In operando studies of zirconium-based metal organic frameworks as nerve-agent filtration materials

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New materials for the rapid decomposition of chemical warfare agents (CWAs) are in high demand for protecting military and civilian populations from these weapons of mass destruction. The need for novel sorbents and decontamination catalysts has gained great urgency as terrorists groups demonstrate the ability to synthesize and deploy agents in chemical attacks. Although many new materials, such as metal-organic frameworks (MOFs), have been proposed to use as CWA filtration media, their eventual transition requires a detailed understanding of the atomic-scale reaction mechanisms.

Zr-based MOFs were recently shown to be among the fastest catalysts of nerve-agent hydrolysis reaction in solution. We show the results of a detailed study of the adsorption and decomposition of a nerve-agent simulant, dimethyl methylphosphonate (DMMP), on UiO-66, UiO-67, MOF-808 and NU-1000 MOFs (that have different pore sizes and connectivities) using synchrotron-based X-ray powder diffraction, X-ray absorption and infrared spectroscopies, which reveals key aspects of the reaction mechanism.[1] This study describes the implementation of a newly developed experimental setup for delivering vaporized DMMP to a reaction cell containing a MOF sample.

The diffraction measurements indicate that all four MOFs adsorb DMMP (introduced at atmospheric pressures through a flow of helium or in air) within the pore space. In addition, the combination of X-ray absorption and infrared spectra suggests direct coordination of DMMP to the Zr6 cores of all MOFs and its subsequent decomposition to phosphonate products. Further, we show that DMMP is actively adsorbed from air with good selectivity, even in the presence of humidity or other ambient gases, demonstrating that Zr6-based MOFs may serve as effective sorbents for CWAs under ambient conditions. These experimental probes into the mechanism of adsorption and decomposition of chemical warfare agent simulants on Zr-based MOFs open new opportunities for rational design of new and superior decontamination materials.
