

Controllable 0 - π Josephson junctions containing a ferromagnetic spin valve

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Superconductivity and ferromagnetism are antagonistic forms of order, and rarely coexist. Many interesting new phenomena occur, however, in hybrid superconducting/ferromagnetic systems. For example, a Josephson junction containing a ferromagnetic material can exhibit an intrinsic phase shift of π in its ground state for certain thicknesses of the material.¹ Such “ π -junctions” were first realized experimentally in 2001,^{2,3} and have been proposed as circuit elements for both high-speed classical superconducting computing and for quantum computing.⁴⁻¹⁰ Here we demonstrate experimentally that the phase state of a Josephson junction containing two ferromagnetic layers can be toggled between 0 and π by changing the relative orientation of the two magnetizations. These controllable 0- π junctions have immediate applications in cryogenic memory where they serve as a necessary component to an ultra-low power superconducting computer.¹¹ Such a fully superconducting computer is estimated to be orders of magnitude more energy-efficient than current semiconductor-based supercomputers.¹² Phase controllable junctions also open up new possibilities for superconducting circuit elements such as superconducting “programmable logic,” where they could function in superconducting analogs to field-programmable gate arrays.

When a superconducting (S) material and a ferromagnetic (F) material are placed in contact with each other, the properties of both materials are modified near the S/F interface. The intriguing nature of this “superconducting proximity effect” in S/F systems arises due to the exchange field in F, which imposes a phase shift on the two electrons of a Cooper pair as they propagate across F. Cooper pairs in conventional superconductors consist of two electrons with equal and opposite momenta and opposite spin. When such a pair crosses the S/F boundary, one electron goes into the majority, or up-spin, band in F and the other goes into the minority, or down-spin, band causing the two electrons to acquire a net center-of-mass momentum $\pm\hbar Q = \pm(\hbar k_F^\uparrow - \hbar k_F^\downarrow)$, where $\hbar k_F^\uparrow$ and $\hbar k_F^\downarrow$ are the Fermi momenta of the majority and minority bands, respectively.¹³ Alternatively, one can say that the electron pair correlation function oscillates in F with wavevector Q perpendicular to the S/F interface. In S/F/S Josephson junctions, those oscillations translate into oscillations between 0-junctions and π -junctions as the F-layer thickness is increased.¹⁻³

Imagine now a Josephson junction with the structure S/F₁/N/F₂/S, where F₁ and F₂ may be different ferromagnetic materials.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ The pair correlation function describing Cooper pairs from the left-hand S accumulates a phase $\phi_1 = Q_1 \cdot d_{F1}$ while traversing F₁, where d_{F1} is the thickness of F₁. If the magnetization of F₂ is parallel to that of F₁, then the pair correlation function will accumulate an additional phase $\phi_2 = Q_2 \cdot d_{F2}$ traversing F₂. If, however, the magnetization of F₂ is antiparallel to that of F₁, then the role of majority and minority bands is reversed, and the pair correlation function will acquire the opposite phase, $-\phi_2$. As shown schematically in Figure 1(a), if we choose ϕ_1 to be close to $\pi/2$ and $\phi_2 \leq \pi/2$, then when the layers are parallel $\phi = \phi_P = \phi_1 + \phi_2$, putting the junction into the π state, and when the layers are antiparallel $\phi = \phi_{AP} = \phi_1 - \phi_2$, putting the junction into the 0 state.

Experimental verification of the prediction outlined above requires performing a phase-sensitive measurement, which we accomplish by fabricating a Superconducting QUantum Interference Device, or SQUID, containing two Josephson junctions of the structure described above. The junctions are elliptically shaped with different aspect ratios of 2.2 and 2.8 so that the magnetic layers in the two junctions will have different switching fields. We choose different ferromagnetic materials – one hard for the “fixed layer” and the other soft for the “free layer” – so that only the free layer switches its magnetization direction in small applied magnetic fields. The free layer was chosen as $\text{Ni}_{0.84}\text{Fe}_{0.16}$ (“Permalloy”) of thickness 1.5 nm to put the junction close to the $0-\pi$ transition [M.A. Khasawneh, BMN, ECG, RL, WPP, & NOB, in preparation]. The fixed layer in the junctions is Ni of thickness 1.2 nm, which should add or subtract a small phase increment.^{15,17-}

¹⁹ Additional information about the materials can be found in the Methods section. Figure 1(b) shows a cartoon with the design of our SQUIDs and junctions, as well as the four accessible magnetic states of the junctions. We will use the figure’s labeling convention for the four states as “ $\pi-\pi$ ”, “ $0-\pi$ ”, etc. corresponding to the states of the two junctions, JJ-1 and JJ-2 respectively. We will show that these labels accurately describe the phase states of the junctions.

We initialize the junctions into the $\pi-\pi$ state by applying a large in-plane field of $H_{\text{in}} = -2600$ Oe, which sets all four magnetic layers in the negative direction. We then measure, at zero field, a set of I-V curves with different values of the current I_Φ through the flux line to observe oscillations in the SQUID critical current as a function of applied flux Φ . Critical currents are obtained by fitting I-V curves to the standard form for an overdamped Josephson junction.²⁰ Note that the critical currents for the two polarities of applied current, I_{c+} and I_{c-} , need not be the same. Next we apply a small “set” field $H_{\text{in}} = 5$ Oe, return the field to zero, and repeat the scan of I-V curves vs flux. We continue taking small steps in H_{in} , each time setting the field back to zero and repeating a full

flux scan. Figure 2(a) shows a 3-dimensional plot of I_{c+} vs H_{in} and I_{Φ} as H_{in} is stepped from 0 to 100 Oe. Cross-sections of the plot at fixed values of H_{in} exhibit clear oscillations in $I_{c+}(I_{\Phi})$. As H_{in} is varied, those cross-sections exhibit two large jumps, the first at $H_{in} = 30$ Oe and the second at $H_{in} = 50$ Oe. At each jump, the overall magnitude of the critical current changes, and the peaks in I_{c+} shift along the flux axis. We identify the first jump with the NiFe free layer in the more circular JJ-1 switching its magnetization direction, so that the phase state of JJ-1 switches from π to 0, thus changing the SQUID from the “ π - π ” to the “0- π ” state. The second jump signifies that the NiFe layer in the more elliptical JJ-2 has switched its magnetization direction, and is now also in the 0-state, so the SQUID is now in the “0-0” state. Figure 2(b) shows similar data acquired for $H_{in} < 0$. Again there are two jumps in the plot, the first occurring at $H_{in} = -35$ Oe, putting the SQUID in the “ π -0” state, and the second at $H_{in} = -100$ Oe, returning the SQUID to the “ π - π ” state as at initialization. Taken together, Figures 2(a) and (b) corresponds to a major loop through all four accessible magnetic states of the system. The fact that the magnitudes of the switching fields for $H_{in} < 0$ are generally larger than for $H_{in} > 0$ is due to dipolar coupling between the fixed Ni layer and the free NiFe layer in each junction.

Figure 3(a) shows more detailed data of I_{c+} and I_{c-} vs I_{Φ} for four selected values of H_{in} taken just after each jump. Several features are immediately apparent in the data. First, I_{c+} and I_{c-} never approach zero; but rather oscillate with an amplitude of about 85 μ A in all four magnetic states. Second, the oscillations of I_{c+} and I_{c-} are not sinusoidal, but rather have an asymmetric saw tooth or ratchet shape. Third, the maxima in the I_{c+} and I_{c-} data do not line up with each other, so in general $I_{c-}(\Phi) \neq -I_{c+}(\Phi)$. All three of these features are well understood;^{20,21} the first is due to the finite geometrical inductance of the SQUID loop, while the second and third are due to

asymmetries in the inductances of the two arms of the loop and in the critical currents of the two junctions.

A simple model of an asymmetric SQUID is shown in Figure 1(c) where L_1 and L_2 are the effective inductances of the two arms of the SQUID loop and I_1 and I_2 are the currents through each arm.^{21,22} Our SQUIDs have an inductance asymmetry, i.e. $L_1 \neq L_2$, because the current paths through the two sides of the SQUID have different lengths (see Figure 1(b)). Our SQUIDs also have an asymmetry in the junction critical currents since the critical current is different when a junction is in the 0 vs the π state. Asymmetries in the SQUID loop inductances and in the critical currents of the two junctions cause horizontal shifts of the $I_{c+}(I_\Phi)$ and $I_{c-}(I_\Phi)$ data in opposite directions, which change when the critical current in one of the junctions changes. One can remove those shifts from the data by plotting the average magnitude of the critical current, $I_c^{\text{ave}} = (I_{c+} - I_{c-})/2$ vs I_Φ , as shown in Figure 3(b) for the four magnetic states represented in Figure 3(a). The $I_c^{\text{ave}}(I_\Phi)$ curves have a variety of shapes depending on how much the $I_{c+}(I_\Phi)$ and $I_{c-}(I_\Phi)$ curves in Figure 3(a) are shifted with respect to each other. Regardless of the shapes, Figure 3(b) shows that the locations of the minima and maxima in $I_c^{\text{ave}}(I_\Phi)$ line up with each other, with phase shifts of π between successive curves. Figure 3(a) also shows independent fits to the I_{c+} and I_{c-} data, described in the Supplementary Material, which confirm a π phase shift between each magnetic state. This demonstrates that we have been able to successfully control the phase of our junctions as proposed above.

The results represented in Figure 3 are reproducible upon repeating the whole major loop. In addition, one can obtain “minor loop” data after initialization by keeping H_{in} between +30 Oe and -35 Oe, so that only the free layer of JJ-1 switches its state. We have obtained similar minor loop

data from several different devices; the best major loop data were obtained in the device shown here.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated unequivocally a Josephson junction whose ground state can be switched between the 0-state and π -state by reversing the magnetization direction of one magnetic layer contained within the junction. Transitions between these states were verified by detecting the additional phase of the π -state junction within a DC SQUID. Phase controllable Josephson junctions have applications in superconducting electronics based on single-flux-quantum logic. The most obvious application is in superconducting memory.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ A single S/F/S Josephson junction with controllable critical current amplitude could function as a superconducting memory cell, but one must find a way to address such a memory cell when it is embedded in a large memory array, and the speed at which the junction switches into the voltage state after the “read” current is applied is limited by the small $I_c R_N$ product of the junction.²⁴ A solution to both problems is a memory cell based on a SQUID with a phase-controllable Josephson junction,¹¹ such as the one shown schematically in Figure 4.¹⁰ In that cell, the S/F/S junction serves as a passive phase-shifter; it has larger critical current than the two S/I/S junctions, so it stays in the supercurrent state during the read operation. The two SIS junctions have smaller I_c but large $I_c R_N$ product, hence they respond quickly to the read current. The state of the memory cell is determined by the critical current of the whole SQUID, which is large when the phase-shifter is in the 0-state and small when it is in the π -state. A scheme for addressing individual SQUID-based memory cells embedded in a large memory array has been proposed.²³ Aside from memory applications, there are other single flux quantum circuits that already benefit from the use of fixed-phase π -junctions.^{7,9,10} One can now start to envision new types of superconducting circuits using

switchable $0-\pi$ junctions like the ones described here. This should open up new horizons in the nascent field of “superconducting spintronics.”²⁵

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Supplementary Information is available in the online version of the paper.

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Author Contributions: E.C.G. and B.M.N. contributed equally to this work. The samples were designed by N.O.B., Y.W. and E.C.G. and fabricated by E.C.G. with significant help from B.M.N. and R.L. The data were taken by B.M.N. using apparatus designed by W.P.P. and software written by Y.W. and E.C.G. The data were analyzed by N.O.B., W.P.P., D.L.M., and J.A.G. The paper was written by N.O.B. and B.M.N. with help from W.P.P. and input from all authors. The study was conceived by N.O.B. and W.P.P.

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Figures

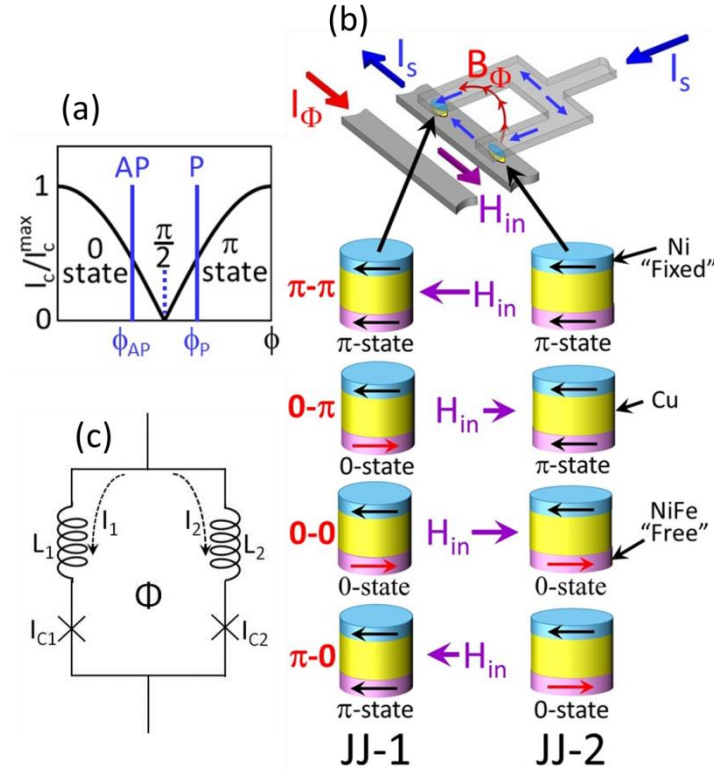


Figure 1

1. Schematic of experimental design. (a) Cartoon showing the critical current and phase state of an $S/F_1/N/F_2/S$ Josephson junction as a function of the total phase shift ϕ acquired by a Cooper pair traversing the entire structure. The individual phase shifts acquired through F_1 and F_2 are given in the ballistic limit by $\phi_1 = Q_1 \cdot d_{F1}$ and $\phi_2 = \pm Q_2 \cdot d_{F2}$, respectively. If $\phi_1 = \pi/2$ and $\phi_2 < \pi/2$, then the Josephson junction will be in the π -state when the magnetizations of F_1 and F_2 are parallel (P), or in the 0-state when the magnetizations are antiparallel (AP). So by controlling the magnetic configuration of the layers in the junction, we can switch a junction between the 0 and π state.

(b) Schematic diagram of the SQUID, and cartoons showing the magnetization directions of the free and fixed layers for the four magnetic states discussed in this work. The $5 \mu\text{m}$ wide straight bottom lead, two Josephson junctions and $5 \mu\text{m}$ wide pitch-fork shaped top lead make up the SQUID device while the $10 \mu\text{m}$ wide adjacent straight long wire injects magnetic flux Φ into the SQUID loop. The inner dimensions of this loop are $10 \mu\text{m}$ by $10 \mu\text{m}$. The positive directions of various experimental quantities are labeled by arrows: the measurement current, I_s , the applied in-plane magnetic field, H_{in} , the flux-line current, I_Φ , and the magnetic field produced by the flux line, B_Φ . The more circular junction is labeled as "JJ-1" while the more eccentric elliptical

junction is labeled as “JJ-2.” The sizes of the four arrows in the four magnetic states depict the magnitude and direction of H_{in} required to reach each state.

(c) Basic model of an asymmetric SQUID, used for quantitative modeling of the SQUID data. I_1 and I_2 are the currents flowing through the two arms, L_1 and L_2 are the effective inductances of the two arms, and I_{c1} and I_{c2} are the critical currents of the two Josephson junctions. The externally-applied flux through the SQUID is Φ .

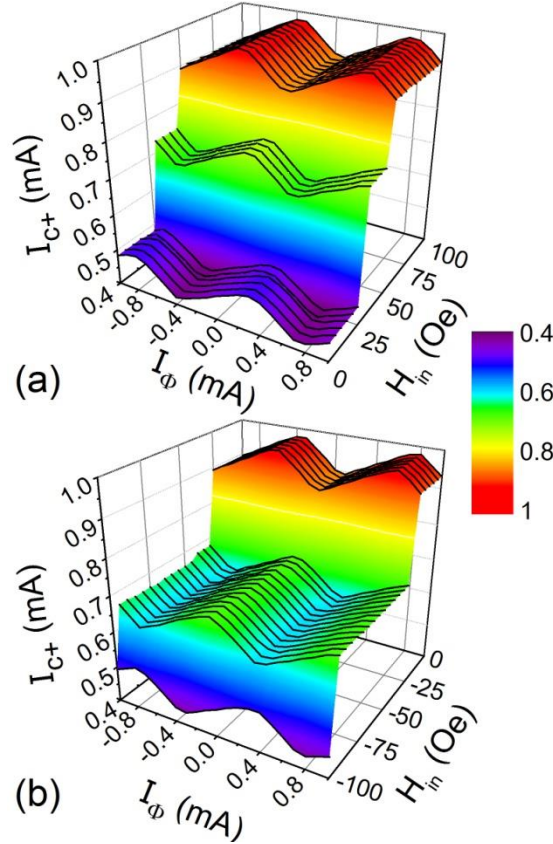


Figure 2

2. Three-dimensional plots of positive SQUID critical current, I_{c+} , vs flux-line current I_{Φ} and in-plane set field, H_{in} . After each value of H_{in} is applied, the field is returned to zero and a scan of I_{c+} vs I_{Φ} is acquired. Cross-sections at fixed H_{in} show clear SQUID oscillations in $I_{c+}(I_{\Phi})$ with a period of about 1.1 mA, corresponding to one flux quantum $\Phi_0 = h/2e$. Sudden jumps in the magnitude and phase of I_{c+} indicate changes in the magnetic state of one of the Josephson junctions in the SQUID. The four total jumps cover the four magnetic states shown in the cartoon of Figure 1(b).

(a) Data for $H_{in} > 0$.

(b) Data for $H_{in} < 0$. In both cases the data are taken with $|H_{in}|$ increasing in time.

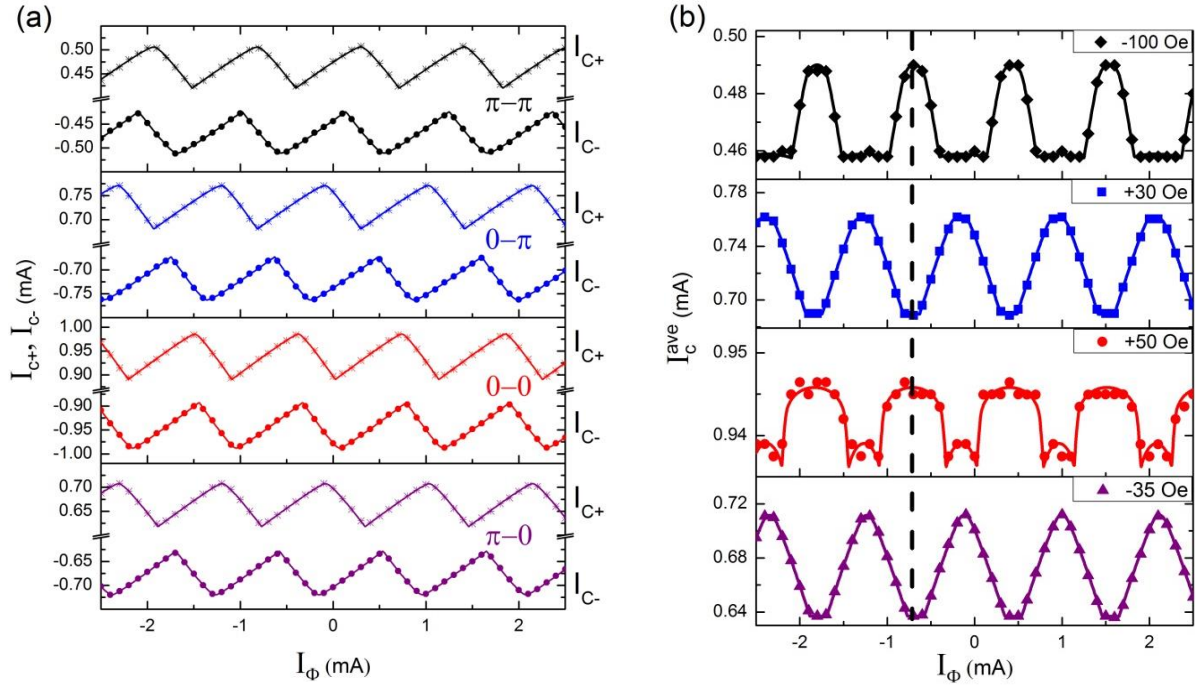


Figure 3

3. I_{c+} , I_{c-} , and I_c^{ave} data with fits for all four magnetic states. (a) Detailed plots of positive and negative SQUID critical currents, I_{c+} and I_{c-} , vs flux-line current I_{Φ} , for the four magnetic states implicated in Figure 2. The states are labeled $(\pi-\pi)$, $(0-\pi)$, etc. according to the phase states of JJ-1 and JJ-2, respectively. I_{c+} and I_{c-} both oscillate as a function of I_{Φ} , but with a ratchet shape due to the finite and unequal geometrical inductances of the two arms of the SQUID loop. For each magnetic state, the two curves are shifted with respect to each other in opposite directions by amounts that depend on the individual critical currents, I_{c1} and I_{c2} , of the two Josephson junctions. These critical currents will change depending on whether the junction is in the 0 or π state. The solid lines are the result of least-squares fits to the data using the asymmetric SQUID model shown in Figure 1(c), as described in the Supplementary Material.

(b) Plot of average critical current, $I_c^{ave} = (I_{c+} - I_{c-})/2$ vs I_{Φ} , for the same four magnetic states represented in (a). The solid lines are derived from the fits in (a). While the shapes of the I_c^{ave} curves depend on the alignment between the I_{c+} and I_{c-} curves, the positions of the maximum and minima in I_c^{ave} are immune to the shifts in I_{c+} and I_{c-} . This figure shows schematically the π phase shifts in the $(0-\pi)$ and $(\pi-0)$ states relative to the $(\pi-\pi)$ and $(0-0)$ states. The analysis presented in the Supplementary Material provides unambiguous proof of the π phase shifts.

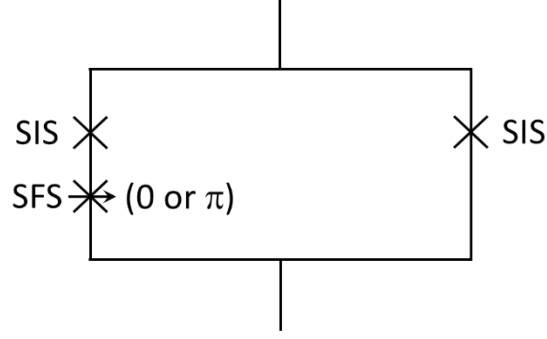


Figure 4

4. Use of a controllable $0-\pi$ junction in a memory cell. This SQUID-based memory cell has high critical current when the controllable S/F/S junction is in the 0-state and low critical current in the π -state. If the critical current of the S/F/S junction is larger than those of the two S/I/S junctions, then only the latter switch into the voltage state when the read current is applied, while the S/F/S junction acts as a passive phase shifter.¹⁰ The read time of the memory cell, $\tau_{\text{read}} \approx \hbar/eI_c R_N$, is then determined by the faster SIS junctions with higher $I_c R_N$ product. Methods to address a single cell in a memory array are discussed in refs. [11] and [23].

Methods

Materials

Ni was chosen as the fixed layer material based on earlier work¹⁹ showing that Ni layers of thickness 1.0 or 1.5 nm magnetize in applied fields of 1000-2000 Oe. Magnetometry measurements of Cu/Ni multilayers show that such thin Ni films surrounded by Cu on both sides have magnetization $M \approx 420 \text{ emu/cm}^3$, magnetically “dead layers” of total thickness $\approx 0.4 \text{ nm}$, and a Curie temperature slightly above room temperature for $d_{\text{Ni}} = 1.0 \text{ nm}$, and well above room temperature for $d_{\text{Ni}} = 1.5 \text{ nm}$ [data taken by C. Klose, unpublished Bachelor’s thesis]. Permalloy was chosen as the free layer material based on ongoing work in our lab showing good single-domain switching of NiFe nanomagnets embedded inside Nb/Cu/NiFe/Cu/Nb Josephson junctions [M.A. Khasawneh, BMN, ECG, RL, WPP, & NOB, in preparation]. The nominal sputtering target concentration is $\text{Ni}_{0.80}\text{Fe}_{0.20}$, but EDS analysis of thick films gives $\text{Ni}_{0.84}\text{Fe}_{0.16}$. Data of critical current vs magnetic field (Fraunhofer patterns) provide a rough estimate of the NiFe magnetic moment in the junction. Fits to the data as a function of NiFe thickness then provide estimates of the NiFe magnetization, $M \approx 800 \text{ emu/cm}^3$, and dead layer thickness of 0.1 nm. In comparison, NiFe films surrounded by Nb show a dead layer thickness of about 0.5 nm.¹⁶ We have not measured the Curie temperature of 1.5-nm thick NiFe films, but it is certainly well above room temperature.

Sample Fabrication

The Josephson junctions and SQUIDs used in this work are fabricated using UHV sputtering deposition and standard microfabrication techniques, including photolithography, e-beam lithography, and ion milling. The bottom wiring layer is a [Nb/Al] multilayer chosen to have less surface roughness than pure Nb, thereby improving the magnetic switching properties of the

soft magnetic materials in the junctions.²⁶ This bottom wiring layer and all of the ferromagnetic layers inside the junction, including a 20-nm top layer of Nb and a final layer of Au to prevent oxidation, are deposited in a single sputtering run without breaking vacuum, to ensure high-quality interfaces. The sputtering chamber is equipped with a liquid-nitrogen-cooled Meissner trap to reduce the partial pressure of water vapor. The base pressure of the sputtering chamber before deposition is $< 2 \times 10^{-8}$ Torr, while the Ar pressure during sputtering is about 2 mTorr. Measurements of the area-resistance product in the normal state yield consistent values of $AR_N \approx 6 \text{ f}\Omega\text{-m}$ for many junctions of different sizes -- an indicator of the reproducible high quality of the interfaces. The bottom layer is patterned using photolithography and the lift-off process. The junctions are patterned by electron-beam lithography and Ar ion milling, using the negative e-beam resist ma-N2401 as the ion mill mask. The junctions are sufficiently small, with an area of $0.5 \text{ }\mu\text{m}^2$ to ensure that the magnetic layers are single domain.²⁷ After milling, a SiO_x layer is deposited by thermal evaporation to electrically isolate the junction and the bottom wiring layer from the top wiring layer. Finally, the top Nb wiring layer is deposited by sputtering, again using photolithography and lift-off to define the pitchfork-like pattern seen in Figure 1b). The final SQUID loop has inner dimensions of $10 \text{ }\mu\text{m} \times 10 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$ with $5 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$ wide strips.

Measurement

The measurements reported here were performed at 4.2 K with the samples immersed in a liquid helium dewar equipped with a Cryoperm magnetic shield. The sample dip-stick is equipped with a commercial rf SQUID that is used in a self-balancing potentiometer circuit to measure the voltage across the sample SQUID, and a superconducting solenoid to apply uniform fields in the

plane of the sample. The measurement current through the sample SQUID is provided by a battery-powered ultra-low-noise programmable current source. The flux current, I_Φ , is provided by a Yokogawa programmable voltage source and a 1 k Ω resistor. I-V curves are obtained by sweeping the measurement current I from 0 to a value just above where the sample goes into the voltage state, to determine I_{c+} , and then sweeping from 0 in the negative direction to a value just beyond I_{c-} .

Initialization of the Ni magnetizations requires applying a large in-plane field $|H_{in}| = 2600$ Oe. After returning the field to zero, we lift the dip-stick several inches until the sample is just above the liquid helium level and the Nb wiring layers are no longer superconducting, to remove any trapped magnetic flux from the superconducting layers. The sample is then lowered back into the liquid helium and left there for the remainder of the run. The maximum field applied after that is ± 100 Oe, which is small enough not to induce any trapped flux in the Nb lines.

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