



RISC-V External Debug Security Extension

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Preamble



This document is in the [Development state](#)

Expect potential changes. This draft specification is likely to evolve before it is accepted as a standard. Implementations based on this draft may not conform to the future standard.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Debugging and tracing are essential tools utilized by developers to identify and rectify software and hardware issues, optimize performance, and ensure robust system functionality. The debugging and tracing extensions in RISC-V ecosystem play a pivotal role in enabling these capabilities, allowing developers to monitor and control the execution of programs during the development and testing phases. However, ensuring the security of this interface is of paramount importance to prevent unauthorized access and potential security breaches. Without adequate security measures, these functions can be exploited by malicious actors to gain unauthorized access, compromise system integrity, and extract sensitive information.

The extension is complementary to RISC-V Debug Specification and Efficient Trace for RISC-V, ensuring robust security. It comprises of ISA part and non-ISA part. The ISA part defines the enhancement inside the hart while the non-ISA part enforces the security rules on Debug Module.

Chapter 2. External Debug Security Threat model

RISC-V defines several privilege levels that are referred to as machine mode (M-mode), supervisor mode (S-mode), user mode (U-mode). Additionally, hypervisor extension changes the supervisor mode into hypervisor-extended supervisor mode (HS-mode) and further introduces virtual supervisor mode (VS-mode) as well as virtual user mode (VU-mode). The availability of privilege levels may vary cross different RISC-V implementations

Numerous Trusted Execution Environment (TEE) architectures leverage the RISC-V privileged software stack. The following [Figure 1](#) serves as an illustrative operating model. Within this model, the Trusted Computing Base (TCB) consists of the M-mode secure monitor, and secured partitions, which are prohibited from debugging.

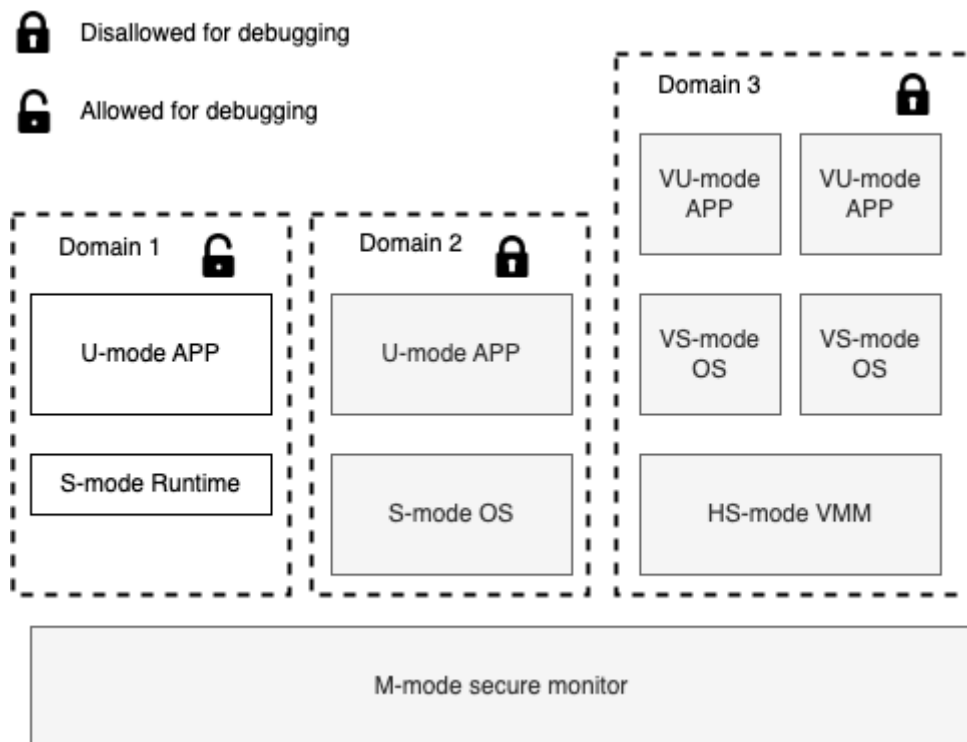


Figure 1. The operating model of RISC-V privilege software stack

The Debug Module and trace module are identified as potential attackers within the scope of this extension. The STRIDE threat model, presented in the [Table 1](#), illustrates the attack vectors associated with each module. The considered attack scenarios include debuggable partitions targeting the M-mode secure monitor and other secured, non-debuggable partitions. Given that the Debug Module's capabilities is beyond M-mode, it can potentially execute attacks including:

- Spoofing
- Tampering
- Repudiation
- Information Disclosure
- Denial of Service

- Elevation of Privilege

Additionally, the trace module poses a risk of disclosing confidential information. However, the extension outlined in this specification aims to mitigate these attack vectors.

Table 1. STRIDE threat modeling for debug and trace

	Partition → Secure Monitor						Partition → Partition					
	S	T	R	I	D	E	S	T	R	I	D	E
Debug Module	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Trace Module				Y						Y		

Chapter 3. Zedsec (ISA extension)

This chapter introduces the Zedsec ISA extension, which extends the ISA section of The RISC-V Debug Specification. The RISC-V hart must implement all features to ensure external debug security. It is designed to enforce access control over operations initiated by the Debug Module, as well as constraints on trigger behaviors. Additionally, it incorporates trace functionality, with its output undergoing check based on hart privilege levels.

3.1. External Debug

By default, the extension forbids the following debug operation in [The debug operations affected by zedsec extension](#) unless they are explicitly granted to the external debugger.

The debug operations affected by zedsec extension

- Entering Debug Mode
- Executing Program buffer
- Serving abstract commands (Access Register, Quick Access, Access Memory)

When the debug operations are not granted, all the above operations issued by Debug Module or trigger will be pending or dropped. The subsequent subsections detail how debug operations are granted.

3.1.1. Debug Access Privilege

The **debug access privilege** is defined as the privilege with which abstract commands or instructions in program buffers access hardware resources such as registers and memory. This privilege operates independently of hart privilege levels and exclusively affects operations within Debug Mode. Memory and register access within Debug Mode are subject to the **debug access privilege**, with all hardware protections, including MMU, PMP, and PMA, checked against it. This privilege is represented by the **prv** and **v** fields in **dcscr**, and it is updated to reflect the hart privilege level upon entering Debug Mode. Each hart has a dedicated **debug access privilege** and it may vary from each other. The permissible privilege levels programmable to **dcscr** in Debug Mode are elaborated in subsequent sections.

In addition, the **mprv** and **mpp** fields take effect exclusively when the **debug access privilege** is in machine mode.

Table 2. Determining maximum debug access privilege with mdbgen and sdbgen

mdbgen	sdbgen	Maximum debug privilege
1	x	M
0	1	S(HS)
0	0	n/a

3.1.2. Machine Mode Debug Control

An input port, named `mdbggen[i]`, is introduced to control the debuggability of machine mode for each hart *i*. This signal is transmitted to the hart and its corresponding debug access control logic. When `mdbggen[i]` is set to 1, the debug operations outlined in [The debug operations affected by zedsec extension](#) are permitted when hart *i* executes in machine mode. Moreover the following rules apply:

- The **debug access privilege** for the hart can be configured to any privilege level
- If register access without halting the hart is supported, this access carries the privilege of machine mode.

When `mdbggen[i]` is set to 0, debug operations in machine mode are prohibited for hart *i*. Any attempt to halt the hart and bring it into Debug Mode will remain pending, and triggers configured to enter Debug Mode will neither fire nor match in machine mode.

3.1.3. Submachine Mode Debug Control

The submachine mode debug of hart *i* is determined by the `sdbgen` field of CSR `mseccfg` within hart *i* and `mdbggen[i]`. Debug operations listed in [The debug operations affected by zedsec extension](#) are allowed when hart *i* executes in submachine mode only if the logical-OR of values in `sdbgen` and `mdbggen[i]` is 1.

The legal value of debug access privilege for hart *i* is solely determined by `sdbgen` when `mdbggen[i]` is 0. In the event of `sdbgen` being 1 while `mdbggen[i]` is 0, the debug access privilege can be configured to privilege levels other than machine mode. Any attempt to set debug access privilege to machine mode will result in a security fault error (cmderr 6).

If register access without halting the hart is supported, this access bears the privilege of supervisor/hypervisor mode to access the hart when `mdbggen[i]` is 0 and `sdbgen` is 1.

Debug operations in all modes are prohibited for hart *i* when the logical-OR of `sdbgen` and `mdbggen[i]` is 0. All halt requests from the Debug Module will remain pending, and triggers configured to enter debug mode will neither match nor fire. The register access without halting is dropped.

Table 3. The debuggable privilege levels per debug controls

mdbggen	sdbgen	Debuggable privilege levels
1	x	All
0	1	All except M
0	0	n/a

3.2. Trace

The extension requires that trace availability from each hart is constrained by default. When `zedsec` is supported, the optional sideband signal to trace encoder, `halted`, must be implemented for each hart, and this signal must be reset to 1. The `halted` signal is only cleared when trace is

permitted by machine mode trace control or submachine mode trace control.

3.2.1. Machine Mode Trace Control

For each hart i , an input port, `mtrcen[i]`, controls machine mode trace availability. Setting `mtrcen[i]` to 1 enables machine mode and submachine mode trace by clearing the halted signal to 0 across all privilege levels. Conversely, if `mtrcen[i]` is set to 0, the halted signal cannot be cleared when the hart operates in machine mode.

3.2.2. Submachine Mode Trace Control

The halted signal for hart i in submachine mode is determined by the `strcen` field of CSR `mseccfg` within hart i , alongside `mtrcen[i]`. When the logical-OR of `strcen` and `mtrcen[i]` is 1, the halted signal is cleared while the hart runs in submachine mode.

When both `strcen` and `mtrcen[i]` are set to 0, the halted signal cannot be cleared at all.

Table 4. The status of the halted sideband signal across privilege levels

mtrcen	strcen	Machine mode	Submachine mode
1	x	halted = 0	halted = 0
0	1	halted = 1	halted = 0
0	0	halted = 1	halted = 1

3.3. Trigger

The trigger configured to enter Debug Mode is checked by zedsec extension. The trigger can fire or match in privilege modes outlined in [Table 3](#).

The extension requires that all pending triggers intending to enter Debug Mode must match or fire before any hart mode switch to prevent privilege escalation.

3.3.1. Machine mode accessibility to **dmode** accessibility

The RISC-V Debug Specification defines that the **dmode** field is accessible only in Debug Mode. When this field is set, the trigger is allocated exclusively to Debug Mode, and any write access from the hart are disregarded. However, the Debug Mode exclusive trigger could potentially serve as an attack surface for unauthorized submachine mode software where debugging is forbidden. The extension relaxes the constrain to the **dmode**, allowing it to be R/W in machine mode when `mdbgen` is set to 0. When `mdbgen` is set to 0, it remains exclusively accessible within Debug Mode.



In this definition, machine mode software assumes responsibility for switching the trigger context according to the debug policy enforced for the sub-machine mode. As a result, it maintains a clean trigger context for the sub-machine mode.

3.3.2. External triggers

The external trigger outputs follow the same limitations as other triggers, ensuring they do not fire or match when the privilege level of the hart exceeds the ones specified in [Table 3](#).

The sources of external trigger input (such as machine mode performance counter overflow, interrupts, etc.) require protection to prevent information leakage. The external trigger inputs supported are platform-specific. Therefore, the platform is responsible for enforcing limitations on input sources. As a result, `tmexttrigger.intctl` and `tmexttrigger.select` should be restricted to legal values based on `mdbgen` and `sdbgen`. Their definitions are provided in the [Table 8](#) below.

3.3.3. Trigger chain

The privilege level of the trigger chain is determined by the highest privilege level within the chain. The entire trigger chain cannot be modified if the chain privilege level exceeds the **debug access privilege**.



This represents a balance between usability and hardware complexity. The integrity of the trigger chain set by the hart must be maintained when an external debugger intends to utilize triggers. There may be instances where the triggers are linked across different privilege levels (e.g., from supervisor mode to machine mode), while the external debugger may only have access to supervisor mode privilege. The external debugger should not alter the chain, because it could suppress or incorrectly raise breakpoint exceptions in machine mode.

3.4. Updates of CSR

3.4.1. Sdext CSR

Debug Control and Status (dcsr, at 0x7b0)

The hart must not automatically treat an external debugger with machine mode privilege (or surpassing machine mode privilege) without conditions. The `prv` and `v` fields in the `dcsr` have been enhanced to authorize privilege for debugger accesses. Upon transitioning into Debug Mode, the `prv` and `v` fields are updated to reflect the privilege level the hart was previously operating in. The `dcsr` is always permitted to be accessed in Debug Mode and the fields `prv` and `v` could be configured to grant privilege to the debugger other than the privilege level when the harts transitioned to Debug Mode. The maximum debug privilege level that can be configured in `prv` and `v` is determined in [Table 2](#). It will generate a security fault error (cmderr 6) if the external debugger attempts to configure `prv` and `v` with a privilege higher than the maximum debug privilege level.

Memory and CSR accesses initiated by abstract commands or from the program buffer will be treated as if they are at the privilege level held in `prv` and `v`. These accesses will undergo protections of PMA, PMP, MMU, and other mechanisms, triggering traps if they violate corresponding rules.



The external debugger has the capability to write to `prv` and `v` and subsequently read back the value, thus determining the maximum debug privilege level.

Additionally, the fields in dcsr are further constrained based on their sphere of action. For example, when a field is effective in machine mode, it is accessible only to debugger which is granted with machine mode privilege. The detailed accessibility is listed in the following table.

Table 5. Dcsr fields accessibility against privilege granted to external debugger

Field	Allowed debug access privilege
ebreakvs	M/S/VS
ebreakvu	M/S/VS/VU
ebreakm	M
ebeaks	M/S
ebreaku	M/S/U
stepie	M
stoptime	M
mprven	M
nmip	M

Debug PC (dpc, at 0x7b1) and Debug Scratch Register (dscratch0, at 0x7b2; dscratch1, at 0x7b3)

Debug PC (dpc) and Debug Scratch Register (dscratch0, dscratch1) are not restricted by prv and v fields to simplify the architecture.

3.4.2. Sdtrig CSR

The extension enforces access control in Debug Mode, which complicates trigger usage within Debug Mode. To mitigate these complications, certain trigger CSRs, tselect, tdata1, tdata2, tdata3, and tinfo are always permitted in Debug Mode, irrespective of the privileges granted to external debuggers. However, the remaining CSRs, tcontrol, scontext, hcontext, mcontext, and mscontext continue to adhere to the debug privileges granted.

Table 6. Trigger CSR accessibility in Debug Mode

Register	w/o Zedsec	w/ Zedsec
tselect(0x7a0)	Always	No change
tdata1(0x7a1)	Always	No change
tdata2(0x7a2)	Always	No change
tdata3(0x7a3)	Always	No change
tinfo(0x7a4)	Always	No change
tcontrol(0x7a5)	Always	Debug access privilege = M
scontext(0x5a8)	Always	Debug access privilege >= Sub-M

Register	w/o Zedsec	w/ Zedsec
hcontext(0x6a8)	Always	Debug access privilege >= Sub-M
mcontext(0x7a8)	Always	Debug access privilege = M
mscontext(0x7aa)	Always	Debug access privilege = M

Beyond CSR-level accessibility adjustments, the fields within mcontrol, mcontrol6, icount, ittrigger, ettrigger, and tmexttrigger—variants of tdata1 located at 0x7a1—are redefined to limit the effective scope of triggers as follows.

Table 7. Tdata1 fields accessibility against privilege granted to external debugger

Field	Allowed debug access privilege
m	M
s	M/S
u	M/S/U
vs	M/S/VS
vu	M/S/VS/VU

The textra32, textra64 provides additional filtering capability for triggers. They are permitted for access in Debug Mode, as they do not affect the trigger firing/matching as it is constrained by **mdbgen** and **sdbgen**.

The **intctl** and **sselect** field within tmexttrigger are redefined as follows.

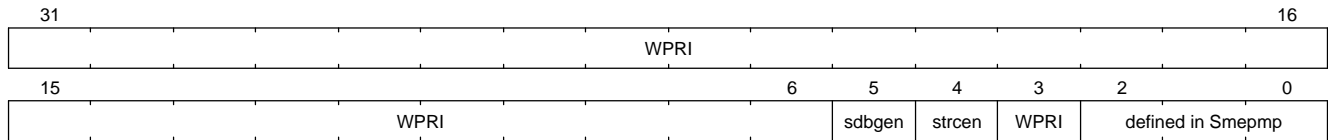
Table 8. The redefinition of field **intctl** and **sselect** within tmexttrigger

Field	Description	Access	Reset
intctl	This optional bit, when set, causes this trigger to fire whenever an attached interrupt controller signals a trigger. the field is only configurable when mdbgen is set to 1.	WLRL	0
select	Selects any combination of up to 16 TM external trigger inputs that cause this trigger to fire The legal value must be constrained by mdbgen and sdbgen according to trigger input type.	WLRL	0

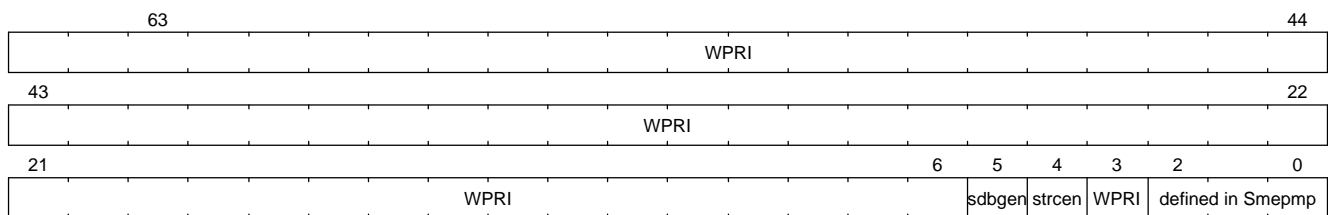
3.4.3. Zedsec CSR

Machine Security Configuration (mseccfg, at 0x747 on RV64, 0x747(low 32 bits) and 0x757(high 32 bits) on RV32)

The fields **sdbgen** and **strcen** are introduced in mseccfg to control debug and trace capability in submachine modes.



Register 1: The **sdbgen** and **strcen** fields in mseccfg on RV32



Register 2: The **sdbgen** and **strcen** fields in mseccfg on RV64

Field	Description	Access	Reset
sdbgen	0(disabled): The external debug capability in submachine mode is solely determined by machine mode control mdbgen . 1(enable): The external debug capability in submachine mode is activated.	WARL	0
strcen	0(disabled): The sideband signal halted to trace encoder is determined solely by mtrcen . 1(enable): The sideband signal halted to trace encoder is set to 0.	WARL	0

Chapter 4. Debug Module Security Extension (non-ISA extension)

This chapter outlines the security enhancements implemented in the Debug Module. The debug operations from external debuggers will be prohibited when the debug capability is not allowed by `mdbgen` and `sdbgen`.

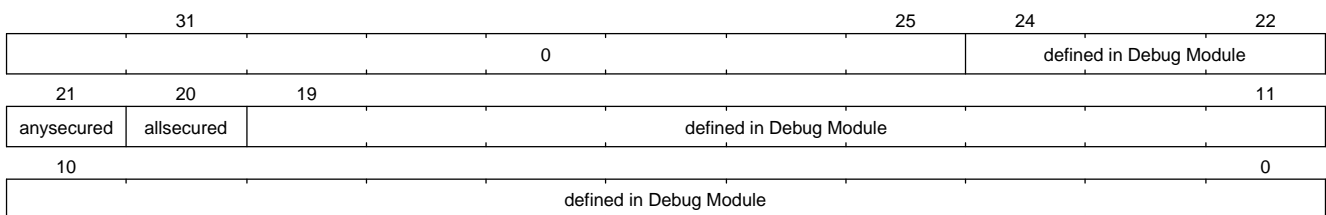
The affected debug operations, including:

- Halt request
- Reset request
- Keepalive request
- Abstract commands

Will be addressed as follows.

4.1. Debug Module Security Extension Discovery

The Debug Module Security Extension imposes security constraints and introduces non-backward-compatible changes. The presence of the Debug Module Security Extension can be determined by polling the `allsecured`/`anysecured` bits in `dmstatus`.



Register 3: The `allsecured` and `anysecured` fields in `dmstatus`

Field	Description	Access	Reset
allsecured	The field is 1 when all currently selected hart are secured and not running in debuggable privilege levels	R	0
anysecured	The field is 1 when any currently selected hart is secured and not running in debuggable privilege levels	R	0

4.2. Halt

The hart can only be halted when it is running in privilege levels specified in [Table 3](#). Otherwise,

the halt request will remain pending. Consequently, the response to the external debugger request may take longer than one second, and this constraint must be eliminated.

When machine mode is not permitted (`mdbg` set to 0) to engage in debugging, the halt-on-reset (`resethaltreq`) operation must fail and set `cmderr` to 6 (security fault error).

4.3. Reset

The reset operations must be safeguarded against various attacks. The RISC-V Debug Specification defines the `hartreset` and `ndmreset` operations, which reset selected harts or the entire system (excluding the Debug Module), respectively. The `hartreset` operation must be prohibited when machine mode is not allowed to be debugged. The security fault error will be raised if the operation is issued when `mdbg` is 0.

The `ndmreset` operation is a system-level reset not tied to hart privilege levels and can only be secured by the system. Thus, it must be de-featured. Issuing `ndmreset` operation results in a security fault error when `mdbg` is 0.

4.4. Keepalive

The keepalive operation serves as an optional request for the hart to remain available for debugger. It is only allowed when machine mode is permitted to debug. Otherwise, it causes a security fault error.

4.5. Abstract Commands

The hart's response to abstract commands is details in [Section 3.1.2](#) and [Section 3.1.3](#). The following subsection delineates the constraints when the Debug Module issues the abstract commands.

4.5.1. Relaxed Permission Check `relaxedpriv`

The field `relaxedpriv` in abstractcs (at 0x16) allows for relaxed permission checks, such as bypassing PMA, PMP, MMU, etc. However, this relaxation violates security requirements, and the extension mandates that `relaxedpriv` be hardwired to 0x0.

4.5.2. Address Translation `aamvirtual`

The field `aamvirtual` in command (at 0x17) determines whether physical or virtual address translation is employed. However, irrespective of the value configured in `aamvirtual`, the extension mandates that memory access addresses are processed as if initiated by the hart in **debug access privilege**.

4.6. System Bus Access

System Bus Access enables direct reading/writing of memory space without involving the hart. However, it must always be checked by bus initiator protection mechanisms such as IOPMP, WorldGuard, etc. If these protections are not in place, System Bus Access must not be implemented.

Failed system bus access attempts result in a bus security fault error (serror 6).



Trusted entities like RoT should configure IOPMP or equivalent protection before granting debug access to machine mode. Similarly, machine mode should apply the protection before enabling submachine mode debug.

4.7. Security Fault Error Reporting

A dedicated error code, security fault error (cmderr 6), is included in cmderr of abstractcs (at 0x16) to signal any breaches of security enforcement by debug operations. Additionally, the bus security fault error (serror 6) is introduced in serror of sbcs (at 0x38) to denote errors related to system bus access.

Appendix A: Theory of Operation

This chapter explains the theory of operation for the External Debug Security Extension. The subsequent diagram illustrates the reference implementation of security control for the Debug Module and trace encoder, respectively.

A.1. Debug Module security control

As outlined in the specification, the security control on the Debug Module can vary for each hart. The dedicated security policy for hart *i* is enforced by the input port `mdbgen[i]` and the `sdbgen` field inside the `mseccfg` CSR. The security control logic examines all debug operations and triggers (with `action=1`) firing/matching based on `mdbgen[i]`, `sdbgen`, and the privilege level of the hart. The failed action will either be dropped or pending. Additionally, the platform-specific external trigger inputs must obey to platform constraints, which must be carefully handled by platform owner. The `mdbgen[i]` be bundled in an MMIO (Memory-Mapped I/O) outside the hart, such as in the Debug Module or implemented as fuses.

The privilege level of the hart is determined by code execution, while the debug requests are validated against the privilege level generated by the hart. This process involves two actors, which may lead to a potential Time-of-Check Time-of-Use (TOCTOU) issue. To mitigate this, the implementation must ensure that the inspection and execution of debug requests occur within the same privilege level of the hart. Failure to do so could result in debug requests bypassing access controls intended for higher privilege levels. If the accesses fail the security check, it must prompt an immediate termination of access to prevent any information leakage.

When the external debugger is stepping through an instruction that triggers a transition to a higher privilege level, the security control logic must verify against debug capability according to [Table 3](#) before entering Debug Mode. If debugging is permitted, the hart re-enters Debug Mode after executing the instruction. Otherwise, the hart continues executing with the pending single step request until it becomes debuggable and can re-enter Debug Mode. In scenarios where multiple submachine mode software are debuggable, the secure monitor in machine mode may switch the context during single stepping. In such cases, the debugger might stop in a different application than the original one. Users of the debugger should be mindful of this possibility.

Application-level debugging is primarily accomplished through self-hosted debugging, allowing the management of debug policies at the supervisor/hypervisor level. As a result, user-level debugging management is not addressed within this extension.

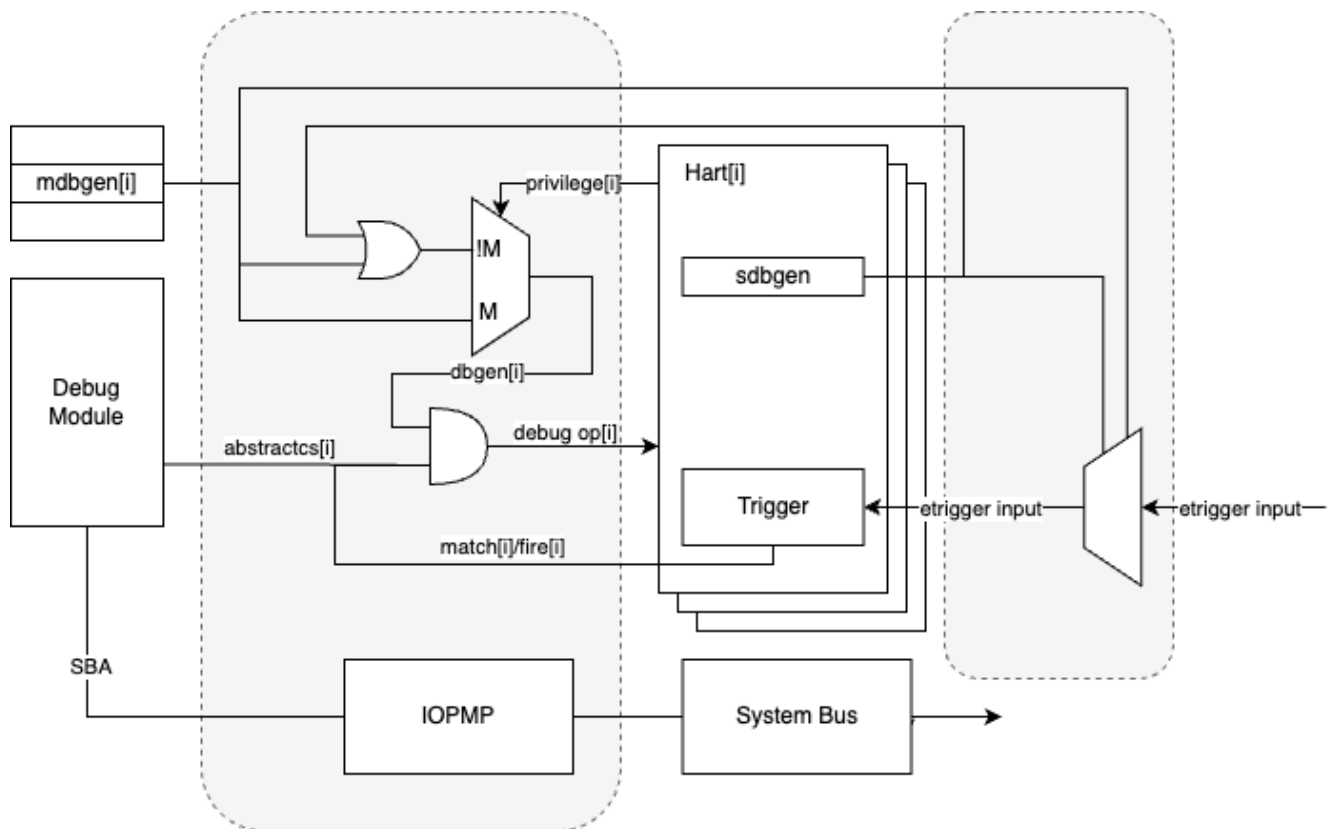


Figure 2. The security control on Debug Module

A.2. Trace Encoder security control

Similar to the Debug Module, the trace encoder is controlled by the `mtrcen[i]` and `strcen` in `mseccfg` CSR for each hart `i`. The halted sideband signal to the trace encoder is determined by [Table 4](#).

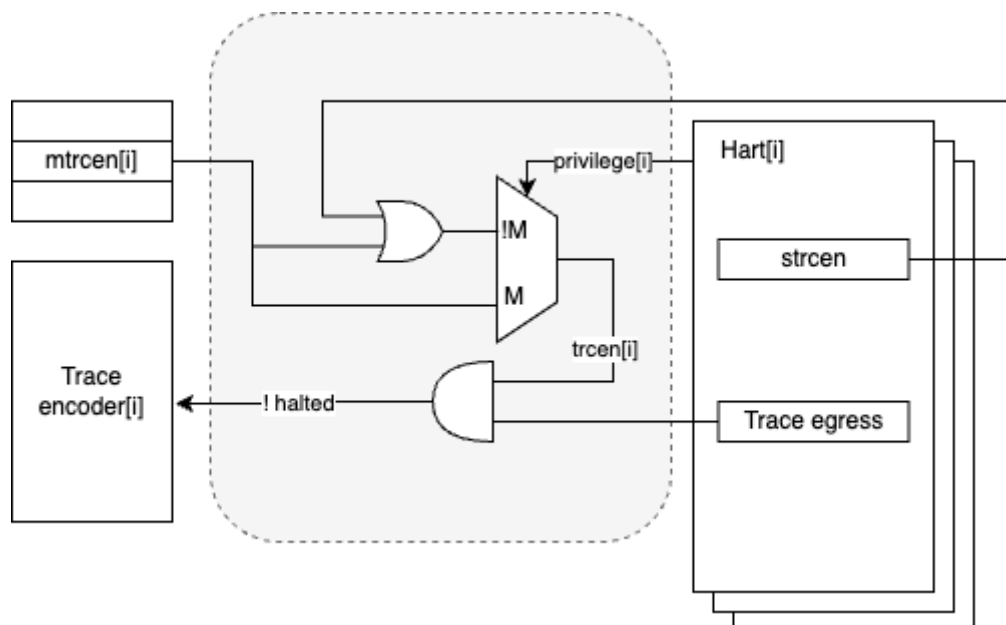


Figure 3. The security control on trace module

Bibliography

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