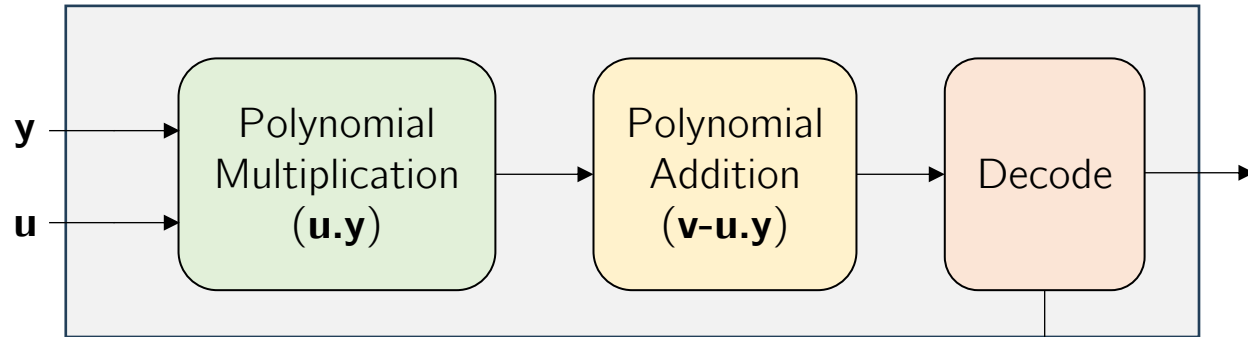
12. return cpke
```

Encrypt

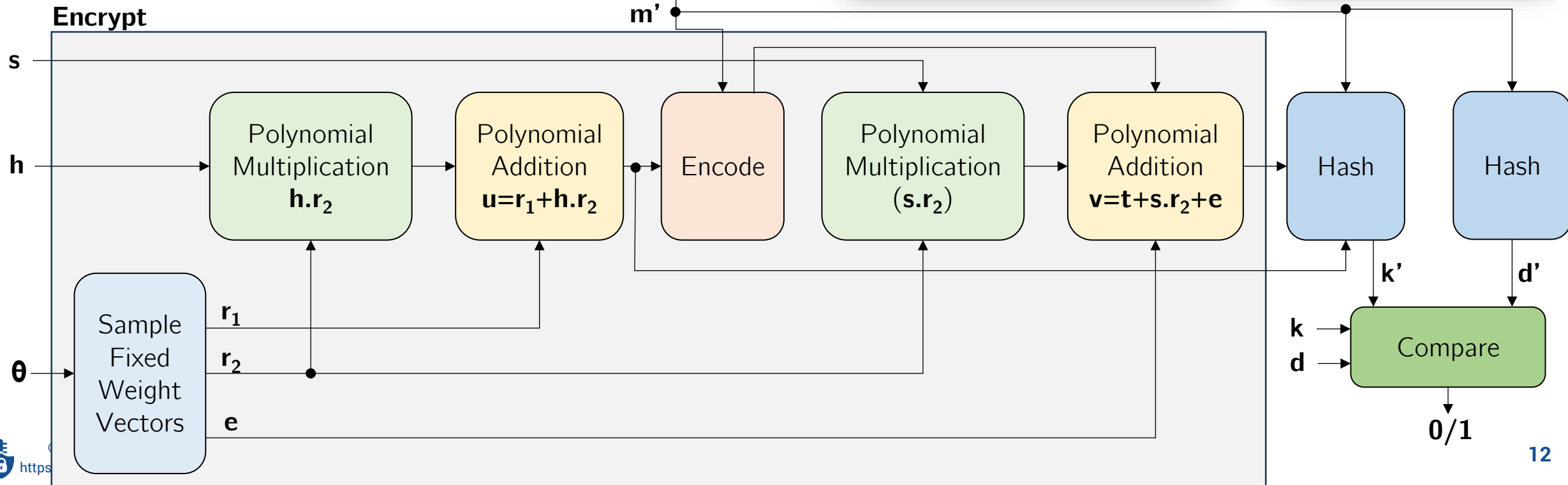


Decapsulation

Decrypt



Encrypt



HQC-KEM.Decaps(dk_{KEM}, c_{KEM})

Input: Decapsulation key dk_{KEM} , ciphertext c_{KEM} .

Output: Shared secret key K' .

```

1.  $ek_{KEM} \leftarrow dk_{KEM}[0 : |ek_{KEM}|]$ 
2.  $dk_{PKE} \leftarrow dk_{KEM}[|ek_{KEM}| : |ek_{KEM}| + |dk_{PKE}|]$ 
3.  $\sigma \leftarrow dk_{KEM}[|ek_{KEM}| + |dk_{PKE}| : |ek_{KEM}| + |dk_{PKE}| + |\sigma|]$ 

4.  $c_{PKE} \leftarrow c_{KEM}[0 : |c_{PKE}|]$ 
5.  $salt \leftarrow c_{KEM}[|c_{PKE}| : |c_{PKE}| + |salt|]$ 

6.  $m' \leftarrow \text{HQC-PKE.Decrypt}(dk_{PKE}, c_{PKE})$ 

7.  $(K', \theta') \leftarrow G(H(ek_{KEM}) || m' || salt)$ 
8.  $c'_{PKE} \leftarrow \text{HQC-PKE.Encrypt}(ek_{KEM}, m', \theta')$ 
9.  $c'_{KEM} \leftarrow (c'_{PKE}, salt)$ 

10.  $\tilde{K} \leftarrow J(H(ek_{KEM}) || \sigma || c'_{KEM})$ 
11. if  $m' = \perp$  or if  $c'_{KEM} \neq c_{KEM}$ 
12.    $K' \leftarrow \tilde{K}$ 
13. endif

14. return  $K'$ 
  
```

HQC-PKE.Decrypt(dk_{PKE}, c_{PKE})

Input: Decryption key dk_{PKE} , ciphertext c_{PKE} .

Output: Message m .

```

1.  $seed_{PKE,sk} \leftarrow dk_{PKE}[0 : |seed|]$ 
2.  $ct_{PKE,sk} \leftarrow \text{XOF.Init}(seed_{PKE,sk})$ 
3.  $(ct_{PKE,sk}, y) \leftarrow \text{SampleFixedWeightVect}_2(ct_{PKE,sk}, R_{sk})$ 

4.  $u \leftarrow c_{PKE}[0 : |u|]$ 
5.  $v \leftarrow c_{PKE}[|u| : |u| + |v|]$ 

6. Compute plaintext  $m$ 
7.  $m \leftarrow C.\text{Decode}(v - \text{Truncate}(u \cdot y, f))$ 

8. return  $m$ 
  
```

HQC-PKE.Encrypt(ek_{PKE}, m, θ)

Input: Encryption key ek_{PKE} , message m , randomness θ .

Output: Ciphertext c_{PKE} .

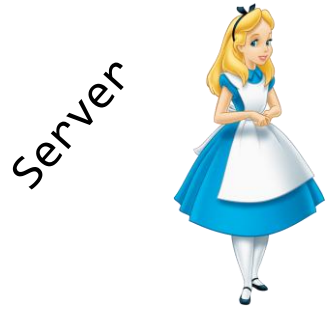
```

1.  $seed_{PKE,sk} \leftarrow ek_{PKE}[0 : |seed|]$ 
2.  $ct_{PKE,sk} \leftarrow \text{XOF.Init}(seed_{PKE,sk})$ 
3.  $(ct_{PKE,sk}, b) \leftarrow \text{SampleFixedWeightVect}(ct_{PKE,sk}, R_{sk})$ 
4.  $s \leftarrow ek_{PKE}[|seed| : |seed| + |s|]$ 

5.  $ct_{\theta} \leftarrow \text{XOF.Init}(\theta)$ 
6.  $(ct_{\theta}, r_2) \leftarrow \text{SampleFixedWeightVect}(ct_{\theta}, R_{\theta})$ 
7.  $(ct_{\theta}, e) \leftarrow \text{SampleFixedWeightVect}(ct_{\theta}, R_{\theta})$ 
8.  $(ct_{\theta}, r_1) \leftarrow \text{SampleFixedWeightVect}(ct_{\theta}, R_{\theta})$ 
9.  $u \leftarrow r_1 + b \cdot r_2$ 
10.  $v \leftarrow C.\text{Encode}(m) + \text{Truncate}(s \cdot r_2 + e, f)$ 
11.  $c_{PKE} \leftarrow (u, v)$ 

12. return  $c_{PKE}$ 
  
```

Performance Comparison HQC vs Elliptic Curve Cryptography



Server



Client

$$K' \leftarrow \text{Decap}(A_{SK}, C)$$

 **K' - Decapsulated Key**

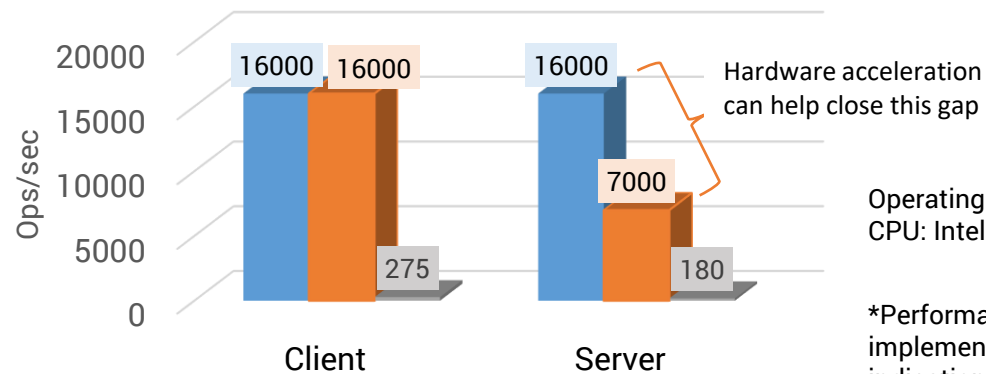
*Key generation is performed offline on the server side

$$(K, C) \leftarrow \text{Encap}(A_{PK})$$

 **K - Encapsulated Key
C - Ciphertext**



Operations Per Second Comparison
on a CPU

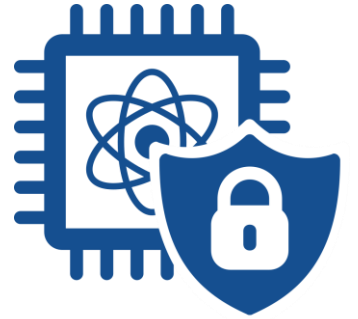


Operating frequency:
CPU: Intel Core i7-11850H – 2.5 GHz

*Performance varies considerably by hardware platform and implementation constraints, and should be taken as a rough indication only.

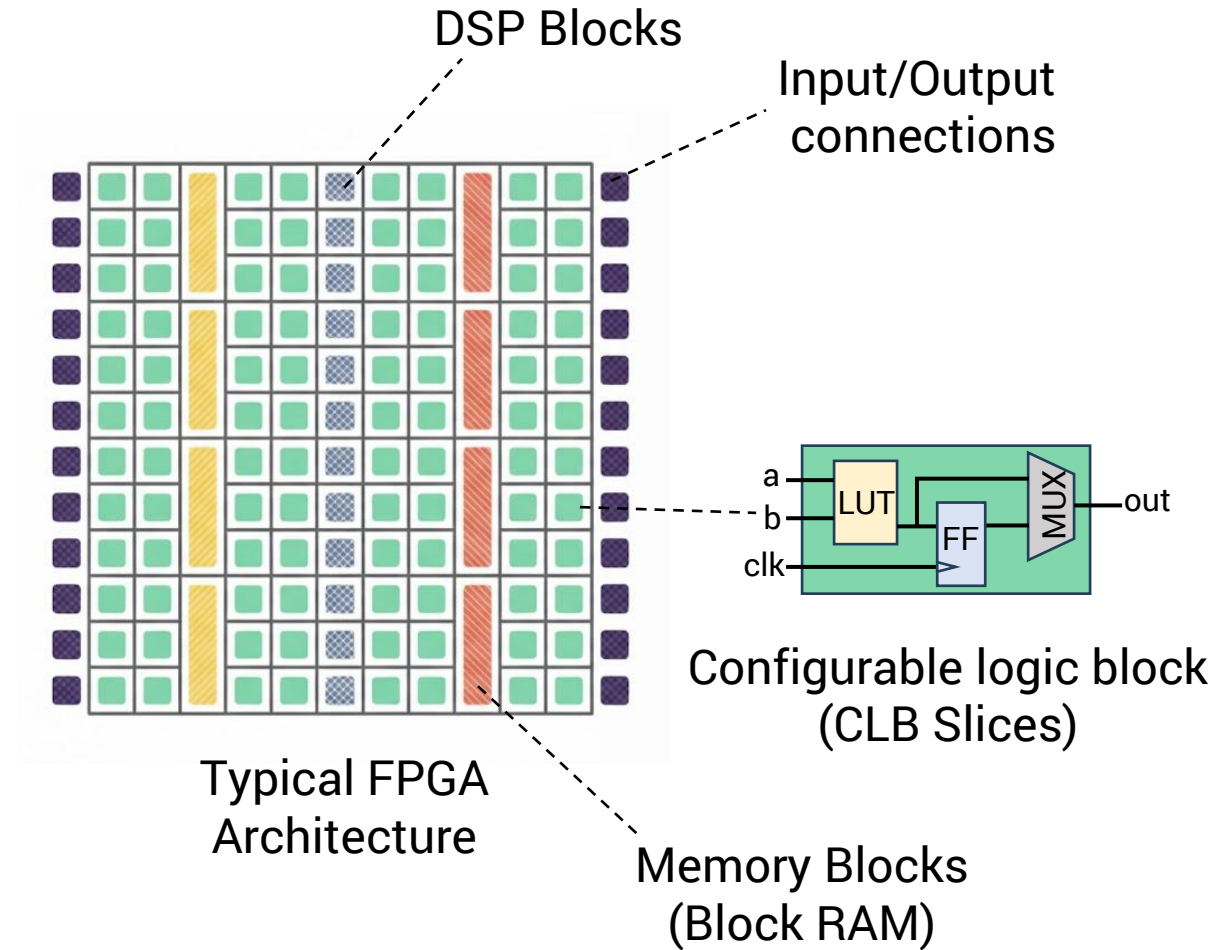
■ X25519 [SAC'15] ■ HQC - Optimized Software [NIST'25] ■ HQC - Reference Software [NIST'25]

Hardware Acceleration Using FPGAs



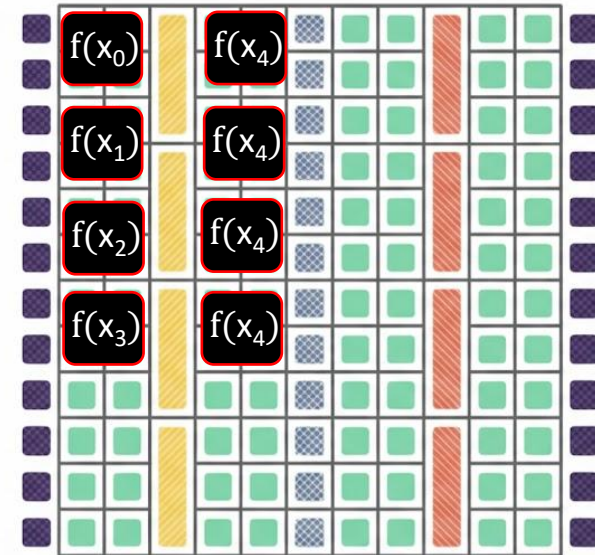
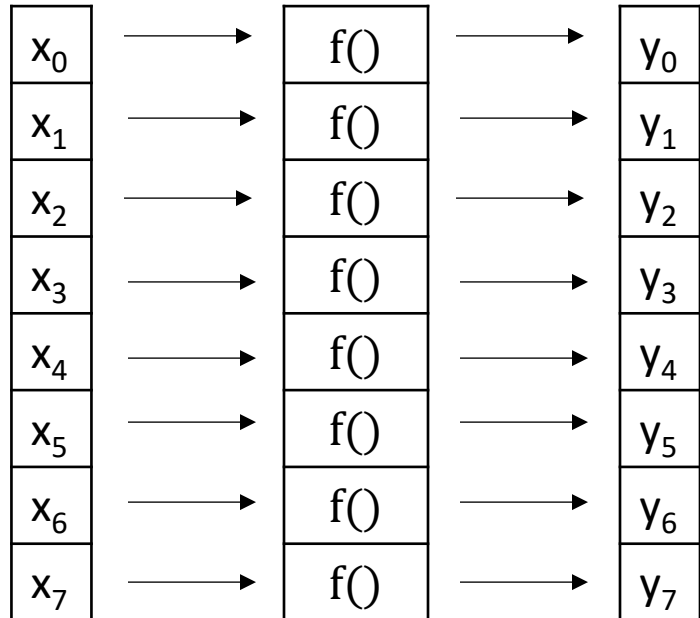
Field Programmable Gate Array (FPGA)

- FPGA is a reconfigurable substrate
- **Reconfigurable** functions, interconnection of functions, input/output
- Depending on application, they can offer **higher throughput**

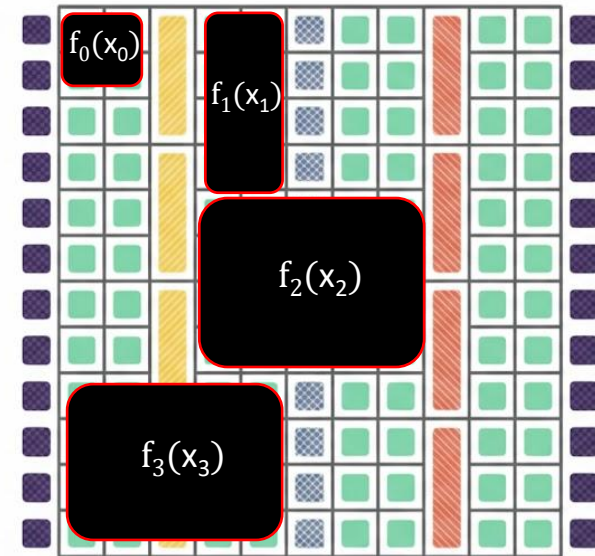
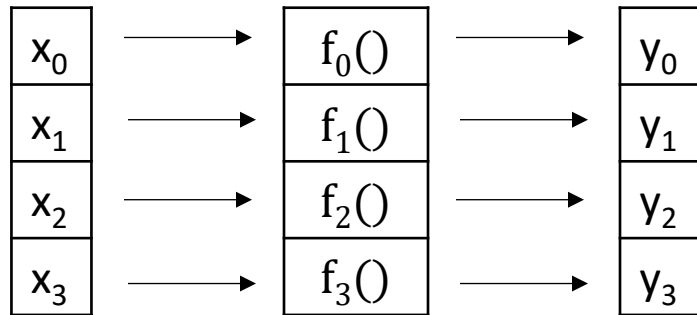


FPGA Throughput – Example 1

- Compute $y = f(x)$ for $x = [x_0, x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4, x_5, x_6, x_7]$

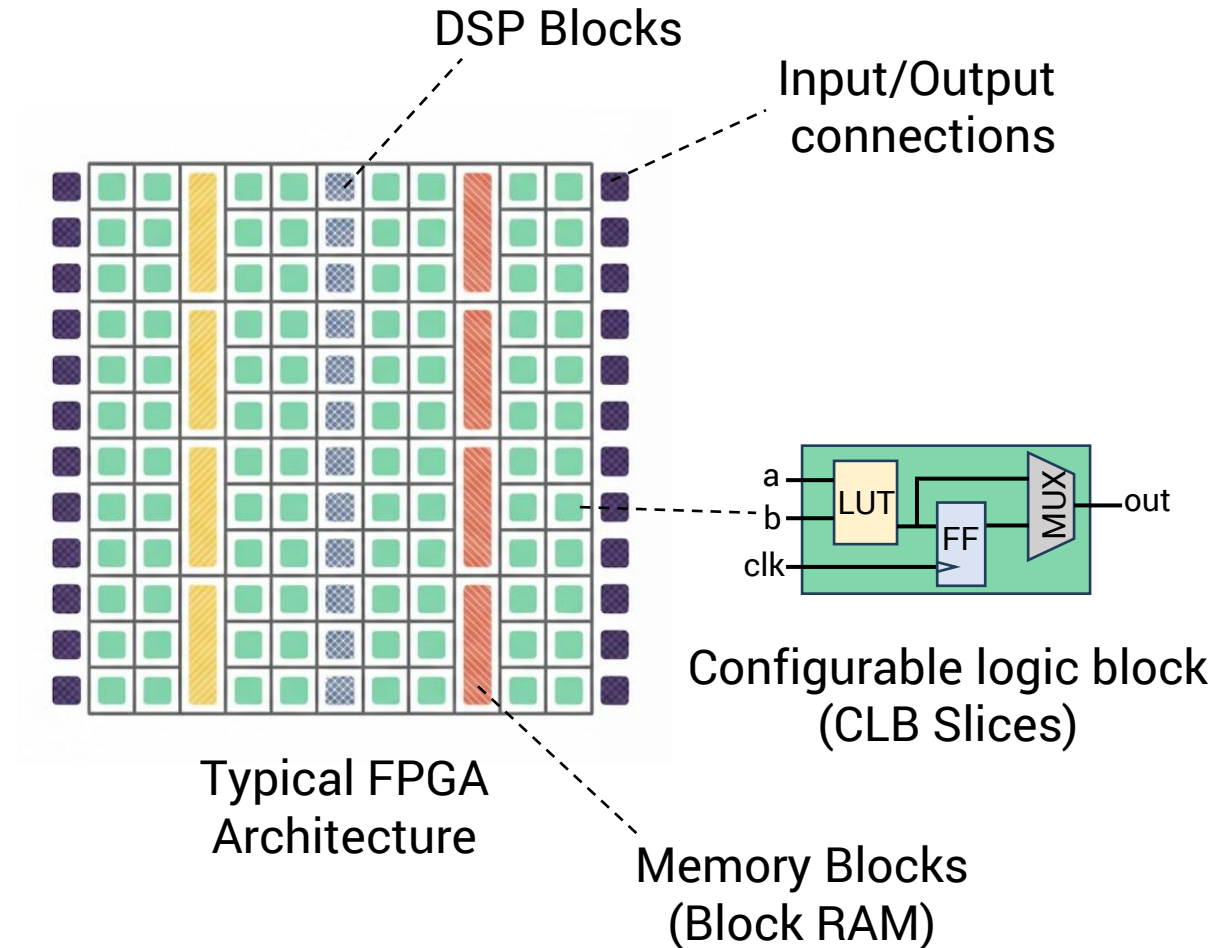


FPGA Throughput – Example 2

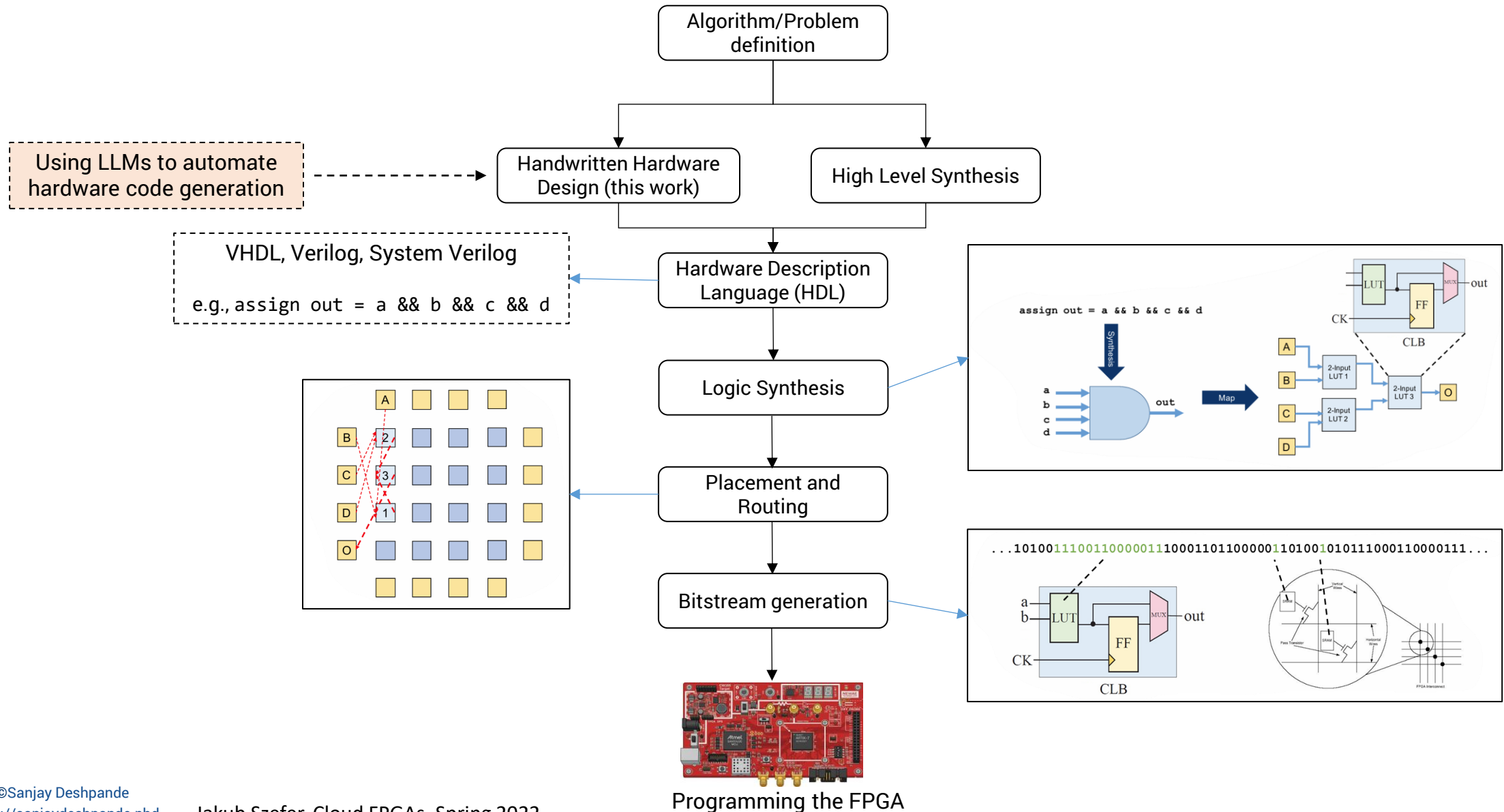


FPGA Implementation Performance and Evaluation Metrics

- Area
- Time
- Time-Area product
 - $\text{Time} * \max\{\text{LUT}/4, \text{FF}/8\} + 128 * \text{BRAM} + 100 * \text{DSP}$
- For reference (AMD Artix 7 200 T FPGA):
 - Look up Tables (LUTs) = 215,360
 - Digital Signal Processing Blocks (DSPs) = 740
 - Flipflops (FFs) = 269,200
 - Block RAM (BRAM) = 365 (each block can store 36 Kb)

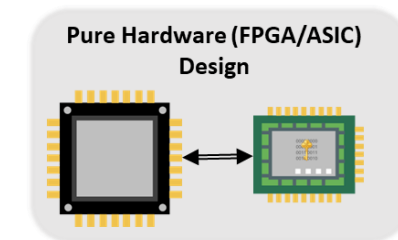
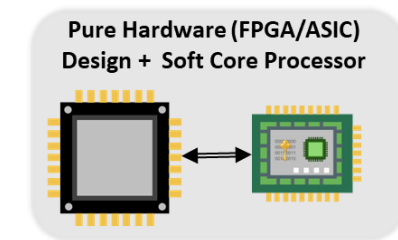
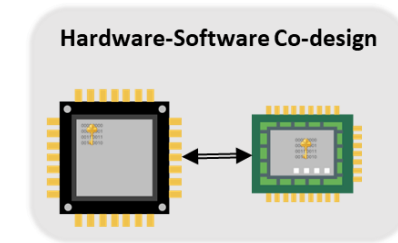


FPGA Design Flow



Hardware Platform Configurations and Interfaces

- $\Leftrightarrow$ represents the interface — the link between the CPU and the hardware accelerator
- Communication protocol depends on placement:
 - AXI (Advanced eXtensible Interface)
 - PCIe (Peripheral Component Interconnect Express)
 - UART (Universal Asynchronous Receiver/Transmitter)
 - ...
- Standardized protocols enable IP reuse and easier verification across different systems



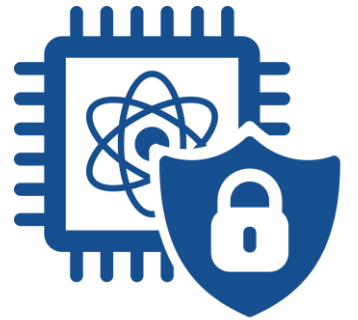
Hardware vs Software Development

	CPU	GPU	FPGA	ASIC
Engineering time	short	medium	long	very long
Compilation time	short	short	long	very long
Debugging	easy	medium	hard	very hard
Maintainability	easy	medium	hard	very hard

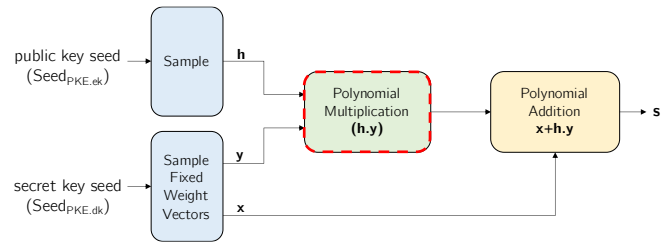


Hardware Implementation

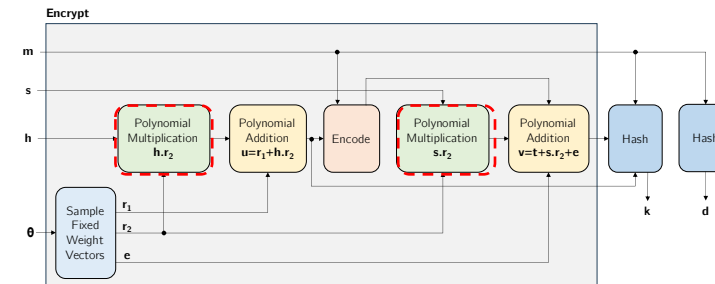
HQC



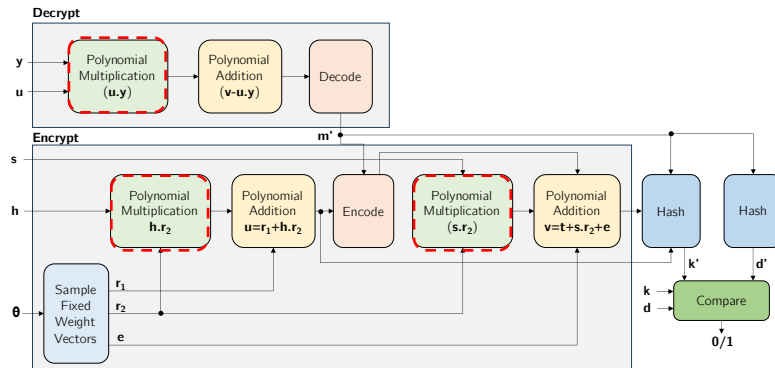
HQC Primitives



Key Generation



Encapsulation

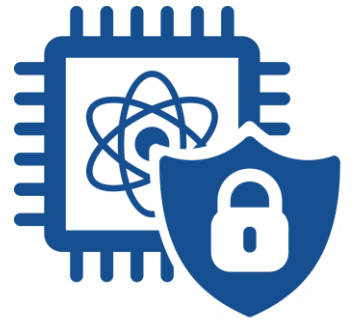


Decapsulation

Performance Bottleneck.

Performance Bottleneck

Polynomial Multiplication



Polynomial Multiplication

A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

$$A(x) = a_0 + a_1x + a_2x^2 + \dots + a_nx^n$$

$$B(x) = b_0 + b_1x + b_2x^2 + \dots + b_nx^n$$

$$c(x) = A(x) \cdot B(x) = \sum_{k=0}^{n+n} c_k x^k \quad \text{Where each } c_k = \sum_{i=0}^k a_i b_{k-i}$$

Polynomial Multiplication – Schoolbook Technique

A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

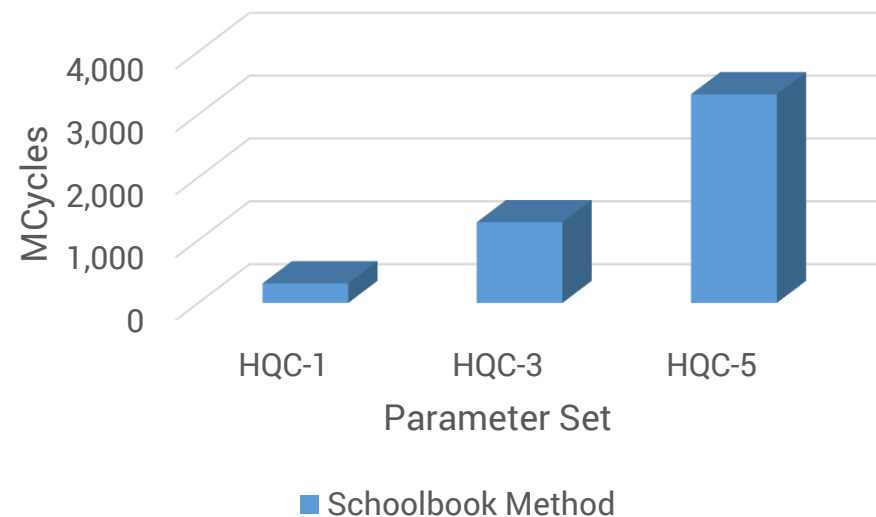
$$A(x)=a_0+a_1x$$

$$B(x)=b_0+b_1x$$

$$C(x)=a_1b_1x^2 + (a_1b_0 + a_0b_1)x + a_0b_0$$

Overall complexity = $O(n^2)$

Complexity of polynomial multiplication



Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131

Polynomial Multiplication – Karatsuba Algorithm

A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

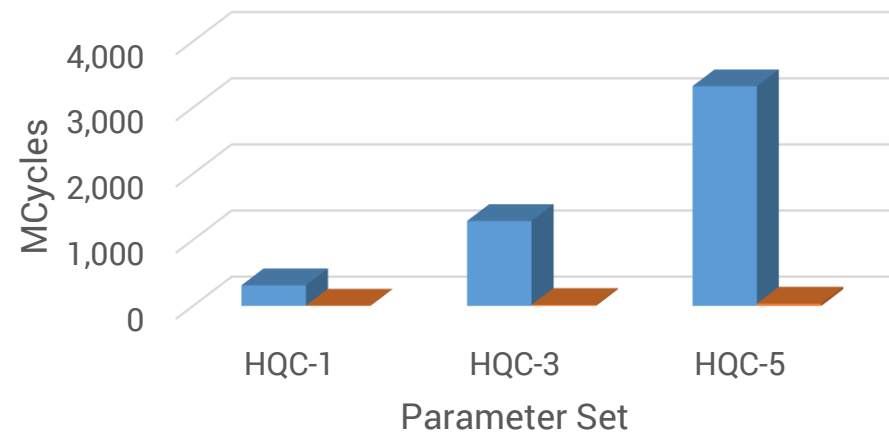
$$A(x) = a_0 + a_1x$$

$$B(x) = b_0 + b_1x$$

$$C(x) = \underbrace{a_1b_1}_{c_2}x^2 + \underbrace{(a_1b_0 + a_0b_1)}_{c_1}x + \underbrace{a_0b_0}_{c_0}$$

$$c_1 = (a_0 + a_1)(b_0 + b_1) - c_0 - c_2$$

Complexity of polynomial multiplication



Schoolbook = $O(n^2)$
Karatsuba = $O(n^{1.585})$

Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131

■ Schoolbook Method ■ Karatsuba

Polynomial Multiplication – Toom-Cook Algorithm

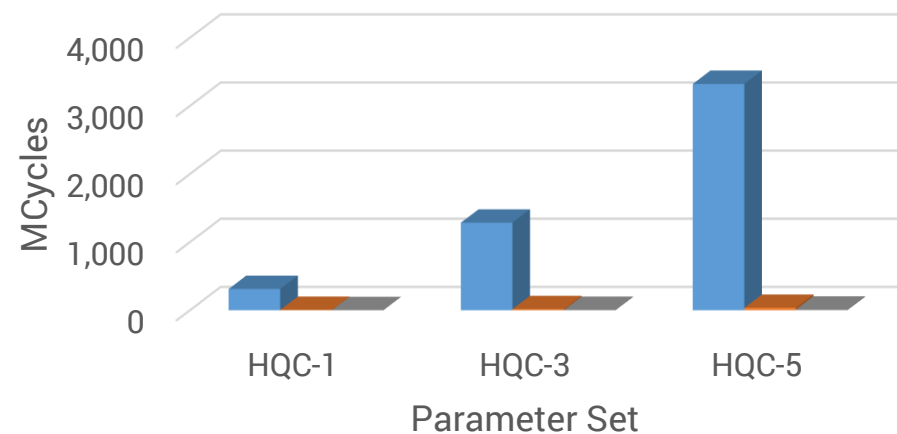
A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

$$A(x) = a_0 + a_1x + a_2x^2 + \dots + a_nx^n$$

$$B(x) = b_0 + b_1x + b_2x^2 + \dots + b_nx^n$$

Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131

Complexity of polynomial multiplication



Schoolbook = $O(n^2)$
Karatsuba = $O(n^{1.585})$
Toom-Cook = $O(n^{1.465})$

■ Schoolbook Method ■ Karatsuba ■ Toom-Cook

Polynomial Multiplication - Can we do better?

A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

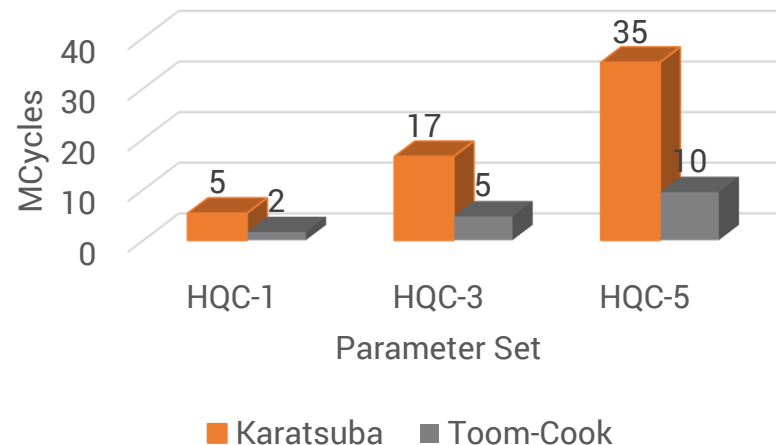
$$A(x) = a_0 + a_1x + a_2x^2 + \dots + a_nx^n$$

$$B(x) = 0 + b_1x + 0 + \dots + b_mx^m$$

One of the inputs to the polynomial multiplier is a sparse fixed weight vector.

Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131

Complexity of polynomial multiplication



$$\begin{aligned} \text{Karatsuba} &= O(n^{1.585}) \\ \text{Toom-Cook} &= O(n^{1.465}) \end{aligned}$$

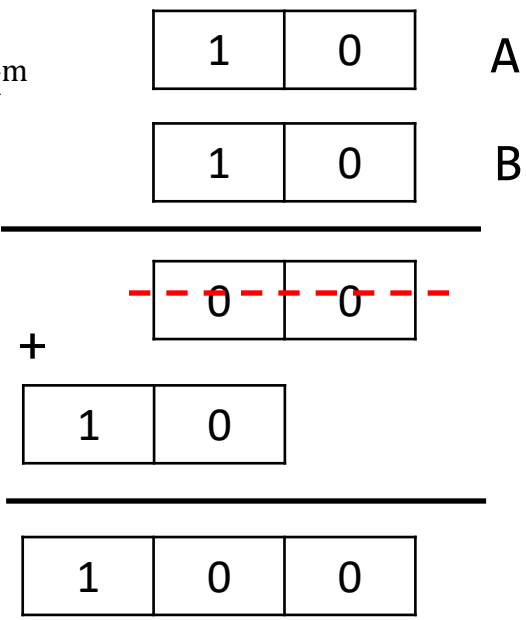
Polynomial Multiplication involving Sparse Polynomials

A & B are polynomials in $\mathbb{F}_2[X]/(X^n-1)$

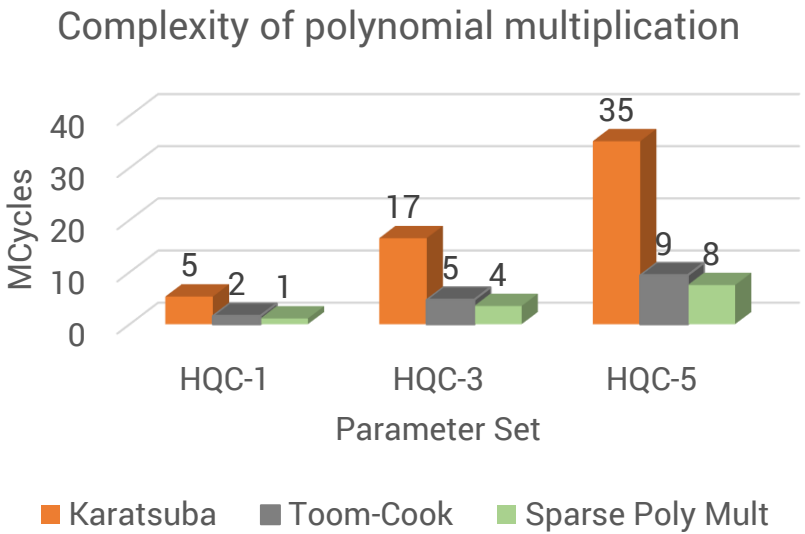
$$A(x) = a_0 + a_1x + a_2x^2 + \dots + a_nx^n$$

$$B(x) = 0 + b_1x + 0 + \dots + b_mx^m$$

$$c(x) = \sum_{i=0}^{w-1} A(x) \ll \text{index}[i]$$

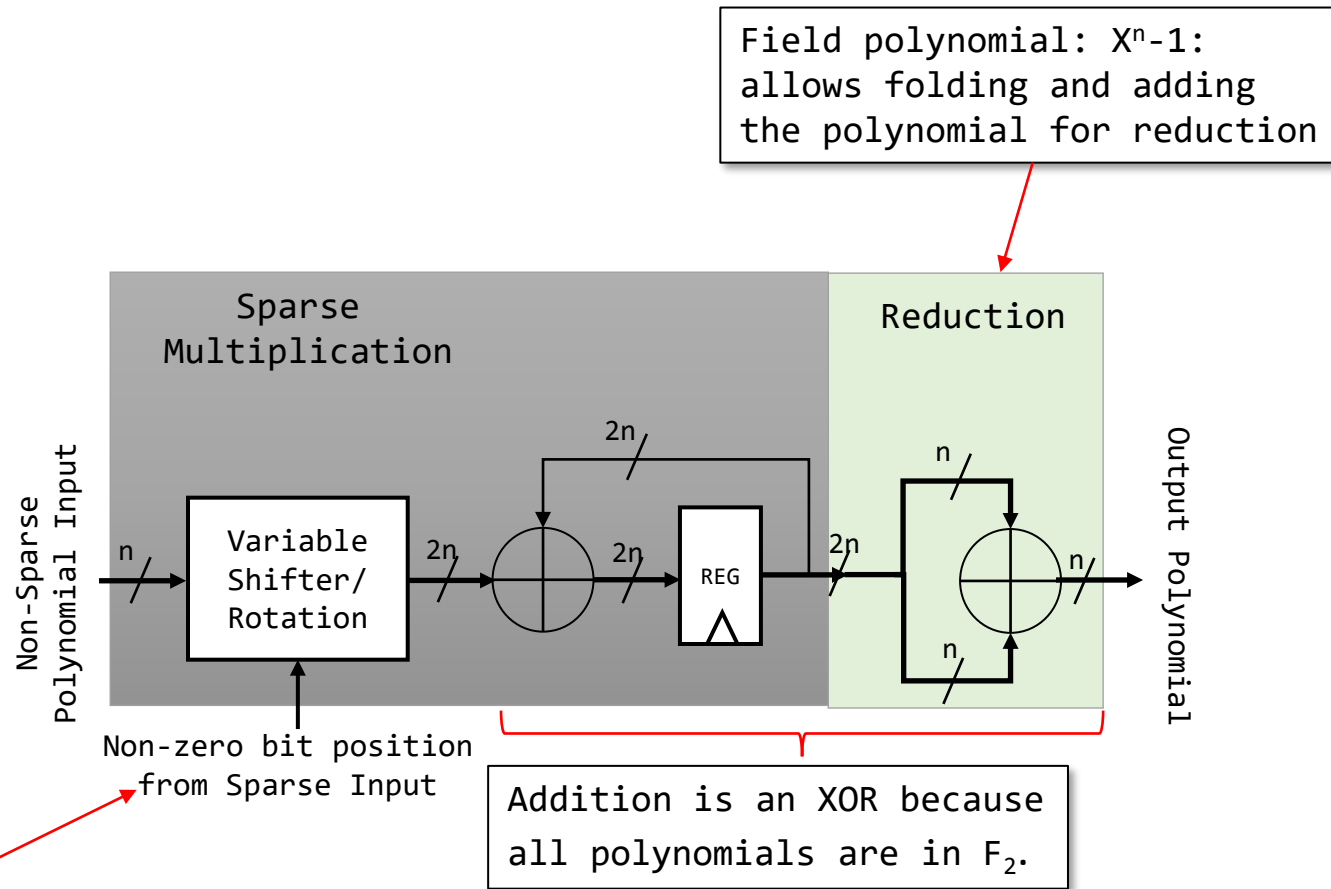


Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131



Karatsuba = $O(n^{1.585})$
 Toom-Cook = $O(n^{1.465})$
 Sparse poly mult = $O(n.w)$

Sparse F_2 Polynomial Multiplication with Reduction



Indices of non-zero elements are used to shift non-sparse polynomial to imitate the multiplication.

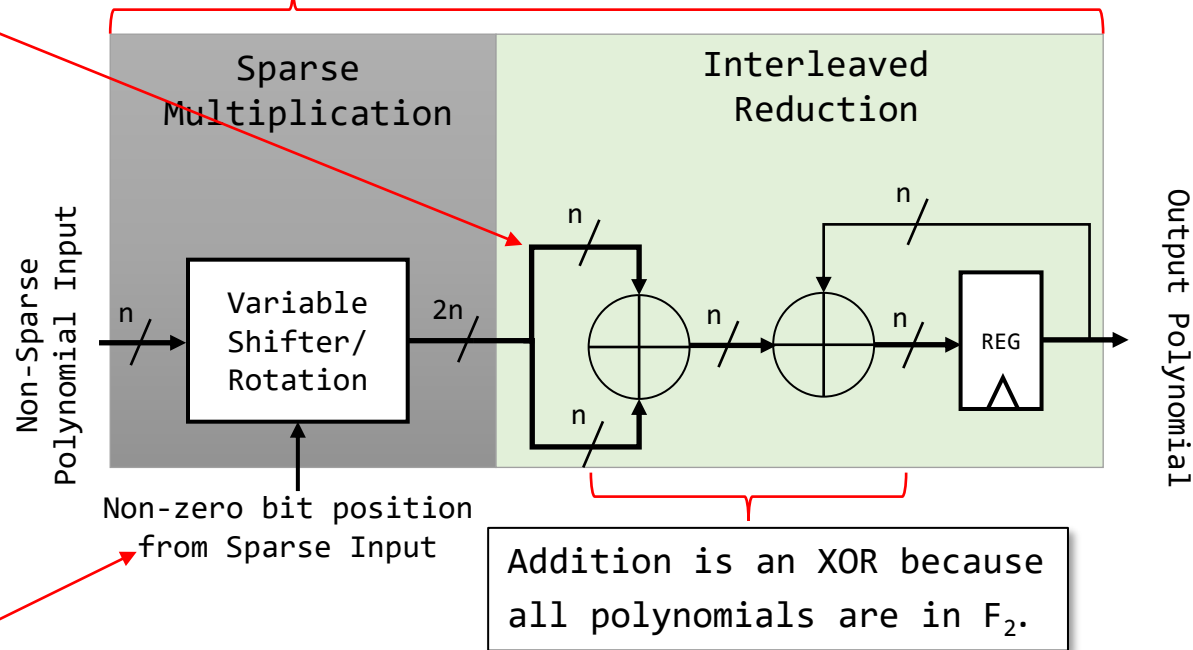
Addition is an XOR because all polynomials are in F_2 .

Sparse F_2 Polynomial Multiplication with Interleaved Reduction

Field polynomial: X^n-1 :
allows folding and adding
the polynomial for reduction

The multiplication and
the modular reduction is
interleaved.

- Reduction in area
- Reduction in memory utilization

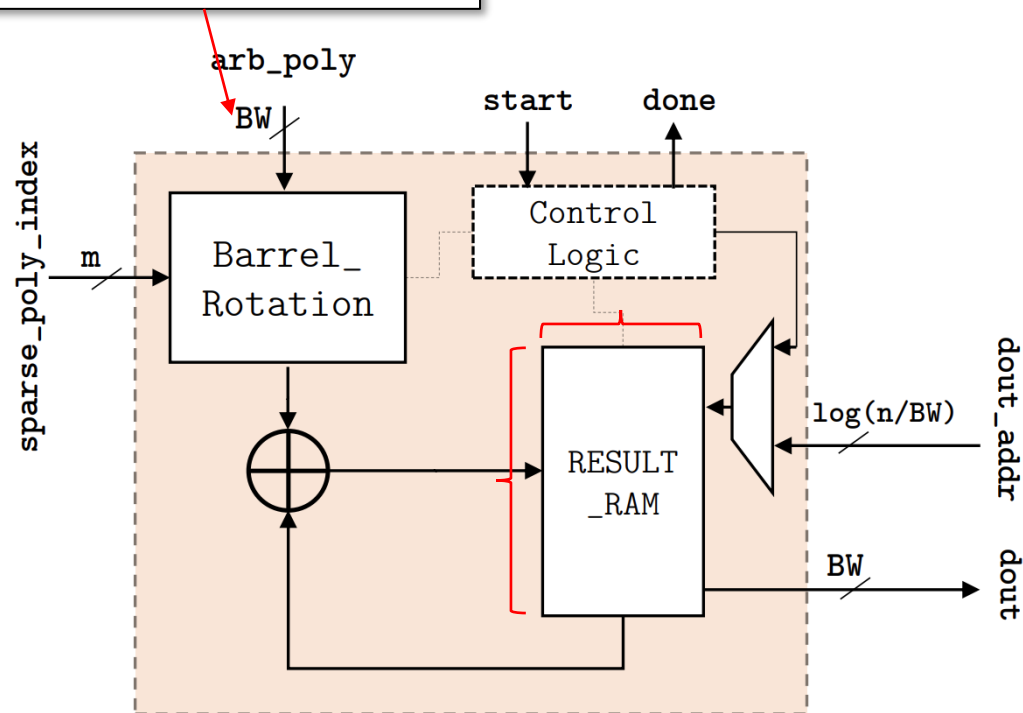


Indices of non-zero elements
are used to shift non-sparse
polynomial to imitate the
multiplication.

Addition is an XOR because
all polynomials are in F_2 .

Sparse F_2 Polynomial Multiplication Hardware Design

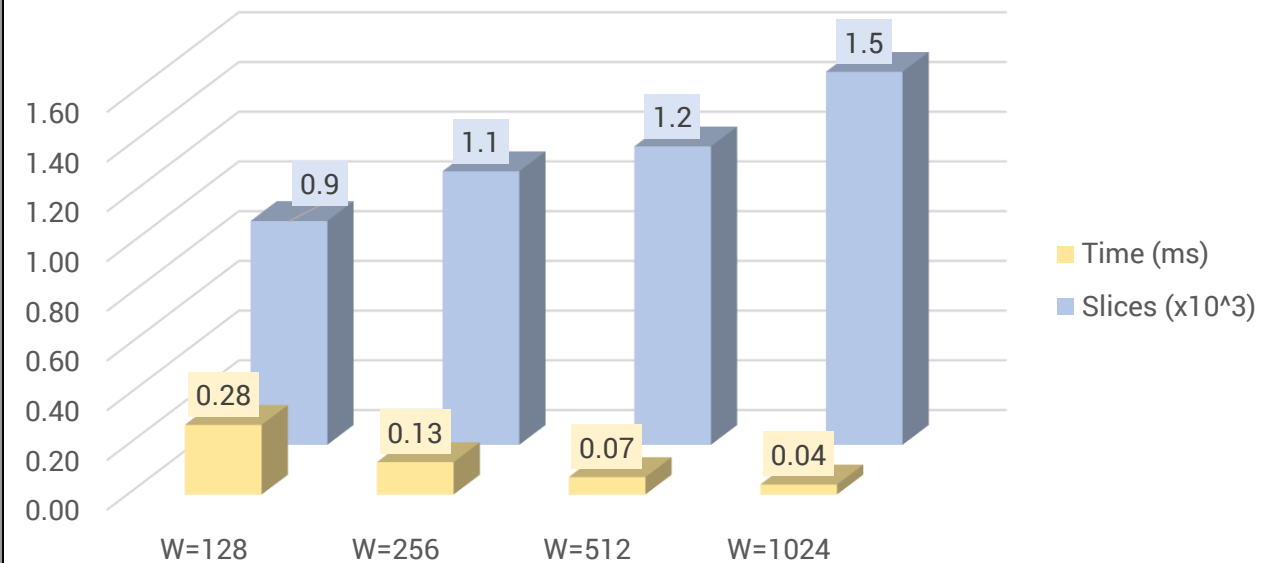
Performance parameter



Hardware design of sparse polynomial multiplication module

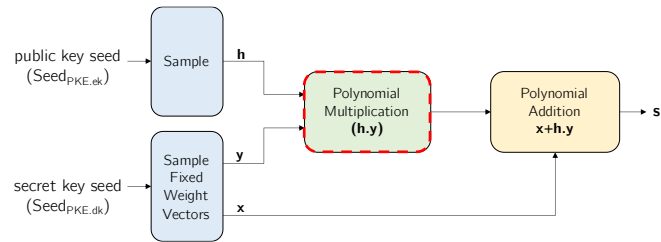
HQC-1

Time and Area Scaling

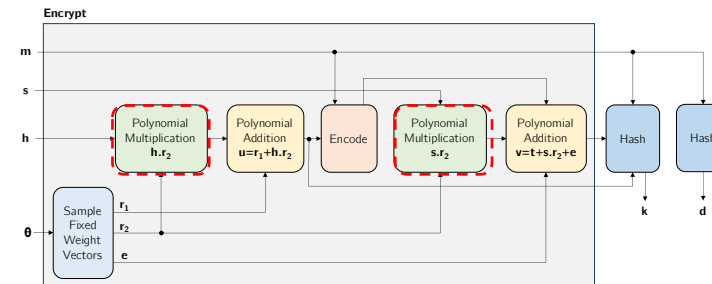


Parameter Set	n	w
HQC-1	17,669	66
HQC-3	35,851	100
HQC-5	57,637	131

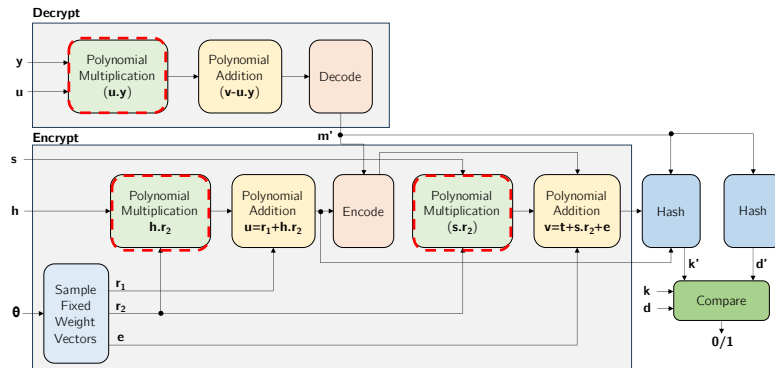
HQC Primitives



Key Generation



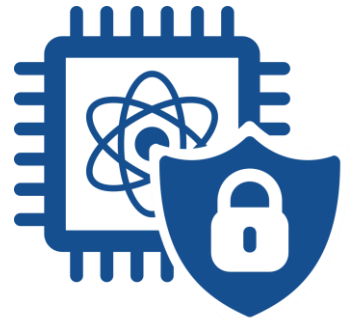
Encapsulation



Decapsulation

Performance Bottleneck

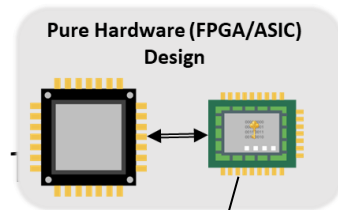
Key Generation, Encapsulation, and Decapsulation



Joint Design – Comparison with other HQC Hardware Designs

FPGA: AMD Artix 7
HQC - 1

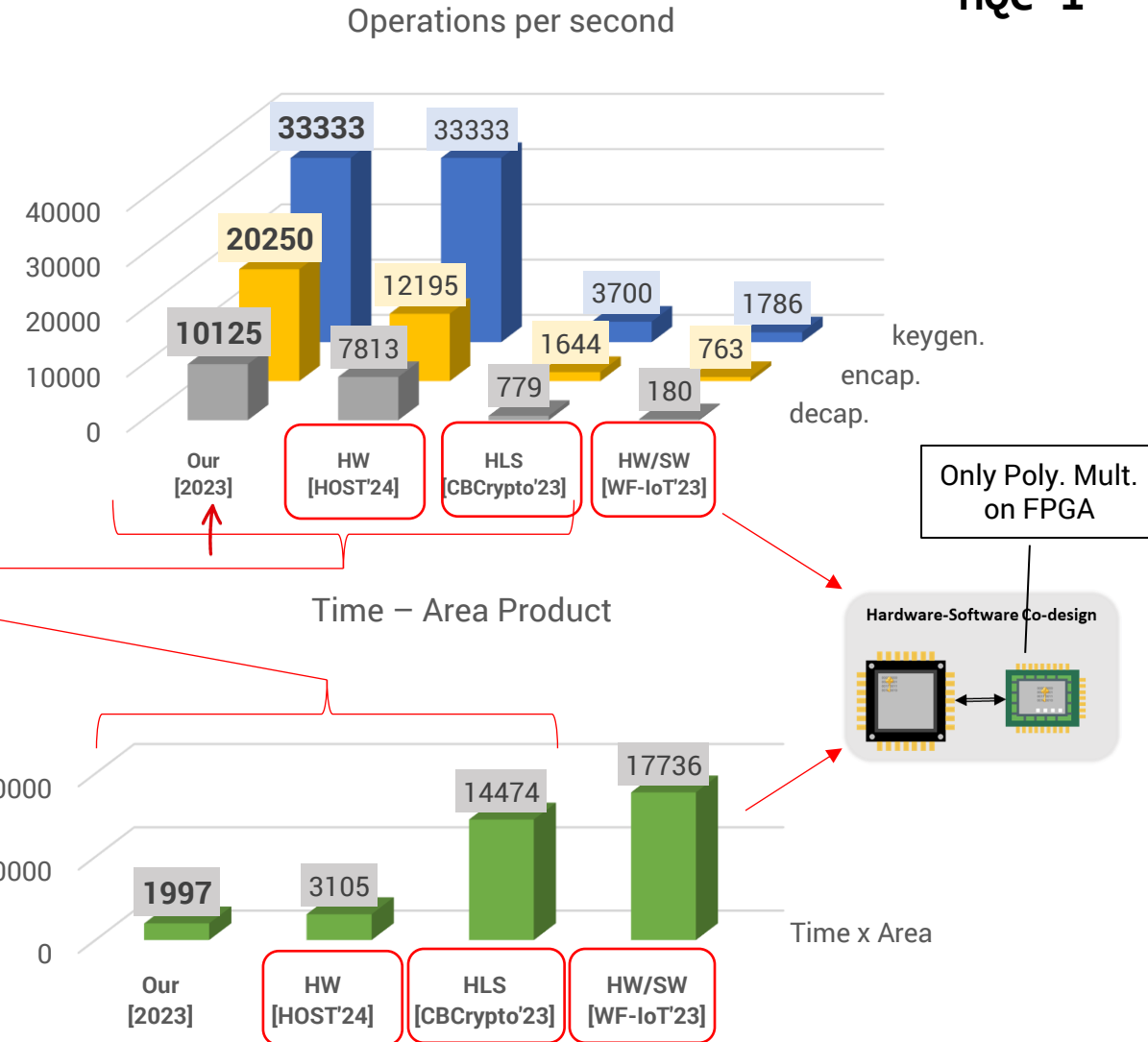
- Joint Design – combines Keygen, Encap, and Decap into one.
- Shared module among different primitives.
 - SHAKE256
 - Polynomial Multiplication
 - Encapsulation
 - Polynomial Addition
- Time-Area product
 - Time * max{LUT/4 + 128 * BRAM + 1



Full design on FPGA

Higher is better

Lower is better

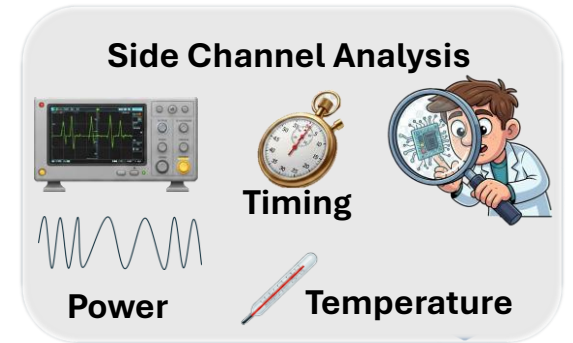


Aguillar-Melchor et al., Towards automating cryptographic hardware implementations: A case study of HQC. , CBCrypto'23

Schöffel et al., Code-based Cryptography in IoT: A HW/SW co-design of HQC, WF-IoT'23

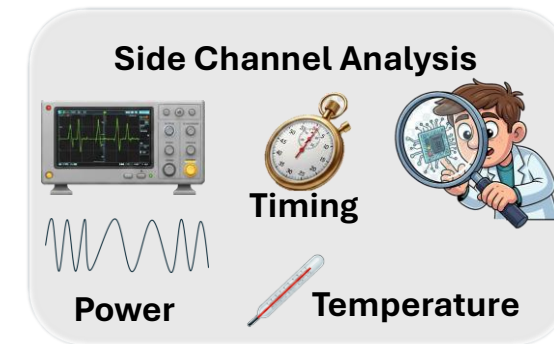
Antognazza et al., A high efficiency hardware design for the post-quantum KEM HQC, HOST'24

Side-Channel Evaluation

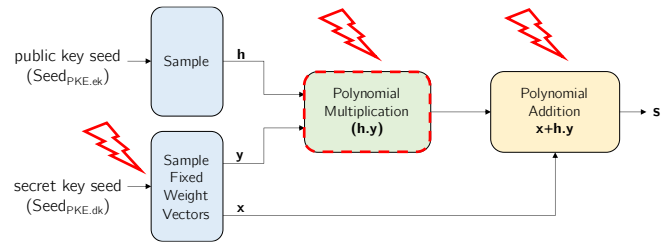


Side Channel Evaluation

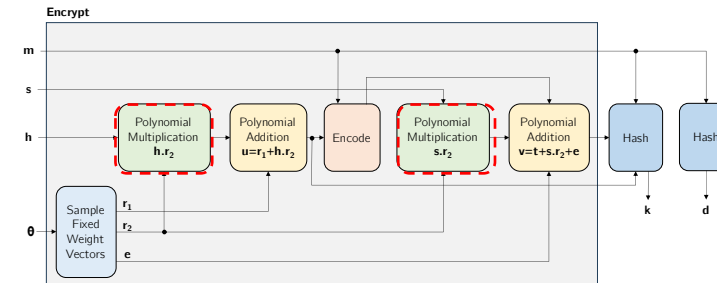
- **Side-channel** attacks are based on the **implementation** of a system
- It is not a brute-force attack or a theoretical weakness based attack
- Observe **unintentional features** such as timing, power, etc



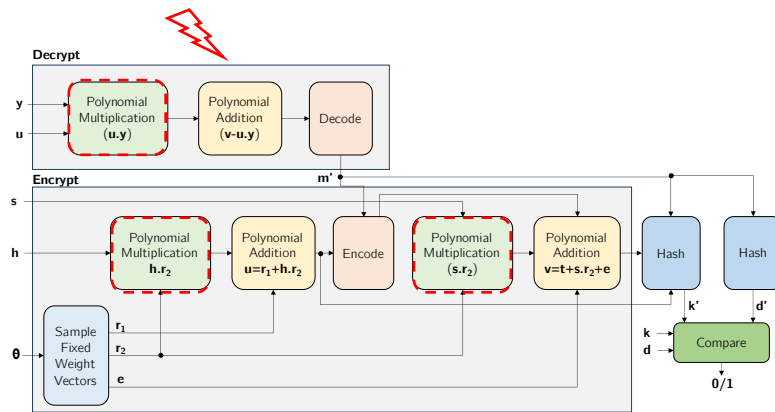
HQC Primitives



Key Generation



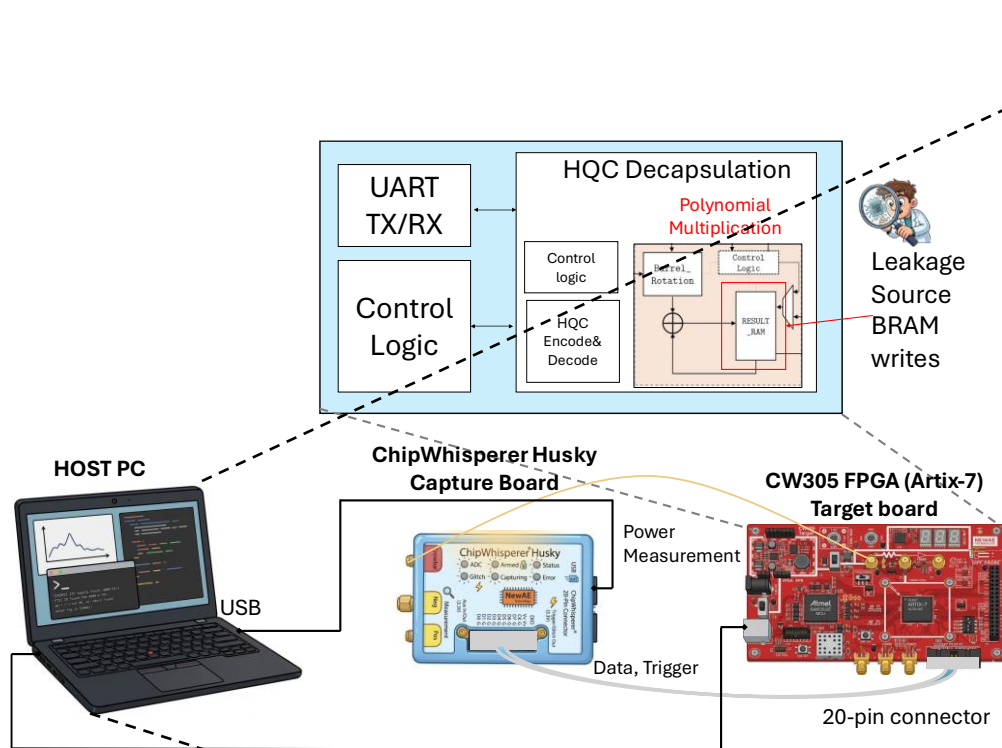
Encapsulation



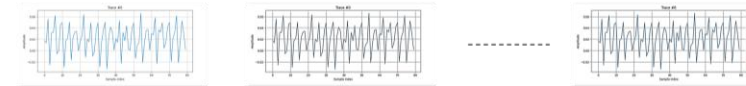
Decapsulation

- Performance Bottleneck
- ⚡ Side-channel attack target

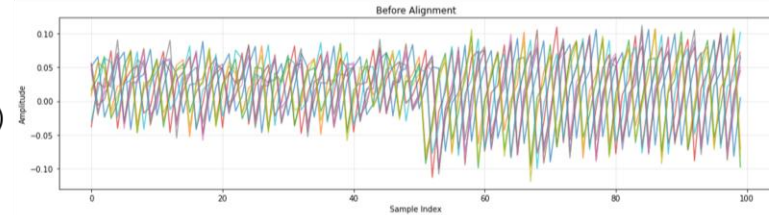
Attack Setup and Working



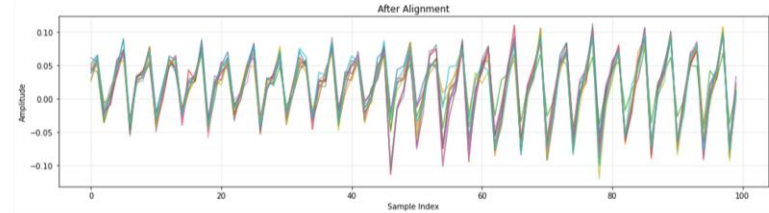
Stage 1:
Trace Acquisition



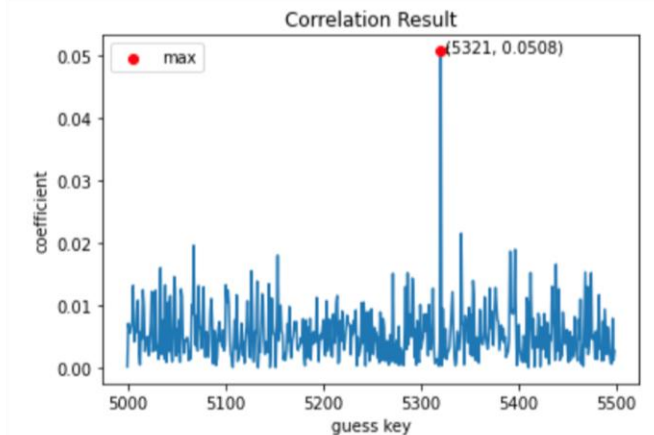
Stage 2:
Preprocessing
(before alignment)



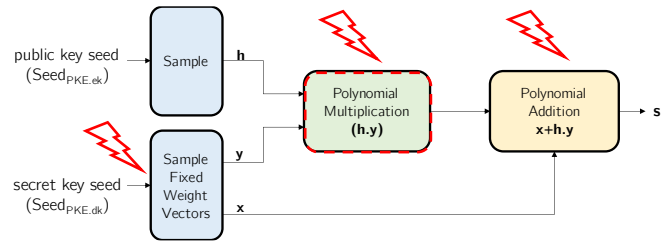
After Alignment



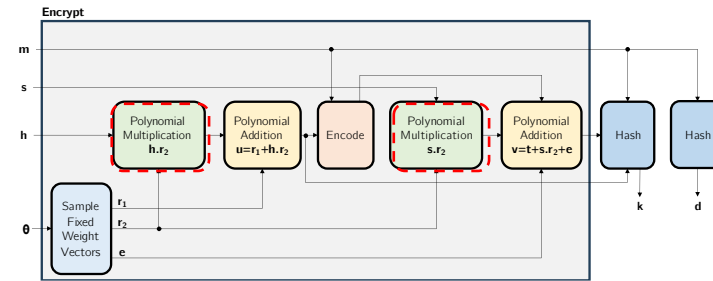
Stage 3: CPA Key
Recovery



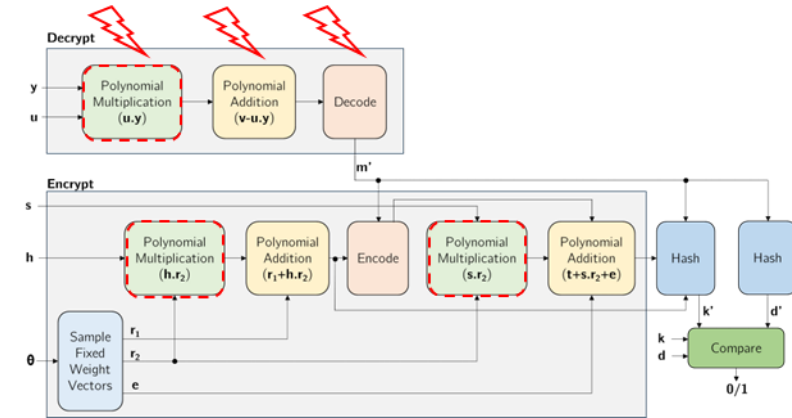
Summary



Key Generation



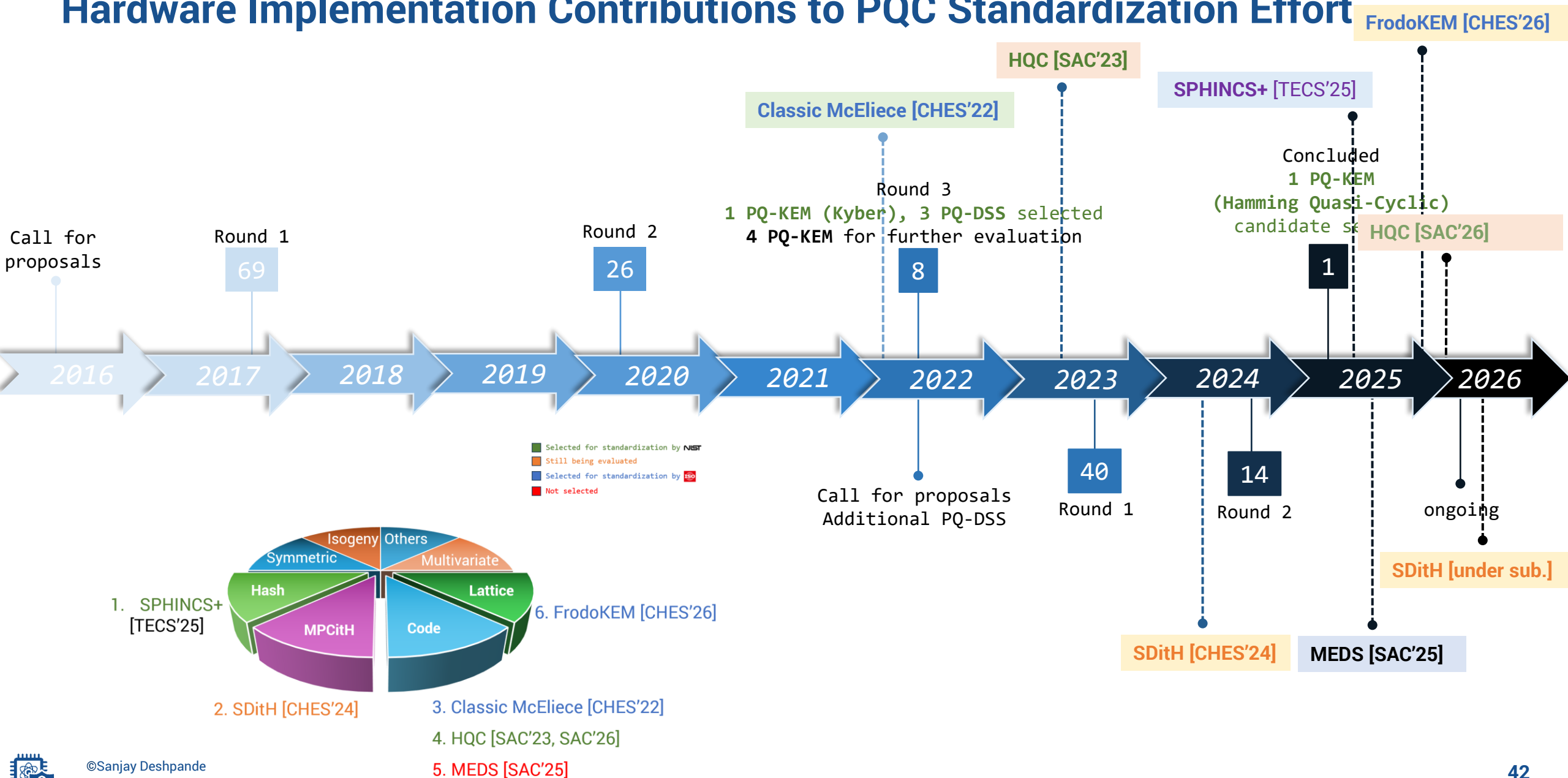
Encapsulation



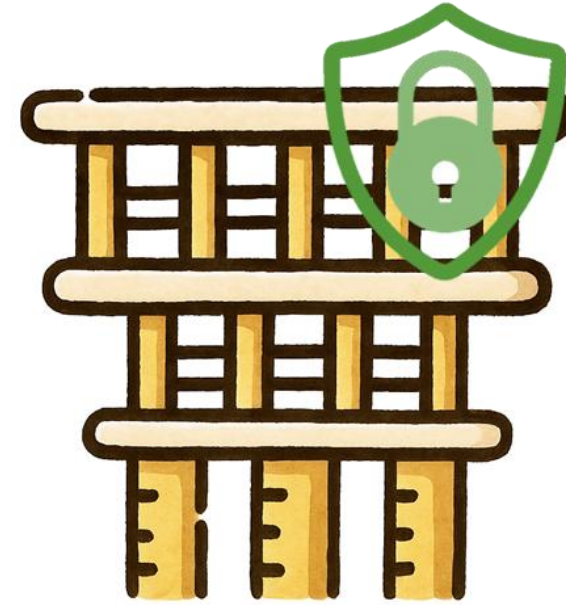
Decapsulation

- Design of performance and security critical aspects of HQC implementation

Hardware Implementation Contributions to PQC Standardization Effort

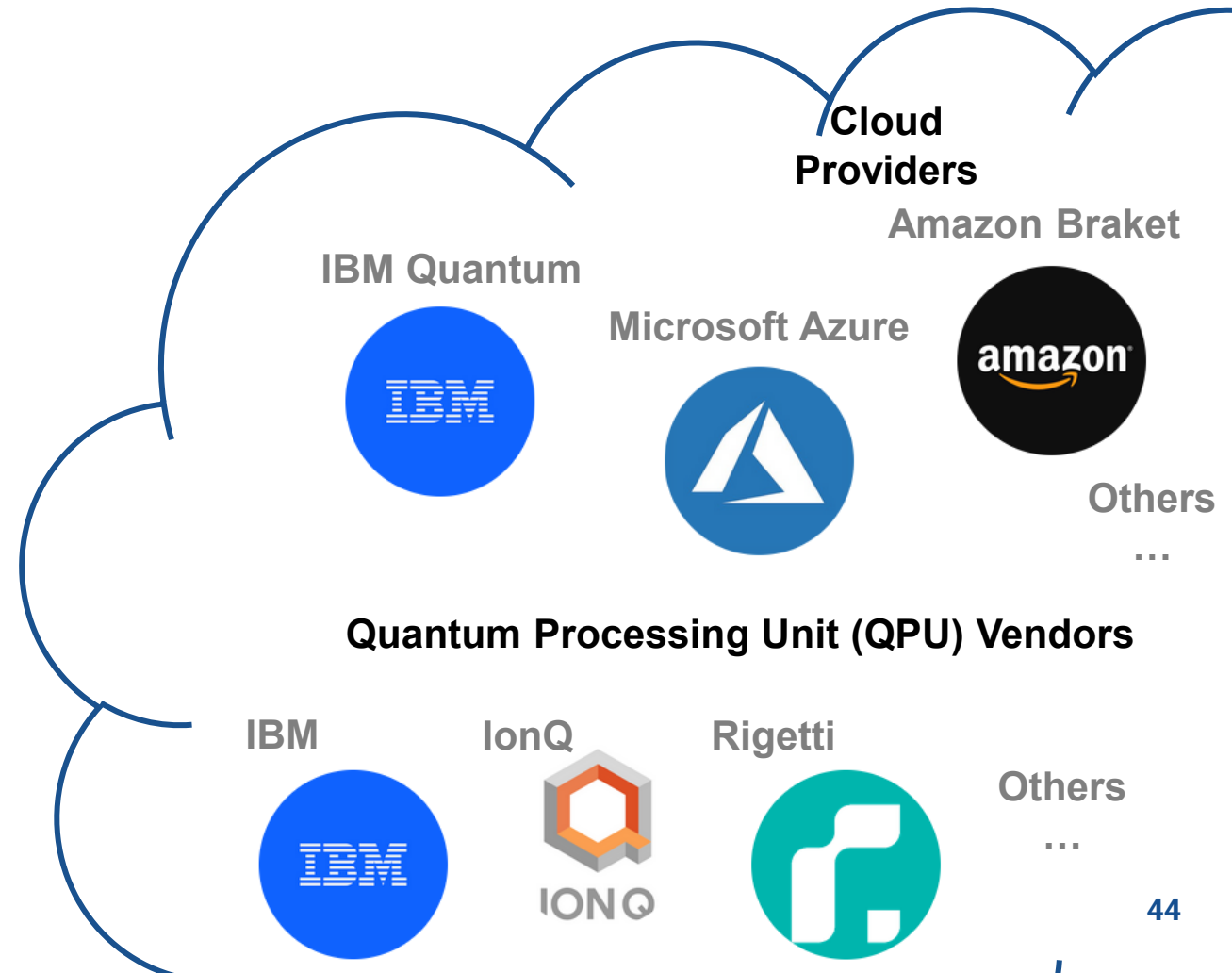


Quantum Computer Cybersecurity



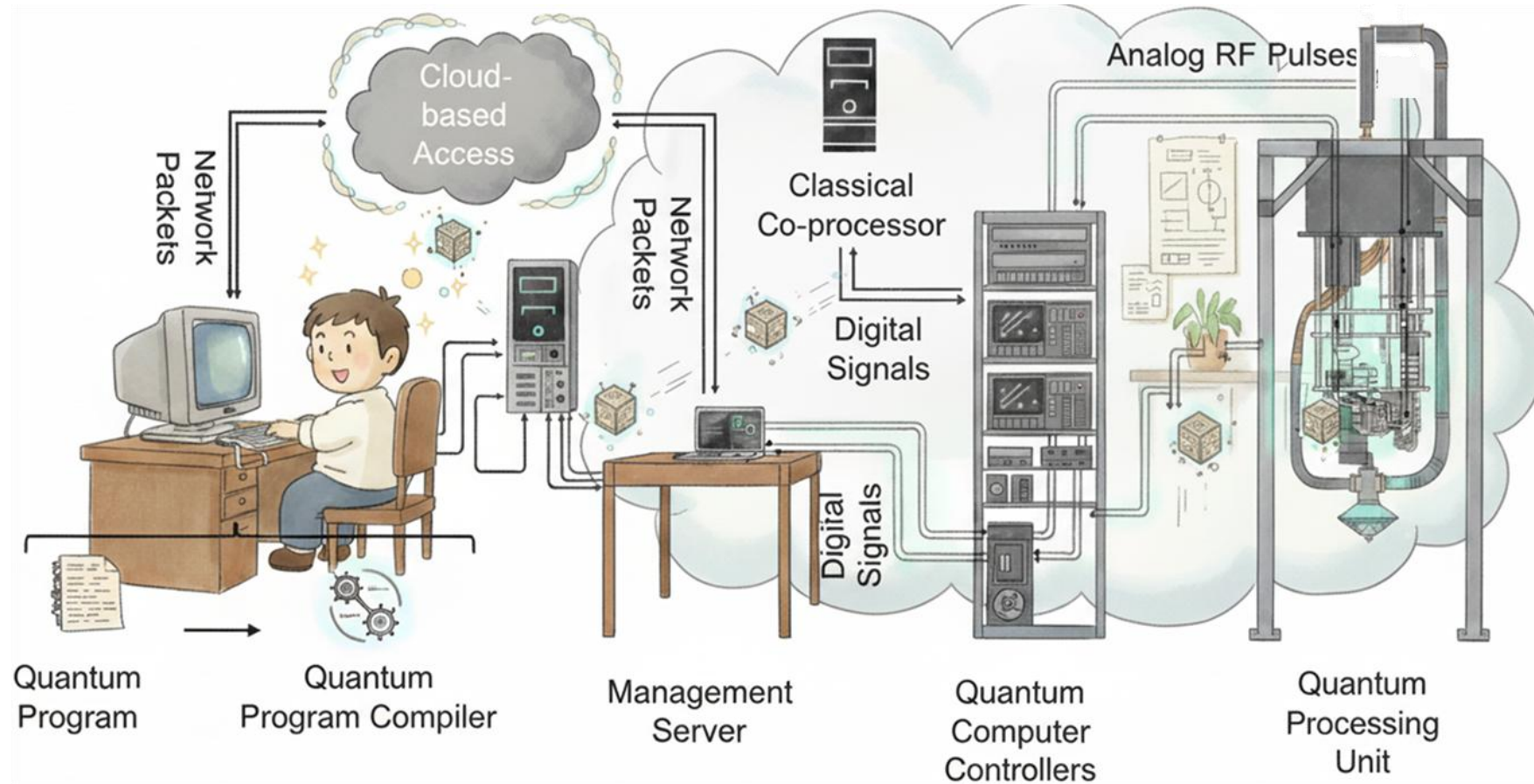
Cloud-based Access to Quantum Computers

- Quantum Computers are rapidly being deployed as cloud-based accelerators today
 - Many companies are pushing for Quantum Computer as a Service (QCaaS) deployments
- But there are no security considerations in QCaaS today
 - Possibly malicious users can now access quantum computing hardware remotely
 - Can attack other users, or try to reverse engineer the infrastructure

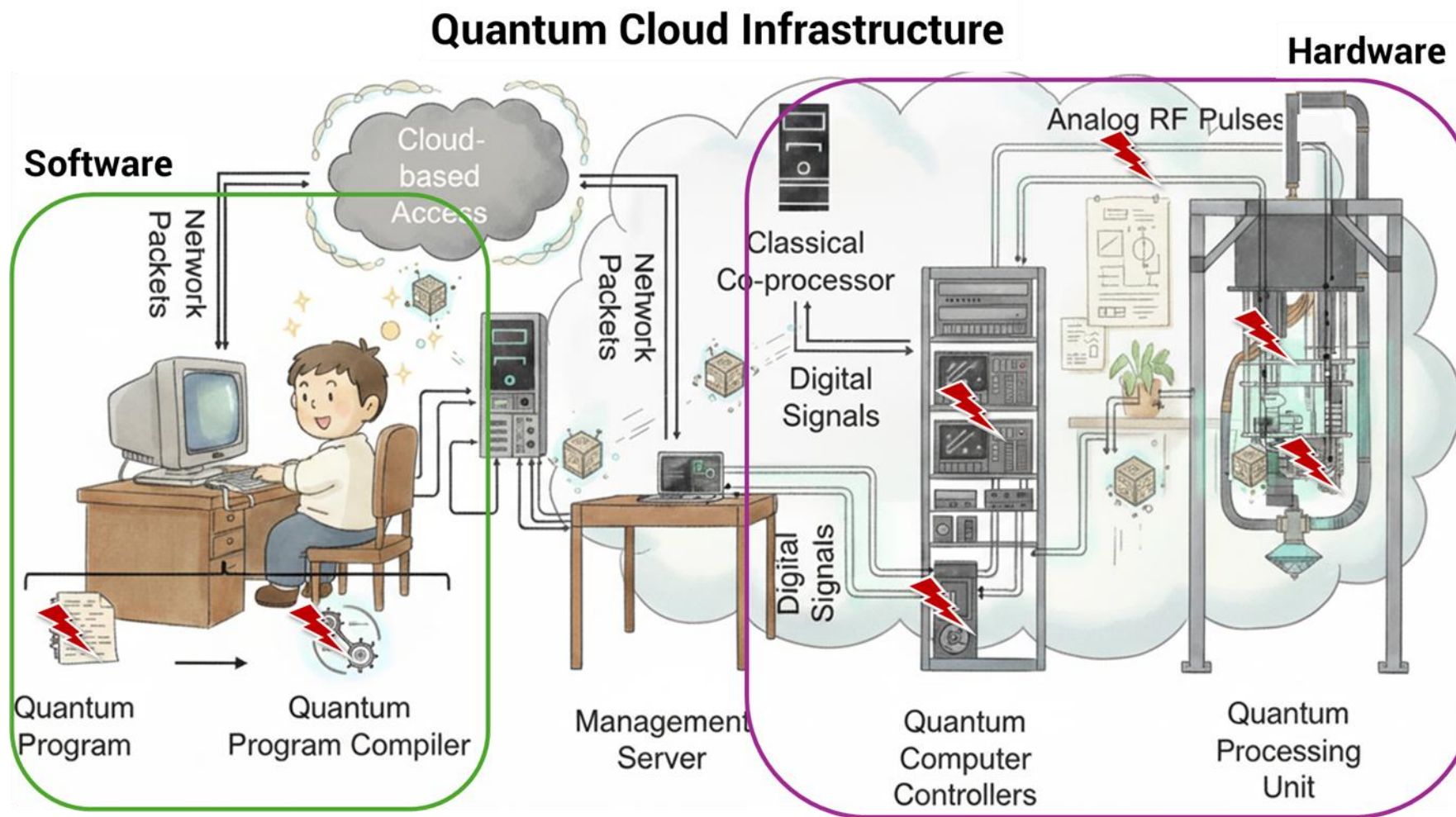


Workflow of Cloud-Based Quantum Computers

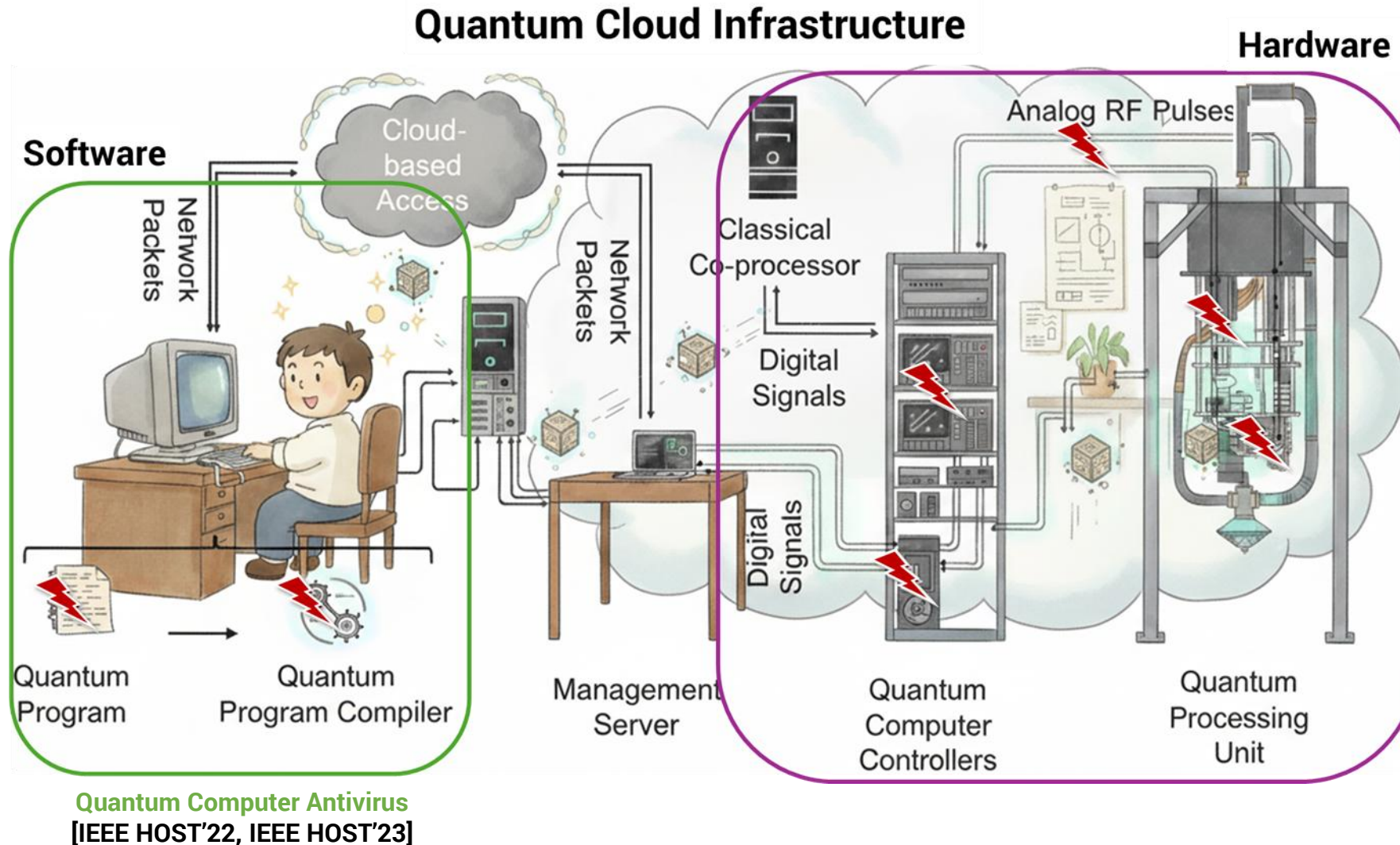
Quantum Cloud Infrastructure



Potential Threat Landscape



Some of Our Work on Quantum Computer Cybersecurity (QCC)



A Quantum Computer Trusted Execution environment [IEEE CAL'23]

Dynamic Pulse Switching for Protection of Quantum Computation on Untrusted Clouds [IEEE HOST'24]

Protecting quantum computers with a trusted controller [IEEE QCE'24]

Trusted execution environments for quantum computers [Front. Comp. Sci'25]

CHEQ: Towards Enabling Circuit Integrity Checking in Quantum Controllers [GLSVLSI'25]

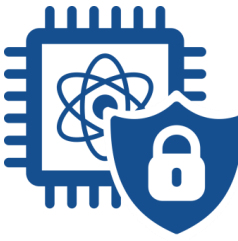
QCCS 2026

4th Annual Quantum Computer Cybersecurity Symposium

To be held November 11 to 13, 2026 at The Guild Lounge in Scott Hall at Northwestern University

<https://caslab.io/events/qccs/>





Thank you!