

α -Diimine Synthesis via Titanium-Mediated Multicomponent Diimination of Alkynes with C-Nitrosos

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ABSTRACT: α -Diimines are commonly used as supporting ligands for a variety of transition metal-catalyzed processes, most notably in α -olefin polymerization. They are also precursors to valuable synthetic targets, such as chiral 1,2-diamines. Their synthesis is usually performed through acid-catalyzed condensation of amines with α -diketones. Despite the simplicity of this approach, accessing unsymmetrical α -diimines is challenging. Herein, we report the Ti-mediated intermolecular diimination of alkynes to afford a variety of symmetrical and unsymmetrical α -diimines through the reaction of diazatitanacyclohexadiene intermediates with C-nitrosos. These diazatitanacycles can be readily accessed in situ via the multicomponent coupling of $\text{Ti}\equiv\text{NR}$ imidos with alkynes and nitriles. The formation of α -diimines is achieved through formal [4+2]-cycloaddition of the C-nitroso to the Ti and γ -carbon of the diazatitanacyclohexadiene followed by two subsequent cycloreversion steps to eliminate nitrile and afford the α -diimine and a Ti oxo.

Introduction

α -Diimines (1,4-diaza-1,3-dienes) are widely used as ligands for organometallic complexes,^{1,2} perhaps most notably in Brookhart-type catalysts for α -olefin polymerization.^{3–5} The α -diimine ligand scaffold has proven to be remarkably versatile due to its facile stereoelectronic tunability.^{6–9} For example, modifications to the backbone and N-aryl substituents of α -diimines can exert control over the molecular weight and microstructure of α -olefin polymers by attenuation of chain walking processes.^{1,10} α -Diimine ligands are also often redox non-innocent, which allows for richer and more complex redox processes.^{11–14} α -Diimines are also precursors to valuable chiral 1,2-diamines through asymmetric hydrogenation,^{15–16} or to *N*-heterocyclic carbene (NHC) ligands through cyclization with paraformaldehyde and subsequent deprotonation.^{17–20}

Typically, α -diimines are synthesized through condensation of α -diketones and amines. Despite the apparent simplicity of this approach, accessing unsymmetrical α -diimines through stepwise condensations is synthetically challenging due to poor chemoselectivity.²¹ Furthermore, since imine formation is reversible, attempts at sequential selective condensations can result in complex mixtures (for example, see Figure 1A, Figures S93–S96). Imines are also notoriously difficult to isolate because they are prone to hydrolysis, making methods that generate product mixtures impractical. Highlighting this problem, although amine condensation with glyoxal to afford α -diimines is a common route to symmetric NHCs there remain no examples of unsymmetric NHCs synthesized *via* condensation with glyoxal.²²

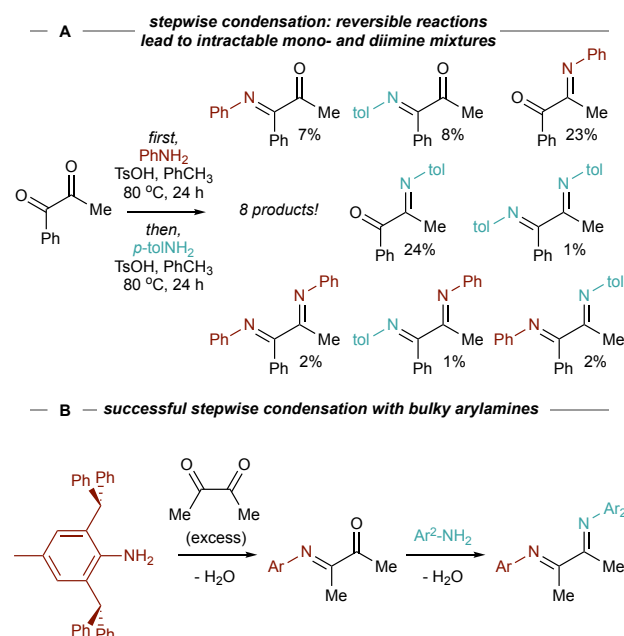


Figure 1. Challenges and current strategies for unsymmetric α -diimine synthesis.

There are comparatively few examples of unsymmetrical α -diimines, and these are mostly limited to N-aryl substituent modifications involving very sterically encumbered groups^{3,9,23} rather than backbone substitution (Figure 1B).^{11, 24–25} Selective trapping of unsymmetrical diimines *via* cyclization has also recently been reported.²⁶ Given this methodology gap, developing a route to these unsymmetrical α -diimines from simple feedstocks would provide a useful tool for the development of more diverse ligand scaffolds and pharmaceutically relevant building blocks.^{3, 15–16}

Our group has reported several examples of Ti-catalyzed oxidative functionalizations of alkynes for the synthesis of multisubstituted N-heterocycles that overcome limitations of classical condensation reactions.²⁷⁻³⁰ We envisioned that a complementary synthetic route to unsymmetrical α -diimines could be achieved through Ti-mediated oxidative diimination of alkynes. Examples of alkyne diamination or diimination are scarce³¹⁻³⁴ despite many reports of alkene diamination.³⁵⁻⁴⁰ To the best of our knowledge, there is only a single example of a multicomponent intermolecular alkyne diamination⁴¹ and no examples of alkyne diimination. Nevertheless, there are several elegant examples of alkyne difunctionalizations⁴² using Ti including alkyne carboamination⁴³⁻⁴⁵ and iminoamination⁴⁶ that provide motivation for further exploring Ti-catalyzed or -mediated diamination/diimination.

Previously, we reported that diazatitanacyclohexadienes (prepared from the multicomponent coupling of Ti imidos, alkynes, and nitriles) could undergo oxidation-induced N-N coupling to yield pyrazoles (Figure 2, top).³⁰ In the interest of further expanding the utility of this unique intermediate, we have begun examining its reactivity with various group transfer reagents. Herein, we report the intermolecular diimination of alkynes by Ti imidos and C-nitrosos to afford unsymmetrical α -diimines (Figure 2, bottom). This diimination reaction proceeds through a cascading sequence of formal cycloaddition and retrocycloaddition reactions from this key diazatitanacyclohexadiene intermediate. This approach is a useful strategy for synthesizing unsymmetrical α -diimines, which are challenging to access through traditional condensation reactions.

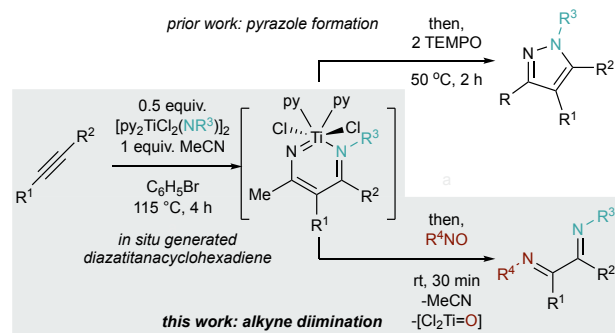


Figure 2. *In situ* generated diazatitanacyclohexadiene intermediates in synthesis. Top: previous work on oxidative N-N coupling to pyrazoles (top), and intermolecular diimination of alkynes (this work, bottom).

Addition of C-nitrosos to Diazatitanacyclohexadienes.

Addition of PhNO (**2a**) to diazatitanacyclohexadiene **1** resulted in rapid, near-quantitative formation of α -diimine **3a** (81% by ¹H NMR) with the concomitant formation of *p*-tolunitrile (Figure 3). It is proposed that this occurs through [4+2]-cycloaddition of PhNO to the Ti and γ -carbon of the ligand backbone, followed by [4+2]-retrocycloaddition to eliminate *p*-tolunitrile, and a second cycloreversion to afford **3a** and a Ti=O species (*vide infra*).

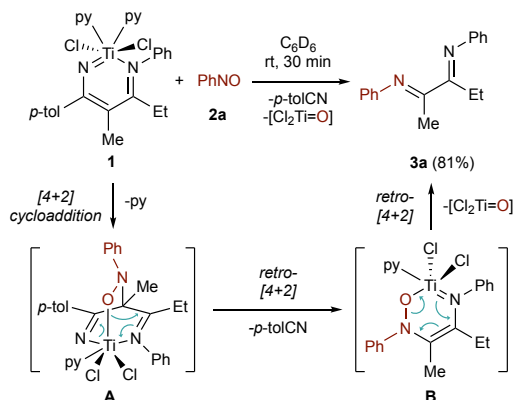
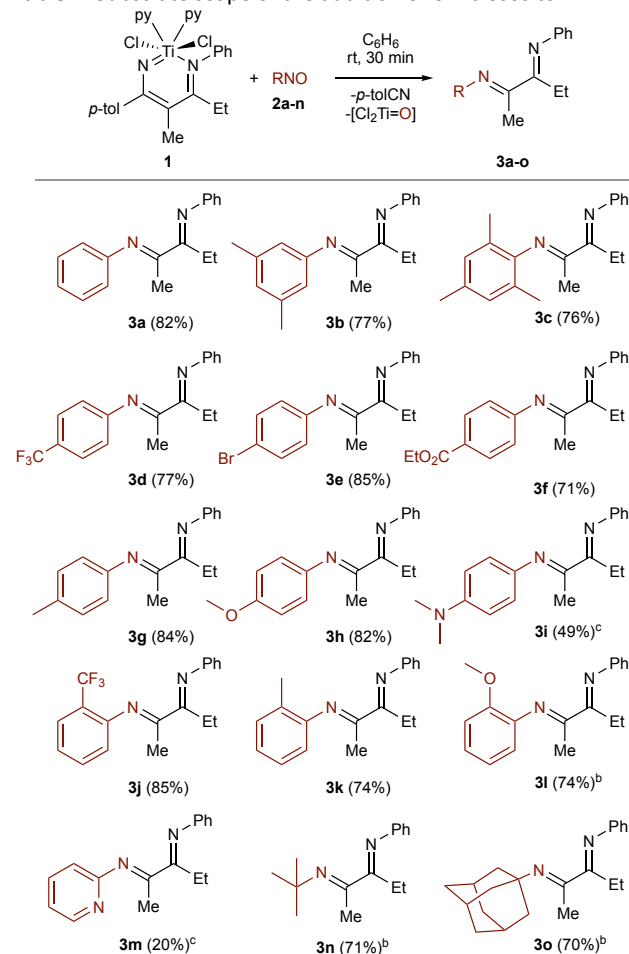


Figure 3. Reaction of a C-nitroso with **1** yields an α -diimine **3a** via a sequence of cycloaddition/retrocycloaddition steps.

Table 1. Substrate scope of the addition of C-nitrosos to **1**.



^aConditions: **1** (0.2 mmol), **2a-o** (0.2 mmol, 1 equiv.), 3 mL C₆H₆. Isolated yields. ^bMixture of imine/enamine tautomers; see SI for ratios. ^cNot isolated, ¹H NMR yield vs. 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene internal standard.

The scope of the C-nitroso reactants examined is shown in Table 1. Conveniently, nitrosoarenes can be readily prepared from the corresponding aniline via Oxone® oxidation.⁴⁷ In most cases, the α -diimine products were obtained in excellent isolated yields (70% to 85%). Use of sterically demanding nitrosos **2b** and **2c** resulted in good yields of **3b** and **3c** (77% and 76%), which are commonly used as bulky α -diimine substituents.³ This method tolerates both electron-

poor (**3d-f**) and electron-rich (**3g-3i**) *para*-substituted (**3d-3i**) nitrosoarenes, as well as *ortho*-substituted (**3j-3l**) nitrosoarenes (**3l** is formed in a 6:1 ratio with its enamine tautomer). The reaction also proceeds cleanly with aliphatic nitrosos: 2-methyl-2-nitrosopropane **2n** gives a mixture of *tert*-butyl substituted α -diimine **3n** and its enamine tautomer in a 3.75:1 ratio (71%). Similarly, 1-nitrosoadamantane **2o** afforded α -diimine **3o** and its enamine tautomer in a 3.13:1 ratio (70%). While the yield of the reaction was mostly consistent irrespective of nitrosoarene substituent, there were a couple of exceptions. For the reaction with electron-rich **2i**, the formation of α -diimine **3i** (49% yield by ^1H NMR) was accompanied by the formation of unidentified side products that precluded isolation. Also, the reaction with 2-nitrosopyridine **2m** yielded only a small amount of **3m** by ^1H NMR (20%) relative to the amount of *p*-tolunitrile byproduct (85%).

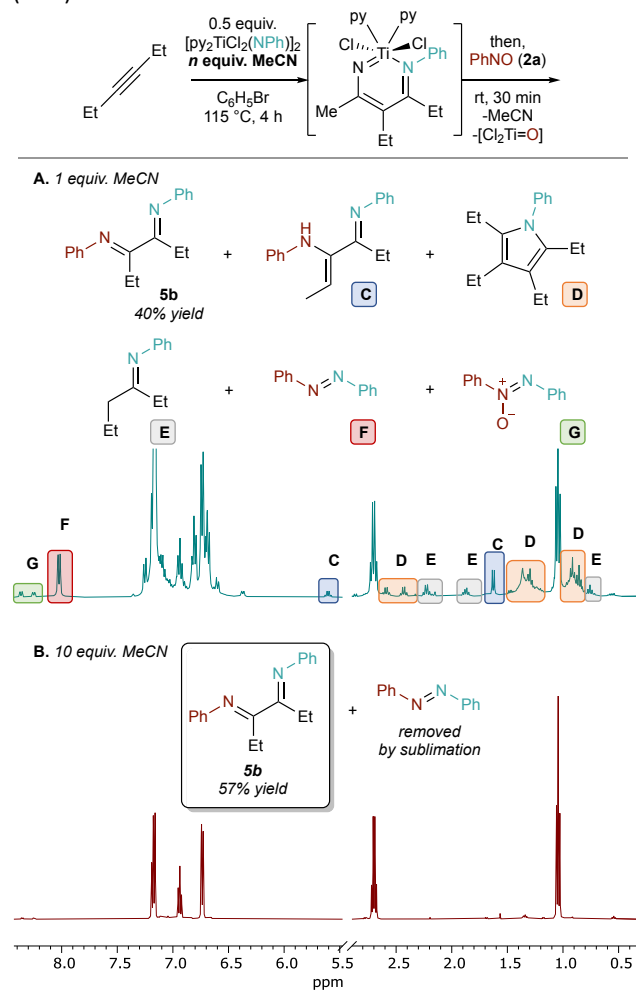


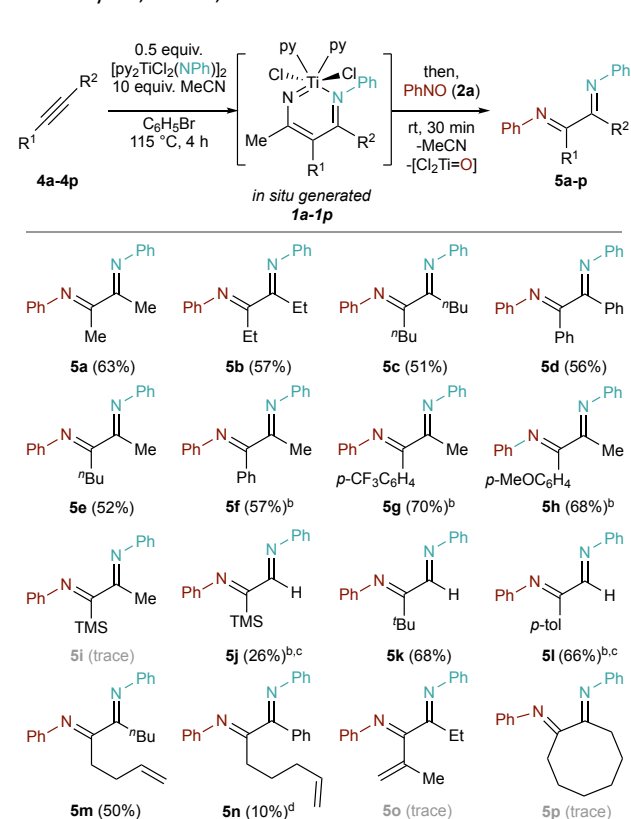
Figure 4. Comparison of synthesis of **5b** using (A) 1 equiv. or (B) 10 equiv. MeCN.

In situ multicomponent diimine synthesis. Diazatitanacycles such as **1** can be synthesized via the multicomponent coupling of Ti imidos, alkynes, and nitriles.³⁰ With this strategy, one-pot alkyne diiminations were carried out (Figure 4, Table 2). In an initial experiment, reactions with 1 equiv. MeCN led to moderate yields of **5b** (40%) from reaction of **4b** and PhNO (Figure 4A). However, several

species from competing side reactions also formed that were difficult to separate from the desired product given the instability of diimines towards hydrolysis: pyrrole (**D**, 5%) from insertion of a second equivalent of alkyne;²⁷ imine from the hydroamination of 3-hexyne (**E**, 6%); and azobenzene (**F**, 12%) from direct metathesis of PhNO with leftover Ti imido.⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹ Using excess MeCN (10 equiv.) suppressed these competing side reactions (Figure 4B) and leads to cleaner formation of the product, with azobenzene as the predominant side-product. Conveniently, basic aqueous extraction can remove the Ti byproducts, and azobenzene can be easily removed by sublimation—avoiding the need to perform column chromatography on the sensitive products.

Based on this result, the scope of one-pot oxidative alkyne diimination with $[\text{py}_2\text{TiCl}_2(\text{NPh})_2]$ and PhNO was examined (Table 2, **5a-5p**). Here, the α -diimine yields are ultimately determined by the yield of *in situ* formed diazatitanacycle **1a-1p**, as the subsequent oxidations are near-quantitative. Symmetrical internal alkynes with both alkyl and aryl substituents formed the respective α -diimines (**5a-5d**) in good isolated yields (51% to 63%).

Table 2. Substrate scope of one-pot *in situ* diimine synthesis from alkynes, imidos, and C-nitrosos.^a



^aConditions: 0.2 mmol (0.5 equiv.) $[\text{py}_2\text{TiCl}_2(\text{NPh})_2]$, 0.4 mmol (1 equiv.) alkyne, 4.0 mmol (10 equiv.) MeCN, 4 mL PhBr, 115 °C, 4 h; then, 0.4 mmol (1 equiv.) PhNO, rt, 0.5 h. Isolated yields. ^bMixture of stereoisomers. ^cYield corrected for minor pyrrole impurities. ^dGC-FID yield (vs. 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene standard).

Unsymmetrical internal alkyne **4e** resulted in the formation of a single α -diimine isomer (**5e**) in a 52% yield. In contrast, α -diimines **5f-5h** give complex ^1H and ^{13}C NMR spectra, presumably due to formation of multiple imine

stereoisomers. Analysis of **5f** by NOESY (Figures S51-2) showed that chemical exchange occurs between each of these isomers by the presence of EXSY cross-peaks. Additionally, GC-MS revealed only one peak corresponding to the mass of **5f** (Figure S53). Imines are well-known to undergo rapid equilibrium between E/Z isomers through inversion (also called the lateral shift mechanism) in nonpolar solvents.⁵⁰ Confirmation that the complex spectra of **5f-5h** were a result of stereoisomer equilibration was obtained through further reaction of the isomer mixtures. For example, reaction of the **5f** isomeric mixture with ZnCl₂ resulted in 93% yield of α -diimine adduct **6f** (Figure 5). α -The identities of diimines **5g** and **5h** were similarly confirmed via ZnCl₂ coordination (see SI).

Terminal alkynes **4j-4l** were also examined. Trapping Ti \equiv NR + terminal alkyne [2+2] cycloadducts with nitriles to form the diazitanacyclohexadiene intermediate is challenging: terminal alkynes typically react faster to form pyrrole or alkyne trimerization products.⁵¹ Nevertheless, **5k** was obtained cleanly in a 68% yield, while **5j** and **5l** were obtained as a mixture of stereoisomers with small pyrrole impurities (2.4% and 12% pyrrole, respectively).

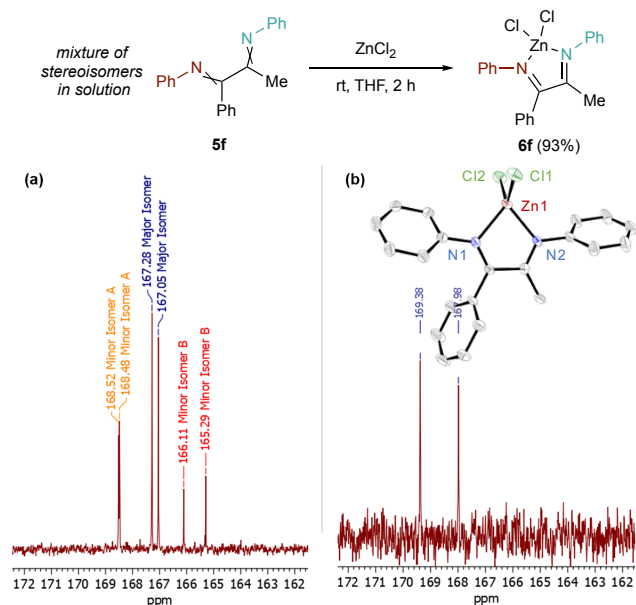


Figure 5. Top: reaction of stereoisomeric mixture **5f** with ZnCl₂ results in convergence to **6f**. Bottom: ¹³C NMR imine region of (a) **5f** (C₆D₆) and (b) **6f** (CDCl₃). Inset: crystal structure of **6f** showing half of asymmetric unit with residual solvent and protons omitted for clarity.

1,5-enyne **4m** allows for clean formation of **5m** (50%), while 1,6-enyne **4n** results in formation of **5n** (10%) as a mixture with competing carboamination⁴⁵ products (6%). Here, the shorter linker of **4m** compared to **4n** prevents the intramolecular alkene insertion that would lead to carboamination. Conjugated enyne **4o** yielded only trace **5o**, while cyclooctyne **4p** predominantly formed alkyne trimer and pyrrole, with only a trace amount of **5p**.

5d was also synthesized *via* a telescoped *in situ* route from TiCl₄(THF)₂, azobenzene, and Zn⁰ powder with only a

moderate decrease in yield (Figure 6). We have previously shown that this strategy is a benchtop-compatible approach to other Ti oxidative amination reactions.⁵²

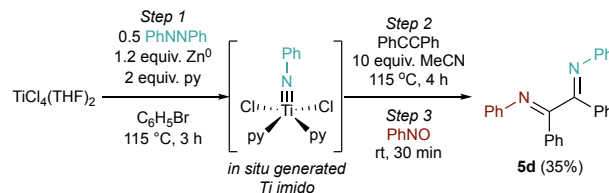


Figure 6. Telescoped one-pot synthesis of **5d** from TiCl₄(THF)₂.

Given that diazitanacyclohexadiene intermediate formation is regioselective,^{30, 53-55} this method could be used to prepare regioisomeric α -diimines through different combinations of alkynes, imidos, and nitrosos (Figure 7). For example, reaction of **4k** with [py₂TiCl₂(Np-tol)]₂ imido gives **5q** (41%), while its regioisomer **5r** can be synthesized by using **2g** and [py₂TiCl₂(NPh)]₂ (44%). Another regioisomer **5s** can be prepared from [py₂TiCl₂(NⁱBu)]₂ with a 50% yield of diimine stereoisomers, albeit with a small pyrrole impurity (4% yield).

Together, these reaction scopes demonstrate that a wide range of both symmetric and unsymmetric α -diimines can be accessed directly through a one-pot multicomponent reaction with a variety of Ti imidos, alkynes, and C-nitrosos.

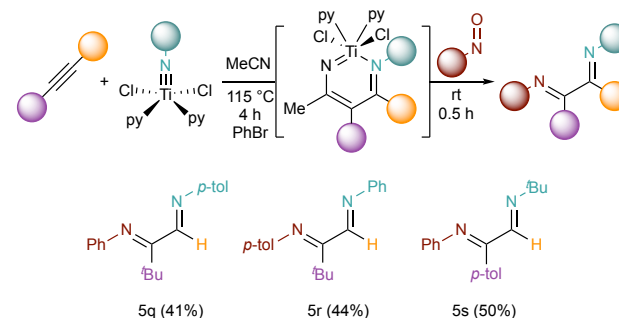


Figure 7. Modular strategy for the synthesis of α -diimine regioisomers.

Proposed mechanism for intermolecular diimination. A plausible mechanism and accompanying DFT calculations for the formation of **5a** from **1a** (**IM1**) and PhNO (**2a**) is shown in Figure 8. The *in situ* formation of **IM1** from Ti imidos, alkynes, and nitriles through alkyne/imido [2+2]-cycloaddition and nitrile insertion has been previously established.^{30, 56-58} The formal [4+2] cycloaddition of PhNO to **IM1** occurs in a stepwise fashion. First, O-coordination of PhNO to Ti yields **IM3**. From **IM3**, the nucleophilic, electron-rich γ -carbon in the metallacycle backbone⁵⁹ attacks the electrophilic N of coordinated PhNO, generating bicyclic **IM4**. This process can be further visualized using IBO analysis (Figure 8a): coordination of PhNO results in a puckering of the γ -C orbital toward the N of coordinated PhNO. Subsequently the new N-C σ -bond is formed in **IM4**, with simultaneous rearrangement of the Ti-N and N-O π -bonds to a new N-C π -bond and O lone pair, respectively. The tendency of C-nitrosos to undergo

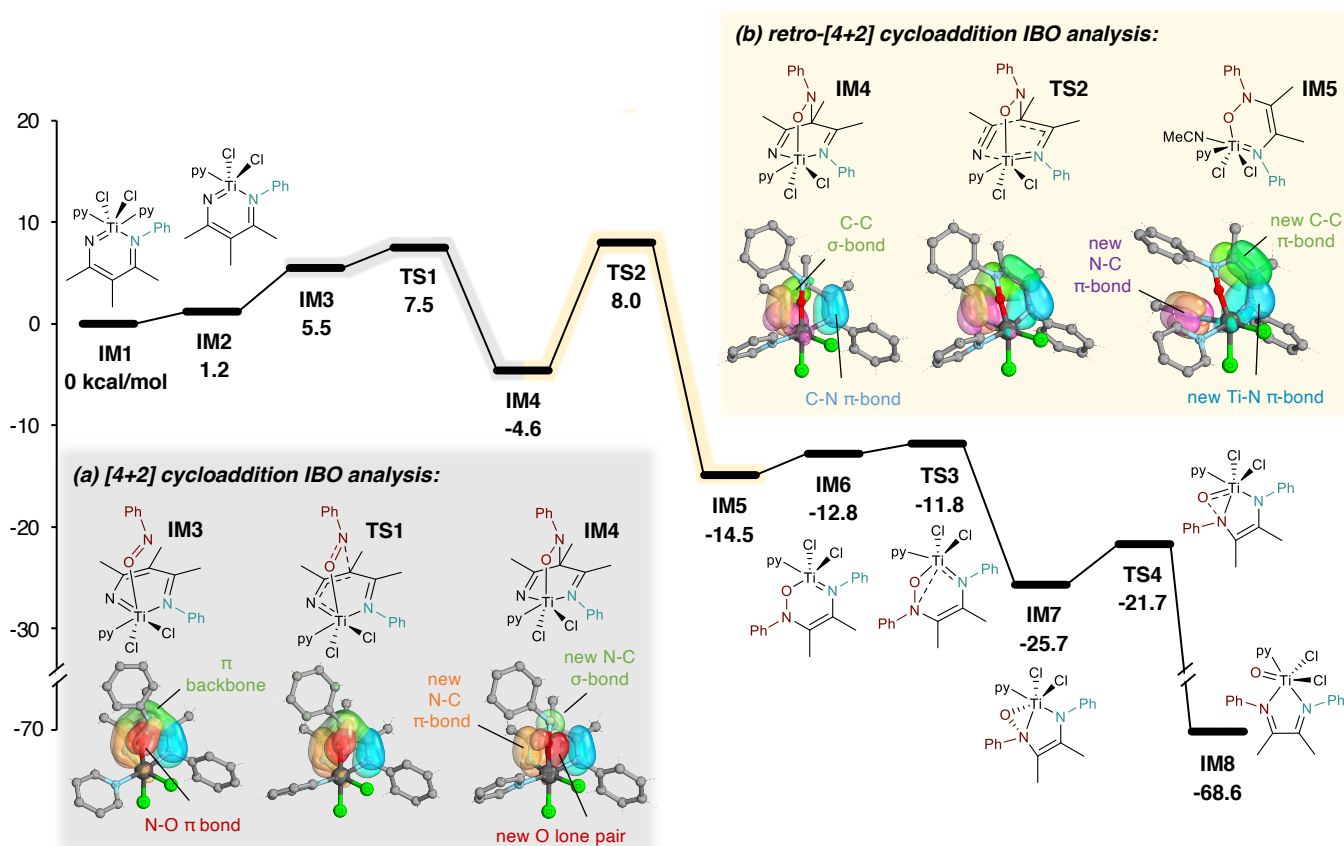


Figure 8. Computed pathway for diimine formation (M06/6-311G(d,p)/SMD, 25 °C, C₆H₅Br). All free energies are referenced to **IM1** = 0.0 kcal/mol. (a) Intrinsic bond orbitals (IBOs) showing [4+2] cycloaddition between NO π -bond (red) orbital of coordinated PhNO and π -backbone (green orbital) of **IM3**. (b) IBOs showing rearrangement of **IM4** to **IM5** via retro-[4+2] cycloaddition.

Diels-Alder-type cycloaddition reactions is well known,⁶⁰⁻⁶¹ but examples of this process with metallacycles are scarce.⁶²⁻⁶³ Titanium β -diketiminate complexes, which differ from diazitanacyclohexadienes by a degree of unsaturation, have also been observed to undergo [4+2]-cycloaddition with ketenes.⁶⁴⁻⁶⁵

IM4 then undergoes rate-determining (12.6 kcal/mol) retro-[4+2] cycloaddition to extrude nitrile, forming azaoxatitanacycle **IM5**. The retrocycloadditive nature of **TS2** can also be visualized by IBO calculations (Figure 8b), which show the elimination of nitrile by the breaking of C-C and Ti-N σ -bonds in **IM4** and the formation of three new N-C, C-C, and Ti-N π -bonds in **IM5**. Further IBO analysis is provided in Figure S98. A similar tandem [4+2]-cycloaddition-cycloreversion process to eliminate nitriles has also been proposed in the synthesis of phosphinines.⁶⁶ **IM5** then undergoes a haptotropic shift following loss of the coordinated nitrile (**IM6**) generating η^2 -(N,O)-bound **IM7**. Finally, N-O bond cleavage results in exothermic formation of a Ti=O species with the bound α -diimine product **IM8**.⁶⁷ Cycloreversions of group IV heterometallacycles to yield M=X (M = Ti, Zr; X = O, N) are well-precedented.⁶⁸⁻⁷³

Ultimately, nitrile serves as a promoter in the *in situ* reactions—first forming the key diazitanacycle intermediate, and then being eliminated prior to product formation. Alternatively, instead of undergoing a [4+2]-cycloaddition, a nitroso could directly insert into the [2+2]

alkyne/Ti \equiv NR cycloadduct, bypassing the need for nitrile. Indeed, C-nitrosos undergo insertions with Ti and Zr metallacycles.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁵ However, a nitrile-free control reaction resulted in exclusive formation of azobenzene through metathesis of the Ti imido with PhNO (Figure 9), making this route unlikely.⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹

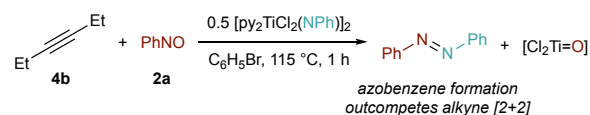


Figure 9. Direct reaction of nitrosos with Ti imidos and alkynes results in formation of azobenzene.

In summary, we have demonstrated a one-pot multicomponent synthesis of α -diimines by the diimination of alkynes by Ti imidos and C-nitrosos. This reaction likely occurs by [4+2]-cycloaddition of a nitroso to the Ti and γ -carbon of a diazitanacyclohexadiene intermediate, followed by two subsequent cycloreversion steps to eliminate nitrile and afford the α -diimine and Ti=O. This is an attractive route to complex, unsymmetrical α -diimines that are difficult to obtain through classical condensation reactions, providing new strategies for ligand synthesis,^{3, 18, 20} and generally adding to the library of alkyne difunctionalization reactions. Efforts are ongoing to make

this cycloaddition-retrocyclization strategy generalizable to other difunctionalizations.

Supporting Information

PDF file of full experimental and computational details.

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