

Photothermoelectric effect-driven TaSe₃ tactile sensors for micrometer-scale distance detection

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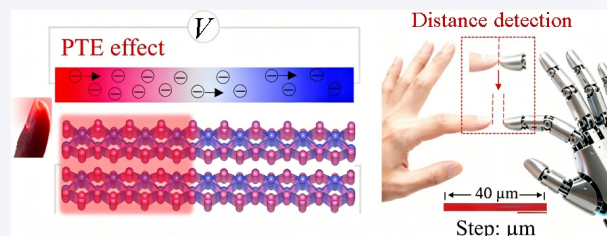
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ABSTRACT: Detecting human-robot distances at the micrometer-scale is essential for advanced human-robot interaction, yet existing flexible sensors are typically limited to millimeter-scale resolution. Here, we develop a flexible sensor using quasi-one-dimensional (quasi-1D) TaSe₃ nanowires to measure micrometer-scale distances via the photothermoelectric (PTE) effect. The sensor has self-powered operation (zero bias), ultrabroadband photoresponse (405 nm to 10.6 μm), good bending stability (no degradation after 500 bends), and strain-insensitive photocurrent. Importantly, it achieves 1 μm spatial resolution for distance detection within 100 μm, suggesting micrometer-scale sensitivity. These results highlight the potential of TaSe₃-based PTE sensors for advancing human-robot systems.

KEYWORDS: photothermoelectric (PTE) effect, TaSe₃, micrometer-scale distance detection, flexible tactile sensor



1 Introduction

Transition metal trichalcogenides TMTs ($M = \text{Ti, Zr, Hf, Ta, and Nb}$; $X = \text{S, Se, and Te}$) is a type of unique quasi-one-dimensional (1D) layered materials, which have led to significant advancements in the field of physics and hold great potential for practical applications across various technological domains [1–4]. Especially, topological semimetal candidate TaSe₃ materials are highly appealing in emerging electronic technologies, such as topological surface states, superconductivity, high breakdown current density and excellent electromagnetic interference shielding [5–8]. As a quasi-1D layered transition metal trichalcogenide, TaSe₃ features a unique structure: strong in-plane covalent Ta-Se bonds and adjacent layers stacked in a planar manner via weak van der Waals interaction [9–12]. Such advantages suggest the superior flexibility of TaSe₃, a feature crucial for applications in flexible electronic sensors [13–16]. Moreover, TaSe₃ has recently demonstrated a prominent Seebeck coefficient, directly validating its potential as a photothermoelectric

(PTE) sensor [17–19]. Since the PTE response depends on the temperature gradient, variations in thermal coupling induced by distance can be transduced into electrical signals.

Notably, distance-related tactile perception is crucial for enabling human-robot interaction, as it supports precise sensor-motor control for safe, accurate human interaction [20–22]. Despite significant advancements, a key challenge persists: the distance detection precision remains at the millimeter scale ($> 1 \text{ mm}$) level [23–28]. The tactile sensors for human-robot interaction, particularly those capable of fine-distance detection, remain in their infancy. To address this challenge, it is anticipated that TaSe₃ is highly desirable for self-powered and tactile sensor.

In this work, we designed a flexible TaSe₃ nanowire-based sensor that leverages the PTE effect for micrometer-scale distance detection. To this end, we prepared high-quality quasi-1D TaSe₃ via chemical vapor transport (CVT)—the synthesized material features a silvery-white appearance and reaches several centimeters in length—and subsequently fabricated TaSe₃ devices. Using room-temperature scanning photocurrent microscopy (SPCM), we confirmed its PTE effect, and systematically characterized its photoresponse across a broadband range (405 nm to 10.6 μm)—verifying its ability to detect infrared radiation from human fingers. Critically, as a flexible sensor, it exhibits remarkable durability: no significant performance degradation after 500 bends, stable photoresponse over bending angles of $\theta = 0^\circ$ to 80° , and a spatial

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resolution of 1 μm for distance detection within $\sim 100 \mu\text{m}$ range.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 TaSe₃ growth and characterization

TaSe₃ was grown by a CVT method [29]. Raman spectra were conducted by a Raman system (FST2 Ahdx DZ, Zolix) [30]. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) was performed (ESCALAB 250Xi). The transmission electron microscope (TEM, Talos F200X, FEI) was used to examine the energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS) [31].

2.2 Device measurement

The electrical properties were performed in a probe station (HFS600E-PB4) using a semiconductor device parameter analyzer (Keithley 4200A-SCS). To test SPCM mapping, the 532 nm light spot was focused on the device with a 50 $\times$ objective (NA = 0.42), and the laser spot was nearly flat with a size of about 2.5 μm . A 532 nm laser with tunable power was used to test the photoresponse of the devices. The 405, 635, 780, 940, 1035, and 1550 nm LED light sources were used to test the broadband wavelength response. A homemade wavelength-tunable multichannel mid-wave infrared (MWIR) laser (3.075 μm) was used to investigate the performance of the detector in the MWIR range. The diameter of the MWIR laser beam was $\approx 3 \text{ mm}$. The performance of the LWIR 10.6 μm was investigated using a CO₂ laser source. The optical power meter was used to calibrate laser power.

3 Results and discussion

The quasi-1D structure of TaSe₃ along the crystallographic *b* and *c* axes is depicted in Figs. 1(a) and 1(b), respectively [32]. TaSe₃ crystallizes into a monoclinic layered structure characterized with the space group *P2₁/m* (No. 11) [33]. The fundamental building blocks consist of two types of parallel trigonal-prismatic chains aligned along the *b* axis, which together form the quasi-1D crystal structure by weak van der Waals (vdW) force [33]. Each chain is formed by a linear arrangement of irregular prismatic cages, with six selenium (Se) atoms located at the corners and a single tantalum (Ta) atom located at the center [33]. Weak vdW bonding between chains allows TaSe₃ cleavage into nanowires [29]. TaSe₃ crystals were prepared via CVT method (Fig. S1 in the Electronic Supplementary Material (ESM)), with growth details in the Experimental section [32]. Figure 1(c) shows SEM images of nanowires obtained via mechanical exfoliation. The nanowires display a curved morphology without any damage, suggesting that TaSe₃ has promising potential as a flexible sensor for practical applications. Figure 1(d) presents the elemental composition of TaSe₃ by XPS. Peaks at ~ 23 , 37, and 45 eV binding energy correspond to Ta 4f_{7/2}, 5p_{3/2}, and 5p_{1/2}, respectively, while the signals at $\sim 54 \text{ eV}$ is attributed to Se 3d_{5/2} [5]. EDS further confirmed the composition of TaSe₃. Figures 1(h) and 1(i) show prominent Ta and Se signals, confirming its composition and homogeneous element distribution. Additionally, Raman analysis under parallel and perpendicular polarized configurations showed notable peaks at 238, 214, 185, 176, 164, 140, 126, and 108 cm⁻¹ (Fig. 1(e)). These peaks correspond to A_{1g}, A_{1g}, B_{2g}/A_g, B_{2g}/A_g, A_{1g}, A_{1g}, B_g, and A_g vibrational modes [34]. To investigate the anisotropy of phonon vibrations, angle-resolved polarized Raman (ARPR) spectroscopy was conducted using the TaSe₃ nanowire. Raman intensity shows

distinct periodic variations under parallel polarization (Fig. 1(f)). Polarization angle was systematically varied from 0° to 360° in 15° increments (Fig. S2 in the ESM). The polarized scattering signals were collected in a parallel configuration relative to the incident light polarization. These data shows clear angular dependence of Raman intensity on light illumination, indicating pronounced in-plane anisotropic phonon vibrations. Interlayer vibration and thermal expansion of TaSe₃ were studied via temperature-dependent Raman spectroscopy (80–300 K, Fig. S3 in the ESM). Results show a pronounced Raman peak red shift with increasing temperature (Fig. S3(a) in the ESM). Extracted interlayer interaction information is shown in Fig. S3(b) in the ESM. The solid curves in Fig. S3(b) in the ESM were linearly fitted using: $\omega(T) = \omega_0 + \chi T$, where χ , ω_0 and T denote the first-order temperature coefficient, phonon frequency and temperature, respectively [17]. The absolute values of χ for the Raman modes were determined to be 0.01094, 0.01591, 0.00653, 0.01286, 0.01789, 0.01286, and 0.00807 cm⁻¹·K⁻¹. The χ parameter describes the slope of the fitted line and is positively correlated with the degree to which temperature influences the interlayer vibration between adjacent layers.

To explore electronics and photoelectronics applications, we fabricated sensors using mechanically exfoliated TaSe₃ nanowires and systematically characterized their properties. Resistance shows a positive correlation with temperature, indicating typical metallic behavior (Fig. S4 in the ESM). Additionally, we examined thermoelectric performance by measuring the Seebeck coefficient (*S*)—which quantifies the ability to convert temperature difference (ΔT) to electrical voltage (ΔU), defined by the equation $S = -\Delta U/\Delta T$. The measured Seebeck coefficient was found to be $-12.6 \mu\text{V}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ (Fig. 2(b)) [35, 36]. Next, the photoresponse of the sensor was measured at room temperature. The sensor exhibits photocurrent at zero bias when light is focused on one end of the sensor (Fig. 2(c)). Additionally, temporal response under 532 nm light (0 V bias) indicates self-powered operation (Fig. 2(d)). In addition, a response time of 11.7 ms can be achieved in our sensor as shown in Fig. S5 in the ESM. The estimated -3 dB bandwidth is approximately 30 Hz according to $f_c = 1/(2\pi\tau)$. To investigate the photodetection mechanism of TaSe₃ sensors, SPCM images without extra voltage are presented in Fig. 2(e). Photocurrent signals are obtained from the TaSe₃-metal interface and surrounding areas, with nonlocal photoresponse observed via light illumination. Notably, the TaSe₃ sensor demonstrates stable operation at zero bias, indicating its self-powered characteristics. Common photodetection mechanisms include three primary types: photovoltaic (PV) effect, photo-Dember (PD) effect, and PTE effect [37]. The PV effect, which stems from the built-in electric field, is associated with a Schottky contact, leading to a nonlinear *I*–*V* curve and a photocurrent distribution at the TaSe₃-electrode interface. In our sensor, ohmic contacts and the photoresponse away from electrodes rule out the PV effect. The photoresponse associated with the PD effect occurs in the contact region of TaSe₃ and electrode, where electron-hole symmetry is broken. Consequently, the photocurrent in TaSe₃ sensor is not restricted to the contact regions, further ruling out the PD effect. Overall, neither the PV nor PD effect explains the characteristics of TaSe₃ sensor. In contrast, the PTE effect produces both ohmic contacts and nonlocal photocurrent, consistent with our results. Unlike mechanisms such as photogating or PD, the PTE effect enables ultrabroadband photodetection without bias at room temperature [38]. The

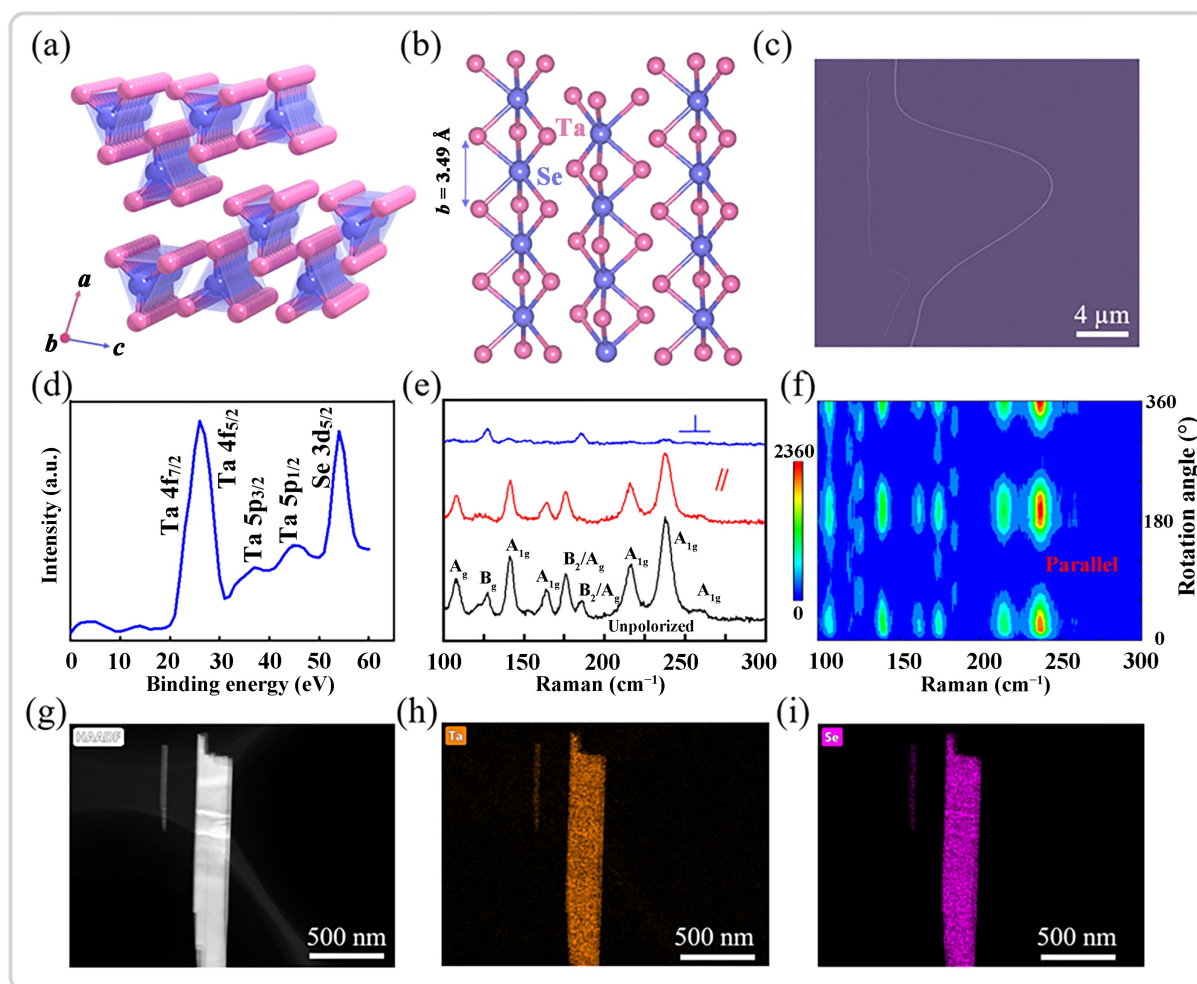


Figure 1 Illustration of the quasi-1D structural characterizations of TaSe₃ nanowire. (a) and (b) Structural model of 1D crystals from different directions. (c) SEM image of exfoliated TaSe₃ nanowires. (d) XPS spectrum of Ta and Se. (e) Raman spectra of TaSe₃ sample under parallel and perpendicular polarized configurations. (f) False-color plots of polarized Raman intensities under parallel polarization configurations. Corresponding EDS elemental mapping images for (h) Ta and (i) Se. The scale bar is 500 nm.

photocurrent is linearly proportional to the optical power (Fig. 2(f)). Figure S6 in the EMS shows the magnitude of the temperature gradient generated under illumination conditions. For instance, infrared radiation emitted by a human finger approaching the end of a PTE sensor can induce a measurable potential difference, which shows a linear correlation with the finger-sensor distance (Fig. 2(g)). Figure S7 in the ESM shows the infrared response detection capability. The distance-dependent response originates from modulated photothermal radiation rather than direct geometric distance measurement. Building on this validated distance-sensing capability, Fig. 2(h) schematically shows human-robot interaction: The robotic hand adjusts movements using PTE sensor distance data. This highlights how accurate sensing enables responsive interaction, with red dashed lines marking guiding distance variations. Thus, micrometer-scale detection is feasible with the TaSe₃-based PTE sensor. For experimental validation of this feedback mechanism, Fig. 2(i) shows the time-resolved photocurrent of the PTE sensor during human finger approach/withdrawal. The PTE mechanism achieves micrometer scale-resolution. The high resolution shows great potential in distance-related tactile sensors (Table S1 in the ESM). P_0 is defined as the photocurrent detected by the sensor at a 100 μm sensing distance for different target objects, while the photocurrent

variation caused exclusively by distance change is defined as ΔP (Fig. 2(ii)). ΔP is given by $\Delta P = (S\Delta T)/R$, with ΔT the temperature difference, S the Seebeck coefficient, and R the resistance. Thus, different targets can be detected by TaSe₃ sensor.

Ambient temperature and bending angle constitute critical factors affecting sensor performance in practical implementations. Experimental results demonstrate relatively stable performance across a broad temperature range (80–280 K), with ohmic contact integrity maintained even under temperature cycling conditions (Fig. 3(a)). To validate its suitability applications, the temperature coefficient of resistance (TCR) of the TaSe₃ nanowires is 0.00174 K⁻¹, showing the potential in a broad temperature range (Fig. S8 in the ESM). Flexible nanowires exhibit enhanced adaptability to irregular or curved surfaces, making them suitable for applications requiring integration with complex geometries [4, 14]. As previously mentioned, TaSe₃ nanowires have inherent flexibility, making it suitable for fabricating a flexible sensor by integrating TaSe₃ with a polyethylene terephthalate (PET) substrate [39]. To validate its suitability for applications (where repeated bending is inevitable), we characterized the bending stability. Figure 3(b) presents the photocurrent of the flexible sensor over 500 bending cycles [13, 16]. Notably, the photocurrent characteristics remained well-preserved even after extensive bending, confirming the exceptional bending

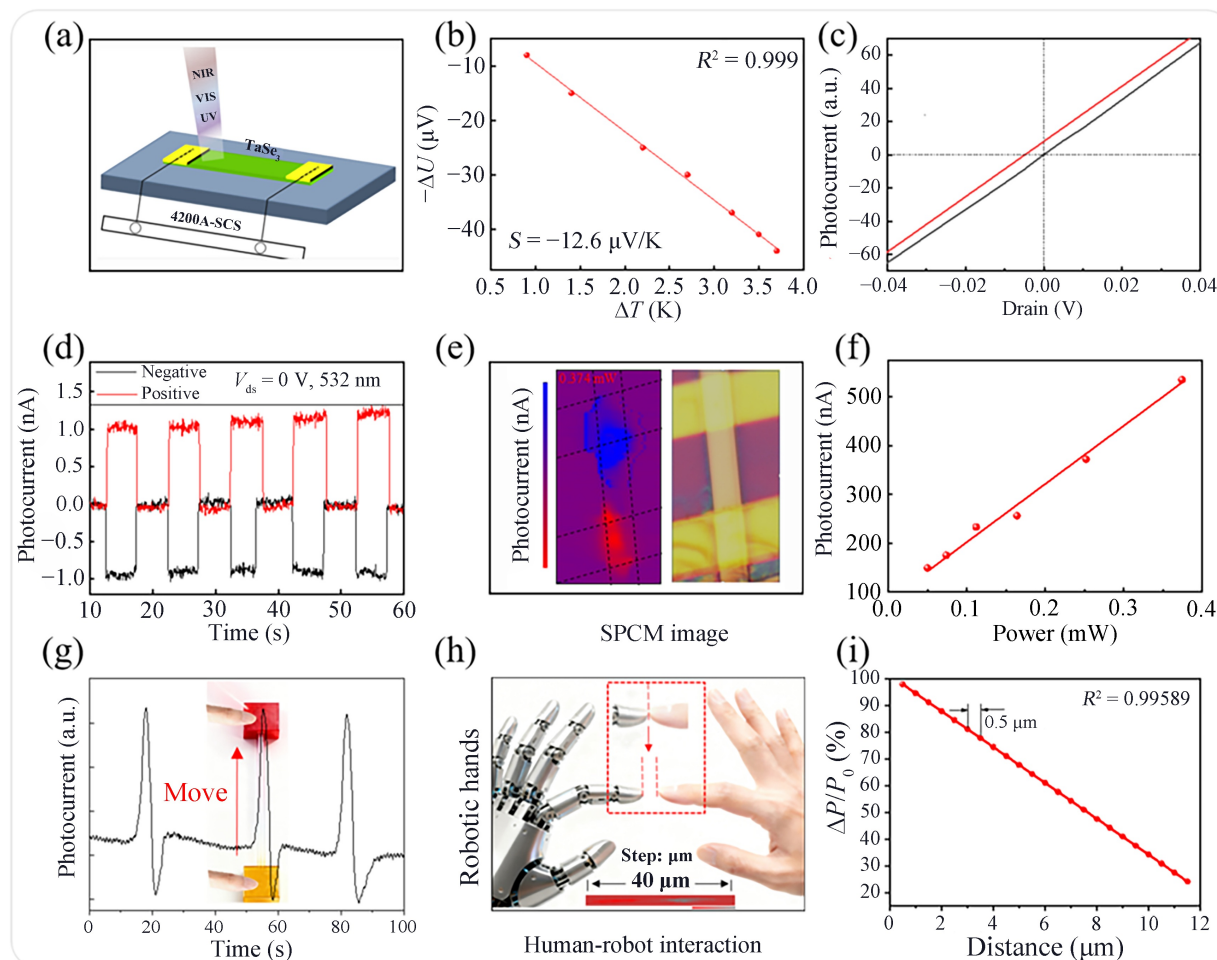


Figure 2 Photothermoelectric effect and distance detection of the TaSe₃ sensor. (a) Schematic of TaSe₃-based sensor. (b) Voltage across the TaSe₃ versus the corresponding temperature difference to determine the room-temperature Seebeck coefficient of TaSe₃. The red line is the linear fit to the experimental data, and the resulting coefficient of determination (R^2) is 0.999. (c) Output characteristics in the dark (black solid line) and under illumination (red solid line) of TaSe₃ sensor. (d) Temporal response with the light spot positioned on the top TaSe₃/Au interface (top-interface) and bottom one (bottom-interface). (e) SPCM images of the TaSe₃ sensor at zero bias with 532 nm excitation. (f) The photocurrent intensity as a function of light power. The solid lines represent the linear fit. (g) Distance detection using a TaSe₃ sensor during human finger approach and withdrawal. (h) In the distance detection, red dashed lines mark distance variations—guiding interaction and enabling precise coordination. (i) The PTE mechanism achieves micrometer scale resolution. The moving distance intervals between the sensor and the detection target is 0.5 μm. P_0 is defined as the photocurrent detected by the sensor at a 100 μm sensing distance for different target objects, while the photocurrent variation caused exclusively by distance change is defined as ΔP .

endurance and mechanical flexibility. Figures 3(c) and 3(d) illustrates the normalized photocurrent of the self-powered sensor during prolonged operation at four distinct bending angles: 100°, 125°, 145°, and 180° (non-bent) under light illumination [15]. The sensor performs stably across these angles, with no significant photocurrent variation. The TaSe₃ sensor shows strain-insensitive photocurrent. Given this adaptability, we investigated the photoresponse of a TaSe₃ nanowire-based sensor across a broad wavelength range (405–3075 nm) under zero-bias operation (Fig. S9 in the ESM) [40]. Figure S9(c) in the ESM shows ultrabroadband detection up to 10.6 μm. Figure S10 in the ESM revealed a linear relationship between photocurrent intensity and incident light power.

For practical application, we integrated the TaSe₃ sensor into a robotic hand (Fig. 4(a)). Figure 4(a) also illustrates the fingertip-integrated TaSe₃ PTE sensor working principle in human-robot interaction, with three stages: (I) sensing (fingertip PTE sensor captures stimuli), (II) data processing (brain-like signal analysis), and (III) motor actuation (drives adaptive robotic motions) [41].

The PTE sensor—serving as the core fingertip component—enables precise interactive feedback. For experimental validation of this feedback mechanism, Fig. 4(b) shows the time-resolved photocurrent of the PTE sensor during approach/withdrawal. The rise time is 50 ms and the fall time is 60 ms. To verify the detection capability at the micrometer-scale, a light spot (simulating a heat source) was moved toward the sensor at $1 \mu\text{m}\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$; Fig. 4(b) shows photocurrent variation distinguishes micrometer-scale movements. To repeatedly verify the high-resolution distance detection within ~100 μm, we brought infrared light near the sensor with 30 μm distance intervals. Figure S11 in the ESM shows that TaSe₃ sensor photocurrent variation clearly distinguishes movements. The photoresponse shows no change under ambient light (Fig. S12 in the ESM).

4 Conclusion

In this study, we developed a PTE-based tactile sensor to address a key challenge in robotics: the lack of mature fine-distance detection

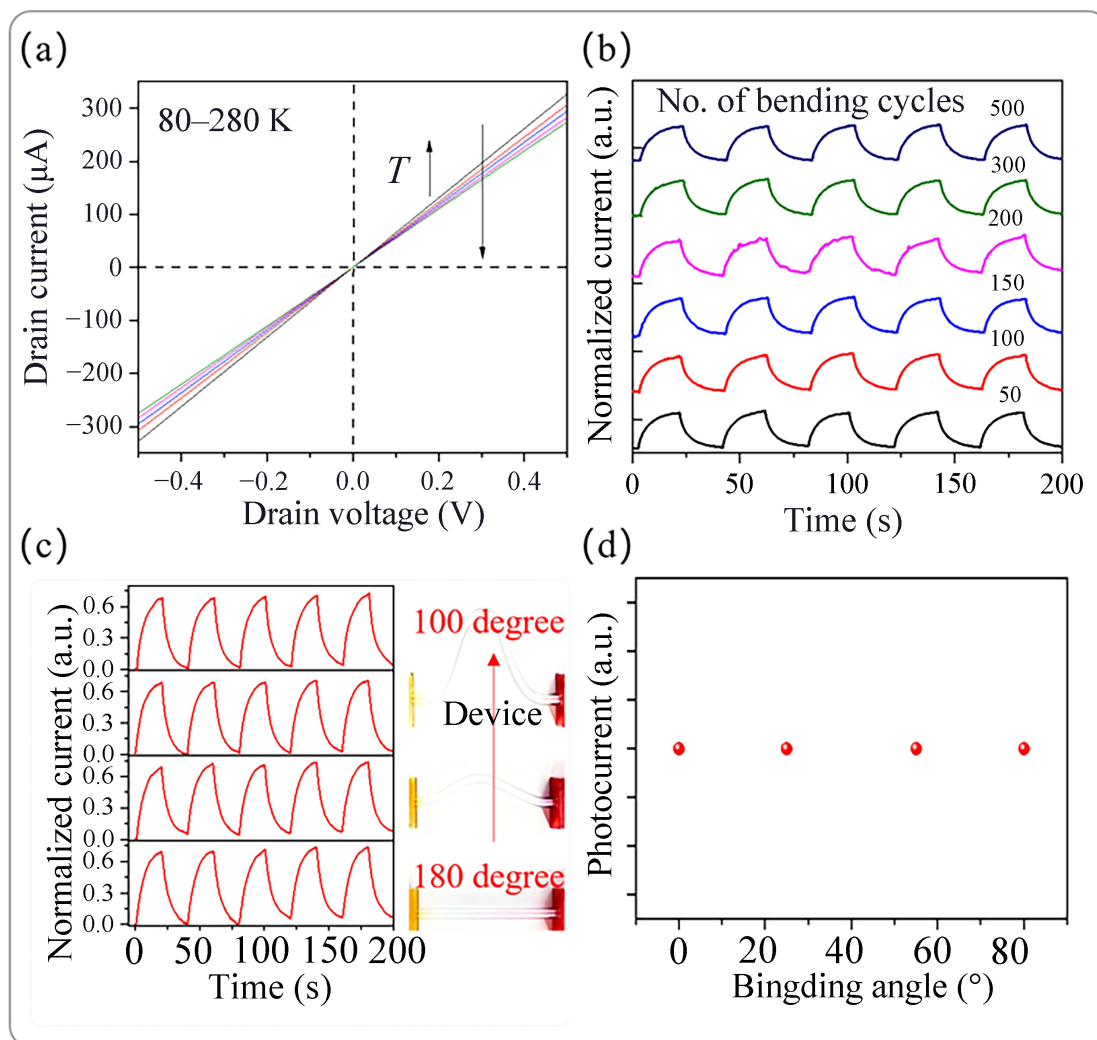


Figure 3 The stability and flexibility of the TaSe₃ sensor. (a) Temperature-dependent output curves of the TaSe₃ sensor. (b) The photocurrent curves of the sensor after different numbers of repetitive bending cycles. (c) and (d) The self-powered sensor features stable performance upon repeated bending at various angles of curvature (100°, 125°, 145°, and 180°), which shows strain-insensitive photocurrent.

sensors. The PTE effect is the key working mechanism: asymmetric light induces sensor temperature differences, generating an electric potential difference with a linear correlation to human finger-sensor distance. For this design, we selected a flexible quasi-1D topological semimetal material with a confirmed Seebeck coefficient as the key sensing material for its suitability in PTE-based distance detection. The sensor precisely detects micrometer-scale distances, enabling adaptive interaction. This work demonstrates the feasibility of PTE-based distance-dependent response and its vital role in advancing dexterous robotic systems.

Electronic Supplementary Material: Supplementary material (Fig. S1 Schematic of CVT method; Fig. S2 Angle dependence of the Raman intensities under parallel polarization configurations; Fig. S3 Temperature-dependent Raman spectroscopy of TaSe₃; Fig. S4 Temperature-dependent resistance from 80 to 280 K; Fig. S5 The temporal response time under 532 nm; Fig. S6 The magnitude of the temperature gradient generated under different light power (532 nm laser); Fig. S7 The positive (red) and negative (black) photocurrent response under 1064 nm; Fig. S8 The temperature coefficient of resistance (TCR) of TaSe₃ nanowires under 80–280 K;

Fig. S9 Photocurrent of the self-powered TaSe₃ sensor under different light illumination (405 to 1035 nm); Fig. S10 Photocurrent of the TaSe₃ sensor for different excitation wavelengths at room temperature; Fig. S11 The resolution of distance-detection sensor with 30 μm intervals; Fig. S12 The photocurrent under dark and ambient light; and Table S1 Comparison of distance detection performance in the literature) is available in the online version of this article at <https://doi.org/10.26599/NR.2026.94908913>.

Data availability

All data needed to support the conclusions in the paper are presented in the manuscript and the Electronic Supplementary Material. Additional data related to this paper may be requested from the corresponding author upon request.

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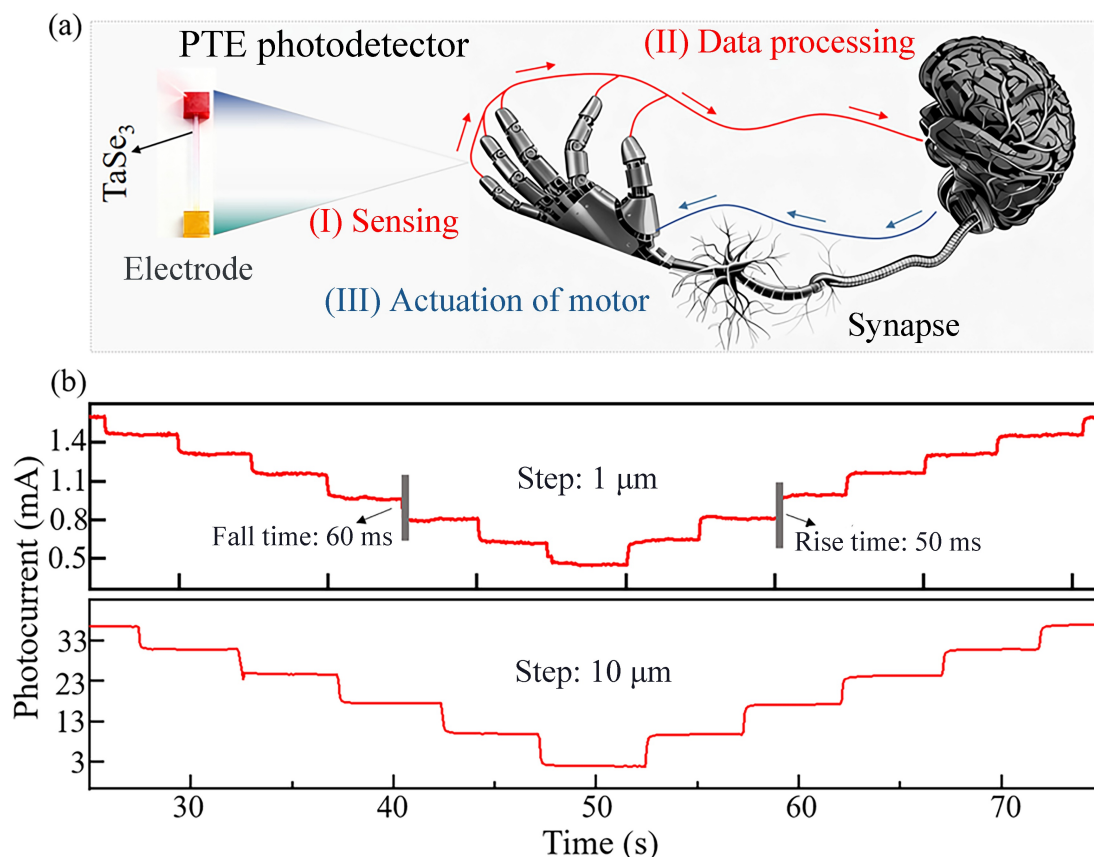


Figure 4 The capability of micrometer-scale distance detection. (a) Schematic of the overall structure of the finger-shaped tactile sensor inspired by human fingers. (b) The moving distance intervals between the sensor and the detection target are 1 and 10 μm , respectively. The rise/fall time: 50/60 ms.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests in this work

Author contribution statement

G. L. and L. L. conceived the idea and performed the experiments and investigated and wrote the whole manuscript. X. F. M., L. W., Y. W. S., J. L. H., and K. K. H. participated in data analysis and manuscript discussion. All authors participated in data analysis and manuscript discussion.

Use of AI statement

None.

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