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# Intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>–H/C–C bond amination of alkyl azides for the selective synthesis of cyclic imines and tertiary amines†

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The intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>–H and/or C–C bond amination is very important in modern organic synthesis due to its efficiency in the construction of diversified N-heterocycles. Herein, we report a novel intramolecular cyclization of alkyl azides for the synthesis of cyclic imines and tertiary amines through selective Csp<sup>3</sup>–H and/or C–C bond cleavage. Two C–N single bonds or a C=N double bond are efficiently constructed in these transformations. The carbocation mechanism differs from the reported metal nitrene intermediates and therefore enables metal-free and new transformation.

## Introduction

N-Heterocycles are undoubtedly important chemicals in organic synthesis, and have been considered as key functionality regulators in pharmaceuticals.<sup>1</sup> The intramolecular nitrogen insertion into Csp<sup>3</sup>–H and/or C–C bonds provides an efficient approach to N-heterocycles.<sup>2–5</sup> The pioneering groups of Aubé<sup>4</sup> and Pearson<sup>5</sup> developed the intramolecular Schmidt reactions<sup>2</sup> and made significant achievements for various N-heterocycle synthesis.<sup>3</sup> The earliest intramolecular aliphatic C–N bond formation named the Hofmann–Löffler–Freitag reaction<sup>5</sup> always started from unstable halogenated amines to construct N-heterocycles. Over the past two decades, the aliphatic C–H amination has achieved great progress *via* the C–H activation strategy.<sup>6</sup> However, most of these reactions required electron withdrawing directing groups and delivered amide products (Scheme 1a). Beginning with Breslow's pioneering work,<sup>7</sup> a metal-nitrene strategy was successfully applied in intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>–H bond N insertion, providing elegant approaches to amides bearing N–H bonds (Scheme 1a).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the development of direct aliphatic C–H/C–C amination is still highly desirable.

Organic azides are synthetically useful in drug discovery, bioconjugation and materials science.<sup>9</sup> Although the intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>–H bond amination/amidation of aryl azides<sup>10</sup>

and sulfonyl azides<sup>11</sup> has achieved great progress, the corresponding transformation of alkyl azides<sup>12</sup> was rarely developed until recent results.<sup>13</sup> In 2013, Betley and coworkers demonstrated the pioneering intramolecular aliphatic C–H amination of alkyl azides catalyzed by an iron catalyst (Scheme 1b).<sup>13a</sup> The groups of van der Vlugt,<sup>13c</sup> Lin,<sup>13d,e</sup> de Bruin,<sup>13c,f</sup> and Chi<sup>13g</sup> independently developed the same elegant intramolecular cyclization of alkyl azides by iron, palladium or cobalt catalysis to deliver N-Boc heterocycles (Scheme 1b), in which the involved nitrene type intermediates required an equivalent of Boc<sub>2</sub>O reagent to liberate the active catalyst to complete the catalytic cycle (Scheme 1b). Despite the advances of the above strategies (Scheme 1a and b), these intramolecular aliphatic amination/amidation processes always delivered N-carbonyl or sulfonyl heterocycles with the formation of one C–N single bond.

a) Intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>–H bond amination/amidation by C–H activation and nitrene strategies

b) Intramolecular amination of alkyl azides to N-Boc heterocycles (ref. 13)



c) Intramolecular N-insertion of alkyl azides to imines and tertiary amines (this work)

Scheme 1 Intramolecular N-insertion of the Csp<sup>3</sup>–H bond.

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Inspired by these results, we speculated that the oxidative generation of carbocation **A** may trigger the formation of cyclic intermediate **B** (Scheme 1c), which may undergo other transformations in the absence of transition-metal catalysts and provide opportunities for new products. Herein, we described a novel intramolecular nitrogen insertion into a Csp<sup>3</sup>-H and/or C-C bond of alkyl azides to deliver cyclic imines and tertiary amines (Scheme 1c). The aliphatic C-H or C-C bond was selectively cleaved with the efficient formation of two C-N single bonds or a C=N double bond.

## Results and discussion

According to our previous element incorporation reactions through the carbocation intermediates generated *in situ* with the DDQ oxidant,<sup>14</sup> we chose azide **1a** as the model substrate to investigate our speculation. As expected, dihydropyrrole **2a** was obtained in 75% yield in the presence of DDQ and TFA at 60 °C (Table 1, entry 1). Two C-H bonds were cleaved and a C=N double bond was constructed along with the release of N<sub>2</sub> in this case. TEMPO or CAN as the oxidant gave inferior yields (entries 2-3), while PIDA or NHPI could not execute the conversion of **1a** to **2a** (entries 4-5). The chlorinated solvent afforded better yields than that of other solvents such as DMSO, toluene, or MeCN (entries 6-9), and the reaction delivered the highest yield in TCE (entry 9). The pK<sub>a</sub> of acids influenced the reaction strongly (entries 10-12). **2a** was obtained in only 10% yield in

the presence of acetic acid (entry 10), while MsOH or TfOH failed to facilitate this transformation (entries 11-12). The treatment of **1a** with 0.4 mL of TFA afforded **2a** in a satisfactory 73% isolated yield (entry 13). Lowering the temperature hampered the reactivity (entry 14).

We explored the generality of this intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>-H nitrogen insertion for  $\delta$ -aryl alkyl azides under standard reaction conditions (Table 2). Substrates bearing electron-donating substituents (MeO, *t*Bu, PhO) at the aryl ring worked smoothly to afford the corresponding cyclic imines **2c-e** in good yields. The electron-withdrawing substituents (F, Cl) caused low reactivity, resulting in pyrrolines **2f-g** in diminished yields (26-31%). Substituents at the *meta* or *ortho* position of the arene rings **1h-j** slightly affected the efficiency. Besides arenes, the heteroaryl azide 2-(4-azidobutyl)thiophene **1k** was transformed to **2k** in 32% yield. The substituents on the alkyl chain influenced this reaction slightly (**2l-o**). The cyclic imines **2** were easily converted to diversified heterocycles.<sup>15</sup> Compared to the well-established approaches to cyclic imines, the present intramolecular N-insertion protocol features mild conditions and high atom economy.

In order to synthesize a six-membered cyclic imine, we conducted the reaction of alkyl azide **3a** under standard conditions. However, the target imine product **4a** was not detected (eqn (1)). We conducted the capture experiment by the addition of benzoyl chloride to the reaction of **3a** (eqn (2)). Aldehyde **5a** and amide **6** were obtained in 77% and 66% yields, respectively (eqn (2)), which indicated that the azide **3a** was converted to amine *via* an imine cation intermediate and a hydrolysis process (for the detailed mechanism, see Scheme 2 and 3).

Table 1 Optimization of the reaction conditions<sup>a</sup>



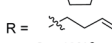
| Entry           | Oxidant | Acid | Solvent | Yield of <b>2a</b> <sup>b</sup> |
|-----------------|---------|------|---------|---------------------------------|
| 1               | DDQ     | TFA  | DCE     | 75%                             |
| 2               | CAN     | TFA  | DCE     | 18%                             |
| 3               | TEMPO   | TFA  | DCE     | 8%                              |
| 4               | NHPI    | TFA  | DCE     | 0                               |
| 5               | PIDA    | TFA  | DCE     | 0                               |
| 6               | DDQ     | TFA  | DMSO    | 0                               |
| 7               | DDQ     | TFA  | PhMe    | 64%                             |
| 8               | DDQ     | TFA  | MeCN    | 46%                             |
| 9               | DDQ     | TFA  | TCE     | 77%                             |
| 10              | DDQ     | AcOH | TCE     | 10%                             |
| 11              | DDQ     | MsOH | TCE     | 0                               |
| 12              | DDQ     | TfOH | TCE     | 0                               |
| 13 <sup>c</sup> | DDQ     | TFA  | TCE     | 84% (73%) <sup>d</sup>          |
| 14 <sup>e</sup> | DDQ     | TFA  | TCE     | 76%                             |

<sup>a</sup> Reaction conditions: **1a** (0.3 mmol), oxidant (0.36 mmol) and acid (0.2 mL) in a solvent (0.5 mL) at 60 °C for 12 h. <sup>b</sup> Yield determined by <sup>1</sup>H NMR spectroscopy with dibromomethane as an internal standard. <sup>c</sup> Performed with TFA (0.4 mL). <sup>d</sup> Isolated yields. <sup>e</sup> Performed at room temperature. DDQ = 2,3-dichloro-5,6-dicyano-1,4-benzoquinone, CAN = cerium ammonium nitrate, TEMPO = (2,2,6,6-tetramethylpiperidin-1-yl)oxyl, NHPI = *N*-hydroxyphthalimide, PIDA = phenyliodine diacetate, TFA = trifluoroacetic acid, MsOH = methanesulfonic acid, TfOH = trifluoromethanesulfonic acid, and TCE = 1,1,2,2-tetrachloroethane.

Table 2 Nitrogenation of alkyl azides to imines<sup>a</sup>



| Entry     | Yield (%)        |
|-----------|------------------|
| <b>2a</b> | 73%              |
| <b>2b</b> | 46% <sup>b</sup> |
| <b>2c</b> | 66% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2d</b> | 70%              |
| <b>2e</b> | 69% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2f</b> | 26% <sup>b</sup> |
| <b>2g</b> | 31% <sup>b</sup> |
| <b>2h</b> | 62%              |
| <b>2i</b> | 38%              |
| <b>2j</b> | 41%              |
| <b>2k</b> | 32% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2l</b> | 63% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2m</b> | 71% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2n</b> | 73% <sup>c</sup> |
| <b>2o</b> | 49% <sup>c</sup> |

R = 

<sup>a</sup> Reaction conditions: **1** (0.3 mmol), DDQ (0.36 mmol) and TFA (0.4 mL) in TCE (0.5 mL) at 60 °C for 12 h. Isolated yields. <sup>b</sup> Performed at 80 °C. <sup>c</sup> Performed with TFA (0.2 mL) at room temperature.





Scheme 2 Proposed mechanism.



On the basis of this result, we investigated the one-pot reaction of alkyl azide **3** with DDQ and TFA followed by *in situ* reduction. We were delighted to find that the corresponding cyclic tertiary amine **7a** was obtained in 55% yield (Table 3). The substituent on the arene slightly influenced the yield and

a series of N-Bn pyrrolidines were synthesized in moderate yields. The azide substrates bearing alkyl substituents also smoothly delivered benzyl-substituted **7h** or pyrrolidine **7i** in moderate yield. In addition, naphthalene, thiophene, dibenzofuran and dibenzothiophene were all well tolerated to afford cyclic tertiary amines **7j–m** in 33–81% yields. It is noteworthy that the transformation of **3** to **7** with the release of nitrogen as the only by-product, is thus highly atom-economic. Moreover, the present strategy cleaves the Csp<sup>3</sup>–Csp<sup>3</sup> bond<sup>16</sup> without strained rings or assisted functional groups. Besides pyrrolidine, piperidine derivative **7n** also could be synthesized by the intramolecular N-insertion of alkyl azide **3n**. Unfortunately, the present strategy could not be applied in the construction of seven- or eight-membered N-heterocycles.

Based on the above experiments, we proposed the possible mechanism of the reaction (Scheme 2). The oxidation of alkyl azides **1** and **3** at the benzylic position by DDQ with TFA provides benzylic cation intermediate **A**, which is attacked by the azide group to generate cyclic intermediate **B**. In the most stable conformation of **B**, the aryl group should stand on the equatorial bond, which makes a small torsion angle with the azide moiety. As a result, the following Schmidt rearrangement of **B** with the concerted release of N<sub>2</sub> and the aryl shift is unfavorable through periplanar migration, while the hydrogen or alkyl shift is potentially feasible through antiperiplanar migration. The five-membered ring species **C** undergoes deprotonation with the release of N<sub>2</sub> to afford cyclic imine **2**,

Scheme 3 Energy profile for the DDQ-mediated amination of alkyl azides **1** and **3**.Table 3 Nitrogenation of alkyl azides to tertiary amines<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Reaction conditions: **3** (0.3 mmol), DDQ (0.36 mmol) and TFA (0.2 mL) in TCE (0.5 mL) at room temperature for 12 h. Isolated yields. <sup>b</sup> Performed with TFA (0.4 mL) at 60 °C. <sup>c</sup> Performed at 60 °C.



while the six-membered ring intermediate **D** undergoes 1,2-alkyl migration to generate the imine cation **E**, which is sequentially reduced to deliver tertiary amine **7**.

To further understand the mechanism, we performed preliminary DFT calculations on the model reaction of alkyl azides **1** and **3** with DDQ and TFA (Scheme 3).<sup>17</sup> We first studied the oxidation of **1** at the benzylic position by DDQ with TFA through O-attack hydride transfer pathway, which is the most thermodynamically favorable pathway in some similar cases.<sup>18</sup> The hydride transfer from **1** to the complex of DDQ and TFA through **TS1** requires a Gibbs free energy barrier of 28.0 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> to form the benzylic carbocation intermediate **A1** and DDQH-TFA<sup>-</sup> anion, which could be stabilized by another TFA molecule to afford DDQ-2H and H(CF<sub>3</sub>CO<sub>2</sub>)<sub>2</sub><sup>-</sup> species. Subsequently, the azide moiety would attack the formed carbocation in **A1** to generate five-membered ring **C**, which is exothermic by 19.2 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>. In the most stable conformation of **C**, the phenyl group on the equatorial bond has a small torsion angle (-24.4°) with the azide moiety, while the benzylic hydrogen and alkyl group have big dihedral angles (95.4° and -150.0°, respectively) with the azide moiety. Therefore, the following Schmidt rearrangement<sup>2</sup> of **C** with the concerted release of N<sub>2</sub> and the hydrogen or alkyl shift is potentially feasible through antiperiplanar migration. The Schmidt rearrangement with the 1,2-H shift through the antiperiplanar transition state **TS2** with a free energy barrier of 16.8 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> gives **2-H**. The barrier of the 1,2-alkyl shift to imine cation **E1** through **TS3** ( $\Delta G^\ddagger = 21.7$  kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>) is much higher than that of the 1,2-H shift pathway.

Alternatively, the hydride transfer from **3** to the complex of DDQ and TFA through **TS4** requires a Gibbs free energy barrier of 26.6 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> to form the benzylic carbocation **A3**. The azide moiety is favorable to attack the intramolecular carbocation to generate six-membered ring **D**, which is exothermic by 16.6 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>. In the most stable conformation of **D**, the dihedral angle of the azide moiety with the alkyl group increases to -159.5°, while the one with hydrogen decreases to 84.2°. This is likely to provide an advantage for the 1,2-alkyl shift. The following Schmidt rearrangement of **D** including the 1,2-H shift through **TS5** requires a free energy barrier of 15.3 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup> to give **4-H**. In contrast with **C**, **D** undergoes a 1,2-alkyl shift through **TS6** with a free energy barrier of 14.4 kcal mol<sup>-1</sup>, which is favorable compared to the 1,2-H shift pathway, indicating that the 1,2-alkyl shift pathway becomes predominant. Reviewing the whole energy profile, it is revealed that the oxidation with hydride transfer is the rate-determining step, while the chemoselectivity in the nitrogenation of alkyl azides is essentially controlled by the conformation of the cyclic intermediate and the ring-side in the Schmidt rearrangement process. The experimentally observed electronic effects on the Ar group are consistent with the first oxidation step with hydride transfer as the rate-determining step (see the ESI† for details).

## Conclusions

In summary, we have demonstrated a novel metal-free intramolecular Csp<sup>3</sup>-H/C-C amination of alkyl azides for the

synthesis of cyclic imines and tertiary amines. Two C-N single bonds or a C=N double bond are efficiently constructed in these transformations through the highly selective benzyl Csp<sup>3</sup>-H or C-C bond cleavage. The mechanistic studies and DFT calculation indicate a carbocation pathway for this novel protocol. The present chemistry not only provides a new approach to N-heterocycles, but also expands the transformation and application of C-H/C-C amination in organic synthesis.

## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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