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Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1103/PhysRevLett.111.175502

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
Physical Review Letters

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Stable All-Nitrogen Metallic Salt at Terapascal Pressures

Jian Sun,1,2,3,* Miguel Martinez-Canales,4,† Dennis D. Klug,5 Chris J. Pickard,4 and Richard J. Needs3

1Department of Physics and National Laboratory of Solid State Microstructures, Nanjing University, Nanjing 210093, China
2Lehrstuhl für Theoretische Chemie, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, 44780 Bochum, Germany
3Theory of Condensed Matter Group, Cavendish Laboratory, J J Thomson Avenue, Cambridge CB3 0HE, United Kingdom
4Department of Physics and Astronomy, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom
5Steeacie Institute for Molecular Sciences, National Research Council of Canada, Ottawa, K1A 0R6, Canada

(Received 14 November 2012; revised manuscript received 7 September 2013; published 24 October 2013)

The phase diagram and equation of state of dense nitrogen are of interest in understanding the fundamental physics and chemistry under extreme conditions, including planetary processes, and in discovering new materials. We predict several stable phases of nitrogen at multi-TPa pressures, including a P4/nbm structure consisting of partially charged N52+ pairs and N52− tetrahedra, which is stable in the range 2.5–6.8 TPa. This is followed by a modulated layered structure between 6.8 and 12.6 TPa, which also exhibits a significant charge transfer. The P4/nbm metallic nitrogen salt and the modulated structure are stable at high pressures and temperatures, and they exhibit strongly ionic features and charge density distortions, which is unexpected in an element under such extreme conditions and could represent a new class of nitrogen materials. The P-T phase diagram of nitrogen at TPa pressures is investigated using quasiharmonic phonon calculations and ab initio molecular dynamics simulations.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevLett.111.175502 PACS numbers: 61.50.Ks, 71.20.–b, 81.05.Zx, 81.40.Vw

The polymerization of molecular nitrogen under high pressure has been very actively researched over the past two decades and has stimulated many experimental [1–12] and theoretical [13–31] investigations. Density functional theory studies suggested that the dissociation of nitrogen could occur at high pressures which are, nevertheless, attainable in diamond anvil cell experiments. In a ground-breaking paper, Mailhiot et al. [16] predicted the polymerization of nitrogen molecules under pressure, leading to the formation of the “cubic gauche” (cg) framework structure (space group I23). After considerable efforts [1,2], cg nitrogen was finally synthesized by Eremets et al. [5], a decade after its prediction. Novel techniques must be developed if cg-N is to be recovered to ambient pressure [5], which could lead to the synthesis of polymeric nitrogen [5] or high-N content salts [32]. Such materials are expected to be excellent candidates as high-energy-density materials.

The N≡N triple bond is one of the strongest known, and breaking it requires surmounting a substantial energetic barrier. However, at high temperatures the triple bond breaks at pressures above about 110 GPa [5], a much lower pressure than predicted for the single bond in H2 [33] and the double bond in O2, which is predicted to survive up to about 1.9 TPa [34,35]. Once the N≡N triple bond is broken, a wide variety of structures can be adopted, similar to phosphorus and arsenic.

After extensive searches for high-pressure nitrogen structures, the sequence of low-temperature phase transitions \( \text{cg} \rightarrow Pba2 \rightarrow P21 \rightarrow P21 \) appeared to be accepted [28,29]. This view was challenged recently, when a cage-like diamondoid “N10” structure (space group I43m) was found to be more stable than any other candidate above 263 GPa [31]. Recently, the melting behavior of nitrogen and phases beyond cg-N have also been investigated [10–12,30].

Recently, dynamical shock wave [36–38] and ramped compression experiments [39–41] have increasingly been used to investigate materials at TPa pressures. Even more extreme conditions are attainable today in laser ignition experiments [42] and laser-induced microexplosions [43]. Experimental determinations of structures at TPa pressures will soon be possible [41], and experiments aimed at compressing nitrogen to TPa pressures are ongoing [44]. However, there is very little knowledge of the structures and properties of nitrogen under these conditions, and therefore theoretical predictions are particularly important [34,45–48]. Understanding the energetics of elements is crucial before one can understand the energetics of the compounds they might form.

Although an increase in coordination number with pressure seems physically reasonable, it is by no means universal. Aluminum, for example, is expected to adopt more open structures at TPa pressures as the valence electrons move away from the ions in the formation of “electride structures” [47]. Well-packed structures are strongly disfavored in oxygen up to at least 25 TPa [34], which is well beyond dissociation. The coordination number of nitrogen has not been determined beyond 800 GPa, at which pressure the insulating N10 (I43m) phase is stable.

We have used ab initio random structure searching (AIRSS) [49,50] and density functional theory methods to find candidate structures of nitrogen up to multi-TPa pressures. Details of the searches are provided in the Supplemental Material [51]. These searches have enabled
The unique structure of the $P4/nbm$ phase led us to perform a Bader charge transfer analysis [52]. As summarized in Table I, we found that the $N_5$ tetrahedra are negatively charged ($-0.37|e|$) and serve as anions, while the positively charged $N_2$ dimers ($+0.37|e|$) act as cations. The charge transfers depend on the precise definition of the atomic charges, but the computed charges are substantial, and the overall picture is independent of their definition. We therefore suggest that the $P4/nbm$ structure resembles an all-nitrogen salt.

Our best candidate structure beyond 6.8 TPa, of symmetry $P2_1$ with 10 atoms in the unit cell, also shows a very strong charge transfer. The computed Bader charges range between $-0.20$ and $+0.35|e|$. This structure can be viewed as two distorted and buckled square layers, rotated with respect to one another by about $\arctan\left(\frac{3}{5}\right)$. Similar energetically competitive structures, such as the $Fdd2$ structure, can be formed with different rotation angles. It is likely that the most stable structure at these pressures is an incommensurate charge density wave (CDW) phase. Nevertheless, even after additional directed searches as described in the Supplemental Material [51], the 10-atom $P2_1$ phase remains the best candidate. The appearance of strong charge transfer effects in an element at such high pressures is most unexpected, as the resulting Coulomb energy is substantial.

At lower pressures, we found a $Cmca$ structure similar to “black phosphorus” to be stable within a narrow pressure range. As depicted in the Supplemental Material [51], the $Cmca$ structure consists of threefold-coordinated nitrogen atoms and has zigzag layers, with a shortest N-N distance of about 1.15 Å at 2.5 TPa, which is much shorter than the N-N separation between the layers of about 1.56 Å. Layered structures also appear in the high-pressure phases of other small molecules of first row atoms, e.g., CO [53] and CO$_2$ [54].

As can be seen in the enthalpy-pressure relations of Fig. 2, solid nitrogen undergoes a series of structural phase transitions beyond the previously known polymeric

![FIG. 1 (color online). Crystal structures of the newly predicted nitrogen phases. (a) $P4/nbm$, (b) $P2_1$, (c) A supercell of $P2_1$ viewed along the $a$ axis. The colored spheres in (a) and (b) represent atoms with different charge environments, as described in the text. Atoms in different layers in (c) have been shown with different colors.](image)

| Structures | $P$ (TPa) | Lattice parameters (Å) | Atomic positions | $Q_b$ (|e|) |
|------------|-----------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| $Cmca$     | 2.5       | $a = 2.090, b = 3.041, c = 2.617$ | 8f (0.0, 0.3966, 0.8157) | 0 |
| $P4/nbm$   | 2.5       | $a = 3.424, c = 2.466$ | 2d (0.0, 0.5, 0.5) | -0.07 |
|            |           |                        | 4g (0.0, 0.0, 0.7376) | 0.18 |
|            |           |                        | 8m (0.1808, 0.6808, 0.7879) | -0.07 |
| $P2_1$     | 8.0       | $a = 2.579, b = 2.396, c = 2.390$ | 2a (0.7889, 0.9079, 0.0325) | 0.03 |
|            |           | $\beta = 62.903^\circ$ | 2a (0.2912, 0.2331, 0.5345) | 0.01 |
|            |           |                        | 2a (0.1858, 0.6314, 0.3824) | -0.20 |
|            |           |                        | 2a (0.2487, 0.8206, 0.7525) | 0.35 |
|            |           |                        | 2a (0.6866, 0.5078, 0.8789) | -0.19 |
| $R3m$      | 12        | $a = 1.613, c = 1.468$ | 3b (0.0, 0.0, 0.5) | 0 |
| $I4_1/amd$ | 30        | $a = 0.890, c = 3.452$ | 4a (0.0, 0.25, 0.875) | 0 |
Although the zonal whereupon it transforms into a sixfold-coordinated hex-
ture is the most favorable phase in the range 6.8–12.6 TPa, of them drops to a very low frequency of 
the calculation using the approximation (QHA). We have also investigated higher 
low temperatures and pressures 
high-temperature dynamical compression experiments. At 
motion effects so that we can investigate their key role in 
drations with respect to the ripples in the layers.

One might expect 
to show two relatively soft modes 
that region, Cmca is never the most stable phase by more 
than 2 meV/atom. Because the candidate structures have 
very different characters, their respective vibrational 
energies differ considerably. As a consequence, vibrational 
effects make noticeable changes to the transition pressures 
even at 0 K where, for example, the pressure for the 
P4/nbm → P21 transition is reduced by 0.5 TPa. The 
N10 (I43m) → P4/nbm transition is not affected as much, 
because their enthalpies cross with a much larger gradient. Finally, our QHA results greatly reduce the possibility of 
P21,21 being stabilized by temperature.

Our calculations show that the insulating behavior of nitrogen persists to 2.0 TPa, at which the transition to the metallic Cmca and P4/nbm phases occurs. This is a considerably higher pressure than in other light elements 
such as hydrogen [33], carbon [48], and oxygen (although oxygen is predicted to become insulating at about 1.9 TPa 
[34]). The projected density of states shows signs of 2s → 2p charge transfer only above 15 TPa. The electronic band 
temperatures, it is a straightforward scheme, and provides 
an estimated upper bound for the melting temperature, Tm. 
Our calculated melting temperature could be compared 
with an experimental Hugoniot. Our results suggest a 
oticeable increase in Tm with pressure, perhaps monotonically.

The inclusion of vibrational effects reduces the region of stability of Cmca to a small wedge in Fig. 3 and, even in 
that region, Cmca is never the most stable phase by more 
analytic approximation (QHA). We have also investigated higher 
temperatures and pressures 
high-temperature dynamical compression experiments. At 
motion effects so that we can investigate their key role in 
drations with respect to the ripples in the layers.

We have extended our calculations to include nuclear 
motion effects so that we can investigate their key role in 
high-temperature dynamical compression experiments. At 
low temperatures and pressures P < 8 TPa we have calculated the P-T phase diagram within the quasiharmonic 
approximation (QHA). We have also investigated higher 
temperatures using ab initio molecular dynamics, and have calculated a rough melting curve using the Z method [56]

Although the Z method somewhat overestimates melting 
pressures relative to R3m.

The partially ionic P4/nbm phase is stable over a wide pressure range, but compression to about 
6.8 TPa leads to the layered P21 structure. The P21 structure 
is the most favorable phase in the range 6.8–12.6 TPa, 
whereupon it transforms into a sixfold-coordinated hex-
agonal R3m phase. As shown within the inset to Fig. 2, nitrogen forms a I41/amd structure similar to Cs-IV [55] 
at about 30 TPa.

We have established the dynamical stability of the pro-
posed structures by computing their phonon spectra over a 
wide range of pressures. A selection of phonon spectra is 
shown in the Supplemental Material [51]. The phonon dis-
}
structures and projected density of states of the relevant structures are shown in the Supplemental Material [51].

The formation of \(N_2\) pairs and \(N_4\) tetrahedra in \(P4/nbm\) is confirmed by the charge density plot in Fig. 4(b), where the atoms between the tetrahedron center and corners, and between the two atoms within the dimers, form strong covalent bonds. The electron localization function shown in the Supplemental Material [51] provides additional evidence for the formation of tetrahedra and dimers in \(P4/nbm\).

The emergence of charged units from an elemental compound has also been observed in \(\gamma\) boron [58]. The pressures of interest in the present study are, however, much larger than those at which \(\gamma\) boron has been observed and, besides, \(P4/nbm\) nitrogen is a very different system. The charge transfer in boron satisfies its tendency to form electron deficient icosahedra. Based on the structural richness of phosphorus and arsenic, one might assume that nitrogen could form similarly rich bonding patterns once the triple bond is broken. At 2 TPa, however, packing efficiency is crucial and one would expect structures with high coordination numbers to be formed. In this metallic phase the variation in coordination (or the inhomogeneity of the density of ions) leads to charge transfer from the highly coordinated atoms ("\(N_2\) pairs") to the lower coordinated ones ("tetrahedra" corners). This charge transfer allows the \(P4/nbm\) structure to form a unique metallic all-nitrogen salt. Each atom in the 1D chains perpendicular to the layers of tetrahedra has four long bonds to the corners of the tetrahedra; thus, only one electron is left. The 1D chain with uniform N-N distances is unstable and undergoes a Peierls distortion, similar to that in lithium [59], and \(N_2\) pairs are formed.

Although \(P2_1\) also shows a clear charge transfer, the atomic arrangement is completely different from that in \(P4/nbm\). This phase is formed by distorted, buckled, and rotated square layers, resembling a CDW. CDWs have been observed previously in chalcogenides under pressure [60]. We believe that nitrogen may actually adopt an incommensurate structure between 6 and 12 TPa. In light of the charge transfer, the buckling of layers could be viewed not only as a symmetry breaking, but also as allowing the positive and negative ions to approach one another and reduce the energy. In addition, while carbon expels charge from the 2s levels above 3 TPa [48], eventually forming an electrode, the bottom of the valence band of \(P2_1\) still has a large 2s population. Charge depletion from the 2s levels only arises with the transition to the \(R\bar{3}m\) phase, at almost 12 TPa. Electrode structures are found, for example, in carbon [48] and aluminum [47] at very high pressures, but they do not appear in nitrogen up to at least 100 TPa. While intuition suggests that close-packed structures should be favored under extreme pressures, this is not the case for nitrogen even at 100 TPa where, for example, the face-centered-cubic structure is almost 2 eV per atom higher in enthalpy than \(I4_{1}/a\).

In conclusion, we have presented a \(P-T\) phase diagram for nitrogen using results from first-principles methods. We have used the \textit{ab initio} random structure searching method to investigate N at TPa pressures. We do not find stable close-packed phases below 100 TPa. We have proposed five additional pressure driven phase transitions and two novel phases with unusual behavior. The \(P4/nbm\) structure can be seen as a \((N_2^{5+}N_2^{\delta-})_2\) metallic salt, formed from dimers and tetrahedra. The layered \(P2_1\) structure also shows strong charge transfer and an undulation resembling a CDW. Our \textit{ab initio} molecular dynamics and Z-method calculations provide a first estimate of the melting curve of nitrogen at TPa pressures.

J.S. gratefully acknowledges financial support of the National Natural Science Foundation of China under Grants No. 51372112 and No. 11023002, the State Key Program for Basic Research of China under Grant No. 2011CB922103, the Alexander von Humboldt (AvH) fellowship, and the Marie Curie fellowship. M. M. C., C. J. P., and R. J. N. were supported by the EPSRC.

*To whom all correspondence should be addressed.
jiansun@nju.edu.cn
†To whom all correspondence should be addressed.
miguel.c.martinez@ucl.ac.uk
