First-principles study on lithium and magnesium nitrogen hydrides for hydrogen storage

T. Tsumuraya, T. Shishidou and T. Oguchi

Department of Quantum Matter, ADSM, Hiroshima University, Higashihiroshima
739-8530, Japan

Abstract

We have investigated the fundamental properties such as structural stability, heat of formation and electronic structure of lithium and magnesium nitrogen hydrides, LiNH₂, Mg(NH₂)₂ and Li₂NH, by means of the first-principles calculations using highly precise all-electron full-potential linear augmented plane wave method. The heats of formation involved in the reactions Li₂NH + H₂ ↔ LiNH₂ + LiH are estimated as −63kJ/mol H₂ within generalized gradient approximation and −71kJ/mol H₂ within local density approximation. Furthermore, we also obtain heats of formation concerning two elementary reactions given by an ammonia mediated model for H₂ desorption mechanism.

Key words: Energy storage materials, Solid state reactions, Enthalpy, Crystal structure, First-principles calculation

1 Corresponding author: Tamio Oguchi
FAX:+81 82 424 7014, E-mail: oguchi@hiroshima-u.ac.jp

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1 Introduction

One of the problems related to the employment of hydrogen-based fuel cells for vehicular transportation is "on-board" hydrogen storage. Hydrogen storage in solids has long been recognized as one of the most practical approach for this purpose. Chen et al. have shown that lithium nitride Li$_3$N can absorb/desorb hydrogen in the following two-step reversible reaction with gaseous hydrogen without any catalyst [1].

$$\text{Li}_3\text{N} + 2\text{H}_2 \leftrightarrow \text{Li}_2\text{NH} + \text{LiH} + \text{H}_2 \leftrightarrow \text{LiNH}_2 + 2\text{LiH} \quad (1)$$

Theoretically, 10.4 mass% hydrogen can be reversibly stored in this reaction. Ichikawa et al. have investigated the mixture of lithium amide LiNH$_2$ and lithium hydride LiH doped a small amount (1mol%) of titanium chloride TiCl$_3$ as a catalyst to improve the reaction kinetics in the second step of the reaction [2].

$$\text{LiNH}_2 + \text{LiH} \leftrightarrow \text{Li}_2\text{NH} + \text{H}_2 \quad (2)$$

The mechanism of the desorption reaction (2) has been experimentally examined in detail [3] [4]. Ichikawa et al. have proposed that the reaction progressed by two elemental reactions mediated by ammonia molecule NH$_3$.

$$2\text{LiNH}_2 \rightarrow \text{Li}_2\text{NH} + \text{NH}_3 \quad (3)$$

$$\text{LiH} + \text{NH}_3 \rightarrow \text{LiNH}_2 + \text{H}_2 \quad (4)$$

Quite recently, some new systems have developed that several types of magnesium hydrides substitute for lithium hydride systems. For instance, Leng et al.

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al. have investigated a composite material made by ball milling of 3:8 molar mixture of Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ and LiH under 1.0MPa H$_2$ atmosphere and proposed the following reversible reaction [5].

$$3\text{Mg(NH}_2\text{)}_2 + 8\text{LiH} \leftrightarrow \text{Mg}_3\text{N}_2 + 4\text{Li}_2\text{NH} + 8\text{H}_2$$ (5)

The experimental results show that a large amount of hydrogen (7 mass%) start to be desorbed at 140°C and a desorption peak at 190°C is formed, without any catalyst used. The hydrogenating and dehydrogenating reaction mechanism and fundamental properties of these hydrides still remain as a matter to be investigated. In particular, the crystal structure of lithium imide Li$_2$NH is not fully determined yet. In this paper, we discuss the heats of formation in the reactions (1)–(4) and the fundamental properties of LiNH$_2$, Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ and Li$_2$NH, on the basis of the first-principles calculations using all-electron full-potential linear augmented plane wave (FLAPW) method.

2 Computational Methods

Our first-principles calculations are based on the local spin density approximation (LSDA) or generalized gradient approximation (GGA) to density functional theory. Kohn-Sham equations are self-consistently solved in a scalar-relativistic fashion by using FLAPW method. Uniform $k$ mesh sets of 4×4×4 for LiNH$_2$, 4×4×4 for Li$_2$NH, 3×3×3 for Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$, 12×12×12 for LiH, and 6×6×6 for Li$_3$N are adopted. Common muffin-tin sphere radii are set to be 0.8, 0.55, and 0.35 Å for Li, N and H, respectively, for all compounds and gases. We have checked convergence of the plane-wave cutoffs for the wavefunctions and the electron density. For molecule and isolated atom calculations, we use
3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Crystal structure

To obtain the heat of formation from first-principles calculations, information on the stable crystal structure is indispensable. We have performed structural optimization in advance for all solids and gases involved in the reactions. Calculated equilibrium lattice constants are listed in Table 1. Theoretical lattice constants are generally in good agreement with experiment. Quantitatively better agreement has been attained by using GGA. The crystal structure of Li$_3$N, LiH, LiNH$_2$ and Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ have been already determined quite accurately by X-ray and/or neutron diffraction experiments, whereas that of Li$_2$NH has never been fully determined yet as shall be discussed below. Crystal structure of Li$_3$N is hexagonal (space group P6/mmm), LiNH$_2$ is tetragonal (I$\bar{4}$) [6] [7] [9], LiH is cubic (Fm$\bar{3}$m), Li metal is cubic (Im$\bar{3}$m) and Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ is tetragonal (I$4_1$/acd) [8] [9].

3.1.1 LiNH$_2$ and Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$

In LiNH$_2$, all of the Li$^+$ ions are coordinated by four amide ions (NH$_2$)$^-$. For LiNH$_2$, we have determined firstly unit cell volume by keeping the c/a ratio constant at the experimental value, and then the c/a ratio for the obtained equilibrium volume. For Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$, we have used experimentally determined lattice constants [9] (a=10.3758Å, c=20.062Å) and performed structural op-
timization with respect to the internal atomic positions. As a result, the bond length and angle between N and H are shown in Table 2. The bond length and angle in the amides are quite similar to those of H$_2$O molecule (0.957Å and 104.5°). The results are consistent with the experimentally obtained structure. Optimized H-N-H bond angle of Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ is a little bit smaller than that of LiNH$_2$. In general, LDA predicts smaller volume in solids than GGA while both approximations lead to almost compatible bond lengths and angles, as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

3.1.2 Li$_2$NH

As for Li$_2$NH, the anti-fluorite crystal structure has been suggested in 1951, but hydrogen position has not been identified [10]. Recently, Ohyama et al. have performed neutron powder diffraction experiments for Li$_2$NH [11]. However, the hydrogen position is not well identified and they propose two models for the crystal structure. They have concluded that the F$\bar{4}$3$m$ structure is most probable. Noritake et al. have carried out X-ray powder diffraction experiments and concluded that the space group is Fm$\bar{3}$m [12]. We have examined hydrogen positions starting from the anti-fluorite structure by using first-principles total-energy and atomic-force calculations and obtained that the most stable H position is along the [001] direction from N at a distance of 1.04 Å, leading to a tetragonal system. Quite recently, Balogh et al. have made deuterated samples Li$_2$ND and performed neutron and X-ray powder diffraction experiments [13]. The resulting lattice constant is approximately twice as large as that reported previously. The H position is now determined, but eight Li atoms are missing. Herbst et al. have proposed orthorhombic Ima2 structure where the missing Li positions are determined using first-
principles calculations [14]. We have calculated total-energy difference between
the two tetragonal and orthrhombic crystal structures and obtained that the
orthorhombic structure is more stable than the tetragonal one by 0.22eV/f.u.
In the following study, we assume the orthorhombic structure proposed by
Herbst et al. for Li₂NH with the internal atomic positions relaxed within the
present FLAPW method in order to evaluate the heat of formation.

Quite recently, several new structures have been predicted from first-principles
calculations. Magyari-Kope et al. proposed orthorhombic structure (Pnma) [15].
Muller et al. proposed layered (P̅1) and orthorhombic (Pbca) ones [16] and
concluded that the most stable structure is orthorhombic (Pbca). However,
energy differences between them are quite small. Our all-electron FLAPW re-
sults for the previously predicted structures are listed in Table 3. The present
results are in good agreement with pseudopotential ones. The most stable
structure is orthorhombic (Pbca) but energy differences to the other struc-
tures are not so large. The equilibrium volumes per formula unit in the newly
predicted structures are likely overestimated compared with experiment while
the orthorhombic (Ima2) structure has consistent volume [14] with experiment
(216 a.u./f.u) [13].

3.2 Electronic structure

Figures 1–3 show total and partial electronic density of states (DOS) within
GGA for LiNH₂, Mg(NH₂)₂ and Li₂NH. Calculated energy gap is 3.21 eV for
LiNH₂, 3.02 eV for Mg(NH₂)₂ and 2.65 eV for Li₂NH. The most character-
istic feature seen in DOS is that lithium and magnesium partial DOS’s are
quite small within the muffin-tin spheres in the valence and conduction band
Table 1
Optimized structure together with the corresponding experimental data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LDA</th>
<th>GGA</th>
<th>Exp.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LiNH₂</td>
<td>a (Å)</td>
<td>4.79580</td>
<td>5.04830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c (Å)</td>
<td>9.97143</td>
<td>10.27835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c/a</td>
<td>2.0792</td>
<td>2.0360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li₃N</td>
<td>a (Å)</td>
<td>3.548</td>
<td>3.624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c (Å)</td>
<td>3.794</td>
<td>3.866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c/a</td>
<td>1.0693</td>
<td>1.0668</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LiH</td>
<td>a (Å)</td>
<td>3.90358</td>
<td>3.99983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>a (Å)</td>
<td>3.350</td>
<td>3.427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H₂</td>
<td>d(H-H) (Å)</td>
<td>0.7738</td>
<td>0.7568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₂</td>
<td>d(N-N) (Å)</td>
<td>1.099</td>
<td>1.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH₃</td>
<td>d(N-H) (Å)</td>
<td>1.026</td>
<td>1.0257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>∠HNH (°)</td>
<td>106.5</td>
<td>106.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

regions, though the magnesium partial DOS’s are relatively larger than those of lithium in the valence bands. Therefore, these compounds may have almost ionic bonding: Li⁺[NH₂]⁻, (Li⁺)₂[NH]⁻², Mg²⁺[(NH₂)⁻¹]₂. The valence bands are mostly composed of N-s and p and H-s states. In conjunction to this fact, DOS in the valence band region are quite similar in the amides LiNH₂ and Mg(NH₂)₂. The general features in DOS of the amide and imide can be
Table 2

Bond lengths and angles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LiNH₂</th>
<th>Li₂NH</th>
<th>Mg(NH₂)₂</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>LDA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d(N-H) (Å)</td>
<td>1.034, 1.036</td>
<td>1.040</td>
<td>1.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∠HNH (°)</td>
<td>103.1</td>
<td>101.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GGA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d(N-H) (Å)</td>
<td>1.029, 1.031</td>
<td>1.035</td>
<td>1.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∠HNH (°)</td>
<td>102.5</td>
<td>101.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiments [9][13]</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d(N-H) (Å)</td>
<td>0.967, 0.978</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>0.98, 1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>∠HNH (°)</td>
<td>104.1</td>
<td>107.2, 105.2, 101.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Energy differences for predicted structures of Li₂NH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ΔHₜₐ</th>
<th>ΔE(kJ/mol)</th>
<th>ΔE(eV/f.u.)</th>
<th>V(a.u./f.u)</th>
<th>PP*(kJ/mol)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orthorhombic(Ima2)</td>
<td>-191.6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layered(P1)</td>
<td>-195.6</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthorhombic(Pnma)</td>
<td>-196.2</td>
<td>-4.6</td>
<td>-0.047</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthorhombic(Pbca)</td>
<td>-198.1</td>
<td>-6.5</td>
<td>-0.067</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*:Pseudopotential results from Ref. [16]
Fig. 1. Calculated partial density of states for LiNH$_2$. The origin in energy is set to at the valence band maximum.

understood by schematic energy diagrams described within molecular-orbital models for the isolated amide and imide molecules shown in Fig. 4. The most interesting common feature in the amide and imide is that the highest occupied states are of non-bonding made of N $p_\pi$ orbitals.
Fig. 2. Calculated partial density of states for Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$. The origin in energy is set to at the valence band maximum.

3.3 Heats of formation

In order to study the phase stability of compounds involved in the reactions, it is quite useful to calculate heats of formation, which is the most fundamental
Fig. 3. Calculated partial density of states for Li$_2$NH. The origin in energy is set to
at the valence band maximum.

and important quantities for hydrogen-storage materials. Heat of formation in
compounds $AB$ is defined as

$$
\Delta H_{el} = E(AB) - E(A) - E(B)
$$

(6)
Fig. 4. Schematic energy diagram of amide (NH$_2$)$^-$ and imide NH$_2^-$ based on molecular-orbital model.

where $E(A), E(B)$ and $E(AB)$ are calculated total energies per formula unit of an elemental metal Li, molecules N$_2$, H$_2$, LiNH$_2$, Li$_2$NH. For example,

$$
\Delta H_{el} (\text{LiNH}_2) = E(\text{LiNH}_2) - E(\text{Li}) - \frac{1}{2} E(\text{N}_2) - E(\text{H}_2)
$$

(7)

Table 4 shows heats of formation for each compound. We have carried out these calculations within both LDA and GGA. From the results that heats of formation for each compound and gas, we can estimate heats of formation (enthalpy change at ambient pressure) in the H absorption and desorption reactions. In these light-element H-storage materials, the zero-point energy contribution $\Delta H_{ZPE}$ should be incorporated. In this paper, we show the heats of formation with the zero-point energies taken from some previous works by Herbst et al. [14] and Miwa et al. [17]. We are now in progress to estimate the zero-point energy contribution by performing frozen phonon calculations. The electronic contribution $\Delta H_{el}$ to the heat of formation for each reaction is obtained within GGA. The heat of formation in the whole reaction between the end materials (1) (Li$_3$N + 2H$_2$ $\leftrightarrow$ LiNH$_2$ + 2LiH) is found to be

$$
\Delta H_0 = \Delta H_{el} + \Delta H_{ZPE} = -85 \text{kJ/mol } \text{H}_2
$$

(8)
\[ \Delta H_{el} = -101 \text{kJ/mol H}_2. \] (9)

Miwa et al. have reported the heat of formation of -85kJ/mol H\(_2\) including the zero-point energy [17]. Our result is also in good agreement with the experimental value of \(-81\text{kJ/mol H}_2\) by Chen et al.[1]. We estimate the heats of formation by separating the whole reaction (1) into the two steps. The first reaction gives

\[
(Li_3N + H_2 \leftrightarrow Li_2NH + LiH) \\
\Delta H_0 = -108 \text{kJ/mol H}_2 \\
\Delta H_{el} = -121 \text{kJ/mol H}_2
\] (10) (11) (12)

and the second reaction does

\[
(Li_2NH + H_2 \leftrightarrow LiNH_2 + LiH) \\
\Delta H_0 = -63 \text{kJ/mol H}_2 \\
\Delta H_{el} = -81 \text{kJ/mol H}_2.
\] (13) (14) (15)

LDA calculations for the whole reaction predict \(\Delta H_0 = -71\text{kJ/mol H}_2\) with \(\Delta H_{el} = -91\text{kJ/mol H}_2\). In this case, the zero point energy contribution is taken from the results by Herbst et al. [14]. In addition, we estimate the heats of formation for the two elementary reactions mediated by ammonia (3) and (4).

\[ \Delta H_{el} = -121 \text{kJ/mol NH}_3 \text{ for } (3) \] (16)

\[ \Delta H_{el} = 40 \text{kJ/mol NH}_3 \text{ for } (4) \] (17)

The enthalpy change in LiNH\(_2\) for releasing NH\(_3\) is strongly endothermic, (The experimental value for the reaction is reported to be \(84 \text{kJ/mol NH}_3\) [2].) the another the reaction between LiH and NH\(_3\) (4) is exothermic. Our results are consistent with experimental results. LiNH\(_2\) solely desorbs NH\(_3\) gas at much
Table 4

Calculated electronic contributions to the heats of formation $\Delta H_{el}$ in kJ/mol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Li$_3$N</th>
<th>LiNH$_2$</th>
<th>LiH</th>
<th>Li$_2$NH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LDA</td>
<td>-223.7</td>
<td>-266.6</td>
<td>-101.6</td>
<td>-277.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GGA</td>
<td>-150.3</td>
<td>-193.2</td>
<td>-79.2</td>
<td>-191.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

higher temperature than desorption temperature of H$_2$ from mixture of LiNH$_2$ and LiH. Experimentally, the thermal desorption mass spectroscopy (TDMS) measurements of ammonia from pure LiNH$_2$ show that the ammonia gas is drastically desorbed starting at 300°C, and the desorption peaked at 350°C [2]. It is also reported that gaseous hydrogen (5.5-6 mass %) between 150 and 250 °C is reversibly desorbed/absorbed in a ball-milled mixture of LiNH$_2$ and LiH. Therefore, the existence of LiH is a crucial factor for H$_2$ desorption from compounds at low temperature.

4 Conclusions

Our first-principles calculations show that the most stable crystal structure of Li$_2$NH is probably orthorhombic, as determined by Herbst et al. Electronic structure of Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ is almost the same as that of LiNH$_2$. The different feature in the electronic structure between Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ and LiNH$_2$ is that hybridization between Mg and N-2$p$ in Mg(NH$_2$)$_2$ is slightly stronger than in LiNH$_2$. We have estimated the heats of formation in the reactions of Li-N-H systems. The heat of formation in the reaction Li$_2$NH + H$_2$ $\leftrightarrow$ LiNH$_2$ + LiH is $-63$kJ/mol H$_2$. It is found that the enthalpy change in LiNH$_2$ for releasing NH$_3$ is strongly endothermic while the reaction between LiH and NH$_3$ is
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References


