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Improved Sensing Characteristics of a Novel Pt/HfTiO$_2$/SiC Schottky-Diode Hydrogen Sensor

W. M. Tang, C. H. Leung, and P. T. Lai, Senior Member, IEEE

Abstract—A novel metal–insulator–silicon carbide Schottky-diode hydrogen sensor with HfTiO$_2$ gate insulator annealed in three different gases (N$_2$, O$_2$, or NO) is fabricated. Measurements are carried out at various hydrogen concentrations at high temperature using a computer-controlled measurement system. The hydrogen-sensing characteristics of the devices are studied with the help of ellipsometry, transmission electron microscopy, scanning electron microscope, energy-dispersive spectroscopy, and atomic force microscopy. Experimental results show that these sensors have high sensor output and can give significant response even at low hydrogen concentration. This work also finds that the NO-annealed sensor has the highest sensor output. When 800–ppm H$_2$ in N$_2$ gas is introduced, the NO-annealed sensor exhibits a high sensor output of 782% at 450 °C, which is about three and six times higher than those of the O$_2$- and N$_2$-annealed sensors, respectively. As compared to another sensor with HfO$_2$ gate insulator annealed in NO, the proposed NO-annealed sensor shows higher sensor output, which should be mainly attributed to the larger barrier height at the metal–insulator interface. The excellent hydrogen-sensing characteristics of this novel sensor make it very suitable for detecting hydrogen leakage, particularly in high-temperature environments.

Index Terms—Annealing, HfTiO$_2$, Schottky diode, SiC-based hydrogen sensor.

I. INTRODUCTION

H YDROGEN is widely used in our daily life. It is a colorless and odorless gas and is less dense than air. It was first identified and characterized by an English chemist Henry Cavendish in 1766 [1]. It can be produced by a variety of methods, including acid and iron methods, steam-reforming production method, coal and electrolysis methods, biological processes, and chemical decomposition of hydrogen-containing compounds. However, it is a very dangerous gas because it can cause a serious explosion if a spark is present. It can also make various metals such as high-strength steels, nickel and titanium alloys become brittle and crack. In order to avoid the leakage of hydrogen that can cause serious accidents, sensors that can detect hydrogen quickly and accurately are very important and essential in practical applications. Apart from leak detection, monitoring of the hydrogen or hydrocarbon concentration in fuel cells, hydrogen-driven vehicles, car exhaust, flues, and biomedical and chemical industries is also an important application of hydrogen sensors.

There are various types of hydrogen sensors which use different sensing mechanisms to detect hydrogen. Many of them use catalytic metals such as palladium (Pd) or platinum (Pt) as a hydrogen trap because these metals have high hydrogen solubility and can selectively absorb hydrogen gas. There are many types of hydrogen sensors such as pyroelectric sensors, piezoelectric sensors, fiber-optic sensors, electrochemical sensors, and semiconductor sensors. Among the various types of sensors, semiconductor sensors are preferably selected as gas sensors due to their much simpler electronic circuitry required for operation. The detection of hydrogen gas with semiconductor sensors is primarily done with semiconductor metal oxides. The initial work on this type of sensor can be traced back to the work of Brattain and Bardeen [2] in 1953. The sensing properties of this sensor are based on reactions between semiconductor oxides and gases in the atmosphere. There is another category of semiconductor hydrogen sensor in which the species of interest are absorbed at semiconductor interfaces and induce interfacial polarization. The first hydrogen sensor under this category was developed by Lundstrom et al. in 1975 [3] and was a metal–oxide–semiconductor (MOS) structure using silicon as substrate, silicon dioxide as gate insulator, and palladium as gate electrode. Since then, a lot of research on such hydrogen sensors has been done. Different materials and fabrication methods have been used to make the hydrogen sensors [4]. Silicon carbide (SiC), a wide-bandgap material, is commonly used to make the hydrogen sensor because it can operate potentially up to 1000 °C. The recent focus of SiC-based gas sensors has been on metal–insulator–SiC (MISiC) gas sensors because these sensors can have better sensitivity, stability, and selectivity [5]. Silicon oxynitride (SiON) has been used as gate insulator for fabricating MISiC Schottky-diode hydrogen sensors [6], [7]. It can suppress leakage current and reduce interface states and oxide charges and hence improve the sensor performance. Apart from oxynitrides, high-$k$ metal oxides can also be used as the gate insulator for reduced leakage. Many high-$k$ metal oxides such as Al$_2$O$_3$ [8], Y$_2$O$_3$ [9], La$_2$O$_3$ [10], ZrO$_2$ [11], TiO$_2$ [12], Ta$_2$O$_5$ [13], and HfO$_2$ [14] have been investigated during the last decade for potential replacement of SiO$_2$ as gate dielectrics in complementary MOS (CMOS)-based VLSI circuits. There are several methods to produce the high-$k$ film such as atomic layer deposition, electron-beam evaporation,

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sol–gel deposition, dc or RF sputtering, and molecular beam epitaxy. Of these deposition methods, dc and RF sputterings are generally preferred because they allow low-temperature processing and can easily make films with different compositions and microstructures.

In this work, a novel MISiC Schottky-diode hydrogen sensor with HfTiO$_2$ as gate insulator is fabricated for investigation. HfTiO$_2$ is a promising gate dielectric for future CMOS technology because incorporating Ti into hafnium oxide can increase the dielectric constant of Hf-based oxide [15]–[17]. The hydrogen-sensing properties of the device are studied and compared with those of its counterpart based on HfO$_2$ by taking measurements at various hydrogen concentrations at high temperature using a computer-controlled measurement system. The qualities, structures, and compositions of the devices are studied by ellipsometry, transmission electron microscopy (TEM), scanning electron microscope (SEM), energy-dispersive spectroscopy (EDX), and atomic force microscopy (AFM).

## II. Experiments

An n-type (0001) Si-face 4H–SiC wafer, manufactured by CREE research, was used in this study. The SiC wafer had a 5-μm epitaxial layer grown on a heavily doped substrate. The doping level of the epitaxial layer was $5 \times 10^{15}$ cm$^{-3}$. The wafer was cleaned using the conventional RCA method, followed by a 60-s dip in 5% hydrofluoric acid to remove the native oxide. The wafer was then loaded into a Denton Vacuum LLC Discovery 635 sputterer, which was then pumped down to $2 \times 10^{-6}$ torr. HfTiO$_2$ was then deposited at room temperature by cosputtering of hafnium metal (99.99% purity) with an RF power of 25 W and titanium metal (99.995% purity) with a dc current of 0.1 A in a mixed Ar/O$_2$ ambient (Ar-to-O$_2$ ratio = 8:1) for 12.3 min. An electrode consisting of 100-nm Pt with a diameter of 0.5 mm was then deposited on the wafer by dc magnetron sputtering through a stainless steel shadow mask. The sample then underwent an annealing in a furnace at 650 $^\circ$C in N$_2$ (1000 mL/min) for 10 min (denoted as N2 sample). In order to investigate the effects of annealing gas on the sensor performance, two more hydrogen sensors annealed under the same annealing temperature and duration but in different annealing gases were fabricated. The samples annealed in O$_2$ and NO were denoted as O2 and NO, respectively. The samples were pasted on headers using silver epoxy. The headers were then put into an oven at 200 $^\circ$C for half an hour to harden the silver epoxy. Finally, a gold wire was connected between the front electrode and one of the pins of the header using a hybrid wedge bonder. The hydrogen sensor fabricated in this study is shown in Fig. 1. The processing conditions and insulator thickness of each sample are summarized in Table I. After the fabrication of the sensors, their hydrogen-sensing properties were investigated and compared with those of the sensor based on HfO$_2$. The details of the fabrication process of the HfO$_2$-based sensor were discussed elsewhere [18]. Measurements were carried out using a computer-controlled measurement system as shown in Fig. 2. Three devices were measured simultaneously for each type of hydrogen sensors. The humidity of the laboratory was maintained at 50% during measurements.

## III. Results and Discussion

Fig. 3 shows the TEM images of the (a) N2 and (b) NO samples. The graph clearly shows the crystal structure of the SiC substrate and a very thin insulator layer in the cross section of the device. Epoxy is shown in the TEM image as it is used during the TEM sample preparation to attach the front sides of the two samples together. Since the Pt layer is deposited onto the insulator layer only in the form of dots with a diameter of 0.5 mm, the Pt layer cannot be seen in the cross section of the sample shown in Fig. 3(b). Fig. 4 shows the SEM picture of the N2 sample. As the catalytic metal electrode is the most important part of the Schottky-diode hydrogen sensors where dissociative reactions of hydrogen take place, the composition
of the electrode is then examined by EDX coupled with the SEM measurement tool. The results confirm that the electrode consists of platinum.

Surface roughness and surface morphology of a film are important physical properties which may affect the electrical properties of electron devices and their sensing capability [19]–[22].

The morphologies of the HfTiO$_2$ films annealed in N$_2$, O$_2$, and NO shown in Fig. 5 are characterized by an AFM machine (SII Nanopics 2100). The AFM images show that all the films have a densely packed amorphous structure, and AFM measurements reveal the rms roughness of the films shown in the figures. It is found that all the films have a smooth surface with an rms
roughness within 0.11–0.13 nm. As all the studied HfTiO$_2$ films exhibit similar physical characteristics in terms of morphology and roughness, the differences in the sensing performance of the studied devices (as shown in the following) are thus mostly attributed to the difference in the interfacial and dielectric properties of the devices rather than the surface properties of the dielectric films.

The $I$–$V$ characteristics of the fabricated sensors in air and in hydrogen environment have been studied and are shown in Fig. 6. The $I$–$V$ curves shift to the left upon exposure to 48-ppm H$_2$ in N$_2$. The inset of Fig. 6 shows the $I$–$V$ curves of the NO sample measured in air and in different H$_2$ concentrations (48, 238, 429, 619, 810, and 1000 ppm). The $I$–$V$ curve shifts to the left as the hydrogen concentration increases. When hydrogen molecules come to the catalytic gate metal, they dissociate at the surface of the metal and form hydrogen atoms. These hydrogen atoms then diffuse through the metal on the order of nanoseconds to the insulator surface and become polarized due to the displacement of their negatively charged electron cloud relative to their positively charged nucleus induced by an external applied field. This dipole layer causes a shift of the electrical ($I$–$V$) characteristics of the devices. The amount of voltage shift at a fixed current is assumed to be proportional to the atomic hydrogen concentration at the interface or the hydrogen coverage $\theta_i$. The maximum voltage change $\Delta V_{\text{max}}$ occurs when each hydrogen absorption site at the interface is occupied by one hydrogen atom, i.e., the hydrogen coverage is one. Fig. 7 shows the schematic energy-band diagram of a MISiC Schottky-diode hydrogen sensor. Electrons in the conduction band of the substrate (SiC) have to overcome an energy barrier $\phi_b$ to reach the gate (Pt). The polarized hydrogen layer can increase the electron concentration of the metal and, hence, its Fermi level near the insulator layer. As a result, the reduced energy barrier at the metal–insulator interface increases the forward current of the device.

Based on the thermionic-emission conduction mechanism of a Schottky diode, for forward bias $V > 3kT/q$, its $I$–$V$ characteristics are given by [23]

$$I = I_o \exp \left( \frac{qV}{nkT} \right)$$

where $k$ is the Boltzmann constant, $T$ is the temperature in Kelvin, and $n$ is the ideality factor. $I_o$ is the saturation current defined as

$$I_o = A^* T^2 \exp \left( -\frac{\phi_b}{\varphi_T} \right)$$

where $A$ is the junction area, $A^*$ is the effective Richardson constant, $\phi_b$ is the barrier height of the Schottky diode, and $\varphi_T = kT/q$. The plots of log$I$ versus $V$ (in air and in 800-ppm H$_2$ in N$_2$ gas) at 450 $^\circ$C are shown in Fig. 8. The plots show good linearity, which indicates that the conduction mechanism of the samples in both air and hydrogen environment is controlled by the thermionic emission.

Fig. 9 shows the variation of $I_{\text{air}}$ as a function of temperature under a fixed electric field (5 MV/cm) in order to take into account the effect of thickness variation among the samples. The $I_{\text{air}}$ of all the samples increases with temperature due to thermionic emission. The NO sample has the smallest $I_{\text{air}}$, while the N2 sample has the largest. This should be due to the fact that adding N into the Hf–Ti oxide can result in better bulk and interface qualities and, hence, smaller leakage current [24], [25]. As discussed in [18], NO nitridation is a promising passivation method to improve the electrical properties of high-$k$ devices because, during the nitridation process, nitrogen atoms decomposed from the NO gas can react with the SiC wafer, forming a nitrogen-terminated passivation layer at the surface of the SiC wafer to help remove the dangling bonds there. In addition, the N species can couple with the O vacancies and reduce the interfacial strain, fixed oxide charges, carbon-related interface traps, carbon atoms, and clusters at the interface [26], [27]. The SiON interlayer formed between the high-$k$
Fig. 8. $I-V$ characteristics of the samples at 450 °C in (a) air and (b) 800-ppm H$_2$ in N$_2$.

Fig. 9. $I_{\text{air}}$ of the samples as a function of temperature. The inset shows a comparison of the $I_{\text{air}}$ of the HfTiO$_2$ and HfO$_2$ samples, both annealed in NO. The standard deviation on the sensor output is 0.014–0.42.

Fig. 10. Sensor outputs of the samples (bias voltage = 2.5 V) upon exposure to different H$_2$ concentrations in N$_2$ at 450 °C. The inset shows a comparison of the sensor outputs of the HfTiO$_2$ and HfO$_2$ samples, both annealed in NO. The standard deviation on the sensor output is 0.014–0.42.

Fig. 11. Barrier-height variations of the HfTiO$_2$ samples annealed in N$_2$, O$_2$, and NO upon exposure to different H$_2$ concentrations in N$_2$ at 450 °C. The inset shows a comparison of the HfTiO$_2$ and HfO$_2$ samples, both annealed in NO.

dielectric and the substrate during the NO nitridation process can also improve the interface quality and suppress the leakage associated with high-$k$ materials [24]. The inset of Fig. 9 shows a comparison of the $I_{\text{air}}$ of the HfTiO$_2$ and HfO$_2$ samples both annealed in NO. The $I_{\text{air}}$ of the HfTiO$_2$ sample is smaller than that of the HfO$_2$ sample. This should be attributed to the decrease of conduction-band offset due to the Ti added into the HfO$_2$ film [28], resulting in a larger barrier height at the Pt/HfTiO$_2$ interface (as shown in the following).

The sensor outputs of the samples upon exposure to different H$_2$ concentrations are shown in Fig. 10. The sensor output is defined as $(I_{\text{H2}} - I_{\text{air}})/I_{\text{air}}$, where $I_{\text{H2}}$ and $I_{\text{air}}$ are the currents of the sensors measured in hydrogen and air, respectively. At 450 °C under a forward voltage of 2.5 V, the sensor outputs of all the samples increase with hydrogen concentration. This phenomenon could be explained as follows. When hydrogen
When hydrogen concentration increases, the barrier height of the sensor decreases, and the barrier-height lowering defined as $\phi_b (\text{air}) - \phi_b (\text{H}_2)$ increases. It is because, when more hydrogen molecules dissociate at the front electrode, more hydrogen atoms can be adsorbed at the electrode–insulator interface to form a stronger polarized layer, causing a larger barrier-lowering effect. Upon hydrogen exposure, the NO sample gives the largest change in barrier height among the test samples and, hence, the highest sensor output. The inset of Fig. 11 shows a comparison of the barrier heights of the HfTiO$_2$ and HfO$_2$ samples. The $\phi_b (\text{air})$ of the HfTiO$_2$ sample is 1.61 V, while that of the HfO$_2$ sample is 1.48 V. Incorporating Ti into the HfO$_2$ film increases the barrier height, thus reducing the conduction-band offset, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the enhanced sensor output of the HfTiO$_2$ sample should be mostly due to the larger barrier height at the Pt/HfTiO$_2$ interface which greatly reduces $I_{\text{air}}$. Table II compares the metal–insulator–semiconductor-based hydrogen sensors with different metal oxide insulators reported in the literature. As compared with previous results, the proposed HfTiO$_2$ sensor exhibits high sensor output and fast response at high operating temperature, suggesting that the hydrogen sensor in this study has promising applications for detecting hydrogen leakage in harsh environments.

### IV. Conclusion

Hafnium titanate (HfTiO$_2$) is successfully used as the gate insulator for fabricating MISiC Schottky-diode hydrogen sensors. The effects of different annealing gases (N$_2$, O$_2$, and NO) on the sensing characteristics of the device have been studied. Experimental results demonstrate that the sensors have high sensor output at high operating temperature. Among the three sensors, the sensor with NO annealing has the smallest $I_{\text{air}}$ and the highest sensor output. This should be attributed to the incorporation of nitrogen in the device which can strongly bond to the interstitial oxygen, forming less mobile NO molecules, resulting in better insulator and insulator/substrate interface quality and, hence, better sensor performance. The study also finds that O$_2$ annealing can improve the film stoichiometry to give smaller $I_{\text{air}}$ and, hence, higher sensor output when compared to N$_2$ annealing. Compared to the HfO$_2$ sensor, the proposed HfTiO$_2$ sensor produces a sensor output increased by a factor of 3.6. This improved performance is attributed to a larger energy barrier at the Pt/HfTiO$_2$ interface which reduces the leakage current of the device. It is also found that...
the electrical conduction of the sensors is controlled by the thermionic-emission mechanism. In summary, these sensors have potential applications for detecting hydrogen leakage, particularly in high-temperature environments.

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