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Abstract

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Quantum chemical calculations show that the uranium molecule U$_2$ has a quintuple bond

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Covalent bonding is commonly described by Lewis’s theory$^{1}$, with an electron pair shared between two atoms constituting one full bond. Beginning with the valence bond description$^{2}$ for the hydrogen molecule, quantum chemists have further explored the fundamental nature of the chemical bond for atoms throughout the periodic table, confirming that most molecules are indeed held together by one electron pair for each bond. But more complex binding may occur when large numbers of atomic orbitals can participate in bond formation. Such behaviour is common with transition metals. When involving heavy actinide elements, metal–metal bonds might prove particularly complicated. To date, evidence for actinide–actinide bonds is restricted to the matrix-isolation$^{3}$ of uranium hydrides, including H$_2$U–UH$_2$, and the gas-phase detection$^{4}$ and preliminary theoretical study$^{5}$ of the uranium molecule, U$_2$. Here we report quantum chemical calculations on U$_2$, showing that, although the strength of the U$_2$ bond is comparable to that of other multiple bonds between transition metals, the bonding pattern is unique. We find that the molecule contains three electron-pair bonds and four one-electron bonds (that is, 10 bonding electrons, corresponding to a quintuple bond), and two ferromagnetically coupled electrons localized on one U atom each—so all known covalent bonding types are contributing.

Multiple chemical bonds between transition metals were unknown to inorganic chemists until the crystal structure of K$_2$(Re$_2$C$_8$)$_3$H$_2$O was reported$^6$ in 1965. A surprisingly short Re–Re distance of 2.24 Å was found, and assigned to a quadruple bond between the two rhenium atoms. Since then, hundreds of metal–metal multiple bonds have been characterized$^7$. Here we extend the concept of metal–metal multiple bonding to the case of two actinide atoms.

The uranium atom (atomic number 92) has the ground-state electronic configuration (5f)$^3$(6d)$^5$(7s)$^2$, corresponding to a quintet ground state. However, the energy cost of unpairing the 7s electrons by forming hybrid orbitals is minimal, and uranium thus has in principle six electrons available with which to form chemical bonds. In a Lewis-like formalism, these electrons would combine as electron-pair bonds, giving rise to a hextuple bond between the two atoms and a singlet ground state. Such behaviour is seen with the chromium dimer$^8$, where the six valence electrons reside in the 3d$^3$ and 4s$^1$ orbitals of the Cr atom.

But whereas the Cr atom has exactly one valence electron in each of its six valence orbitals (the five 3d and one 4s orbital), the U atom has 16 orbitals (seven 5f, five 6d, one 7s and three 7p) that are energetically close to one another. The bonding situation involving uranium is thus considerably more complex, given that all 16 orbitals may be considered valence orbitals available for forming the chemical bond in U$_2$. This complexity makes simple inference regarding the nature and strength of the U$_2$ bond impossible, despite the fact that the strength of a covalent bond depends only on the energy of the atomic orbitals on the two different centres involved, and on the overlap between the orbitals. In the case of U$_2$, overlap between two 7s orbitals and between three out of the five 6d

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**Methods**

**Device**

The growth started with a 0.7-µm-thick low n-doped (n = 5 × 10$^{16}$ cm$^{-3}$) GaInAs layer acting as lower waveguide core, on top of which the 30 repetitions of the active region and Raman structure periods (Fig. 1b) were grown. A 0.5 µm GaInAs layer (n = 5 × 10$^{16}$ cm$^{-3}$) completes the waveguide core, on top of which an AlInAs cladding layer was grown with a total thickness of 2 µm, where the first 1 µm was doped to n = 1 × 10$^{17}$ cm$^{-3}$, while the rest of it was doped to n = 5 × 10$^{16}$ cm$^{-3}$. The topmost layer was composed of a highly doped (n = 4 × 10$^{19}$ cm$^{-3}$) 0.8-µm-thick GaInAs layer for plasma enhanced confinement, and a final 0.1-µm-thick GaNAs contact layer Sn-doped to n = 1 × 10$^{19}$ cm$^{-3}$. The material was processed into ridge waveguides 2.5 mm long and 14–20 µm wide, with a 350-nm-thick Si$_3$N$_4$ passivating layer on the lateral walls of the ridge and a Ti (30 nm)/Au (300 nm) top contact. A non-alloyed Ge/Au contact was deposited on the back. The samples were indium-soldered on Ni/Au plated copper holders and mounted in a liquid-nitrogen flow cryostat.

**Measurements**

A Fourier transform infrared spectrometer was used for optical measurements, together with a calibrated room-temperature HgCdTe detector for the optical power–current characteristics. A free-space Raman setup equipped with a 20× microscope objective and a calibrated room-temperature HgCdTe detector for the Stokes emission. This behaviour therefore represents additional evidence that the emission at 9 µm cannot be due to ordinary laser action.

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**Competing interests statement**

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests.

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orbitals (forming one \( \sigma \)-type and two \( \pi \)-type orbitals, respectively) will be large. The 5f orbitals will all have smaller overlap. However, the 5f atomic orbital energy level is lower than that of the 6d and 7s levels, and this would favour a system that does not deviate too much from the electronic configuration of the free atom when forming the dimer.

Given this complex situation, accurate computational investigations of the bonding in \( \text{U}_2 \) call for a method that allows all valence orbitals to combine freely to form the most stable chemical bond. The complete-active-space self-consistent-field (CASSCF) method is such a method, offering maximum flexibility for describing electronic structures and capable of handling arbitrary spin. This flexibility is important because we cannot assume anything concerning the final number of paired electrons in \( \text{U}_2 \).

CASSCF was used to generate multireference wavefunctions for subsequent multiconfigurational second-order perturbation theory calculations of the dynamic correlation energy (CASPT2)\(^{10} \). The effects of relativity, which are substantial for atoms as heavy as uranium\(^{11} \), were taken into account. The calculations were performed with MOLCAS-6.0 quantum chemical software\(^{12} \) (see Methods for details).

Trial studies including different sets of valence orbitals in the active space all showed that three ‘normal’ electron-pair bonds are formed by hybrid atomic orbitals dominated by 7s and 6d character. Double occupation of these three orbitals was thus enforced in subsequent calculations. The remaining six electrons were then allowed to freely occupy the remaining 5f and 6d orbitals while searching for the occupation resulting in the lowest energy. The most stable electronic structure was found to be a septet state (that is, the remaining six electron spins are parallel), and to have a total orbital angular momentum, \( L \), equal to 11 atomic units (a.u.).

The molecular orbitals involved in forming \( \text{U}_2 \) are depicted in Fig. 1, together with the occupation number of each orbital (or pair of orbitals). As illustrated in the figure, the lowest-energy doubly occupied molecular orbital is of 7s\( \sigma \)-type, corresponding to a ‘typical’ single \( \sigma \)-bond. The other two doubly occupied orbitals are degenerate, of covalent \( \pi \)-type and result from combinations of 6d and 5f atomic orbitals (6d\( \pi \)-type in the figure). Two singly occupied orbitals, of \( \sigma \)-type (6d\( \sigma \)) and \( \delta \)-type (5f\( \delta \)), respectively, give rise to one-electron bonds between the two atoms. Two further singly occupied orbitals, of \( \delta \)-type (5f\( \delta \)) and \( \pi \)-type (5f\( \pi \)), respectively, give rise to two additional (but weak) one-electron bonds. Finally, two electrons occupy what may be considered fully localized 5f\( \sigma \) orbitals. Overall, our calculations indicate that \( \text{U}_2 \) has three strong ‘normal’ electron-pair bonds, two fully developed one-electron bonds, two weak one-electron bonds, and two localized electrons.

The singly occupied 5f\( \sigma \) orbitals add up to one 5f orbital on each atom with the electron spins parallel. In such a situation, the two electrons usually couple such that the total spin becomes zero (spin-up on one atom and spin-down on the other), because this antiferromagnetic coupling provides some additional bonding, even if small. For \( \text{U}_2 \), however, all spins are predicted to be parallel (ferromagnetic coupling), which can be attributed to ‘exchange stabilization’: if all open-shell electrons have the same spin, the interaction between the non-bonding 5f electrons and the two one-electron bonds is energetically more favourable than the antiferromagnetic coupling of the 5f electrons.

The total wavefunction for the ground state can be expressed as a linear combination dominated by essentially two electronic configurations:

\[
\Psi = 0.782(7s\sigma_{g})^{2}(6d\pi_{u})^{4}(6d\alpha_{g})^{4}(5f\delta_{g})^{4}(5f\pi_{u})^{1}
\times (5f\varphi_{u})^{1}(5f\varphi_{g})^{1}
+ 0.596(7s\sigma_{g})^{2}(6d\pi_{u})^{4}(6d\alpha_{g})^{4}(5f\delta_{g})^{4}(5f\pi_{u})^{1}
\times (5f\varphi_{u})^{1}(5f\varphi_{g})^{1} + \text{small terms}
\]

Figure 1. The active molecular orbitals forming the chemical bond between two uranium atoms. The orbital label is given below each orbital, together with the number of electrons occupying this orbital or pair of orbitals in the case of degeneracy.
the two terms in equation (1) then yields the total orbital angular momentum, \( A = 0 + 2 + 2 + 1 + 3 + 3 = 11 \). The calculations also show that all open shell electrons have parallel spin (Hund’s first rule), resulting in a total spin angular momentum of 3, a septet state.

The U₂ chemical bond is thus more complex than any other known diatomic bond, with summation of the bonding electrons suggesting a quintuple bond. It is also unusual that strong bonding (see below) and strong ferromagnetism coexist as they do here. Moreover, its multi-radical nature (six electrons are available for binding) may support chemical bonds to a variety of ligands, such as in NU₂N or Cl₂U₂Cl₃. So far, the molecules OU₂O (ref. 4) and H₂U₂H₂ (ref. 3) have been detected.

The large number of orbitals available to the unpaired electrons permits this molecule to have the very large total orbital angular momentum of 11 a.u. However, in a heavy-atom system the combination of spin and orbital angular momenta must be considered. Our calculations show that in the case of U₂, the total angular momentum around the molecular axis is 14 a.u. (11 a.u. from the orbitals plus 3 a.u. from the total spin). High angular momentum values have been found in lanthanide compounds, where the 4f electrons giving rise to such high values are localized and do not participate in chemical bonding. In U₂, all electrons contribute to the bonding.

We have computed energies for a number of points in the neighbourhood of the equilibrium distance and also for two separated uranium atoms. The results for the distance with the lowest energy are presented in Table 1, giving energies where dynamic correlation is included in the calculations (CASPT2), and energies where both dynamic correlation and the effect of spin–orbit coupling are included in the calculations (CASPT2-SO). The CASPT2 level gives a dissociation energy of 40.2 kcal mol⁻¹, which decreases to 30.5 kcal mol⁻¹ when the effect of spin–orbit coupling is added. We find an equilibrium bond distance of 2.43 ˚A and a harmonic vibrational frequency of 265 cm⁻¹. The only experimental datum on neutral U₂ available for comparison is a dissociation energy of 52 ± 5 kcal mol⁻¹ (ref. 4). Spectroscopic studies are clearly desirable to assess our results and establish the ground electronic state of U₂, which is expected on the basis of the current work to be a ↑₁₁↑₄ state. However, the present computational approach has been used in a number of earlier studies of actinide compounds, yielding results in agreement with experiment both for structural properties and relative energies (see, for example, the recent study of the electronic spectrum of the UO₂ molecule). On the basis of the earlier results, we estimate that the computed U₂ bond distance is accurate to better than 0.05 ˚A. Estimating the uncertainty in the calculated binding energy is more difficult, because a comparably complicated chemical bond has not been treated before, and because balanced treatment of the molecule and the free atoms is difficult. Nonetheless, the U₂ molecule is undoubtedly bound with an appreciable binding energy. Moreover, the fact that all low-lying energy levels correspond to the same general electronic structure assures us that our description of the bonding mechanism is correct.

The first attempt to use correlated electronic structure theory to describe the bonding in a system as complex as U₂ faced methodological and computational limitations, so the calculations were not sufficiently accurate to fully describe the bonding. Moreover, spin-orbit effects were not explicitly included. In contrast, the present results have been obtained from a CASCCF wavefunction that is based on 20 active orbitals with six active electrons, which gives much greater flexibility in the construction of the most stable electronic structure with respect to the total spin and orbital angular momentum (see Methods for details). For example, while the earlier calculations on U₂ concluded correctly that six of the valence electrons occupy the 7s⁹g and the two 6d⁹u orb, and that most of the binding energy is contained in these three chemical bonds, the use of only six active orbitals for the remaining six electrons resulted in a ←zę ground state unbound with respect to dissociation. The resultant suggestion that this state of U₂ will at most be a metastable species is very different from the present findings, but can be explained by the fact that the U₂ wavefunction exhibits strong configurational mixing not accounted for in the earlier work. This situation highlights the advantages of improved theory and computational resources available today, which have made it possible for us to carry out an accurate computational investigation of a molecule as large as U₂ and reveal its unique bonding pattern.

### Methods

#### CASCCF calculations

The quantum chemical calculations were performed using the CASCCF method. This is based on a partitioning of the molecular orbital space into three subspaces: inactive, active, and external orbitals. The inactive orbitals are assumed to be doubly occupied. Remaining electrons occupy the active orbitals. The choice of these orbitals is crucial for the method. It should encompass all electronic structures that can be expected to be important for the quantum chemical problem studied. It is in principle simple to choose the active orbitals for the description of a chemical bond and its dissociation: one needs to use all orbitals that can be generated from the valence orbitals of the two atoms involved. It has been described above how the choice was made in the present case. We used a basis set of the atomic natural orbital (ANO) type that has been developed especially for relativistic calculations with the Douglas–Kroll–Hess (DKH) hamiltonian. A primitive set 26s1p1d4f3g was contracted to 9s5p7d5f4g2. A larger ANO basis set was constructed for the calculation of the binding energy, in which the primitive set 27s2p1f4g6h was contracted to 11s10p8s6d3g1h.

#### CASPT2 and spin–orbit calculations

Dynamic correlation effects were computed using second-order perturbation theory (the CASPT2 method). For atoms as heavy as uranium it is necessary to include relativistic effects. They were included using the second-order DKH hamiltonian. The scalar part of this hamiltonian was used in the generation of the CASCCF wavefunction. The calculations were performed for a number of electronic states of gerade symmetry (after checking that states of ungerade symmetry were higher in energy). Spin–orbit (SO) coupling was then included by allowing the CASCCF wavefunctions to mix under the influence of the SO hamiltonian. The number of such wavefunctions was increased until the ground state energy was converged to 10⁻¹ a.u. (1 a.u. = 2,625.50 kcal mol⁻¹). The final calculation included 16 CASCCF wavefunctions in the SO calculation. The method is described in detail in ref. 14, and references therein. It has been applied to a number of heavy atom systems with good results both for ground state properties and excited states. Calculations were performed for a number of points around the equilibrium geometry. The binding energy was estimated from a calculation on the uranium atom, which was performed with the same basis set used for the U₂ molecule and with the valence orbitals active. The all-electron atomic calculation, the full basis set used for the basis set superposition error. The ground state of the uranium atom is ¹L, which is 17-fold degenerate. Calculations were performed for all 17 components. We used the corresponding wavefunctions as the basis in a subsequent SO calculation of the J = 6 ground level. The results of these calculations are presented in Table 1 and discussed in the text.

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Lithospheric structure of the Rio Grande rift

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A high-resolution, regional passive seismic experiment1–6 in the Rio Grande rift region of the southwestern United States has produced new images of upper-mantle velocity structure and crust–mantle topography. Synthesizing these results with geochemical7–9 and other geophysical10–13 evidence reveals highly symmetric lower-crustal and upper-mantle lithosphere extensional deformation, suggesting a pure-shear rifting mechanism for the Rio Grande rift. Extension in the lower crust is distributed over a region four times the width of the rift’s surface expression. Here we propose that the laterally distributed, pure-shear model is characterized by ductile deformation of the lower crust and mantle lithosphere and predicts symmetric thinning and a symmetric lithospheric cross-section with respect to the rift axis17. The simple-shear model is characterized by strain localization along a master or a sequence of low-angle (10° to 30° dip) detachment(s) that may span the entire lithosphere18. A low-angle detachment predicts an asymmetric lithospheric cross-section, with the greatest crustal thinning laterally offset from greatest mantle lithosphere thinning.

In both the simple-shear and the pure-shear models, extensional thinning of crust and mantle lithosphere produces local upwelling of warm asthenosphere to replace thinned lithosphere. Additional heat is released by adiabatic decompression, producing partial melting and rift-associated volcanism. The emplacement of advected warmer material creates lateral temperature gradients that can induce small-scale convection19,20. Small-scale convective cells may create significant additional horizontal stresses that further advance rifting, volcanism and other lithosphere-scale deformation14,20.

The simple-shear and pure-shear models offer distinct topographic, heat flow, gravity anomaly, and lithospheric velocity structural predictions. Ideally, it should be possible to distinguish between the models by the topographic expression of the rift, because the asymmetry of simple-shear deformation predicts asymmetry in the flexural uplift of the rift flanks21, with the greatest uplift offset laterally from the surface expression of the rift. Rift-flank topography along the Rio Grande rift (RGR) (Fig. 1) is in fact relatively symmetric about the rift axis, with variations of typically less than 1–2 km between opposing rift flanks. However, the use of topography as a diagnostic tool may be significantly complicated by crustal composition and the fact that rifting has resulted in brittle deformation in the uppermost crust—expressed as a series of asymmetric grabens15,22.

Similarly, the asymmetry of the simple-shear model predicts a complementary heat-flow asymmetry23. Heat-flow measurements in the RGR region show a broad region of roughly symmetric high heat flow trending approximately along the rift axis24, consistent with pure-shear extension. However, regional heat-flow values along the RGR and elsewhere may be significantly complicated by advective hydrothermal transport within the crust.

One method of assessing the existence of simple-shear detachment(s) is to image the symmetry and location of maximum crustal thinning relative to the surface expression of the rift axis. We have constructed a new image of the crust–mantle boundary using receiver functions computed from teleseismic body waves recorded by the 950-km-long, 54-station LA RISTA experiment25–26, a linear transect that crossed the RGR obliquely near 34.5° (Fig. 1). Receiver function processing isolates P-to-S converted seismic phases generated by impendence discontinuities27. Discontinuity images are constructed by migration and stacking of many receiver functions with different ray paths through the crust and mantle, recorded at many stations. LA RISTA receiver function images (Fig. 2) indicate crustal thickness ranging from 45 to 50 km beneath both the Colorado Plateau (stations NM34–UT54), and the Great Plains (TX01–NM20), with a rift-associated thinning to approximately 37 km centred beneath the RGR axis to within a few kilometres. These estimated crustal thicknesses are consistent with previous compilations of refraction surveys28 across the RGR.

Using geologic constraints from previous seismic reflection work29, we modelled the predicted geometry of the base of the crust (Moho) and the base of the lithosphere resulting from the amount of extension seen at the surface in the southern Albuquerque–Belen basin (16.9 km of extension over 60 km) (Figs 2, 3). The modelling technique30 takes into account the kinematics of lithospheric extension, the isostatic response to crust and lithospheric thinning, and the elastic response of the lithosphere (flexure). Extension by either east- or west-dipping simple shear (Fig. 2a, b) predicts offset Moho upwarping that is