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Regulating iminophosphorane P=N bond reactivity through geometric constraints with cage-shaped triarylphosphines†

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Structure–reactivity investigations and quantum-chemical parametrization of steric and electronic properties of geometrically constrained iminophosphoranes enabled the design of new frustrated Lewis pairs and revealed unusual properties at the phosphonium center embedded in the cage-shaped triptycene tricyclic scaffold.

Iminophosphoranes, the nitrogen analogues of phosphorus ylides in aza-Wittig reactions,¹ are increasingly used to design pincer type ligands for transition-metals² and main-group elements.³ They have found recent applications in organocatalysis⁴ and in the phosphine-mediated redox catalyzed Staudinger ligation of carboxylic acids and azides (Scheme 1a).⁵ Iminophosphoranes are prepared by the Staudinger reaction,^{1a} whose reaction intermediates have been extensively investigated (Scheme 1b).⁶

Owing to the high basicity of their nitrogen atom, iminophosphoranes have been extensively used to design superbases (e.g. Schwesinger phosphazenes),⁷ and have been combined with bulky boron Lewis acids such as B(C₆F₅)₃ to generate frustrated Lewis pairs (FLPs) reacting with small molecules such as CO₂ and H₂ (Scheme 1c).⁸

Whereas the reactivity of these phosphaza ylides is usually governed by the electronic and steric properties of the substituents at the P and N atoms, constraining their geometry with a highly strained skeleton or cage-shaped framework is of increasing interest for modulating the reactivity of p-block compounds and reaching new reactivities (Scheme 2).⁹

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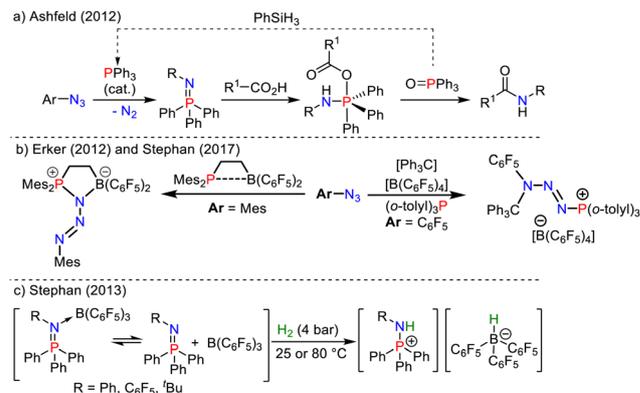
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Chitnis and coworkers recently designed phosphaza-adamantane with thermal, air, and redox stability by using a geometrically constrained adamantane scaffold (Scheme 2a-A).¹⁰ Radosevich and coworkers modulated the properties of the P=N bond in phosphazenes by designing phosphabicyclic compounds with distorted T-shaped molecular geometries, enabling the tuning of their reactivity *via* a geometric constraint (Scheme 2a-B).¹¹ Uchiyama recently employed a phospho-boratriptycene cage-shaped scaffold to intercept betaine intermediates in Wittig reactions of phosphorus ylides with aldehydes (Scheme 2a-c).¹²

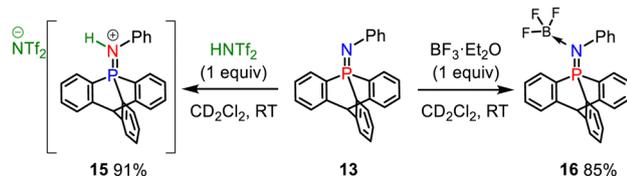
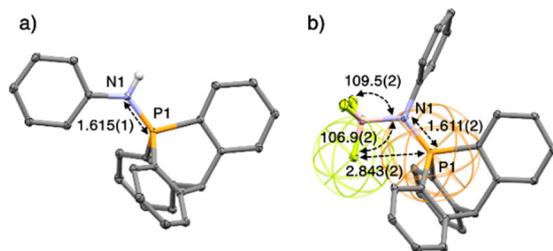
We now report a series of phosphatrimetric nitrogen-ylides derived from 9-phosphatriptycene,¹³ in which the geometric constraint is inducing an unusual pyramidalized phosphorus environment at the edge of the triptycene scaffold.¹⁴ The impact of the geometrical constraint on the Lewis and Brønsted basicities, steric hindrance and reactivity of the P=N bond was elucidated by quantitative investigations of their association with carbenium ions, and Brønsted and Lewis acids.

Adducts featuring unprecedented non-covalent fluorine or oxygen non-covalent bonding to C–P σ* orbitals were obtained



Scheme 1 (a) P^{III}/P^V-redox catalyzed Staudinger ligation reaction.⁵ (b) Interrupted Staudinger reactions.⁶ (c) Applications of iminophosphoranes in FLP chemistry.⁸



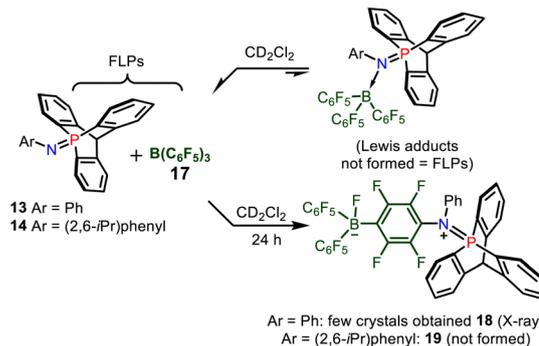
Scheme 4 Reaction of **13** with a Brønsted and a boron Lewis acid.Fig. 2 Ellipsoid representation (50% probability level) of single-crystal X-ray structures of one of the two molecules in the asymmetric unit of **15** (a), and **16** (b). H atoms, anion and solvent are omitted for clarity.

phosphorus imidates (previous shortest = 2.848(2) Å for the corresponding $\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{NCO}t\text{Bu}$ analogue of **10**).¹⁷

The iminophosphorane **13** was used for subsequent reactivity studies and was reacted with triflimidic acid HNTf_2 and $\text{BF}_3 \cdot \text{OEt}_2$ giving respectively **15** and **16** in good yields (Scheme 4). Protonation and BF_3 complexation induced a deshielding of the ^{31}P NMR signals of **15** (10.7 ppm) and **16** (10.4 ppm) compared to that of **13** (−20.4 ppm). Crystallographic analysis showed that H^+ and BF_3 complexation of **13** resulted in a significant P–N lengthening, with a PN distance of 1.560(2) Å in **13**, 1.615(1) Å in **15** and 1.611(2) Å in **16** (Fig. 2). This can be accounted for by the loss of one lone pair on the nitrogen that decreases the hyperconjugation with the $\sigma_{\text{P}-\text{C}}$ orbitals ($E_2 = 13.3$ and 13.5 kcal mol^{−1} for **15**) as compared to what was observed in **13** (*vide supra*).

The structure of **16** in the solid state revealed that one F atom in BF_3 is anti ($\theta_{\text{C}-\text{P}-\text{F}} = 173.65(8)^\circ$) to one of the P– C_{arom} bonds (Fig. 2b). The valence angle $\theta_{\text{N}-\text{B}-\text{F}}$ for F_1 is 106.9(2)°, whereas it is 109.5(2)° and 109.8(2)° for the other two fluorine atoms. This suggests an interaction between the lone pair of one fluorine with the σ^* orbital of one $\text{C}_{\text{arom}}-\text{P}$ bond. This P...F distance of 2.8433(14) Å is longer than in the phosphonium based anion receptors of Gabbaï (2.666(2) Å) in which the phosphonium bears a positive charge.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is still very short with a F...P distance in **16**, well below the sum of the van der Waals radii of both atoms (3.35 Å), represented by wireframe coloured spheres around F and P (Fig. 2b).

Then, the association of **13**–**14** with tris(pentafluorophenyl)borane **17** was investigated by multinuclear NMR spectroscopy (Scheme 5). When mixing these reagents in CDCl_3 , a negligible deshielding of the signal of **13** (≈ 3 ppm) was observed by ^{31}P NMR spectroscopy, and only a broadening of the peaks was observed in ^1H NMR, while the ^{11}B NMR signal of **17** remained at −60.0 ppm. This indicated a very weak interaction between **13** and $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ typical of an encounter complex or a frustrated

Scheme 5 FLPs between **13** and **17** and deactivation pathway resulting in the formation of the phospho-iminium fluoroborate **18**.

Lewis pair, and the formation of a Lewis adduct was thus excluded. After keeping the FLP solution for one day, crystals of compound **18** were obtained (see ESI,† Fig. S2) among other decomposition products. Thus, the deactivation of FLP occurs partly *via* $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$ reaction of the nitrogen atom of the 9-phosphatriptycene imine **13** at the para position of a C_6F_5 ring of $\text{B}(\text{C}_6\text{F}_5)_3$ (Scheme 5), similarly as with phosphorus ylides.^{8c} In the case of **14**, since it is of larger steric hindrance around its nitrogen atom, such type of $\text{S}_{\text{N}}\text{Ar}$ reaction to yield **19** was not possible.

The steric hindrance at the nitrogen atom was comparable for $\text{TrippP}=\text{NPh}$ (**13**) and $\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{NPh}$ according to their similar buried volume $\%V_{\text{bur}}$ and $\text{He}_{8-\text{steric}}$ parameters (see ESI,† Table S3).¹⁹ Analogously, the $\%V_{\text{bur}}$ of phosphatriptycene **5** (31.3%) is comparable to that of Ph_3P **1** (29.6%).²⁰

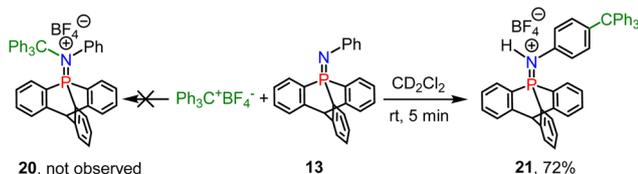
Computations show that the proton (PA) and methyl cation affinities (MCA) of iminophosphoranes **9**–**14** are influenced by geometric constraints at the phosphorus atom. This constraint decreases the basicity at N by up to 8 kcal mol^{−1} when comparing **13** to its analogue $\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{NPh}$ (Table 2). It simultaneously enhances the Lewis acidity at the phosphorus atom by 4 kcal mol^{−1}, as evidenced by fluoride ion affinity (FIA) values at the electron deficient formal phosphonium P centre. Analysis of the fluoride complexation through the activation strain model (see ESI,† Table S4) indicates that this enhanced Lewis acidity is mainly due to a lower distortion energy in the case of **13**. The energy necessary for the geometrically constrained phosphatriptycene imine structure to adopt the trigonal

Table 2 Computed proton affinities (PAs) and methyl cation affinities (MCAs) of **9**–**14** with respect to the N atom in benzene as a solvent in kcal mol^{−1}, and fluoride ion affinities (FIA) in kcal mol^{−1} with respect to the P atom

Cmpd	B	9	10	11	12	13	14	$\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{NPh}$
PA	263	247	255	246	245	262	264	270
MCA	110	93	95	92	94	108	113	113
FIA ^a	60 ^b	47	37	45	51	36	38	32

^a Computed FIA at the pseudo phosphonium center using the isodesmic approach with COF_2 anchor points; see ESI, Table S2 for the FSiMe_3 anchor point and for FIAs for **6**–**8**. ^b In agreement with the reported FIA value for compound **B** (Radosevich T-shaped iminophosphoranes shown in Scheme 2b) of 57 kcal mol^{−1} in ref. 11.





Scheme 6 FLP type reaction of iminophosphorane **13** with the tritylium tetrafluoroborate to yield compound **21**.

bipyramidal geometry is indeed lower (by 4.6 kcal mol⁻¹) than the one required for $\text{Ph}_3\text{P}=\text{NPh}$.

Finally, we found that combining **13** with a titylium ion results in a nitrogen/carbon FLP, and the phospho-iminium **20** was not formed (Scheme 6), but instead $\text{S}_{\text{E}}\text{Ar}$ reactions occurred at the para position of N-Ph of **13** to yield compound **21**, evidenced by X-ray diffraction (Fig. S2b, ESI[†]).

Thus, in conclusion, the geometric constraints brought by the cage-shaped tricyclic phosphatriptycene scaffold decrease the Brønsted basicity at the nitrogen but enhance the Lewis acidity at the phosphorus, leading to a partial Umpolung type reactivity at the P=N bond. Unusually short non-covalent F...P and O...P intramolecular electrostatic contacts also result from the geometrical constraints. The new cage-shaped phosphatriptycene nitrogen-ylides might have interesting reactivity in terms of frustrated Lewis pairs catalysis²¹ which is subject to further exploration in our labs. The transition metal-free directed electrophilic borylation²² of the triptycene core based on the N-centred directing group approach is also under investigation.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

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