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Catalytic dinitrogen reduction to hydrazine and ammonia using $Cr(N_2)_2$ (diphosphine)₂ complexes[†]

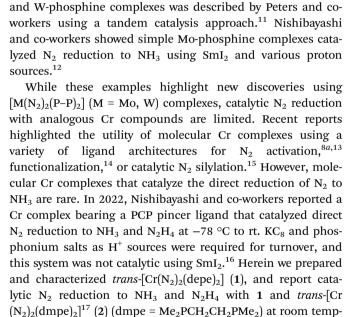
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sources.

The synthesis, characterization of trans-[Cr(N₂)₂(depe)₂] (1) is described. 1 and trans-[Cr(N₂)₂(dmpe)₂] (2) catalyze the reduction of N₂ to N₂H₄ and NH₃ in THF using SmI₂ and H₂O or ethylene glycol as proton sources. 2 produces the highest total fixed N for a molecular Cr catalyst to date.

Motivated by the desire to understand and control the challenging multi-proton, multi-electron reaction of N₂ reduction to NH₃, researchers have intensely studied the reactivity of molecular transition metal dinitrogen complexes.¹ Well-defined molecular systems offer a high degree of electronic and structural control to regulate chemical reactivity of N2.² When combined with effective strategies to form N-H bonds, such as proton-coupled electron transfer (PCET) reagents,³ *i.e.* SmI₂ and a proton source, tens-of-thousands of equivalents of NH₃ can be generated.⁴ The valuable information obtained from these studies includes the identification of viable M-N_xH_y reaction intermediates from spectroscopic data that can be used to delineate the mechanistic steps of a putative catalytic cycle. Such studies can aid in the understanding of the mechanistically complex biological N2 fixation processes carried out by nitrogenase enzymes,⁵ as well as heterogeneous Haber-Bosch catalysts.⁶

Group 6 N₂ complexes bearing monodentate phosphine ligands, especially with Mo and W, were among the first molecular systems to generate stoichiometric quantities of N₂-derived NH₃ from protonolysis reactions with strong acids nearly 50 years ago.⁷ Recently, a renaissance of examining structurally similar [M(N₂)₂(P–P)₂], (M = Mo, W; P–P = diphosphine) systems has begun, elevating these simple complexes as catalysts for N₂ reduction to NH₃, or other remarkable reac-



erature using SmI₂ and ethylene glycol or H₂O as proton

THF with excess Mg powder under a N₂ atmosphere for 24 h

furnished **1** as a dark red solid in 70% yield. Isolation of **1** allowed for a comparison of the structural and spectroscopic data with **2** that was reported in 1983.^{17a} The structure of **1**,

determined by single crystal X-ray diffraction, shows Cr with

four phosphorus atoms of the chelates on the equatorial plane

and two axial end-on bound N2 ligands, Fig. 1, panel a. The

average Cr-N, Cr-P, and N=N bond distances are 1.904 ±

0.005 Å, 2.334 ± 0.007 Å, and 1.104 ± 0.004 Å, respectively. The

corresponding Cr-N, and Cr-P, bond distances in 2 (see ESI[†]),

Vigorous stirring of yellow trans-[CrCl₂(depe)₂]¹⁸ (1-Cl) in

tions such as cleavage of the N_2 triple bond.⁸ Masuda and coworkers reported spontaneous $N \equiv N$ bond cleavage upon one-

electron oxidation of *trans*- $[Mo(N_2)_2(depe)_2]$ (depe =

 $Et_2PCH_2CH_2PEt_2$) to form $[Mo(N)(depe)_2]^{+,9}$ Chirik and coworkers developed a photocatalytic strategy to form NH₃ from

 $[Mo(N)(depe)_2]^+$ and H_2 .¹⁰ Electrocatalytic N₂ fixation with Mo

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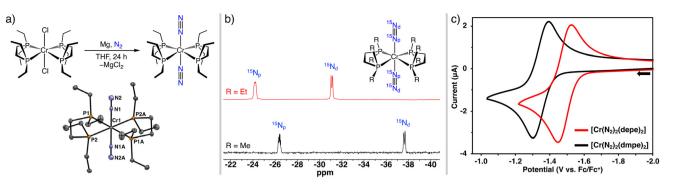


Fig. 1 (a) Synthesis and molecular structure of **1**. Thermal ellipsoids are drawn at 50% probability. Hydrogen atoms are omitted for clarity. Crystals of **1** contain two molecules per asymmetric unit with comparable metric parameters; only one molecule is shown. Selected bond distances (Å) and angles (°): Cr1–N1 = 1.9081(10); N1–N2 = 1.1003(14); Cr–P1 = 2.3343(3); Cr–P2 = 2.3249(3). Cr2–N3 = 1.9008(10); N3–N4 = 1.1069(14); Cr–P3 = 2.3425(3); Cr–P4 = 2.3346(3). P1–Cr1–P2 = 81.650(9); P3–Cr2–P4 = 81.583(10); P1–Cr1–N1 = 89.25(3); P2–Cr1–N1 = 90.21(3); P3–Cr2–N3 = 89.29 (3); P4–Cr2–N3 = 90.59(3). (b) $^{15}N^{1}H$ NMR spectra of $\mathbf{1}^{15N}$ (red) and $\mathbf{2}^{15N}$ (black) recorded at 25 °C in THF-d₈. (c) Cyclic voltammograms of **1** and **2** in THF showing the Cr^{1/0} wave.

are slightly shorter at 1.8862(17) Å, and 2.294 \pm 0.005 Å, and the N \equiv N distance is 1.110(2) Å.¹⁹ The ligand bite angles for **1** and **2**, *i.e.* P1–Cr–P2, are 81.6° and 83.5°, respectively, and the P–Cr–N angles are near 90°.

The ³¹P{¹H} NMR spectrum of **1** in THF-d₈, displays a singlet at 79.9 ppm (68.8 ppm for 2) consistent with four magnetically equivalent P atoms. Complexes **1** and **2** were characterized by ¹⁵N NMR spectroscopy to augment the cumulative library of tabulated ¹⁵N NMR data of phosphine-supported group 6 N₂ complexes.^{13h} The ¹⁵N₂-labelled complexes **1**^{15N} and **2**^{15N}, were prepared by mixing the respective Cr–N₂ complexes in THF-d₈ under 1 atm ¹⁵N₂. The ¹⁵N NMR spectra were collected after mixing for 24 h. The ¹⁵N{¹H} NMR spectra contain two resonances; a doublet ($J_{NN} = 7.0$ Hz) and a multiplet (~2.5 Hz ³¹P coupling) (**1**^{15N}: -31.1 ppm, -24.2 ppm, and **2**^{15N}: -37.6 ppm, -26.4 ppm), assigned as the distal (N_d) and proximal (N_p) nitrogen atoms, respectively, (Fig. 1, panel b).¹³ⁱ

Cyclic voltammetry (CV) experiments established the redox behaviour of the Cr(0)-N₂ complexes. Voltammograms were recorded using a glassy carbon working electrode at 0.1 V s⁻¹ in THF. The voltammogram for each complex displays a reversible, one-electron $Cr^{1/0}$ wave with the half-wave potential ($E_{1/2}$) of -1.49 V and -1.34 V (vs. Cp₂Fe^{+/0}) for 1 and 2, respectively (Fig. 1, panel c). The electrochemically reversible Cr^{I/0} couples indicate N2 dissociation does not occur upon oxidation to Cr(I) during the CV experiments. The reversibility of the waves for 1 and 2 contrasts other *cis*- or *trans*- $[Cr(N_2)_2(P_4)]$ complexes measured by CV that exhibit quasi-reversible or irreversible $Cr^{I/0}$ waves due to rapid N₂ loss upon oxidation.^{13b,c,i} In the current study, an irreversible anodic wave was assigned to the $Cr^{II/I}$ redox feature at E_{pa} = -0.48 V and E_{pa} = -0.63 V, for 1 and 2, respectively, due to N₂ dissociation at more positive potentials, (Fig. S17 and S18 ESI[†]). The CV results suggest a one-electron chemical oxidation to form trans- $[Cr(N_2)_2(P-P)_2]^+$ should be possible; however, our attempts to isolate such a species have been unsuccessful. Owing to the more electronrich metal centre of 1, the $\nu_{\rm NN}$ band in the infrared spectrum

at 1906 cm⁻¹ (THF) appears at lower energy than the $\nu_{\rm NN}$ band for 2 at 1917 cm⁻¹ (THF).

Complexes 1 and 2 were examined as catalysts for the direct reduction of N_2 to NH_3 and N_2H_4 . The catalysis studies were performed in THF at room temperature using the PCET reagent SmI_2 and ethylene glycol and/or water as proton donors. A typical catalytic run used 583 equiv. SmI_2 , 1166 equiv. ROH per Cr centre and was stirred for 48 h. Quantification of NH_3 , N_2H_4 and H_2 (see ESI for details†) products assessed the total fixed N generated in each reaction. Selected catalytic data are listed in Table 1 (see ESI for all tabulated results†).

Analysis of the catalysis results provides insights about the performance of 1 and 2 under identical reaction conditions. 2 afforded more total fixed N than 1 in all catalytic trials. For example, 1 generated up to 5 equiv. of NH_3 and 5 equiv. N_2H_4 per Cr center using ethylene glycol as the proton donor after >100 h. Under identical conditions, 2 produced up to 16 equiv. NH₃ and 10 equiv. N₂H₄ in 48 h. Furthermore, ethylene glycol worked more effectively as the proton donor affording higher total fixed N than using H₂O. The deliterious effect of H₂O on catalysis was noted in reactions with 2 using ethylene glycol as the primary proton source. As the amount of H₂O added to the reaction increased, NH_3 production declined, while the N_2H_4 formed stayed relatively constant. We postulate the Cr complexes may simply be more prone to degradation in the presence of H₂O. Separately, 2 was treated with 500 equiv. H₂O or ethylene glycol in THF-d₈. Free dmpe from complex degradation appeared more rapidly using H_2O , as assessed by ³¹P NMR spectroscopy. Catalysis performed with 2 under an atmosphere of ${}^{15}N_2$ afforded ${}^{15}NH_4^+$ as a doublet at 7.1 ppm (J_{15N-1H} = 71 Hz) in the ¹H NMR spectrum, identifying ${}^{15}N_2$ as the source of ¹⁵NH₃.

Catalytic trials using *trans*- $[CrCl_2(dmpe)_2]$ (2-Cl) and ethylene glycol generated comparable amounts of NH₃ and N₂H₄ as using 2 as the precatalyst. 1-Cl did not catalyze N₂ reduction, affording only 1 equiv. of NH₃ and N₂H₄ per Cr center. SmI₂

Table 1	Selected Cr-catalyzed N ₂ reduction ex	periments
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Entry	Cr cat.	ROH	NH ₃ equiv./Cr ^a	N ₂ H ₄ equiv./Cr ^b	Total fixed N	Time (h)
1	None	$(CH_2OH)_2$	0	0	0	48
2	1	$(CH_2OH)_2$	3.7 ± 0.9	1.4 ± 0.8	$4.9^h \pm 1.5$	48
3	1	$(CH_2OH)_2$	4.6 ± 0.6	4.0 ± 1.7	$8.6^{h} \pm 2.1$	100
4^c	1	H_2O	1.4	0.7	2.1	48
5^d	1	H_2O	3.2	0.6	3.8	28
6	1-Cl	$(CH_2OH)_2$	1.2	0.9	2.1	48
7	2	$(CH_2OH)_2$	14.6 ± 1.6	5.9 ± 2.9	$20.5^{h} \pm 3.8$	48
8 ^e	2	$(CH_2OH)_2$	6.2 ± 0.5	6.4 ± 0.8	$12.6^{h} \pm 0.3$	48
9^f	2	$(CH_2OH)_2$	4.4 ± 0.9	6.6 ± 0.6	$11^h \pm 0.4$	48
10^g	2	$(CH_2OH)_2$	1.1	5.7	6.8	48
11^d	2	H ₂ O	5.1	5.9	11	3
12	2-Cl	$(CH_2OH)_2$	13.5 ± 2.8	5.9 ± 0.6	$19.4^{h} \pm 3.4$	48

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Experiments performed using 0.6 µmol catalyst in 15.0 mL THF at 25 °C under 1 atm N2, with 583 equiv. of SmI2, and with 1166 equiv. ROH unless otherwise specified. ^a Determined by acidification and NH₄⁺ quantification using ¹H NMR spectroscopy (see ESI⁺). ^b Determined by color-metric *p*-dimethylaminobenzaldehyde method (see ESI⁺). ^c 1000 equiv. H₂O/Cr. ^d 10 000 equiv. H₂O/Cr. ^e 25 ppm of H₂O. ^f 250 ppm of H₂O. ^g 583 equiv. (CH₂OH)₂, 583 equiv. H₂O. ^h Average of two or more trials. H₂ quantification by gas chromatography, values are tabulated in ESI.[†]

and ethylene glycol may be ineffective at reducing the $Cr(\pi)$ center of 1-Cl to Cr(0) where N2 is strongly activated. Treatment of 2-Cl with 2 equiv. SmI2 and 2 equiv. ethylene glycol rapidly generated 2 (see ESI[†]). However, the same reaction of 1-Cl and SmI₂ with ethylene glycol additive did not form 1 ($E_{1/2}$ = -1.49 V, vide supra). 1 or 2 could not be generated from 1-Cl or 2-Cl using excess SmI₂(THF) alone (E° of $SmI_2(THF) = -1.41 \pm 0.08 V^{20} \nu s. Fc/Fc^+$). A Cr(1) species could be accessible, but N2 activation and subsequent functionalization steps may be moderated at Cr(1), limiting catalysis.

The mixed N₂ reduction selectivity to form NH₃ and N₂H₄ provides preliminary evidence for a catalytic cycle that follows, at least in part, an alternating N₂ reduction mechanism, Fig. 2, bottom. A purely distal N2 reduction pathway, Fig. 2, top, would be selective for NH₃ formation. In a 1986 report, the reaction of 2 with CF₃SO₃H was postulated to form a Cr-hydrazido product, [Cr(NNH₂)(dmpe)₂][CF₃SO₃]₂.²¹ A recent study by Wei, Yi, Xi, and co-workers examining early stage N₂ functionalization of $[Cp^*Cr^0(depe)(N_2)]^ (Cp^* = \eta^5 - C_5(CH_3)_5)$ using a variety of electrophiles (H⁺, Me₃Si⁺, Me⁺) also revealed the selective formation of Cr-hydrazido products, consistent with a distal pathway. Contrary to these reaction patterns, protonation studies of related *cis*- or *trans*- $[Cr(N_2)_2(P_4)]$ complexes we examined using strong acids or H⁺/e⁻ reagents, as well as the catalytic Cr[PCP] system¹⁶ generated NH₃ and N₂H₄.^{13c,i,15a} Considering all these examples, and that N2 reduction mechanisms are sensitive to reaction conditions, (i.e. identity of the H^+ and e^- reagents, solvent, temperature), a hybrid N_2 reduction pathway²² where the third and fourth N-H bonds are formed at the proximal N atom of a Cr-hydrazido intermediate, Fig. 2, middle, cannot be excluded for the current systems. Further studies are warranted to understand the N₂ reduction pathways with Cr.

The proclivity for N₂ ligand substitution in 1 and 2 was evaluated as a metric that could reflect catalyst stability and influence catalytic performance. We examined reactions of 1 and 2 with CO to assess the rate of ligand exchange, Fig. 3. Ligand substitution in these six-coordinate complexes is expected to be a dissociative process; a result of Cr-N or Cr-P bond dissociation. Wilkinson, Hursthouse, and co-workers noted 2 did not react with 7 atm CO for several hours except under u.v. irradiation (in light petroleum) to form *cis*-[Cr(CO)₂(dmpe)₂] (cis-2-CO).^{17b} This account was surprising, and the unreactive nature toward N₂/CO exchange seemed uncharacteristic of a

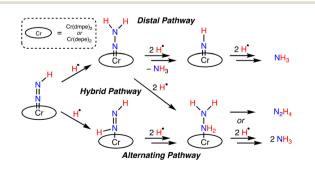


Fig. 2 Plausible N₂ reduction mechanisms for Cr mediated formation of hydrazine and ammonia.

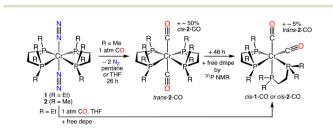


Fig. 3 Ligand exchange reactions of 1 and 2 with CO display different reaction profiles.

complex with terminally bound N₂ ligands. We reacted 2 with 1 atm CO at 25 °C in pentane or THF without u.v. irradiation and monitored the reaction by *in situ* IR spectroscopy, or ³¹P NMR spectroscopy (see ESI†). In both solvents the reaction was slow, but 2 was not unreactive. In THF, after 26 h ~85% of 2 converted to a ~1:1 mixture of *cis*-2-CO and *trans*-[Cr (CO)₂(dmpe)₂] (*trans*-2-CO). *trans*-2-CO converts to ~95% *cis*-2-CO (and ~5% free dmpe) after additional 46 h by ³¹P NMR spectroscopy. In THF, 1 converts directly to *cis*-[Cr(CO)₂(depe)₂] *cis*-1-CO (ν_{CO} = 1829, 1768 cm⁻¹) in ~3 h by *in situ* IR spectroscopy (see ESI†). The vastly different rates of N₂/CO ligand exchange underscore the greater kinetic stability of 2 toward Cr–L dissociative processes that could ultimately curtail catalyst deactivation pathways (*i.e.* ligand loss) improving catalyst performance for N₂ reduction compared to 1.

In conclusion, we present a contemporary advancement in the use of *trans*- $[Cr(N_2)_2(P-P)_2]$ complexes (1 and 2) for direct catalytic reduction of N₂ to form NH₃ and N₂H₄ using the PCET reagent SmI₂ and H₂O and/or ethylene glycol as proton donors. A new complex, *trans*- $[Cr(N_2)_2(depe)_2]$, was presented herein. Despite having similar electronic structures, we posit 2 is a better catalyst than 1 (using the presented conditions), due to a less negative Cr^{1/0} redox couple and greater kinetic stability from Cr–L dissociative processes.

Author contributions

C. Beasley, investigation, methodology, writing, editing; O. L. Duletski, investigation; K. S. Stankevich, investigation; N. Arulsamy, investigation, writing; M. T. Mock, conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing, editing, funding acquisition.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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