

Ca₂C MXene monolayer as a superior material for detection of toxic pnictogen hydrides

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The DFT study on the adsorption of pnictogen hydrides on Ca₂C MXene layer.
- Adsorption of NH₃ on the Ca₂C MXene was the strongest among the studied gases.
- The molecular dynamics calculations confirmed the thermal stability of the gas/MXene systems.

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ABSTRACT

Carbide-nitride MXene two-dimensional materials have great potential to be used in the future electronic applications. However, determining the interaction between gas molecules and two-dimensional materials is an important step for designing novel gas sensors. Herein, we theoretically investigate the sensitivity of Ca₂C MXene monolayer toward pnictogen hydrides (NH₃, PH₃, AsH₃, and SbH₃). We found that the toxic gas molecules adsorption with high adsorption energies have a considerable effect on the electronic properties of the Ca₂C MXene layer. The molecular dynamics calculations at 400 K also verified the thermal stability of the gas/Ca₂C systems. Our results might be helpful for future researches toward application of carbide-nitride MXene materials for detecting toxic gas molecules.

1. Introduction

Two-dimensional (2D) nanomaterials attracted a wide attentions due to their divers applications such as sensing devices, catalysis, optoelectronic applications, and medicine [1–4]. Besides, there have been many studies on a new class of 2D materials, carbide-nitride (MXenes), with interesting properties [5–8]. MXenes are also successfully synthesized by the elements of group IIIA or IVA and a carbon or nitrogen. Similar to the 2D transition metal dichalcogenides, MXenes can be semiconducting or metallic [9–15]. Furthermore, these novel 2D MXene materials possess high metallic conductivity [16,17]. High performance of the 2D MXene layers have been verified in divers fields such as bio-sensors [18] and hydrogen storage applications [19–24]. For instance, Liu et al. [25, 26] investigated the application of 2D Ti₃C₂ in the hydrogen sorption behavior of MgH₂. Motivated by the successful synthesis [27] of the 2D MXene monolayer with calcium carbide composition (Ca₂C), in this work we investigate the application of the Ca₂C monolayer as adsorbent

for use in next generation pnictogen hydrides (PHs) sensor. While the interesting properties of the considered Ca₂C MXene attract high attentions, research on the applications of the considered 2D material to detect toxic PHs are still scarce.

Detecting toxic environmental pollutants is an important issue relating to human life. Accordingly, the design of high-efficient gas sensors has been attracted much attention. Detection of toxic PHs, (NH₃, PH₃, AsH₃, and SbH₃) using nanomaterials have been previously investigated [28–41]. NH₃, a volatile substance with a low boiling point, despite the harmful of this gas, it is applied in various synthesizing procedures [42,43]. PH₃, as a extremely toxic agent, effects the central nervous network and lungs [44–46]. As another toxic PH, some studies have been performed on the detection of AsH₃ [33,37]. While diverse nanomaterials have been proposed to detect of PHs [28–41], it has not been carried out a comprehensive research to detect the PHs using Ca₂C MXene monolayer. Previous fascinating findings [18–27] have inspired us to explore the application of Ca₂C MXene monolayer as the gas sensor

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to detect toxic PHs. So, this work is conducted to investigate the performance of Ca_2C MXene layer to detect toxic NH_3 , PH_3 , AsH_3 , and SbH_3 , using density functional theory (DFT) calculations.

2. Computational details

All calculations of the Ca_2C MXene as well as PH/ Ca_2C complexes were performed using GAUSSIAN09 package [47]. We have carried out the optimization of the considered MXenes by nine DFT functionals [48]: PBE [49], TPSS [50], BP86 [51,52], B3LYP [53,54], TPSSH [55], PBE0 [56], CAM-B3LYP [57], M11 [58], and LC-WPBE [59]. Our results reveal a good agreement with previously measured electronic properties of the Ca_2C MXene layer [27] and PBE DFT method. Accordingly, the PBE functional is chosen in our study to calculate the properties of the MXene and PH/MXene complexes. The van der Waals (vdW) bindings are also computed using the DFT-D3 technique [60]. The stability of the PH/MXene complexes was also examined by frequency calculations. Besides, cohesive energy (E_{coh}) of the MXene layer was computed using by:

$$E_{\text{coh}} = \left(E_{\text{tot}} - \sum_i n_i E_i \right) / j \quad (1)$$

The adsorption energy (E_{ads}) can be also calculated by:

$$E_{\text{ads}} = E_{\text{complex}} - E_{\text{PH}} - E_{\text{MXene}} \quad (2)$$

Finally, charge transfer between PHs and MXene layer was calculated using the natural bond orbital (NBO) approach [61,62].

3. Result and discussions

3.1. Ca_2C MXene monolayer

Ca_2C MXene monolayers have the hexagonal symmetry, in which the C atom is located between two Ca atoms, as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 represents the optimized geometry of the MXene with the average Ca–C 2.63 Å and Ca–Ca 3.40 Å bond lengths, and Ca–Ca–C (49°), Ca–C–Ca (81°), and C–Ca–C (99°) angles which are in agreement with the previous studies [63,64]. The thermal stability of the MXene monolayer with D_{2h} symmetry, has been recently confirmed by using molecular dynamics calculations [65]. No imaginary frequencies were

obtained, representing that the MXene layer is dynamically stable and belongs to minima in the potential energy surface. The calculated cohesive energy for the Ca_2C MXene monolayer is -3.95 eV, that is in agreements with the previous study [66]. Note that, the cohesive energy is between the values of already synthesized 2D systems such as graphene (-7.90 eV) [67] and silicene (-4.01 eV) [68]. Our calculations also reveal that the HOMO-LUMO energy gap (E_{gap}) of the Ca_2C is 0.21 eV, offering the Ca_2C MXene monolayer should present metallic nature, that is in agreements with the previous studies [64,65]. To verify the electronic structure of MXene monolayer, the corresponding density of state (DOS) are analyzed and presented in Fig. 1 (c). As shown in this figure, the metallic nature of considered layer has been verified with DOS analysis.

3.2. PH@MXene complexes

We investigate the adsorption of a PH gas molecule on the surface of Ca_2C layer. Structurally, 5 adsorption positions are found on the Ca_2C layer, such as on top of Ca atoms, Ca–C and Ca–Ca bonds, hexagonal and rhombuses hollows of Ca_2C sheet. After full optimization without any constrain, the configurations with the adsorbed XH_3 gas molecules with X head to the Ca atom of the Ca_2C monolayer was found to be the most stable adsorption configurations (Fig. 2).

It is worth to mention that other initial adsorption configurations were reoriented to the stable configuration. The calculated parameters such as interaction distance (r), adsorption energy (E_{ads}), HOMO-LUMO gap energy (E_{gap}), and total charge transfer (Q_T) for the considered PH/ Ca_2C complexes are reported in Table 1.

The X ... Ca interaction distances (r) are equal to 2.00, 2.50, 2.80, and 3.00 Å, for $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, respectively. The lowest interaction distance was obtained from the N... Ca interaction for the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complex. As reported in Table 1, the NH_3 molecule was adsorbed over the surface of Ca_2C with the adsorption energy (E_{ads}) of -1.36 eV. E_{ads} values for $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems are -1.10 , -0.82 , and -0.56 eV, respectively. The calculated E_{ads} here are in range of measured E_{ads} values of PH gas molecules adsorbed on various adsorbents [65]. The calculated NBO charges over the adsorbed NH_3 , PH_3 , AsH_3 , and SbH_3 gas molecules are 195 |me|, 180 |me|, 104 |me|, and 76 |me|, respectively. As results show, charge transfers occur from PH gas molecules to Ca_2C MXene. The calculated E_{gap} values for PH/ Ca_2C systems, are 0.62, 0.59, 0.43, and

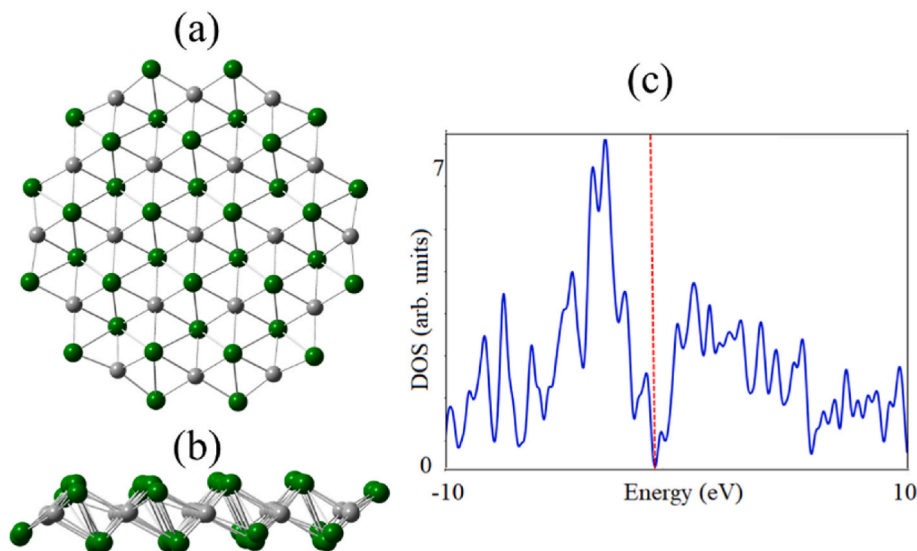


Fig. 1. Top (a) and side (b) views and the density of state diagram (c) of optimized Ca_2C MXene monolayer. The Ca and C atoms are shown in green and gray colors, respectively. Hydrogen is used as passivated atom on the periphery, which is not shown. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

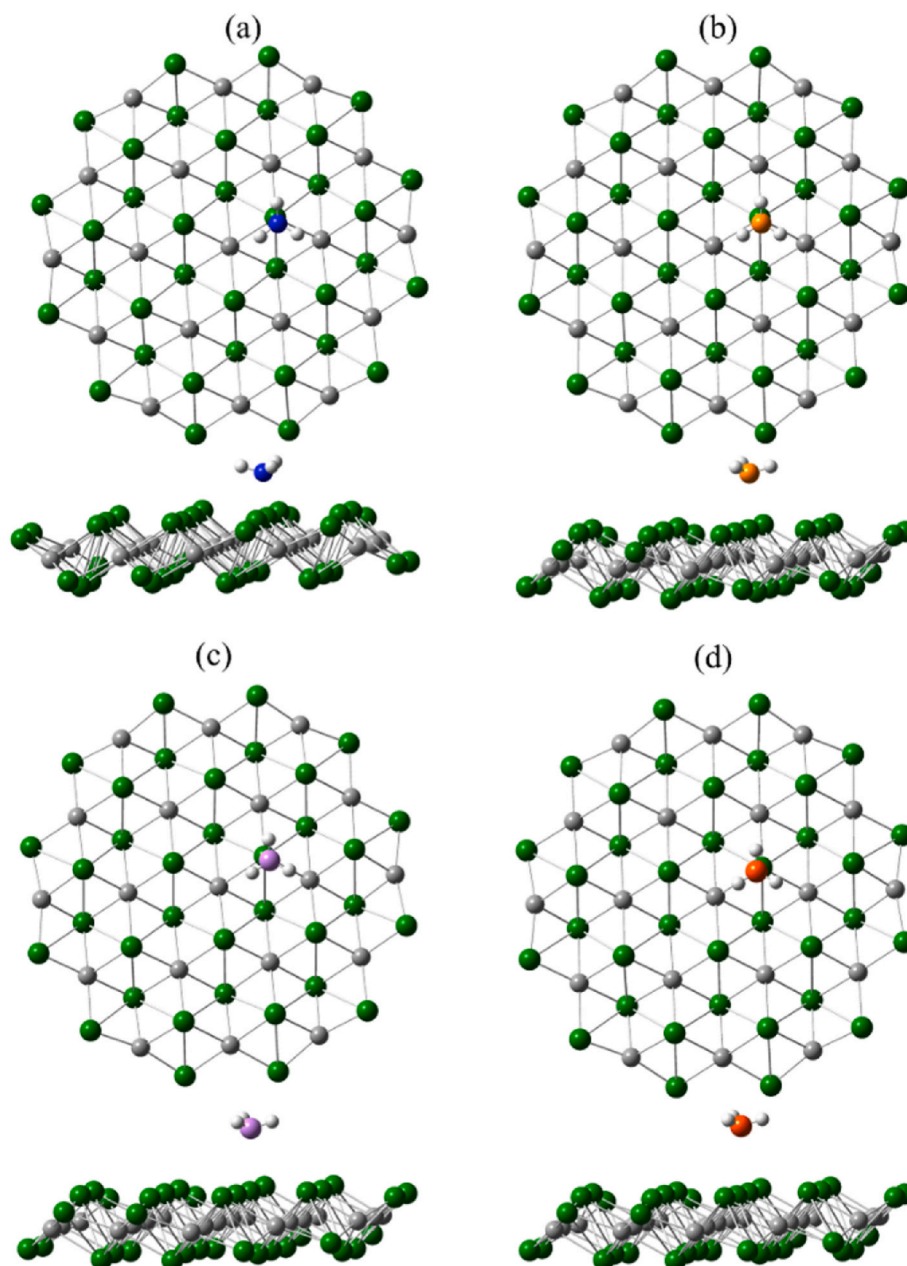


Fig. 2. Top and side views of optimized $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (a), $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (b), $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (c), and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes. The Ca, C, H, N, As, and Sb atoms are shown in green, gray, white, blue, brown, and orange colors, respectively. Hydrogen is used as passivated atom on the periphery, which is not shown. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

Table 1

The calculated interaction distance (r), adsorption energy (E_{ads}), HOMO-LUMO energy gap (E_{gap}), change in the E_{gap} of Ca_2C upon the adsorption process ($\% \Delta E_{\text{gap}}$), and total charge transfer (Q_T) for the considered PH/ Ca_2C systems.

system	r (Å)	E_{ads} (eV)	Q_T (me)	E_{gap} (eV)	$\% \Delta E_{\text{gap}}$
Ca_2C	—	—	—	0.21	—
$\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	2.00	−1.36	185	0.62	195
$\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	2.50	−1.10	172	0.59	180
$\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	2.80	−0.82	102	0.43	104
$\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	3.00	−0.56	72	0.37	76

0.37 eV for the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems, respectively. To verify the effect of PH gas molecules on the electronic properties of the Ca_2C MXene, the corresponding density of states (DOS) are plotted and represented in Fig. 3.

Consistent with the obtained energetic analyses, the DOS analysis also determines that the interactions between NH_3 and PH_3 gas molecules and Ca_2C are stronger than the AsH_3 and SbH_3 molecules. As represented from Fig. 3, the strong interaction causes a significant change of the DOS on both sides near the Fermi level. For all of the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes, valence and conduction levels shift to lower and higher energies, respectively, leading to significant enhancement of the MXene's E_{gap} . The $\% \Delta E_{\text{gap}}$ values for these PH/MXene systems are 195, 180, 104, and 76%, respectively. However, the larger changes in the E_{gap} values shows higher sensitivity of the Ca_2C toward the NH_3 and PH_3 compared to the AsH_3 and SbH_3 adsorption. This observation is anticipated to bring about clear modification in the electrical conductivity of Ca_2C according to the following formula [69].

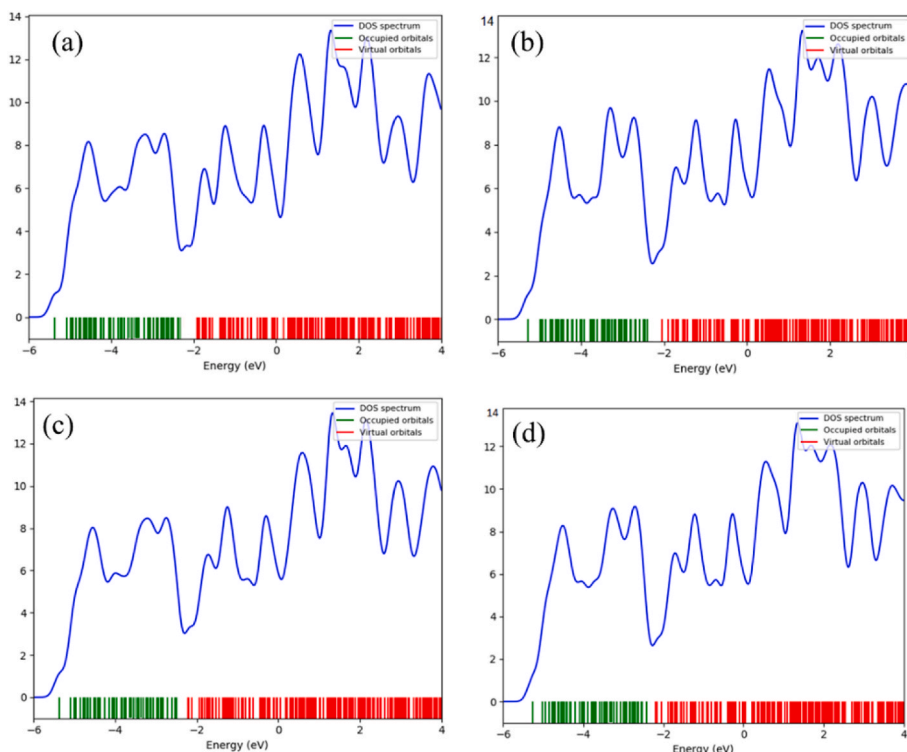


Fig. 3. The DOS analysis of the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (a), $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (b), $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ (c), and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes.

$$\sigma \propto \exp\left(\frac{-E_{\text{gap}}}{2kT}\right) \quad (3)$$

where σ is the electrical conductivity and k is the Boltzmann's constant. So, considerable enhances of about 195 and 180% in the E_{gap} value for $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ and $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes determine the high sensitivity of the electronic properties of Ca_2C toward the NH_3 and PH_3 gas molecules.

Now, we compute the recovery time (τ) under a specific temperature to estimate the possibility of adsorption of considered PH gas molecules. If the E_{ads} is remarkably enhanced, much longer τ is predicted based on the conventional transition state rule [70]:

$$\tau = \nu_0^{-1} \exp\left(\frac{-E_{\text{ads}}}{kT}\right) \quad (4)$$

The ν_0 , k , and T indicate the attempt frequency, Boltzmann's constant, and temperature, respectively ($\nu_0 \sim 800$ THz). Enhancing E_{ads} , the necessary T for desorption increases, and subsequently, the τ becomes longer. The calculated τ for considered PH gas molecule desorption is reported in Table 2.

Our results show that the calculated τ values are in the range [71] that is appropriate for sensing NH_3 and PH_3 at 400 K and AsH_3 and SbH_3 at 300 K.

The molecular dynamics (MD) calculations in the NVT ensemble, with a time step of 1 fs in 5000 with a massive GGM thermostat, has been also carried out at 400 K to investigate thermal stability of studied systems (Fig. 4).

The results confirmed the thermal stability of the pristine Ca_2C

MXene and the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ and $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes at 400 K. We found that the changes in the total energy that are criteria for the thermal stability of considered structures are ignorable.

Now, it remains to investigate the humidity interference of the Ca_2C MXene by exposing it to the water. The humidity interference is an important parameter for designing the gas detecting materials. Divers orientations of the H_2O adsorption on the Ca_2C MXene were examined. After full structural optimization without any constrain, the configuration with the adsorbed H_2O with O head to the Ca atom of the Ca_2C monolayer was found to be the most stable adsorption configuration. The calculated interaction distance and E_{ads} of the $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems are 2.25 Å and -0.89 eV, respectively, which is lower than $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ and $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems. It should be noted that the E_{ads} values of the $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ is relatively more negative than $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems. The $\% \Delta E_{\text{gap}}$ of $\text{H}_2\text{O}/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ system is +88%, while this parameter for the $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, $\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and $\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ systems are 195%, 180%, 104%, 76%, respectively. Thus, the pure Ca_2C MXene has a more electronic sensitivity to the H_2O molecule as compared to the NH_3 , PH_3 , and AsH_3 gas molecules. In this respect, the Ca_2C MXene may detect NH_3 , PH_3 , and AsH_3 gas molecules in the presence of H_2O .

4. Conclusions

In summary, we performed DFT calculations to investigate the adsorption of PHs such as NH_3 , PH_3 , AsH_3 , and SbH_3 gas molecules on the Ca_2C MXene. The considered toxic gas molecules are chemically adsorbed on the Ca_2C via the adsorption configurations of Ca atom of the Ca_2C and X atom of the XH_3 (NH_3 , PH_3 , AsH_3 , and SbH_3) gas molecules, with adsorption energies in range of -0.56 eV to -1.36 eV. The ΔE_{gap} of the Ca_2C MXene has been increased from 76% to 195% due to the strong interactions between HP and MXene monolayer. These results reveal that the Ca_2C MXene can be used as an appropriate adsorbent to detect harmful PH gas molecules. The results of the present work are important findings because reveal the performance of novel 2D nano-materials based on Ca_2C MXene in gas sensor applications.

Table 2

Calculated τ (sec) for the considered PH/MXene complexes.

system	τ (300k)	τ (400k)
$\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	8.79×10^7	1.71×10^2
$\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	3.77×10^3	9.04×10^{-2}
$\text{AsH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	7.45×10^{-2}	2.68×10^{-5}
$\text{SbH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$	3.20×10^{-6}	1.48×10^{-5}

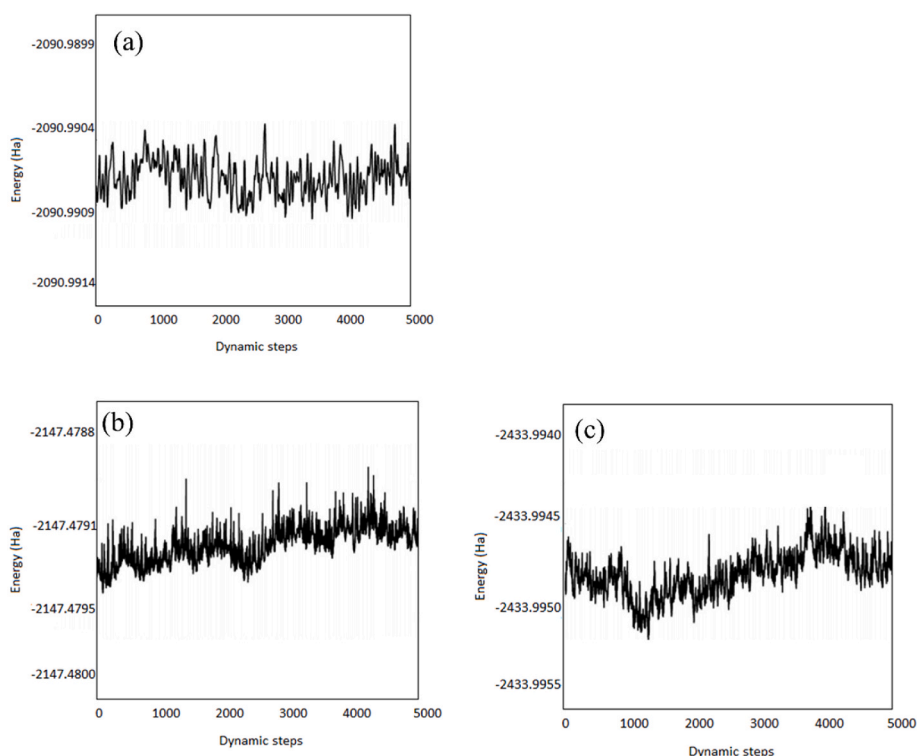


Fig. 4. The MD calculations at 400 K for the (a) pristine Ca_2C monolayer, (b) $\text{NH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$, and (c) $\text{PH}_3/\text{Ca}_2\text{C}$ complexes.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Yunrui Yan: Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Zhang Wei:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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