

Theoretical Study on CO₂ Hydrogenation Mediated by Ru-PNP Pincer Complexes: An Implication Towards Rational Catalyst Design

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ABSTRACT

Catalytic CO₂ reduction mediated by Ru-PNP pincer complexes has been studied using density functional theory (DFT). Calculations clearly reveal that modification of the PNP pincer framework by introducing planar conjugation in the backbone improves the catalytic efficiency. Activation strain model reveals that reduction of strain in the transition states with modified PNP framework associated with the insertion of CO₂ molecule is responsible for lowering the activation barrier. Calculations also reveal that electron withdrawing substituents at the PNP ligand improves the catalytic performance.

Keywords: CO₂ reduction, theoretical calculations, conjugation, substituent.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has intensified the need for its proper utilization as a non toxic carbon source in clean energy technologies. Carbon dioxide is not only found to be an economical and renewable carbon source, but also serves as an important C₁ building block for many chemicals.¹ Besides contributing in the sustainable development of chemical industry, products like formic acid or methanol also behave as potential hydrogen storage agents.^{2,3} As such, hydrogenation of CO₂ has grabbed

immense interest of researchers and its efficient conversion has turned out to be a subject of numerous studies.

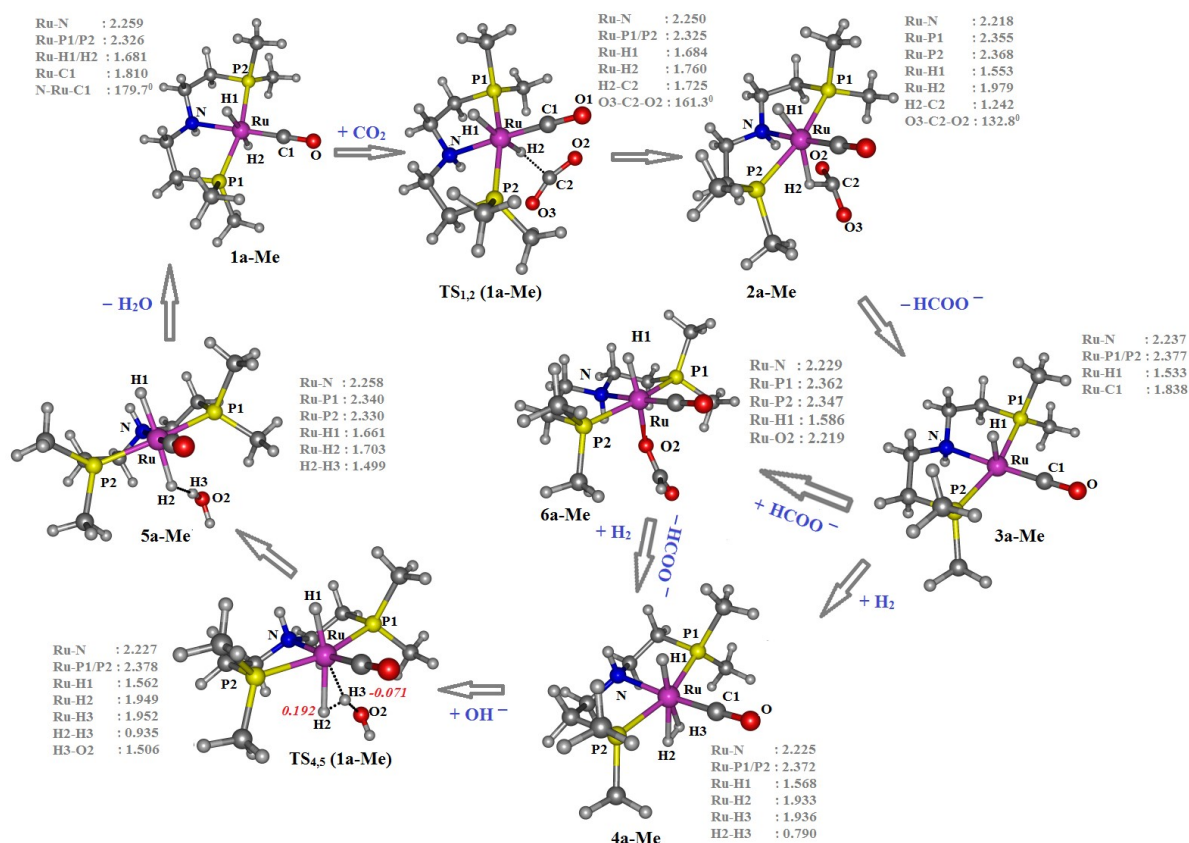
Bio-relevant metals viz. Fe^{4,5,6,7} and Co^{8,9,10} have been used in homogenous systems to catalyse the reaction of hydrogenation but reports show that use of noble metals including Rh^{11,12}, Ir^{13,14} and Ru¹⁵⁻¹⁸ make the process even more efficient. Nozaki and co workers introduced an Ir based PNP pincer complex for CO₂ hydrogenation and forwarded two competing pathways — ligand dearomatization and hydrogenolysis.¹⁹ The iridium (III) trihydride catalyst was reported to exhibit highest catalytic activity in aqueous KOH. While reversibility of this reaction was favoured when triethanolamine was used.²⁰ Later on, theoretical reports of Yang⁸ and Ahlquist²¹ confirmed that base assisted H—H cleavage mechanism was energetically more favourable. The use of Ru-PNP and PNN pincer complexes in recent times have shown promises towards the catalytic process.²² These complexes reversibly bind CO₂ forming 1,3- CO₂ adducts. Huff and Sanford used PNN pincer ligands and reported a TOF of 2200 h⁻¹.^{23,24} Filonenko *et al.* have shown that metal-ligand cooperation in Ru-PNP complexes lowers the efficiency of the catalytic reaction.^{25a}

With the advancement of computational tools, the design of new catalysts is making promising progress.²⁶⁻³⁰ Inspired by the performances of Ru-PNP pincer complexes,^{15-18,25} herein, we intend to investigate the effect of substituents on the PNP ligand and skeletal modification of the PNP ligand. As substituents have a profound effect on many catalytic processes,^{18,31} this study is aimed to provide better understanding towards rationale catalysts design. In this study, three Ru-catalysts including the modified PNP framework of the ligand (**1a**, **1b** and **1c**, Scheme 1) are considered and the energetic of the catalytic process has been elucidated. In addition, calculations have been performed to illustrate the effect of electron withdrawing —CF₃ and electron donating —CH₃ substituents towards the efficacy of the

64 Solvent correction was taken into account by performing all the calculations in
65 tetrahydrofuran (THF) medium using polarizable continuum model (PCM)³⁶ during
66 optimization as well as vibrational frequency calculations. All energies are zero point and
67 thermal corrected. Natural bond orbital (NBO)³⁷ analyses were also performed to understand
68 the electronic feature of the systems. All calculations were performed using Gaussian 16 suite
69 of programs.³⁸

70 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

71 **Overview of the Catalytic Cycle.** Before discussing skeletal and electronic modification of
72 the catalyst, we wish to explain several important feature of the catalytic cycle.^{13,22,25} As
73 shown in Scheme 1, the mechanism of CO₂ hydrogenation is speculated to initiate with bis-
74 hydrido Ru-PNP complex **1** which is subjected to CO₂ addition. It should be noted that a
75 detailed mechanistic study by Filonenko *et. al.* have shown that bis-hydrido Ru-PNP complex
76 **1** provides the unique lowest energy barrierless pathway of CO₂ hydrogenation.^{25b} For the
77 sake of brevity, the geometrical changes during the CO₂ hydrogenation is shown in Fig 1 for
78 catalyst **1a-Me** only and the energetic for **1a-1c** with R = Me is shown in Fig 2.

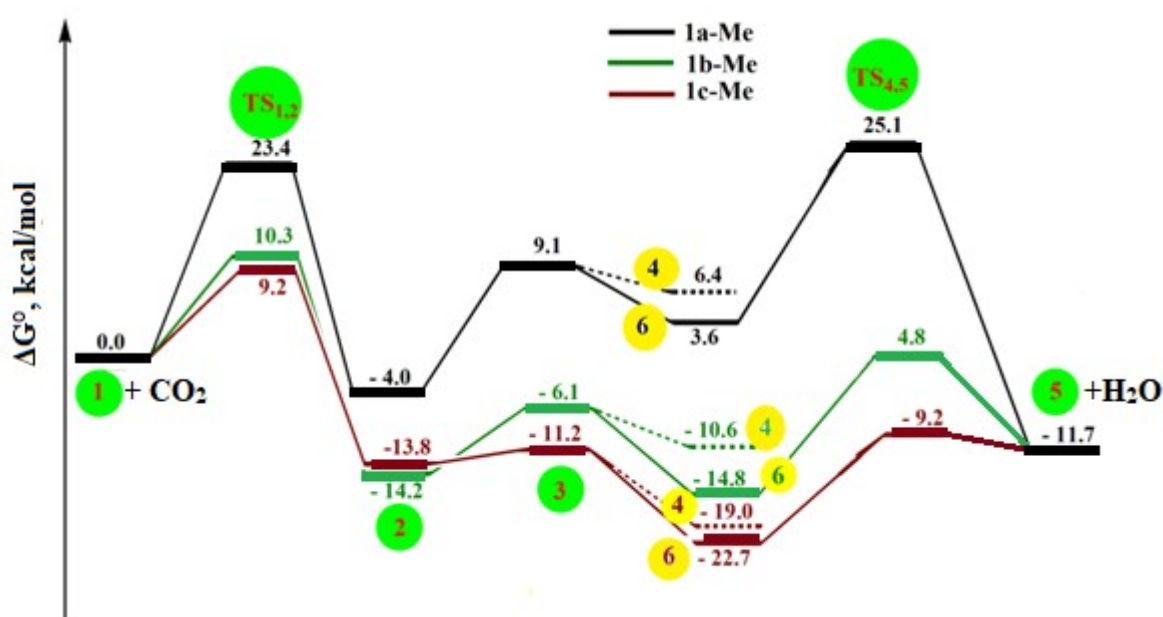


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Fig 1. Geometric changes during CO₂ hydrogenation by **1a**. Bond lengths are in Å and angles are in degrees. Natural charges (in *e*) at H2 and H3 in **TS_{4,5} (1a-Me)** are shown in red italic font.

CO₂ molecule attacks the hydridic H attached to the Ru centre to form H-bound formate complex **2a-Me** via **TS_{1,2} (1a-Me)** in which the distance between the Ru bound H and C atom of CO₂ (H2-C2) is 1.725 Å (Fig 1). Geometries of **TS_{1,2} (1b-Me)** and **TS_{1,2} (1c-Me)** are shown in Fig 3. The H2-C2 distances in **TS_{1,2} (1b-Me)** and **TS_{1,2} (1c-Me)** are 1.625 and 1.746 Å. The Ru-H2 distance (1.916 Å) is most elongated in **TS_{1,2} (1c-Me)** (Fig 3). The CO₂ molecule becomes slightly bent in **TS_{1,2}**. The barrier height for this step lies in the range of 9.2–23.4 kcalmol⁻¹ (Fig 2) and is lowest for **1c**. The formate complex **2** then decomposes into a five coordinated complex **3** by liberating formate anion HCOO⁻. This might be followed either by re-addition of HCOO⁻ to form an O-bound formate complex **6** which may

92 undergo ligand exchange to further generate **4** or by H₂ addition to the metal centre leading
 93 directly to a Ru-dihydrogen complex **4**. The formation of the O-bound complex **6** is found to
 94 be slightly more feasible than that of **4** in all the three cases. This is also in tune with previous
 95 theoretical calculations on the mechanistic pathway mediated by Fe, Co and Ir-PNP pincer
 96 complexes.⁸ The H₂ molecule in **4** binds in η^2 fashion to the Ru centre. On introducing the
 97 base (OH⁻), complex **4** undergoes heterolytic H-H cleavage via TS_{4,5} (Fig 1 and 3) to release
 98 an H₂O molecule and thereby regenerating the bis-hydrido Ru-PNP complex **1**. The
 99 computed natural charges at the H atoms of η^2 bound H₂ are respectively -0.071e and 0.192e
 100 in TS_{4,5} (**1a-Me**), -0.063e and 0.187e in TS_{4,5} (**1b-Me**) and -0.069e and 0.190e in TS_{4,5} (**1c-**
 101 **Me**) and thus supporting the heterolytic cleavage of the η^2 bound H₂.



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103 **Fig 2.** The energy profile diagram for CO₂ hydrogenation of methyl substituted catalysts (**1a-**
 104 **Me, 1b-Me and 1c-Me**).

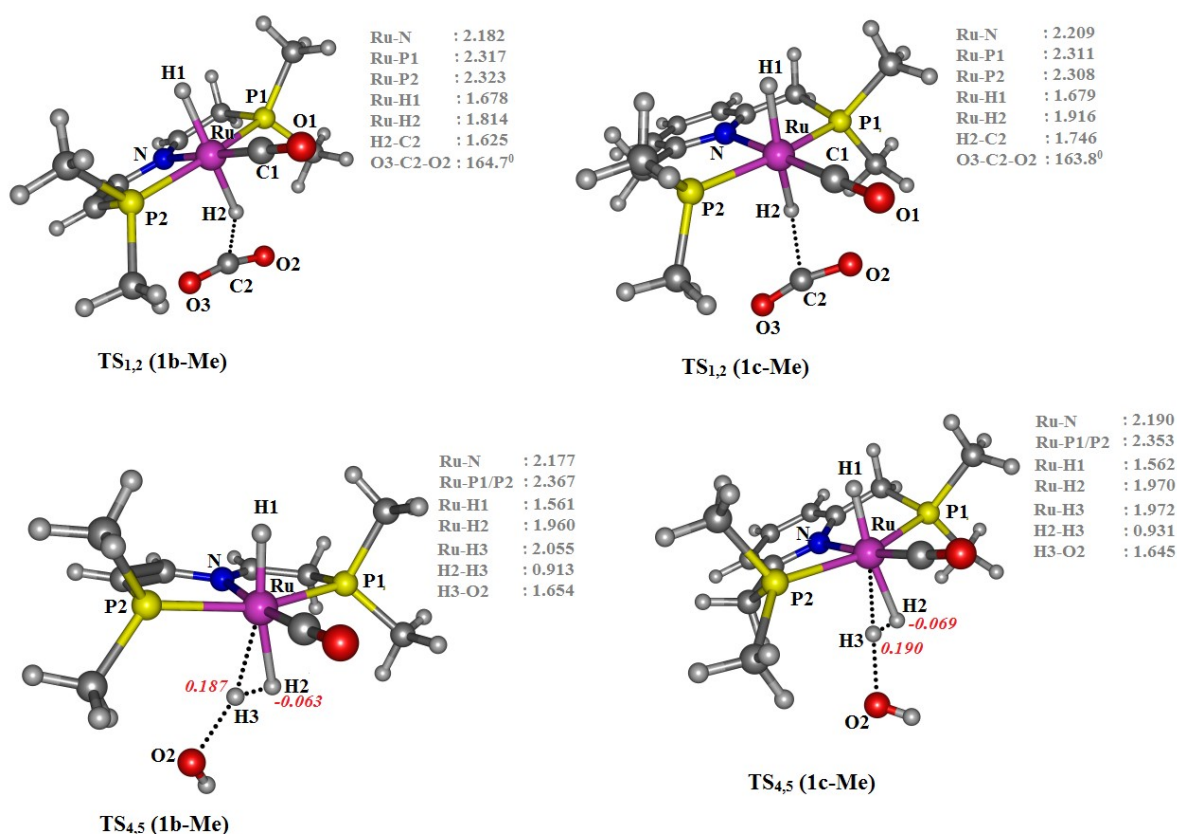


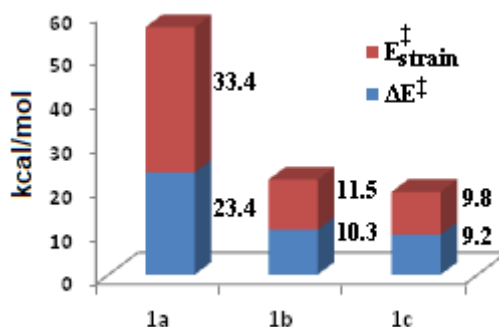
Fig 3. Optimized geometries of TS_{1,2} (**1b-Me**), TS_{1,2} (**1c-Me**), TS_{4,5} (**1b-Me**) and TS_{4,5} (**1c-Me**). Bond lengths are in Å and angles are in degrees. Natural charges (in *e*) at H2 and H3 are shown in red italic font.

The energy profile diagram (Fig 2) clearly shows that the energy barriers for catalyst **1a** is significantly higher than that of **1b** and **1c** which suggests that **1b** and **1c** are more efficient for CO₂ hydrogenation. To investigate the probable reason behind the lower activation barrier with **1b** and **1c**, we first employed the activation strain model of chemical reactivity introduced by Bickelhaupt *et. al.*^{39,40} This model is a fragment based approach and would give us an insight of the effect of various ligand frameworks on the activation barriers involved in CO₂ reduction. According to this model the activation energy of a reaction may be decomposed into activation strain, $\Delta E_{\text{strain}}^{\ddagger}$ and TS interaction, $\Delta E_{\text{int}}^{\ddagger}$ (Eq. 1)

$$\Delta E^{\ddagger} = \Delta E_{\text{strain}}^{\ddagger} + \Delta E_{\text{int}}^{\ddagger}$$

$\Delta E_{\text{strain}}^{\ddagger}$ is the deformation energy required for the deformation of reactants from their equilibrium geometry to the geometry they acquire in the activated complex and $\Delta E_{\text{int}}^{\ddagger}$ is the interaction energy between the deformed reactants in the transition state.

122 The calculated $\Delta E_{\text{strain}}^{\ddagger}$ for the first step of the catalytic cycle i.e. the attack of CO₂ at the
 123 H–Ru bond indicates that the activation strain increases in the order **1c** < **1b** < **1a** (Fig 4).
 124 The deformation energy for **1a** is very high compared to **1b** and **1c** which may be attributed
 125 to the greater rigidity in the PNP framework in **1b** and **1c**. Hence, tuning the PNP framework
 126 towards more rigidity by introducing double bonds or pyridine like backbone may turn out to
 127 be a good modification of the catalyst. Filonenko *et. al* have previously demonstrated that
 128 pyridine-based Ru-PNP pincer complexes show superior catalytic performances towards
 129 reversible CO₂ hydrogenation.²⁵



130
 131 **Fig 4.** Variation of activation strain energy $\Delta E_{\text{strain}}^{\ddagger}$ with activation energy ΔE^{\ddagger} .

132 We further used energy decomposition analysis (EDA)⁴² of the transition states
 133 involved in the first step, i.e., the CO₂ insertion step, to have an idea of the energetic
 134 contribution. Various methods have been put forward to characterize the changes in reactivity
 135 and structures of reactants during the course of a reaction, EDA is one such elegant
 136 approach.⁴² This scheme was confined to structures that correspond to minima on potential
 137 energy surfaces until 2011 when Mitoraj *et. al* applied the same to investigate the changes in
 138 electronic structures of reactants along the reaction path which includes even saddle points.⁴³
 139 Here we have performed EDA to quantify various components of interaction energy in **TS₁₋₂**
 140 (**1a-Me**, **1b-Me** and **1c-Me**) that prevails between the key fragments i.e., the methyl
 141 substituted Ru-catalyst (**1a**, **1b** and **1c**) and CO₂ molecule. The total energy variation of
 142 forming a complex can be decomposed as

$$143 \quad \Delta E_{\text{tot}} = E^{\text{complex}} - \sum_i E_i^{\text{frag}} = (\Delta E_{\text{els}} + \Delta E_{\text{Ex}}) + \Delta E_{\text{orb}} = \Delta E_{\text{steric}} + \Delta E_{\text{polar}}$$

144 where ΔE_{els} is electrostatic interaction term, normally negative if the two fragments are
 145 neutral; ΔE_{Ex} is exchange repulsion term, which comes from the Pauli repulsion effect and is
 146 invariably positive. For convenience, it is customary to combine these two terms as steric
 147 term (ΔE_{steric}). ΔE_{orb} in above formula is orbital interaction term, and sometimes also known
 148 as induction term or polarization term. ΔE_{orb} arises from the mix of occupied MOs and
 149 virtual MOs. If the combined wavefunction is used as initial guess for complex, then E_{orb} can
 150 be evaluated by subtracting the first SCF iteration energy from the last SCF iteration energy.
 151 All these calculations were performed using a combination of Gaussian³⁸ and Multiwfn suite
 152 of program.⁴¹

$$153 \quad \Delta E_{\text{orb}} = E_{\text{SCF}, \text{last}} - E_{\text{SCF}, 1\text{st}}$$

154 Table 1 contains the numerical data of the energy decomposition analysis. ΔE_{els} and
 155 ΔE_{orb} are the stabilizing terms while ΔE_{Ex} is the destabilizing component. It is evident from
 156 Table 1 that all these molecules have significant electrostatic attraction and the corresponding
 157 term has maximum contribution towards the interaction energy. Both the orbital and
 158 electrostatic contribution together overcompensates the exchange energy and is found to
 159 increase quantitatively down the column from **1a-Me** to **1c-Me**. This gives a clear indication
 160 that electrostatic attraction is dominant over orbital overlap in the transition states. The
 161 decreasing barrier height down the column can also be attributed to increase in extent of
 162 stabilizing factors i.e. ΔE_{els} and ΔE_{orb} . The repulsive component which is the result of
 163 interactions between the occupied orbitals ΔE_{Ex} is significantly smaller and contributes
 164 almost equally in all the systems.

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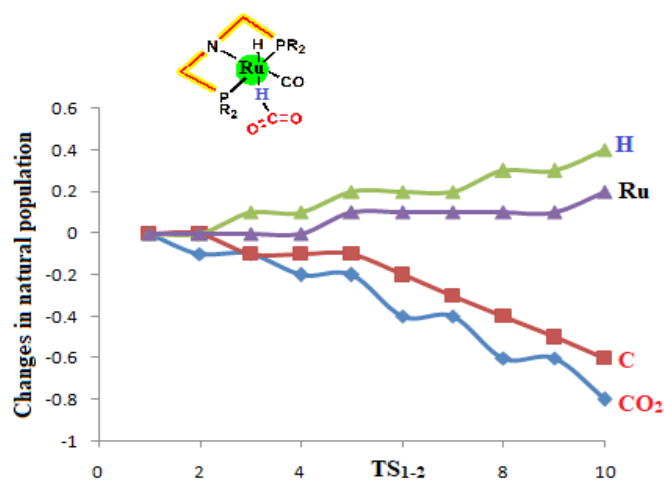
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167 **Table 1.** The EDA terms for **TS_{1,2}** with Me substituent. All energies are in kcal/mol.

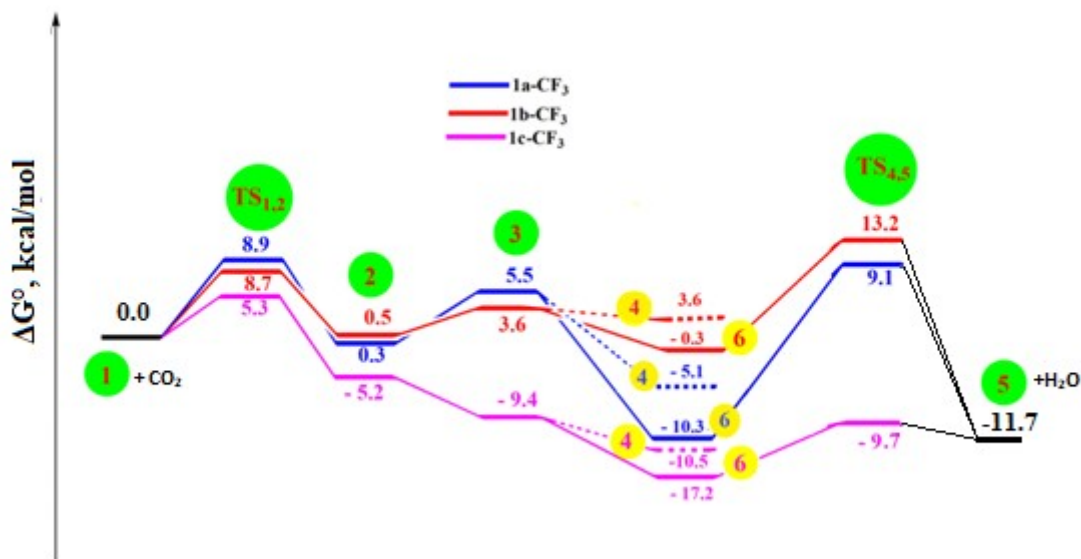
Molecule	ΔE_{Ex}	ΔE_{els}	ΔE_{orb}	ΔE_{tot}
TS_{1,2} (1a-Me)	2.1	-5.3	-2.9	-6.1
TS_{1,2} (1b-Me)	2.3	-6.1	-3.2	-7.0
TS_{1,2} (1c-Me)	2.3	-7.3	-4.1	-9.1

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169 **Effect of Electron Withdrawing Substituent.** So far we have discussed the effect of
170 different PNP framework on the activity of the Ru catalyst. We now turn our attention to
171 investigate the effect of electron withdrawing substituent $-\text{CF}_3$ on the catalytic performance.
172 Before discussing the effect of substituents, the elucidation of the electronic process of the
173 catalytic cycle is very essential. We investigated the population changes along the intrinsic
174 reaction coordinate (IRC)³⁵ in the first step, i, e., CO_2 insertion step (Fig 5) as it is the most
175 important step of the catalytic cycle.²⁵ We used **1a-Me** for this analysis and discussion
176 considering it to be the standard. Fig 5 reveals that during the first step of CO_2 insertion the
177 electron population of CO_2 decreases on going from **1a-Me** to **2a-Me**. However, the electron
178 population of Ru and H increases during the reaction. This is a clear indication of charge
179 transfer from CO_2 to H. Therefore, electron withdrawing substituent like $-\text{CF}_3$ attached to P
180 atom of the PNP ligand will make the Ru centre electron poor and thereby expected to
181 increase the charge flow from CO_2 to Ru through the H atom. This in turn is expected to
182 stabilize the transition state **TS_{1,2} (1a-Me)** and thereby, facilitates the catalytic performance.
183 Indeed, replacement of $-\text{CH}_3$ by $-\text{CF}_3$ at the P atom of PNP ligand decreases the barrier
184 dramatically for all the catalysts (Fig 6) and thereby increases the catalytic activity.



185
 186 **Fig 5.** Natural population changes (in |e|) on coordination of CO₂ to the catalyst **1a-Me**.
 187 Positive values represent increase in population and vice-versa.



188
 189 **Fig 6.** Energy profile diagram for the catalytic cycle with —CF₃ substituted catalysts (**1a-F**,
 190 **1b-F** and **1c-F**).
 191 **CONCLUSIONS**

191 CONCLUSIONS

192 Density functional calculations were carried out to discuss the mechanism of CO₂
 193 reduction using Ru-PNP complexes and to study the elementary steps involved in the
 194 catalytic cycle. Three different catalysts consisting of different PNP ligands were considered
 195 in this study. Energetic of the reaction profile reveals that catalyst **1b** and **1c** with planar
 196 conjugation and pyridine based PNP ligand are more efficient towards CO₂ reduction.
 197 Activation strain model reveals that there is reduction in strain for **1b** and **1c** in the transition
 198 states for the CO₂ insertion step. Energy decomposition analysis further confirmed the
 199 presence of greater contribution of electrostatic component towards the stabilizing energy in

case of **1b** and **1c**. Analysis of the electronic process reveals that there is significant charge transfer from CO₂ to the H atom attached to Ru centre and therefore, incorporation of electron withdrawing —CF₃ substituent further lowers the activation barrier of the CO₂ insertion step.

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Fig S1 and Cartesian coordinates of all the optimized geometries.

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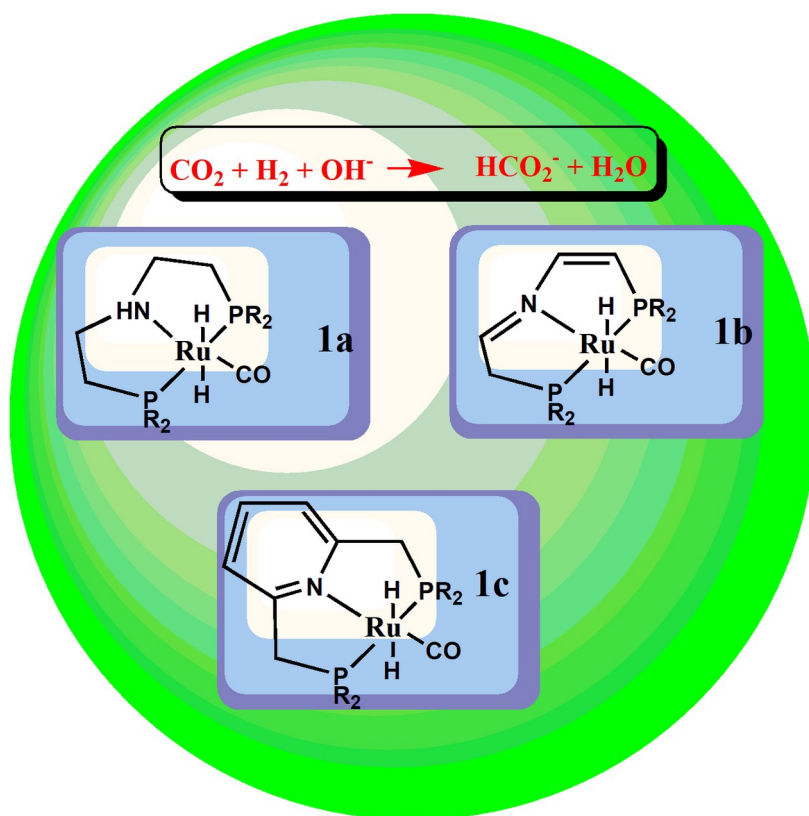
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TOC Graphic



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