

Ultrafast optical switching of infrared plasmon polaritons in high-mobility graphene

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1. BN/G/BN van der Waals structures fabrication and characterization
2. Graphene plasmon dispersion
3. Plasmon fringes in cw nano-imaging data
4. On the origin of plasmon damping
5. Calculations of non-equilibrium plasmon dispersion
6. Derivative analysis of non-equilibrium plasmon dispersion

1. BN/G/BN van der Waals structures fabrication and characterization

We obtained microcrystals of both graphene (G) and hexagonal boron nitride (BN) using mechanical exfoliation. The starting point was exfoliating BN micro-crystals on top of polypropylene carbonate (PPC) polymer. The stack is assembled using the same method as in our previous work [S1]. In short, the BN/graphene/BN stack is made using the top BN micro-crystals to pick up single layer graphene and the bottom BN micro-crystals in sequence. Bubble- and wrinkle-free stacks were then transferred on to SiO₂/Si substrates. For the etching process, only a small portion of the graphene edge was exposed for edge-contact deposition (Fig. 1b). Thus most of the graphene specimen remains intact. Finally, the edge-contact was made by depositing 1/10/60 nm of Cr/Pd/Au layers. A complete BN/G/BN device optical image is shown in Fig. 1b of the main text.

2. Graphene plasmon dispersion

Figure S1 represents the frequency (ω) – momentum (q) dispersion diagram of the polaritonic modes at the air/BN/G/BN/SiO₂/Si interface visualized via a false color map of the imaginary part of the reflectivity $r_p = r_p(q, \omega)$ [S2]. The graphene chemical potential is $E_F \sim 0.32$ eV, which corresponds to the carrier density $n = 7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$. This choice of E_F gives the plasmon dispersion in a good agreement with the data points at $\omega = 890 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ and 935 cm^{-1} (the black dots in Fig. S1), which are obtained from the cw images presented in Fig. 2 of the main text. The additional dispersion lines seen in Fig. S1 are due to phonon-polariton guided waves in BN slabs [S3, S4]. These latter modes are confined to the frequency bands $\omega = 746\text{--}819 \text{ cm}^{-1}$ and $1370\text{--}1610 \text{ cm}^{-1}$. Both of these bands are outside the frequency range in the current study, and so we do not discuss them further.

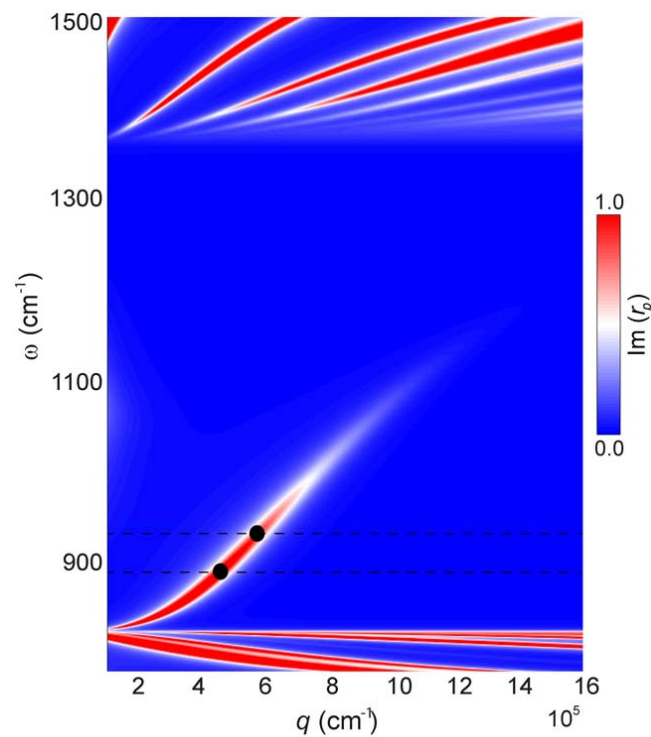


Figure S1 | Graphene dispersion diagram. Calculated frequency (ω) – momentum (q) dispersion diagram for polaritonic modes of BN/G/BN on SiO₂/Si substrates at $E_F \sim 0.32$ eV. The black dots are the experimental data derived from cw nano-imaging.

3. Plasmon fringes in cw nano-imaging data

For a general theoretical analysis of the plasmon fringes observed in the near-field experiments we imagine formally splitting the total electric field underneath the tip into two contributions: the field that would exist in an infinite graphene sheet and the perturbation caused by the presence of the graphene edge. The fringes must result

from (constructive or destructive) interference of these two contributions. In the previous work [S5, S6], it was effectively assumed that the perturbation caused by the edge can be described by the method of images. In other words, the effect of the edge located at distance L from the tip was taken to be equivalent to having an “image” tip the distance $2L$ away from the physical tip. The amplitude of the plasmons launched by the image tip at the position of the actual tip carries an extra factor equal approximately to $e^{2iqL}L^{-1/2}$, where the second factor describes the algebraic decay of a wave spreading radially in two dimensions. This leads to the $\lambda_p/2$ -periodic variation of the total signal with L . This physical picture has been successful in describing plasmonic fringes in relatively low-mobility graphene. However, our new experimental data presented in the main text (as well as data reported in [S7]) indicate that for the high-mobility graphene this picture is incomplete. These data reveal that the plasmon fringes appear as double peaks, implying that two distinct periodicities exist, $\lambda_p/2$ and λ_p .

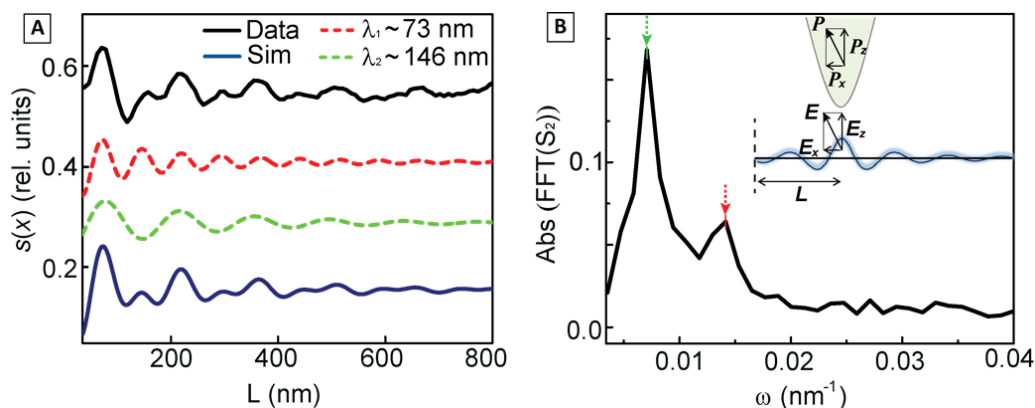


Figure S2 | Double periodicity of plasmon fringes. A) The black solid line is the plasmonic trace acquired at gate voltage 115 V; the red and green dashed lines correspond to $\frac{\exp(2iqL)}{\sqrt{L+R_1}}$ and $\frac{\exp(iqL)}{L+R_2}$, respectively; the blue solid line displays their sum, which reproduced the key features of the black trace, except very near the graphene edge. The curves are offset for clarity. B) The Fourier transform amplitude of the black trace in panel A; the two peaks correspond to the λ_1 and λ_2 periods. Inset: a schematic illustrating a possible origin of the λ_p -periodic fringes (see text).

In order to quantify the two periods, we utilized Fourier transform, which we found quite adequate and simpler to implement than Hankel transform employed in ref. S7. The Fourier transform of the line profile acquired at the gate voltage of 115 V is shown in Fig. S2A&B. The two prominent peaks correspond to the periods $\lambda_1 = 73$ nm and $\lambda_2 = 146$ nm. Following [S7], we also considered a data fit in the form $A \frac{\exp(2iqL)}{\sqrt{L+R_1}} + B \frac{\exp(iqL)}{L+R_2}$ with adjustable parameters $A = -0.25$, $B = 1.74$, $R_1 = -9.34$ nm, $R_2 = -28.36$ nm. This phenomenological expression reproduces the measured double-peak plasmon fringes except for the very first one, see Fig. S3A. The fit has an unphysical divergence at small $L = -R_2$.

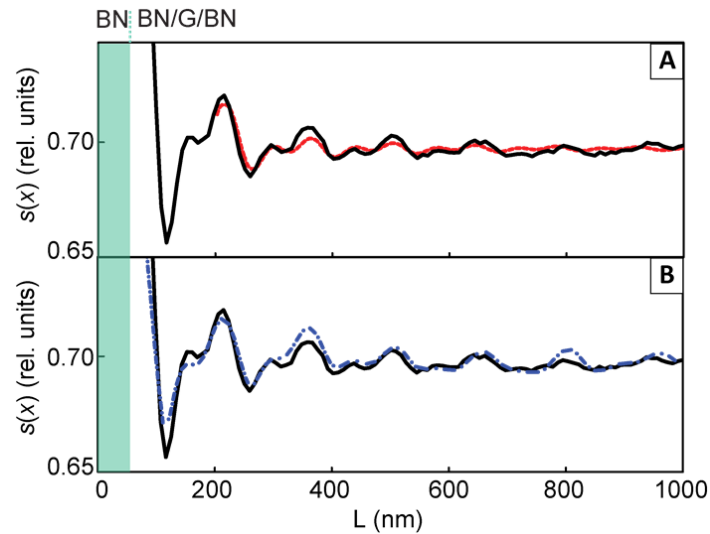


Figure S3 | Plasmon line profile fitting. A) The black solid line is the raw data from Fig. 2d of the main text; the red dotted line is the fit using the phenomenological formula of [S7] (see text). B) Numerical simulation of the line profile using the spheroidal tip model (the blue dotted line).

In accordance with the above discussion, the shorter period is $\lambda_p/2$ and its appearance is understood from the method of images. The physical origin of the λ_p periodicity requires further explanation. One possibility, raised in [S7], is that the light beam incident on the graphene edge can also launch plasmons. Such plasmons would have the requisite qL phase shift with respect to those launched by the tip. The excitation of the plasmons by the edge can occur only due to the component of the incident electric field normal to the edge [S9]. If this mechanism were operational, the amplitude of the longer-period oscillations would show a cosine-like dependence on the polarization angle θ of the incident light. Therefore the plasmon fringes launched by the edge should be absent when the incident electric field is parallel to the edge ($\theta = 0$) and should be the strongest when it is perpendicular to it ($\theta = \pi/2$). No such dependence has been observed in the experiment. Figure S4A shows the raw data obtained from two different orientations of graphene edges with respect to the incident radiation. These patterns are nearly identical. Clearly, the λ_p periodicity of plasmon fringes is found at both polarizations. This finding indicates that direct launching of the plasmons by incident field scattered off the graphene edge is a small effect.

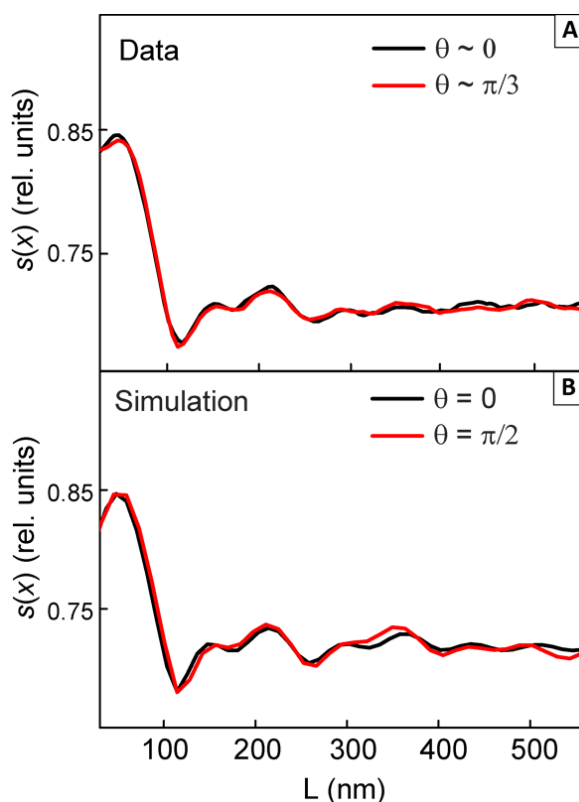


Figure S4 | Plasmonic fringes near the edge of graphene. A) Raw data for plasmon fringes across two different graphene edges: one is oriented at $\theta \sim 0$ with respect to the direction of the incident beam and the other one is at $\theta \sim \pi/3$. B) Using the spheroidal model, we calculated the plasmon line profiles both for $\theta = 0$ and $\theta = \pi/2$. The agreement between data and modeling results indicates that the contribution from direct launching of the plasmons by graphene edge alone is small.

To investigate this issue further, we studied the electrodynamic response of the system (tip plus sample) by numerical simulations. Our modeling assumes the spheroidal shape of the tip. As the basic elements of this model have already been described in detail in the previous papers [S5, S8], we mention only new aspects of this numerical code. Previously, the scattering amplitude $s(\omega)$ (before demodulation) was ascribed to the component p_z of the total radiating dipole of the tip normal to the surface. In the current work, the in-plane component p_x is also taken into account. The model also includes the in-plane dipole moment of the graphene sheet. Thus, the described above hypothesis of launching of the plasmons by the edge should be automatically incorporated in the model as well. As shown in Fig. S3B, our numerical simulations reproduce the doubly-periodic line form of the observed signal. Additionally, its polarization dependence (see Fig. S4B) is almost negligible, in agreement with the experiment shown in Fig. S4A but in contrast with edge-launching hypothesis. Our modeling therefore suggests that the λ_p -periodic part of the signal could be due to the p_x polarization of the tip, which is included in the new simulation code. The effect of this component of the radiating dipole is shown schematically in the inset of Fig. S2B.

The physical explanation of this effect must have to do with the fact that the method of images is only an approximation. It would be strictly valid only if the plasmons obeyed the 2D wave equation. Instead, the plasmons in graphene are governed by a more complicated integral-differential equation [S5, S8]. We speculate that because of this distinction, there should be a correction to the method of images, in the form of a local charge accumulation near the edge. Because of the long-range nature of the Coulomb force, this extra charge can produce the in-plane electric field E_x and hence the dipole polarization p_x of the tip directly, without the intermediary of a plasmon wave, see Fig. S2B. The net result is that the plasmon has to propagate only the distance L not $2L$, leading to the evident λ_p -periodicity of the near-field signal. Although this scenario gives a qualitative explanation of the observed effect, the quantitative analysis requires further theoretical work, which we will report elsewhere.

4. On the origin of plasmon damping

In the following paragraphs, we discuss the origin of graphene plasmon losses in the cw nano-IR images that we examined as a function of the gate-induced carrier density. As with previous studies [S7], it is instructive to represent these data in a form of two-dimensional plots mapping of near-field $s(x)$ signal as a function of gate voltage across the graphene edge within a single experiment (in Fig. S5A). These data were acquired by consecutive scanning along the same line across graphene edge at increasing gate voltage. Information on the variation of both λ_p and γ_p with respect to electrostatic doping is encoded in data in Fig. S5A. The analysis reported below allows us to extract the plasmon lifetime as well as the optical conductivity of encapsulated graphene. As described in the main text, the plasmon damping is defined as [S5]:

$$\gamma_p(\omega) \approx \frac{\sigma_1(\omega)}{\sigma_2(\omega)} + \frac{\kappa_2(\omega)}{\kappa_1(\omega)} \quad (\text{S1})$$

Here, $\sigma_1(\omega)$ and $\sigma_2(\omega)$ are the real and imaginary parts of optical conductivity of graphene; $\kappa_1(\omega)$ and $\kappa_2(\omega)$ are the real and imaginary parts of the effective dielectric function of the substrate environment. The first term in Eq. (S1) accounts for plasmonic losses associated with intrinsic electronic properties of graphene whereas the second term is solely determined by the optical phonon scattering of the surrounding materials.

Using the spheroidal tip model [S8], the value of γ_p can be obtained through a fitting protocol matching the experimental data against a theoretical fringe profile. From the best fit, we obtained $\gamma_p \sim 0.02$, independent of carrier density in the range of 4×10^{12} to $7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$. In contrast, the carrier mobility scales inversely with carrier density as $\mu \propto 1/n$. At $n \sim 7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$, the intrinsic room-temperature carrier mobility which is only limited by acoustic phonon scattering was predicted to be $\sim 16,000 \text{ cm}^2/\text{Vs}$ (see Fig. S6) [S7, S10, S11]. The hBN optical constants used here were obtained from recent measurements [S3, S4], from which we estimate that plasmon dissipation

induced by scattering of optical phonons in hBN is $\frac{\kappa_2(\omega)}{\kappa_1(\omega)} \approx 0.005$. Taking the value of

$\frac{\sigma_1(\omega)}{\sigma_2(\omega)} \approx 0.015$, we obtain a dissipation rate of graphene plasmons $\tau^{-1} = \frac{\sigma_1(\omega)}{\sigma_2(\omega)} \times \omega \approx 13 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, corresponding to a DC mobility of $\sim 14,000 \text{ cm}^2/\text{Vs}$ at $\sim 7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ doping level, which agrees well with the theoretically calculated phonon scattering limitation. We therefore conclude that our results approach the ultimate limit of graphene plasmon propagation at ambient conditions, in which the dominant dissipation mechanism arises from intrinsic scattering from the graphene acoustic phonon. Our results also agree well with the recently reported experimental and theoretical study of intrinsic plasmon damping in BN/G/BN systems [S7, S10].

The low plasmon damping is also reflected in the optical conductivity, as shown in Fig. S5B. Here the real part of the optical conductivity is less than $0.2\pi e^2/2h$ at a doping level of $7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$, consistent with the theoretical estimate of σ_1 obtained from non-interacting Dirac quasiparticle model. To this end, we also calculated the plasmon lifetime τ as a function of carrier densities. It is found that τ is $\sim 1 \text{ ps}$, which is remarkably long and confirms that our results approaching the ultimate limitation set by phonon scattering. [S10, S12].

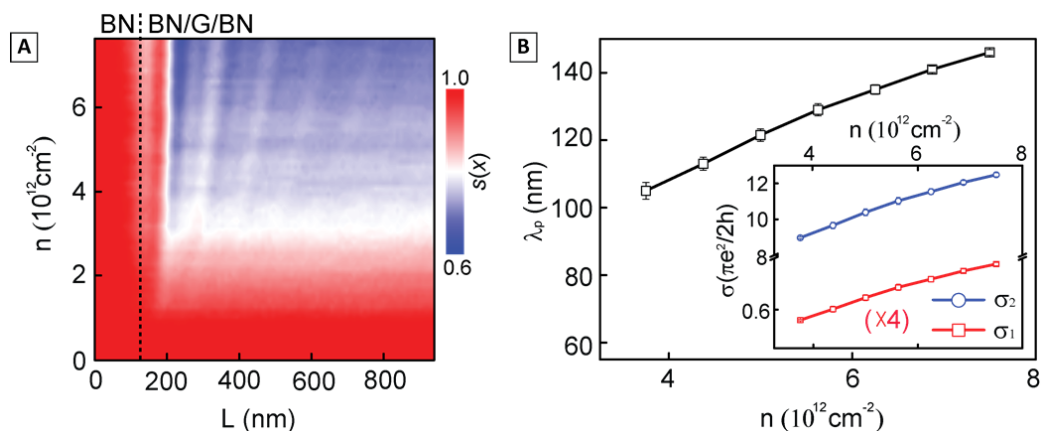


Figure S5 | Analysis the origin of plasmon damping. A) 2D diagram of $s(x)$ as a function of gate voltage in real space for an infrared wavelength of 890 cm^{-1} . Multiple plasmon fringes with monotonically increasing plasmon wavelength as function of gate voltage are clearly seen. B) Extracted plasmon wavelength versus carrier density. Inset shows the optical conductivity as function of doping.

In Figure S6, we also plotted the carrier mobility μ as a function of the carrier density n , at doping levels relevant to this work. Here, the intrinsic acoustic phonon scattering at room-temperature was treated as the limiting factor [S7, S10, S11]. At $n \sim 7.5 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$, the intrinsic room-temperature carrier mobility was predicted to be $\sim 16,000 \text{ cm}^2/\text{Vs}$.

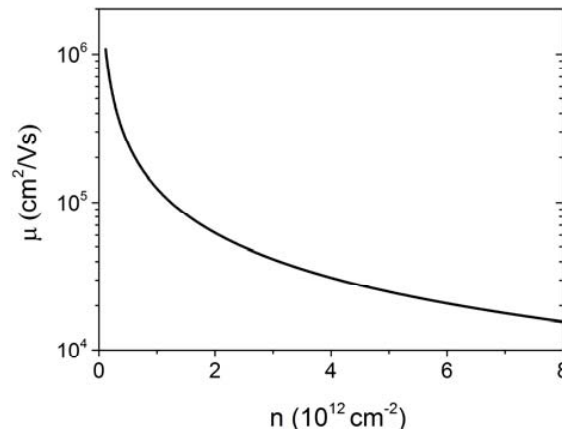


Figure S6 | Carrier mobility versus doping. Calculated DC mobility limited by acoustic phonon scattering with the deformation-potential coupling constant $D = 19$ eV at 300 K for different densities $n = 1.0 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$ and $8.0 \times 10^{12} \text{ cm}^{-2}$.

5. Calculations of non-equilibrium plasmon dispersion

In this section, we discuss the pump-induced plasmon dispersion calculations. In the main text (Fig. 3b), we have simulated the ω - q maps for the surface modes at the air/BN/G/BN/SiO₂/Si interface with the electronic temperature as one of the fitting parameters. This is different from the graphene plasmon dispersion calculation described in section 2, where the carrier density serves as the variable parameter. The difference stems from non-equilibrium state of graphene at time scales relevant to our experiments: 30 fs – 5 ps [S13]. At these time scales, optical excitation in graphene preserves the electron density, but results in an elevated carrier temperature [S13, S14].

In order to calculate the temperature dependent plasmon dispersion we employed the standard sheet conductivity of graphene consisting of inter- and intraband contributions:

$$\sigma(\omega) = \sigma_{\text{intra}}(\omega) + \sigma_{\text{inter}}(\omega), \quad \sigma_{\text{intra}}(\omega) = \frac{i D(T_{\text{el}})}{\pi \omega + i\Gamma}. \quad (\text{S2})$$

The Drude-like intraband component that has been shown to dominate for our excitation conditions [S14] contains the scattering rate Γ and the temperature dependent Drude weight (Eq. S3). In Figure S7 we plot the calculated plasmon dispersion for carrier temperatures from 1500 to 3200 K. At $T_{\text{el}} = 3200$ K, a best match to experimental data was obtained. This good agreement further confirms the plasmonic origin for the real-space features observed in our pump-probe data.

The Drude spectral weight governing the plasmonic response is given by the equation

$$D(T_{\text{el}}) = \left(\frac{8\pi^2 e^2}{h^2} \right) k_B T_{\text{el}} \ln \left[2 \cosh \frac{\mu}{2k_B T_{\text{el}}} \right], \quad (\text{S3})$$

where μ is the chemical potential, e is the elementary charge, and h is Planck's constant [S14]. At zero temperature, Eq. (S3) predicts $D = (2\pi e/h)^2 E_F$, where $E_F = \mu(T_{\text{el}} = 0)$ is the Fermi energy. At high T_{el} , $k_B T_{\text{el}} \gg |\mu|$, Eq. (S3) implies a linear increase of D with T_{el} . The plasmon wavelength λ_p is directly proportional to $D(T_{\text{el}})$ and inversely proportional to the effective permittivity $\kappa(\omega)$ (the geometric mean of the in- and out-of-plane permittivities) of the encapsulating hBN:

$$\lambda_p(\omega) = \frac{4\pi}{\kappa(\omega)\omega^2} D(T_{\text{el}}). \quad (\text{S4})$$

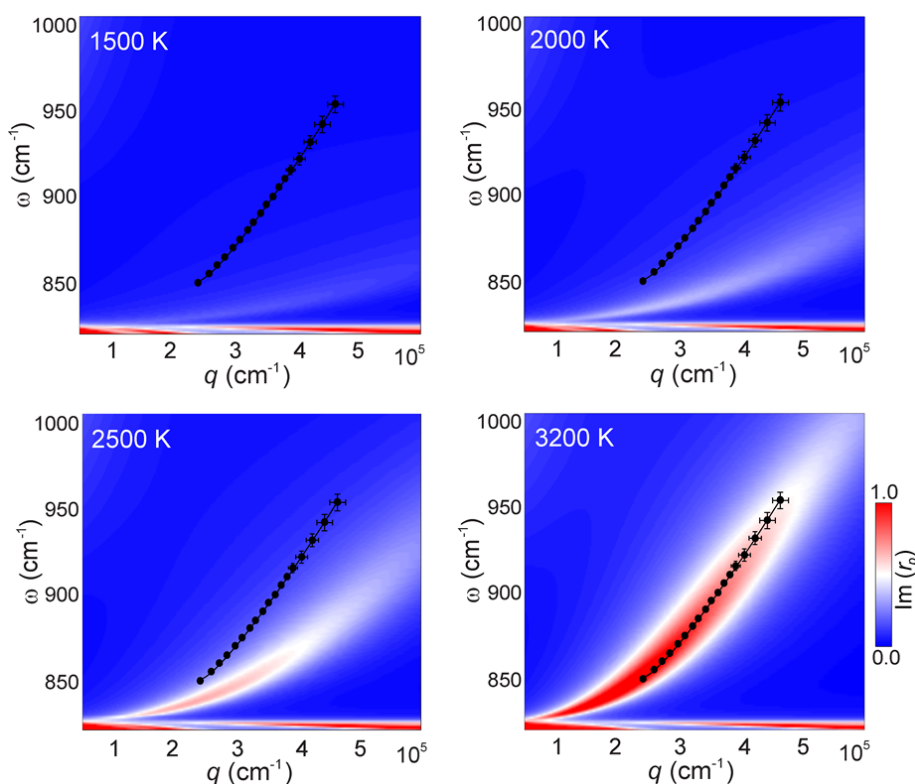


Figure S7 | Plasmon dispersion at different temperatures. Calculated plasmon dispersion at temperatures from 1500 K to 3200 K (false color). The black dots with solid line are the experimental data as discussed in the main text.

6. Derivative analysis of non-equilibrium plasmon dispersion

As described in the main text, we have utilized the derivative of the raw data at $t = 0$ ps delay time to determine the peak positions in our scattering amplitude data, as shown in Fig. 1c (reproduced here as Fig. S8A). This derivative $\frac{ds(\omega, x)}{dx} = 0$ plot is

presented in Fig. S8B. The first prominent aspect of this two-dimensional derivative map is the alternating blue and red regimes which are separated by the white lines. The blue corresponds to negative values; the red corresponds to positive values of the derivative and the white lines correspond to the zeros. Thus, the white lines correspond to the extrema of the signal, in particular, the 1st, 3rd and 5th (when apparent) lines are the maxima. The dashed lines in Fig. S8A depict these maxima overlaid on the raw data map. The vertical solid line marks the edge of graphene inside our encapsulated structures. In Fig. S8C, we show an attempt to model the hyper-spectral data obtained in Fig. S8A. Using the spheroidal tip model, the calculated ω - q map does reproduce the gross features of the raw data shown in Fig. S8A. This confirms the correlation of plasmon scattering associated with an increase in T_{el} , as shown in Fig. 3a.

Figure S8D&E shows the raw data and its derivative of $s(\omega, x)$ at 2 ps time delay. The peak position can be extracted using the approach discussed above. To determine the electronic temperature at $t = 2$ ps, we first computed the imaginary part of the complex reflectance $r_p(q, \omega)$, see Fig. S8F. The momentum at which $\text{Im } r_p(q, \omega)$ has the maximum is identified with q_p . This value serves as the input into the spheroidal model simulations, which produce the ω - x diagram. The numerically computed fringe positions can then be compared with those found from the derivative of the measured signal. The best match of these two was achieved at $T_{el} = 1700$ K.

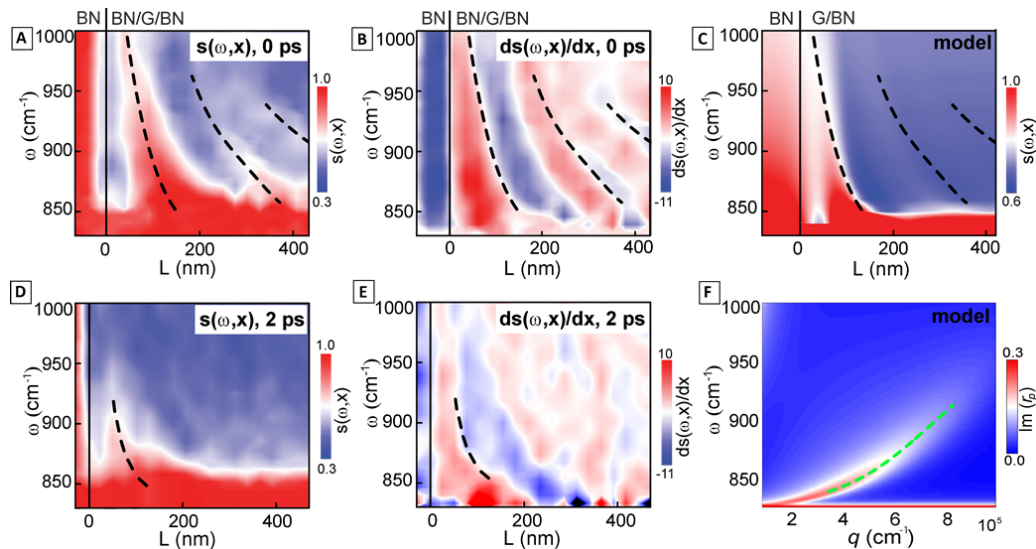


Figure S8 | Non-equilibrium plasmon dispersion. A-C) plasmon dispersion at 0 ps. A) Raw data of $s(\omega, x)$ at 0 ps as presented in the main text of Fig. 1c. B) Map of the derivative $\frac{ds(\omega, x)}{dx} = 0$ of our hyper-spectral map at 0 ps. The black dashed lines mark the maxima. C) Calculated two-dimensional hyper-spectral map of $s(\omega, x)$ using the spheroidal model. Here the plasmon damping was set to be $\gamma_p = 0.15$. The solid black line represents the graphene edge location. D-F) plasmon dispersion at 2 ps. D) Raw data of $s(\omega, x)$ at 2ps as presented in the main text of Fig. 1E. E) Two-dimensional hyper-spectral map of the derivative $\frac{ds(\omega, x)}{dx} = 0$ at 2ps. The black dashed line marks

the maximum. F) The dispersion of photo-induced plasmons represented by the imaginary part of the complex reflectance $\text{Im } r_p(q, \omega)$ calculated for an electronic temperature of ~ 1700 K at $\gamma_p = 0.15$. We obtained $\text{Im } r_p(q, \omega)$ through calculations that take into account the multilayer structure of our air/BN(10 nm)/G/BN(30 nm)/SiO₂/Si sandwiched devices.

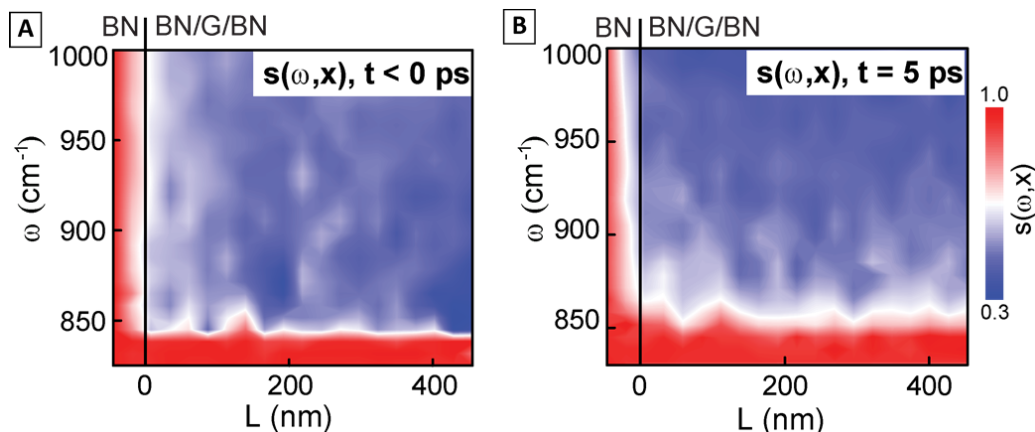


Figure S9 | Ultrafast pump-probe data at different time delays. A) Hyper-spectral map of the near-field scattering amplitude $s(\omega, x)$ before pump overlap with probe beam. B) Hyper-spectral map of the near-field scattering amplitude $s(\omega, x)$ at a pump-probe delay time of 5 ps, where no dispersion is observed. The black solid line marks the edge between BN/BN and BN/G/BN.

In Figure S9, we show the pump-probe $s(\omega, x)$ data obtained at time delay of $t = 5$ ps and another map obtained before the pump beam overlaps with probe beam ($t < 0$ ps). In both cases, no plasmon dispersion was observed. This confirms that the observed plasmonic patterns within several picoseconds of photo-excitation is due to the strongly enhanced electronic temperature associated with this dynamical variation of the Drude weight. It also indicates that although the probe beam alone can heat the electrons [S14], it is insufficient to trigger plasmon interference patterns.

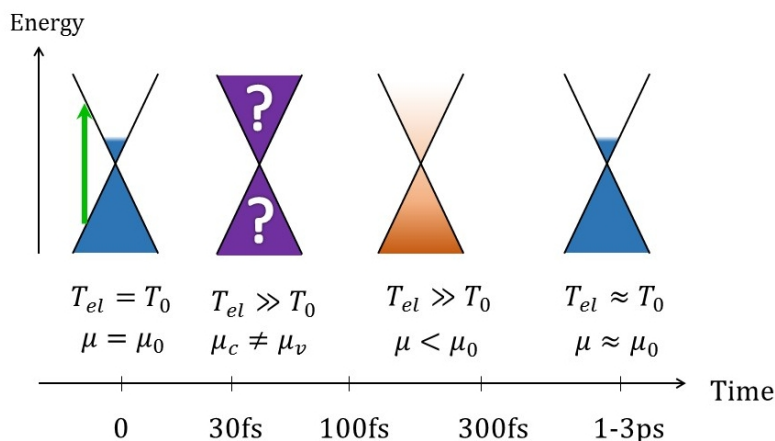


Figure S10 | Schematic evolution of the carrier population dynamics in graphene. Before pumping, electrons and holes have equal temperature T_0 and chemical

potential μ_0 . Immediately after pumping, the carrier distribution is complicated (non-Fermi-Dirac). Within the first 30-50 fs the interaction of electrons with one another and with optical phonons establish two separate Fermi-Dirac distributions for electrons and holes with nearly equal and very high temperature T_{el} but unequal chemical potentials μ_e, μ_v . After about 100 fs the two chemical potentials equilibrate to the common value μ . Finally, the electron temperature gradually approaches the lattice temperature T_0 mainly due to emission of acoustic phonons. This regime, lasting for several picoseconds, is probed in the present experiments.

Finally, we remark on the possible decay mechanisms for non-equilibrium plasmons. Under the conditions of our experiments, the most likely decay channel appears to be the emission of acoustic phonons, as suggested recently in [S7, S10]. On the other hand, the optical phonons, which have energy of ~ 0.2 eV may play a role during the first 30-50 fs after the pump pulse when the electron temperature is still higher than 0.2 eV. This and other stages of the relaxation of the electrons are illustrated in Fig. S10, which is constructed based on the literature devoted to highly photo-excited graphene [S13, S15-S18].

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