

Cite this: *RSC Adv.*, 2017, 7, 23709

# Novel $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ and $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based energetic oxidizers for solid propellants with super high specific impulse

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Novel  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based energetic oxidizers were designed, and their structures, thermal stabilities, and energetic properties were investigated *via* density functional theory (DFT). The analysis of the bond dissociation energies (from 93.4 to 120.8 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>) for the screened salts suggests that they possess better thermal stabilities than the reported  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$  (89.8 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>), and compound 5 was the most stable energetic salt. All the screened salts possess a positive oxygen balance ranging from 13% to 50%. Due to a positive oxygen balance, the specific impulses of the compounds 5, 11–14 (>300 s) were superior to those of ammonium perchlorate (AP) and ammonium dinitramide (ADN) when the optimized ratio of oxidizer/aluminium/PBAN (%) was 76 : 10 : 14. Considering their thermal stability and chemical reactivity, compounds 5 and 11 with super high specific impulses can be regarded as excellent candidates for novel potential solid propellants.

Received 21st March 2017

Accepted 13th April 2017

DOI: 10.1039/c7ra03304d

rsc.li/rsc-advances

## Introduction

Energetic oxidizers, such as ammonium perchlorate (AP) and ammonium dinitramide (ADN), are compounds that release excess of oxygen, which react with fuels and produce large amounts of hot gases for propulsion.<sup>1,2</sup> With high densities and heats of formation, high specific impulse, and high thermal stabilities, energetic salts have been a research hotspot of explosive compounds, which are useful as propellants, explosives, and pyrotechnics.<sup>3–7</sup> As two parts of energetic salts, the cations and anions take the role of fuels and oxidizers, respectively. The introduction of non-oxygen containing cations into the energetic salts will decrease the oxygen balance of the salts, restricting the promotion of the energetic performance of the energetic salts; thus, it is often sufficient to oxidize the carbon content only to CO and not to CO<sub>2</sub> to achieve near maximum performance.<sup>8</sup> However, oxygen-containing cations remain elusive because once nitrated or oxidized, the ability of neutral Lewis bases to form cationic species is greatly reduced.<sup>9,10</sup> Therefore, novel oxidizers with oxygen-containing cations will be helpful to improve the oxygen balance and energetic performance of the energetic salts; for example,  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ , which have been reported decades ago, but the research on these cations moved slowly due to their strong oxidizability and reactivity.<sup>11,12</sup>

The study history of  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  originated from the chemistry of trifluorammonium oxide ( $\text{NF}_3\text{O}$ ) in the 1960s,<sup>13–16</sup> and it was found in

1969 that it exists in an ionic form in its Lewis acid adducts.<sup>17</sup> In 1999,  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  was used as an intermediate to synthesize the amazing  $\text{N}_5^+$  cation.<sup>18</sup> To date, only several  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ -based salts with paired anions such as  $\text{SbF}_6^-$ ,  $\text{Sb}_2\text{F}_{11}^-$ ,  $\text{AsF}_6^-$ ,  $\text{BF}_4^-$ , and  $\text{B}_2\text{F}_7^-$  have been synthesized, among which  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$  was the most stable salt.<sup>19</sup> As another fluoride oxide cation,  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  was reported in the form of  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$  in 2007,<sup>20</sup> which exists in the form of two different configurations: *trans*- $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  and *cis*- $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ . Since then, no novel  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based salts have been experimentally or theoretically reported. These two cations compose of nitrogen, oxygen, and fluorine in their structures. On the one hand, contrary to the commonly used fuel cations, oxygen in their composition will help to improve the oxygen balance. On the other hand, fluorine can also act as a strong oxidizer to further improve the oxygen balance of the energetic salts. Moreover, hydrogen is not present in the cations, which helps to improve the entire density of the energetic salts. These characteristics make them excellent candidates as strong energetic oxidizers to be used as potential propellants when combined with appropriate anions. Fig. 1 demonstrates the superior specific impulse performance of oxygen-rich  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based oxidizers in contrast to that of traditional fuel cation-based oxidizers, based on theoretical calculations.

Our previous study indicated that the combination of  $\text{AlF}_4^-$  with a strong oxidizing  $\text{N}_5^+$  cation may stabilize the salt,<sup>21</sup> which prompted us to pair  $\text{AlF}_4^-$  with the two cations to evaluate their stabilities. Additionally, the possibility of synthesizing novel  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  salts with good stability lead us to carry out further investigations. To evaluate the role of the central atom in  $\text{SbF}_6^-$  for the stability of  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$ , the Sb atom

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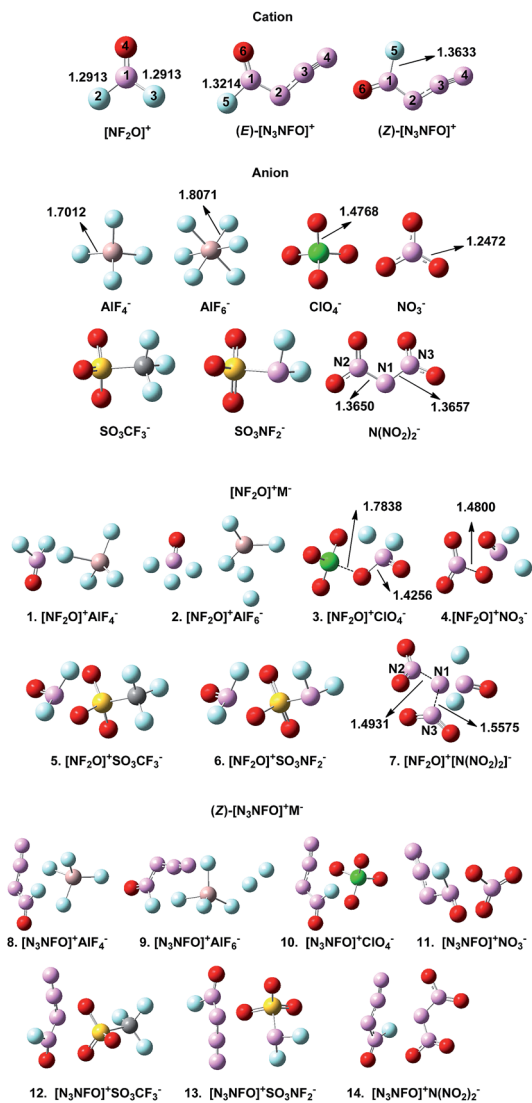


Fig. 2 The optimized structures of the separated  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ ,  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ ,  $(E)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ , and  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{M}^-$  ( $\text{M}^- = \text{ClO}_4^-, \text{NO}_3^-, \text{N}(\text{NO}_2)_2^-, \text{SO}_3\text{CF}_3^-, \text{SO}_3\text{NF}_2^-, \text{AlF}_4^-, \text{and AlF}_6^-$ ).

its combination with  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ , which may be caused by their intermolecular electrostatic interactions. For compounds **3**, **4**, and **7**, when  $\text{ClO}_4^-$ ,  $\text{NO}_3^-$ , and  $\text{N}(\text{NO}_2)_2^-$  are combined with  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ , the stable structures of the anions are interrupted. The Cl–O bond noted in **3** is lengthened (1.7838 Å) when compared with the Cl–O bond (1.4768 Å) in separated  $\text{ClO}_4^-$ , resulting in Cl–O bond breakage and a newly formed N–O bond. A similar bond breakage occurs in **4** in which the N–O bond of  $\text{NO}_3^-$  is broken with much larger distance of N–O (1.4800 Å) than that of the separated  $\text{NO}_3^-$  (1.2472 Å). The structure of **7** obviously demonstrates its structural instability, where the distance of N1–N2 and N2–N3 in  $\text{N}(\text{NO}_2)_2^-$  is 1.4931 Å and 1.5575 Å, respectively, completely decomposing to two separated  $\text{NO}_2$  molecules in the gas phase.

Based on the inspection of the optimized structures, we preliminarily screened out the possible stable compounds **1**, **5**, **6**, **8**, **10–14** to carry out further investigations.

## Stabilities

The energies released upon the formation of salts by the isolated ions are reflected in the binding energy ( $\Delta E$ ) values, which can be expressed by the following equation.

$$\Delta E = E_0(\text{cation}) + E_0(\text{anion}) - E_0(\text{salt})$$

A larger binding energy means greater stability after the formation of the salts. For comparison, the calculated binding energy of  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$  and the screened compounds are listed in Table 1. Obviously, each compound has a larger binding energy ranging from 93.4 to 120.8 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> than that of  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$  ( $\Delta E = 89.8$  kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>), indicating they have relatively better stabilities than  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$ . For compounds **1** and **8** with the same paired anion  $\text{AlF}_4^-$ , **8** gives a larger  $\Delta E$ , indicating that  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  can better stabilize  $\text{AlF}_4^-$ -based salts when compared with  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$ . In addition, our calculations show that for the same paired anions,  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  and  $(E)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based salts have close  $\Delta E$  values with a difference of 2 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>, which is due to the close free energies of separated  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  and  $(E)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ .<sup>25</sup> The data in Table 1 shows compound **5** has the largest binding energy ( $\Delta E = 120.8$  kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>), indicating that it is the most stable salt, whereas **1** is the least stable ( $\Delta E = 93.4$  kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>). To sum up, the thermal stability order is **5** > **6** > **11** > **12** > **8**  $\approx$  **14** > **10** > **13**  $\approx$  **1** >  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$ , based on which it can be inferred that the screened compounds have great possibilities to be synthesized.

The energy gap ( $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$ ) of the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) and the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO) is essential for kinetic stability and chemical reactivity during the chemical processes with electron transfer or leap.<sup>26,27</sup> The HOMOs and LUMOs of the selected salts are depicted in Fig. 3. For the series of  $(E)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$  salts, the distributions of orbitals and  $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$  values are similar to that of the *Z* isomers, which are not shown. An inspection of Fig. 3 demonstrates that the LUMO orbitals mainly locate on the part of the cations, and the HOMO orbitals mainly locate on the ions. It's well known that a higher energy gap implies lower chemical reactivity and a lower gap implies higher chemical reactivity. Therefore, the  $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$  values

Table 1 The binding energy ( $\Delta E$ ) and the energy gaps ( $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$ ) of the screened compounds and  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$

Compd.	$\Delta E$ [kcal mol <sup>-1</sup> ]	$\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$ [eV]
$[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$	89.8	7.85
<b>1</b>	93.4	8.17
<b>5</b>	120.8	11.02
<b>6</b>	114.1	9.92
<b>8</b>	96.4	7.49
<b>10</b>	95.6	5.12
<b>11</b>	99.0	8.72
<b>12</b>	97.6	5.14
<b>13</b>	93.8	5.11
<b>14</b>	96.3	4.77



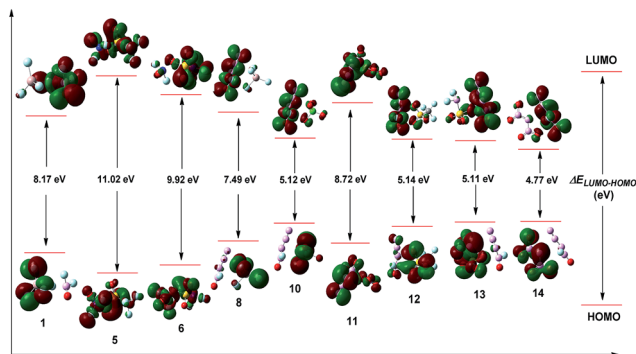


Fig. 3 The depicted HOMOs, LUMOs, and energy gaps ( $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$ ) of the selected compounds.

in Table 1 indicate that compounds **1**, **5**, **6**, and **11** have lower chemical reactivity than  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^-$ , with  $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$  values ranging from 8.17 eV to 11.02 eV, and the compound with the lowest chemical reactivity should be **5** (11.02 eV). In summary, the screened salts have a chemical reactivity order of  $5 < 6 < 11 < 1 < [\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+\text{SbF}_6^- < 8 < 12 \approx 13 \approx 10 < 14$ .

### Energetic properties

The heat of formation (HOF) is an important parameter to obtain the detonation properties of a compound, and the accurate heats of formation of the cations and anions of the screened compounds were calculated at the G2 level of theory. The lattice energy ( $\Delta H_L$ ) was mainly determined by the volume and type of the salt. For all the salts, the ratio of the number of cations to anions was 1 : 1 and the calculated  $\Delta H_L$  values in Table 2 range from 507 to 569  $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ . Due to the low HOF of  $\text{AlF}_4^-$ , compounds **1** and **8** with  $\text{AlF}_4^-$  as the anion show lower HOFs when compared with other compounds, whose values are  $-1517$  and  $-1160$   $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ , respectively, among which **14** has the highest positive heat of formation up to 637  $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ . Moreover, all the related salts exhibit certain detonation properties such as detonation velocities ( $D$ ) and detonation

pressures ( $P$ ), among which **14**, composed of  $\text{N}(\text{NO}_2)_2^-$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ , shows a comparable energetic performance with AP and ADN, better than that of other compounds with  $\text{NO}_3^-$ ,  $\text{ClO}_4^-$ ,  $\text{AlF}_4^-$ ,  $\text{SO}_3\text{CF}_3^-$ , and  $\text{SO}_3\text{NF}_2^-$  as paired anions.

The oxygen balance (OB) indicates the degree to which an explosive can be oxidized. As an important index for identifying the potential of oxidants, compounds with positive OBs indicate that there is enough oxygen in their composition to convert all the carbon and hydrogen atoms to carbon monoxide and water, respectively, whereas negative OBs indicate an insufficient oxygen content for complete oxidation. All the screened salts possess positive OBs ranging from 13% to 50%. Compounds **1** and **13** have positive OBs of 23% and 25%, respectively, which are comparable to those of AP and ADN. Particularly, the OBs of **10** (50%), **11** (47%), and **14** (45%) are much higher than those of AP and ADN (26%).

The value of excellent oxidizers can be reflected in the application as propellants. As an important parameter, the specific impulse ( $I_s$ ) is used to determine the performance of solid propellants or binders. The  $I_s$  values of the relevant compounds were calculated under isobaric conditions at 7 MPa with an initial temperature of 3300 K using EXPLO5 (v6.01). Compounds **10**, **11**, and **14** show impulse values of 236 s, 264 s, and 260 s, which are much higher than those of AP ( $I_s = 157$  s) and ADN ( $I_s = 202$  s) as neat compounds. The impulse calculations for neat compounds **5** and **6** were not performed due to the problem of temperature limits during the calculations. The addition of aluminium and PBAN binder as a fuel drastically increases the  $I_s$  for all the compounds. We carried out  $I_s$  calculations with different combustion parameters: oxidizer/aluminium/PBAN [%], and the calculations indicate that the optimized ratio of the mixtures with aluminium and PBAN binder was composed of 76% oxidizer, 10% aluminium, and 14% binder. Surprisingly the calculations show compound **12** achieves the highest  $I_s$  value at 464 s, far exceeding that of any other already known solid propellant. This unexpected effect may be caused by the introduction of carbon in **12** when compared with the other salts. Moreover, compounds **5**, **11**, **13**,

Table 2 Properties of screened  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $(Z)\text{-}[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based oxidizers, AP, and ADN

Compd.	OB <sup>a</sup> [%]	$\rho^b$ [ $\text{g cm}^{-3}$ ]	$\Delta H_L^c$ [ $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ ]	$\Delta H_f^d$ [ $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ ]	$V_D^e$ [ $\text{km s}^{-1}$ ]	$P^f$ [GPa]	$I_s^g$ [s]	$I_s^h$ [s]	$I_s^i$ [s]	$I_s^j$ [s]
<b>1</b>	23	2.18	569	-1517	2.69	2.3	138	216	227	239
<b>5</b>	18	1.82	507	-947	4.51	12.0	—	324	263	244
<b>6</b>	32	1.76	532	-344	2.72	2.1	—	279	224	257
<b>8</b>	17	2.03	539	-1160	5.14	11.1	187	220	217	205
<b>10</b>	50	1.97	538	389	6.61	19.0	236	297	289	271
<b>11</b>	47	1.80	557	413	7.03	20.0	264	309	296	284
<b>12</b>	13	2.06	512	-624	5.34	13.8	191	464	124	247
<b>13</b>	25	2.01	519	-3	6.17	15.4	206	361	80	263
<b>14</b>	45	1.85	524	637	7.56	23.9	260	309	294	286
ADN <sup>28</sup>	26	1.81	—	-150	7.86	23.6	202	264	269	202
AP <sup>29</sup>	26	1.95	—	-296	6.37	15.8	157	256	261	244

<sup>a</sup> Oxygen balance. <sup>b</sup> Density. <sup>c</sup> Lattice energy. <sup>d</sup> Calculated enthalpy of formation ( $\text{kJ mol}^{-1}$ ). <sup>e</sup> Detonation velocity. <sup>f</sup> Detonation pressure. <sup>g</sup> Specific impulse(s) of neat compounds. <sup>h</sup> Specific impulse(s) of mixtures with aluminium and/or PBAN binder as 76 : 10 : 14. Binder composition 6% polybutadiene acrylic acid, 6% polybutadiene acrylonitrile and 2% bisphenol A ether. <sup>i</sup> Original NASA composition (70 : 16 : 14) for the space shuttle solid rocket boosters. <sup>j</sup> Specific impulse(s) of mixtures with aluminium and/or PBAN binder as 80 : 20 : 0.



and **14** are quite promising oxidizers, with superior  $I_s$  values ( $>300$  s) relative to those of AP ( $I_s = 256$  s) and ADN ( $I_s = 264$  s) with similar formulations. Our calculations show that the  $I_s$  values of all the screened oxidizers were superior to those of AP and ADN, except for **1** and **8**. Considering the relative thermal stability and chemical reactivity discussed above, the calculation results suggest that compounds **5** and **11** may be used as a new generation of superenergetic oxidizers with potential applications as solid rocket propellants.

## Conclusions

A series of  $[\text{NF}_2\text{O}]^+$  and  $[\text{N}_3\text{NFO}]^+$ -based energetic oxidizers were designed employing density functional theory. The calculated binding energies indicate that compounds **1**, **5**, **6**, **8**, **10–14** ( $\Delta E > 93$  kcal mol $^{-1}$ ) have better thermal stabilities than previously reported  $\text{NF}_2\text{OSbF}_6$  ( $\Delta E = 89.8$  kcal mol $^{-1}$ ). The energy gap ( $\Delta E_{\text{LUMO-HOMO}}$ ) analysis predicted that **1**, **5**, **6**, and **11** exhibit a lower chemical reactivity than  $\text{NF}_2\text{OSbF}_6$ , in which **5** has the lowest chemical reactivity. Amazingly with good thermal stabilities, compounds **5**, **11–14** show superior  $I_s$  values ( $>300$  s) to those of ammonium perchlorate (AP) and ammonium dinitramide (ADN) with an optimized ratio of oxidizer/aluminium/PBAN (%) of 76:10:14. While considering the kinetic stability, compounds **5** and **11** may be used as potential solid propellants. Moreover, our exploration using experiments is currently underway. We hope our work may supply new insight into the expansion of novel energetic oxidizers and candidates for future solid propellants.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the financial support received from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (21576026 and U1530262).

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