

Refined Crystal Structure and Mechanical Properties of Superhard BC₄N Crystal: First-Principles Calculations

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Synthesized cubic BC₄N with Vickers hardness 10% higher than that of cubic BC₂N exhibits a strange X-ray diffraction spectrum, assigned as a zinc-blende cubic structure. However, its crystal structure cannot be constructed with a zinc-blende structure as viewed from the stoichiometric formula. We found that this structure can be described by 3C-BC₄N in Ramsdell notation, with the space group of *P3m1*. First-principles calculations show that this so-called “cubic” BC₄N is a large gap insulator and has outstanding mechanical properties such as an ideal tensile strength of 77.1 GPa and a theoretical Vickers hardness of 84.3 GPa. The simulated Raman spectra of five 3C-BC₄N configurations show totally different features, providing a valid method to conclusively determine the atomic arrangement of cubic BC₄N.

Potential superhard crystals in the ternary boron carbon nitrogen (B–C–N) system have attracted a great deal of attention in seeking novel superhard crystals with hardness comparable to diamond since the prediction of superhard β -C₃N₄ crystal.¹ The ternary superhard B–C–N crystals are predicted to exhibit properties that are comparable or even superior to those of diamond and cubic boron nitride (*c*-BN), making them have a wide variety of potential applications in science and technology. Since superhard *c*-BC₂N (refs 2, 3) and *c*-BC₄N (ref 3) crystals were successfully synthesized by using diamond-anvil cell and multianvil press, many investigations based on first-principles calculations^{4–11} have been carried out on the possible refined crystal structure, ideal strength, and Vickers hardness of *c*-BC₂N. Although experimentalists claimed that their in situ and ex situ synchrotron X-ray diffraction (XRD) data support the primary results of assigning both *c*-BC₂N (refs 2, 3) and *c*-BC₄N (ref 3) as zinc-blende (ZB) cubic structure, the theoretical results demonstrate that for *c*-BC₂N all of the proposed hypothetical structures that originated from ZB mismatch the experimental XRD and Raman data.^{2,3,12} Thereby the refined crystal structure of *c*-BC₂N has become a heated argument. On the basis of the 16-atom supercell of diamond in first-principles calculations, very recently, we have successfully determined the exact atomic arrangement of *c*-BC₂N crystal by carefully comparing the simulated XRD and Raman spectra of the hypothetical structure with those measured for *c*-BC₂N. The determined structure named *t*-BC₂N (ref 13) has the tetragonal symmetry with the space group of *P*-421*m*, whose simulated XRD and Raman spectra as well as estimated theoretical Vickers hardness are in excellent agreement with the corresponding experimental results. For the synthesized *c*-BC₄N crystal, the reported experimental Vickers hardness is 10% higher than that for the synthesized *c*-BC₂N crystal;³ however, its refined crystal structure is still unclear up to now. Determining the refined

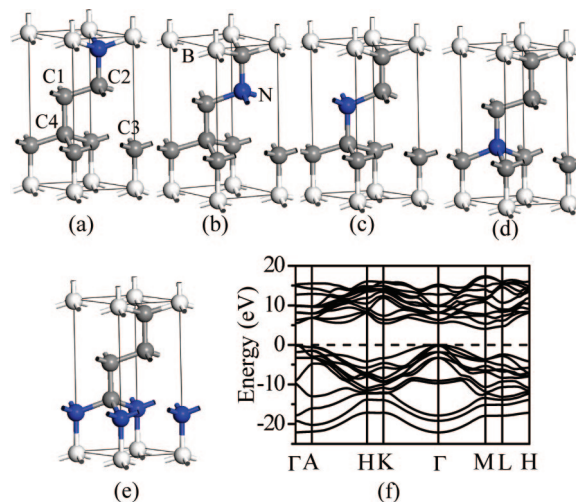


Figure 1. Crystal structures of (a) BC₄N-1, (b) BC₄N-2, (c) BC₄N-3, (d) BC₄N-4, and (e) BC₄N-5. Band structure (f) of BC₄N-1.

crystal structure and manifesting the mechanical properties of *c*-BC₄N is a very important and challenging task for a deep and comprehensive understanding of structural features and functional properties of stoichiometric crystals in the ternary B–C–N system.

The experimental XRD result has suggested that the synthesized superhard *c*-BC₄N belongs to the ZB structure with the face-centered cubic unit cell of $a = 3.586 \text{ \AA}$.³ Strictly speaking, there are eight atoms in the unit cell of the ZB structure. For the stoichiometric BC₄N, its unit cell consists of 6 or 12 atoms; in other words, it is impossible to construct *c*-BC₄N structures from the eight-atom ZB unit cell. If considering a supercell, theoretically, *c*-BC₄N cannot still belong to the ZB structure family according to its stoichiometric formula. Therefore, we have to seek another clue to configure the unit cell of *c*-BC₄N. On the basis of the experimental XRD result, of course, the considered structure should be similar or close to diamond or *c*-BN. As is well-known, diamond and *c*-BN can be considered

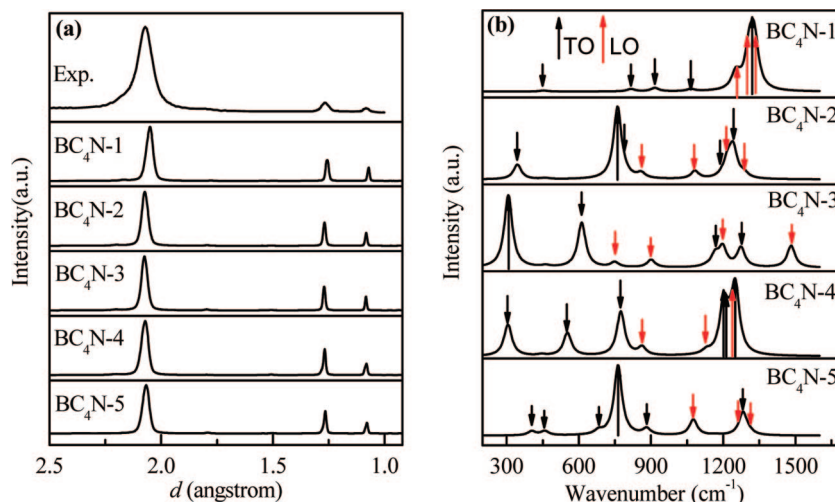
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TABLE 1: Equilibrium Lattice Parameters, Density (ρ), Total Energy (E_t), Formation Energy (E_f), Bulk Modulus (B), and Shear Modulus (G) for Five 3C-BC₄N Configurations, 3C-Diamond, and 3C-BN^a

	BC ₄ N-1	BC ₄ N-2	BC ₄ N-3	BC ₄ N-4	BC ₄ N-5	3C-diamond	3C-BN	<i>c</i> -BC ₄ N (expt)
symmetry	<i>P3m1</i>	<i>P3m1</i>	<i>P3m1</i>	<i>P3m1</i>	<i>P3m1</i>	<i>Fd-3m</i>	<i>F-43m</i>	
<i>a</i> (Å)	2.507	2.544	2.545	2.544	2.540	2.493	2.539	2.535
<i>c</i> (Å)	6.196	6.192	6.205	6.202	6.179	6.107	6.218	6.211
<i>c/a</i>	2.472	2.434	2.439	2.438	2.433	2.450	2.449	2.450
ρ (g/cm ³)	3.588	3.487	3.477	3.481	3.506	3.641	3.562	3.498
E_t (eV/atom)	-162.07	-161.366	-161.431	-161.343	-161.51	-155.46	-175.70	
E_f (eV/atom)	0.137	0.841	0.776	0.864	0.697			
B (GPa)	418.8	387.5	389.0	377.3	371.3	447.1	383.8	
G (GPa)	521.3	300.2	162.3	73.0	285.6	546.4	406.5	

^a The experimental density is from ref 3.**Figure 2.** Simulated XRD spectra of five 3C-BC₄N configurations in comparison with the measured XRD spectrum of *c*-BC₄N (a), and the simulated Raman spectrum of five 3C-BC₄N (b).

as the same 3C structures as 3C-SiC in Ramsdell notation.¹⁴ Therefore, the six-atom unit cell of the 3C structure is certainly a good candidate for the construction of dense BC₄N structures. Recently, a BC₄N_{2×1} superlattice has been predicted.¹⁵ However, the unit cell of BC₄N_{1×1} translated from the BC₄N_{2×1} superlattice belonged to the 3C structure. In this Article, we report the 3C crystal structure of *c*-BC₄N matching the experimental XRD data. We investigate its electronic band structure, ideal tensile strength, and theoretical Vickers hardness, and we calculate the theoretical Raman spectra of different configurations in 3C-BC₄N. We found that the Raman spectra become an important criterion for accurately determining the atomic arrangement of *c*-BC₄N. In addition, the pressure-induced phase transition path from hexagonal BC₄N phase to *c*-BC₄N is also discussed.

The present calculations were performed with CASTEP code based on density functional theory.¹⁶ The exchange-correlation function was treated by the local density approximation (LDA-CAPZ).^{17,18} The norm-conserving pseudopotential¹⁹ with cutoff energy of 770 eV and the *k* points of 12 × 12 × 4 according to the Monkhorst-Pack scheme²⁰ were used. The structure was relaxed by the Broyden-Fletcher-Goldfarb-Shanno methods.²¹ The XRD patterns are simulated using the Reflex package in the MS Modeling. The calculation methods of ideal tensile strength are similar to the previous studies.^{22,23} At each step, the fixed tensile strain was applied to the selected direction, and then the structural parameters were relaxed until the stress tensors orthogonal to the applied stress were less than 0.1 GPa. Therefore, a series of tensile stress corresponding to the incrementally applied tensile strains can be obtained. For

the simulations of the Raman spectra, PWSCF code²⁴ was used within the framework of ab initio pseudopotential density functional perturbation theory.^{25,26} A 80 Ry plane wave cutoff energy and 8 × 8 × 4 Monkhorst-Pack mesh of points in the Brillouin-zone were used. The detailed simulation procedure was described in ref 27.

Starting from the 3C-SiC structure, only five nonequivalent atomic configurations exist for BC₄N as shown in Figure 1. All of the configurations have the trigonal symmetry with the space group of *P3m1*. Both BC₄N-1 and BC₄N-5 exhibit a sandwich-like structure with an *ABCABC...* stacking sequence consisting of two C-C layers and one B-N layer along the *c*-axis direction. In the other three configurations, the B-N bonds are free. The relaxed structural parameters, total energy, and other considered properties of the five 3C-BC₄N configurations are summarized in Table 1, and the corresponding data of 3C-diamond, 3C-BN, and experimentally synthesized *c*-BC₄N in Ramsdell notation are also listed for comparison. In the BC₄N-1, the ratio of the number of C-C, B-N, B-C, and C-N bonds is 7:3:1:1, obeying the bond-counting rule,²⁸ so it has the lowest total energy among the five BC₄N configurations. The theoretical density of BC₄N-1 is 3.588 g/cm³, which is between those of diamond and *c*-BN and slightly larger than the experimental value (3.498 g/cm³) (ref 3) of *c*-BC₄N. As shown in Figure 1f, BC₄N-1 has an indirect band gap with the top of the valence band at the Γ point and the bottom of the conduction band at the *M* point. The band gap of 4.06 eV for BC₄N is less than those for diamond ($E_g = 4.15$ eV) and *c*-BN ($E_g = 4.49$ eV), while it is larger than those of the hypothetical ZB-BC₂N structures.⁶ For the trigonal crystal with the classes of *3m*, 32,

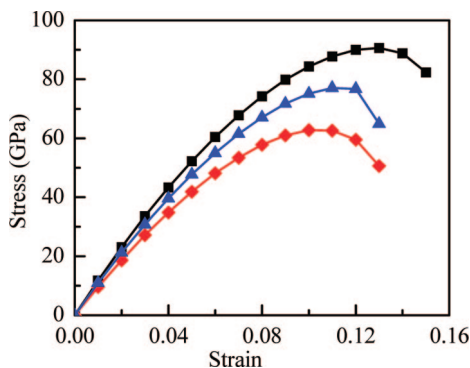


Figure 3. Calculated tensile stress–strain curves of BC₄N-1 (blue ▲), 3C-diamond (■), and 3C-BN (red ◆) along the *c* direction.

TABLE 2: Bond Parameters and the Calculated Vickers Hardness of Hypothetical BC₄N-1

bond type	n_i	d^{X-Y} (Å)	P^{X-Y}	N_e^{X-Y}	f_h^{X-Y}	f_i^{X-Y}	H_V^{X-Y}	H_V (GPa)
C1–C2	3	1.531	0.85	0.724	0.012	0.038	93.0	84.3
C2–N	1	1.500	0.46	0.694	0.083	0.161	82.2	
B–N	3	1.550	0.69	0.745	0.195	0.301	67.2	
B–C3	1	1.604	0.49	0.735	0.020	0.057	81.8	
C3–C4	3	1.532	0.84	0.723	0	0	97.0	
C1–C4	1	1.535	0.48	0.720	0.041	0.095	86.0	

and $-3m$,²⁹ its six independent elastic stiffness constants are given as c_{11} , c_{12} , c_{13} , c_{14} , c_{33} , and c_{44} . The complete set of these elastic constants for BC₄N-1 are listed as follows: $c_{11} = 1131.5$ GPa, $c_{12} = 75.8$ GPa, $c_{13} = 59.5$ GPa, $c_{14} = -6.7$ GPa, $c_{33} = 1116.9$ GPa, and $c_{44} = 508.5$ GPa. Clearly, the calculated elastic constants c_{ij} of BC₄N-1 satisfy the mechanical stability restrictions of $c_{11} - |c_{12}| > 0$, $(c_{11} + c_{12})c_{13} - 2(c_{13})^2 > 0$, and $(c_{11} - c_{12})c_{44} - 2(c_{14})^2 > 0$ for the trigonal structures.³⁰ Similar to the investigation in sp³-bonded BC₂N, the formation energy of sp³-bonded BC₄N can be defined as $E_f = E_{BC_4N} - (E_{3C-BN} + 2E_{3C-diamond})/3$. As shown in Table 1, all of the hypothetical 3C-BC₄N structures have positive formation energy, indicating that they are metastable and tend to separate into 3C-diamond and 3C-BN.

To determine the refined crystal structure of the synthesized *c*-BC₄N, we first simulate the XRD spectra. Figure 2a shows the comparison between the experimental XRD pattern of *c*-BC₄N and the simulated XRD patterns of five 3C-BC₄N configurations with the same grain size of 6 nm at the same wavelength of 0.4246 Å as those used in experiment.³ Both measured and simulated XRD patterns exhibit three strong 111, 220, and 311 Bragg lines and one very weak 200 Bragg line in the *d*-spacing range from 1.0 to 2.5 Å. We found that all five simulated XRD patterns match that of *c*-BC₄N very well, implying that XRD is insensitive to the interchange of atom positions in B–C–N system. Because of the small difference

of atomic number among B, N, and C atoms, in other words, it is difficult to conclusively determine the refined crystal structure of *c*-BC₄N from the XRD spectrum. Raman spectroscopy is sensitive to the atomic arrangement in a crystal even though component atoms are very adjacent in the Periodic Table of the elements; therefore, it becomes a very useful tool for the structural analysis of B–C–N crystal.¹³ The simulated Raman spectra of the five 3C-BC₄N configurations are totally different in the strong peak position as shown in Figure 2b. For BC₄N-1, there are five visible transverse optical (TO) modes of 453.47, 816.83, 915.71, 1065.22, and 1325.28 cm⁻¹, and three longitudinal optical (LO) modes of 1250.28, 1306.44, and 1335.10 cm⁻¹. The strongest peak appears at about 1325 cm⁻¹ (TO), and the second strongest peak at 1250 cm⁻¹ (LO). For BC₄N-2 and BC₄N-5, their strongest peaks locate at about 761 cm⁻¹ (TO), and their second strongest peaks at 1241 cm⁻¹ (TO) and 1266 cm⁻¹ (TO), respectively. For BC₄N-3 and BC₄N-4, their strongest peaks appear at 307 cm⁻¹ (TO) and 1250 cm⁻¹ (TO). Interestingly, the strongest Raman peak at 1325.28 cm⁻¹ for BC₄N-1 almost overlaps the experimental Raman peak at 1325.7 cm⁻¹ for the experimentally synthesized *c*-BC₂N.¹² The only difference between the Raman spectra of BC₄N-1 and *c*-BC₂N is that there is the second strong peak at 1250 cm⁻¹ for BC₄N-1, which can be used to experimentally distinguish *c*-BC₄N from *c*-BC₂N. For the five configurations of BC₄N, obviously, their XRD spectra do not show much difference, while their Raman spectra exhibit very different features. Therefore, the simultaneous measurements of the XRD and Raman spectra are required for determining the atomic arrangement of a B–C–N crystal.

In the view of total energy or formation energy, BC₄N-1 can be assigned to *c*-BC₄N, which needs the further confirmation from the measurement of Raman spectrum as discussed above. Next, we will calculate the mechanical properties of BC₄N-1. The calculated bulk and shear moduli of BC₄N-1 are 418.8 and 521.3 GPa, respectively; both are very close to those of diamond and in good agreement with the values calculated by Vegard's law. Previous investigations have shown that the weakest tensile direction for diamond or *c*-BN is $\langle 111 \rangle$.³¹ BC₄N-1 has the atomic positions similar to those of diamond; thus its weakest tensile direction should be along the *c*-axis in Ramsdell notation, corresponding to $\langle 111 \rangle$ in diamond. Therefore, here we calculate only the tensile stress as a function of the strain for 3C-diamond, 3C-BN, and BC₄N-1. As shown in Figure 3, the calculated ideal tensile strength of BC₄N-1 is 77.1 GPa, in agreement with the 79.3 GPa of BC₄N_{2×1} superlattice¹⁵ but obviously larger than 60 GPa of *c*-BN and 68.4 GPa of BC₂N_{1×1} superlattices.¹⁰ Because BC₄N-1 is a semiconducting polar covalent compound, its theoretical Vickers hardness can be estimated by using our microscopic model of hardness.³² There are six types of chemical bonds in BC₄N-1 as shown in

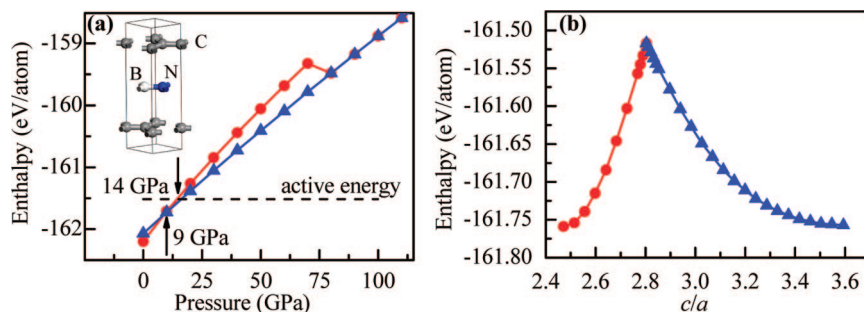


Figure 4. Enthalpy–pressure (a) and enthalpy–parameter *c/a* (b) relations of BC₄N-1 (blue ▲) and *h*-BC₄N-1 (red ●).

Table 2. According to our microscopic model of hardness,^{32,33} the theoretical Vickers hardness of BC₄N-1 can be calculated as $H_V = [(H_V^{C1-C2})^{n_1}(H_V^{C2-N})^{n_2}(H_V^{B-N})^{n_3}(H_V^{B-C3})^{n_4}(H_V^{C3-C4})^{n_5}(H_V^{C1-C4})^{n_6}]^{1/n_1+n_2+n_3+n_4+n_5+n_6}$, where $H_V^{X-Y} = 350(N_e^{X-Y})^{2/3}e^{-1.191/f_h^{X-Y}}/(d^{X-Y})^{2.5}$ is the hardness of the hypothetical binary compound composed of the X–Y bond, n_i ($i = 1-6$) is the number of the corresponding chemical bond, N_e^{X-Y} is the valence electron densities of the hypothetical compounds composed of the X–Y bond, and d^{X-Y} is the length of the X–Y bond. According to our generalized ionicity scale,³³ f_h^{X-Y} is the Phillips ionicity of the X–Y bond and can be calculated with $f_h^{X-Y} = (f_h^{X-Y})^{0.735} = [1 - \exp(-P_c - P^{X-Y}/P^{X-Y})]^{0.735}$, where f_h^{X-Y} is the new ionicity scale of the X–Y bond based on bond overlap population, P^{X-Y} is the overlap population of the X–Y bond, and P_c is the overlap population of the bond in a pure covalent crystal containing the same type of chemical bond. Here, we select the bond population in a pure covalent crystal of 3C diamond as P_c values. Two P_c values of 0.84 and 0.50 are obtained for the bond in bulked *a*–*b* plane and the bond along the *c*-axis, respectively. The calculated theoretical Vickers hardness of BC₄N-1 is 84.3 GPa, 10% larger than that (75.3 GPa) of the recently proposed hypothetical *t*-BC₂N of *c*-BC₂N.¹³ This result is in good agreement with the experimental result for *c*-BC₄N.³

Similar to the relationship between 3C-diamond and 3R-graphite, the hypothetical graphite-like BC₄N (*h*-BC₄N) also has five corresponding configurations. As shown in the inset of Figure 4a, *h*-BC₄N with the lowest total energy, named as *h*-BC₄N-1, maintains the standard layered structure similar to *h*-BC₂N-F of hexagonal BC₂N.³⁴ *h*-BC₄N-1 has the same *P3m1* symmetry as BC₄N-1. Therefore, we can calculate the pressure-induced phase transition from *h*-BC₄N-1 to BC₄N-1 with symmetry constraints. At zero pressure, *h*-BC₄N-1 is more stable than BC₄N-1. With the increase of pressure, the enthalpy of *h*-BC₄N-1 is equal to that of BC₄N-1 at the pressure of 9 GPa. However, the direct phase transition from *h*-BC₄N-1 to BC₄N-1 would not occur due to the existing energy barrier between the two phases. The curves of enthalpy versus *c/a* for *h*-BC₄N-1 and BC₄N-1 at 9 GPa in Figure 4b suggest that the energy barrier is 0.24 eV at *c/a* = 2.811, less than 0.33 eV for the phase transition from 3R-graphite to diamond.³⁵ At *c/a* = 2.811, the enthalpy of *h*-BC₄N-1 is 161.509 eV, corresponding to the pressure of 14 GPa in Figure 4a. Therefore, the calculated dynamic pressure of the phase transition from *h*-BC₄N-1 to BC₄N-1 is 14 GPa, less than the used pressure of 20 GPa in synthesizing *c*-BC₄N.³ When the pressure is applied to over 80 GPa, *h*-BC₄N-1 will transform completely to BC₄N-1, and this pressure value is the same as that for the phase transition predicted from 3R-graphite to diamond.³⁵

In summary, we found that all five 3C-BC₄N configurations constructed with Ramsdell notation match the synthesized *c*-BC₄N in the XRD spectrum. However, BC₄N-1 has the lowest total energy and formation energy. In the view of energy, BC₄N-1 can be assigned as *c*-BC₄N. The calculation results indicate that *c*-BC₄N is a superhard material next to diamond. The dynamic pressure of the phase transition from *h*-BC₄N-1 to BC₄N-1 is only 14 GPa, less than the used pressure in synthesizing *c*-BC₄N. The simulated Raman spectrum for

BC₄N-1 shows two strong peaks, one at about 1325 cm⁻¹ from the contribution of the TO mode and the other at 1250 cm⁻¹ from the contribution of the LO mode. This feature can be used as the criterion not only to determine the atomic arrangement of *c*-BC₄N but also to distinguish *c*-BC₄N from *c*-BC₂N.

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