



Stress-induced high- T_c superconductivity in solid molecular hydrogen

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Solid molecular hydrogen has been predicted to be metallic and high-temperature superconducting at ultrahigh hydrostatic pressures that push current experimental limits. Meanwhile, little is known about the influence of nonhydrostatic conditions on its electronic properties at extreme pressures where anisotropic stresses are inevitably present and may also be intentionally introduced. Here we show by first-principles calculations that solid molecular hydrogen compressed to multimegabar pressures can sustain large anisotropic compressive or shear stresses that, in turn, cause major crystal symmetry reduction and charge redistribution that accelerate bandgap closure and promote superconductivity relative to pure hydrostatic compression. Our findings highlight a hitherto largely unexplored mechanism for creating superconducting dense hydrogen, with implications for exploring similar phenomena in hydrogen-rich compounds and other molecular crystals.

high pressure | anisotropic stresses | metallic hydrogen | superconductivity | first-principles calculations

Since Wigner and Huntington's (1) pioneering work, pressure-induced metallization of hydrogen has attracted immense interest and impelled advances in theoretical and computational methods, ultrahigh-pressure devices, and related measurement and characterization techniques (2, 3). The prediction (4) that metallic hydrogen may be a high-temperature superconductor driven by the Bardeen-Cooper-Schrieffer (BCS)-type phonon-mediated mechanism further invigorated the study of this fascinating material and its enigmatic properties. As a prominent thermodynamic quantity, pressure, which is defined as hydrostatic, drives the formation of new material phases through structural transitions and electronic bandgap closure (5). Two main avenues have been pursued for producing metallic hydrogen at high pressure: 1) closure of the electronic bandgap of solid molecular hydrogen and 2) dissociation of hydrogen molecules to form monatomic metal. These mechanisms have been explored through optical and electrical conductivity techniques over the years (6–16). In addition, at least five molecular phases, labeled I to V, have been documented experimentally to pressures up to 400 GPa and temperatures up to 300 K (17–21). These very high static pressures can significantly limit, constrain, and challenge full experimental characterization of materials, especially above 300 GPa, leading to ambiguities and controversies in the interpretation of reported results.

Theoretical studies (22–27) of the metallization of solid hydrogen have focused on its formation under hydrostatic pressure. However, conditions inside diamond anvil cells (DACs) at the required pressures (e.g., >300 GPa) can introduce nonuniform deformations and anisotropic stresses in the vicinity of the sample as revealed by direct X-ray imaging study above 300 GPa (28). More recent studies have further explored these effects (29, 30) and have also unveiled unprecedented structural ductility in diamond under large multiaxial deformation modes (31, 32), underscoring complex strain conditions inside DACs under extreme loading conditions. It is therefore instructive to establish the influence of anisotropic stresses on the evolution of structural and electronic properties of molecular hydrogen under nonhydrostatic pressure conditions (more discussion of nonhydrostatic stress states in DACs can be found in *SI Appendix*). Although gases that are solidified under pressure are often assumed to be hydrostatic over a range of pressures, direct measurements indicate the development of anisotropic strains even well below 100 GPa (33). Moreover, significant pressure gradients were documented even in the earliest optical studies of closing of the bandgap above 200 GPa (2, 7).

Here we report an exploratory study of metallization and superconductivity of solid molecular hydrogen under anisotropic stresses, i.e., on nonhydrostatic pressures. Our first-principles stress-strain calculations establish that despite being a soft and plastic crystal at low pressures (and temperatures), solid hydrogen at megabar pressures can sustain considerable uniaxial compressive and shear stresses, and such anisotropic stresses can have a major impact on physical properties. Prominent effects include lattice symmetry

Significance

Metallic hydrogen has long been considered the Holy Grail of high-pressure physics that holds the intriguing possibility of realizing room-temperature superconductivity. However, the ultrahigh pressures required for hydrogen metallization impose severe experimental challenges and constraints on synthesis and characterization, leaving large ambiguities and controversies in the interpretation of reported results. We show that nonhydrostatic stresses offer a viable route to promote metallization and superconductivity in hydrogen at more accessible static compression conditions (e.g., <300 GPa). Such stress anisotropy is expected to be highly dependent on sample and measurement conditions, which may explain the discrepancies in previously reported experimental results, including variations in the rate of bandgap closure and onset of electrical conductivity in solid molecular hydrogen.

The authors declare no competing interest.

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reduction and ensuing changes in the electronic band structure that accelerate the bandgap closure, leading to metallization, and enhance the electron–phonon coupling (EPC), giving rise to superconductivity. In particular, we find that shear deformations are highly effective in inducing metallic and superconducting states at much reduced hydrostatic pressures. These phenomena are driven by robust underpinning mechanisms and are therefore expected to remain intact when possible corrections by thermal and quantum effects are further considered. The present findings may explain loading-dependent differences in reported experimental results (9–16, 34, 35) and show that introducing controlled nonhydrostatic stresses is a viable route to promote metallization and superconductivity in hydrogen at readily accessible static compression conditions (e.g., <300 GPa).

Stress Responses and Bandgap Evolution of Solid Molecular Hydrogen. To explore the impact of anisotropic stresses on the transition of solid hydrogen from insulating to metallic and potentially high- T_c superconducting states, we focus on phase III of solid hydrogen, which was discovered in 1988 (2, 6) and has been predicted and observed to be the stable insulating phase at temperatures below 200 K in the pressure range of about 150 to 400 GPa before potentially turning metallic upon further compression. The extremely high pressures required to achieve metallization have been a formidable challenge to reliable measurements and analysis. Theoretical calculations (17, 36) for phase III have predicted two nearly degenerate and thus coexisting structures of $C2/c$ symmetry containing 12 and 24 atoms per unit cell, respectively, which are compatible with the low-temperature Raman and infrared (IR) spectra (36). In this work, we focus on the $C2/c$ -12 structure (Fig. 1 *A* and *B*) as an exemplary case study; our studies show that this phase is able to sustain large anisotropic stresses and more easily transform into metallic states. We first performed extensive first-principles calculations to determine the stress responses of the $C2/c$ structure to anisotropic compression and shear strains in the hydrostatic pressure range of 200 to 350 GPa, and key representative stress responses are summarized in Fig. 1 *C* and *D* (full stress–strain relations are given in *SI Appendix*, Figs. S1 and S2 and crystal structure information of representative deformed molecular hydrogen is listed in *SI Appendix*, Table S1). It is seen that the structure can sustain considerable anisotropic compressive stresses ranging from 30 to 60 GPa that increase with rising hydrostatic pressure of 200 to 350 GPa or shear stresses of about 30 GPa that are insensitive to hydrostatic pressure.

Electronic band-structure calculations show that these nonhydrostatic stresses that give rise to anisotropic strains lower the bandgap E_g relative to the equivalent isotropic stresses or hydrostatic pressures (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S3) as shown in Fig. 1 *E* and *F*, stemming from band shifts and splittings caused by the symmetry reduction of the deformed crystal. In particular, we find that shear strains ε_{zx} are highly effective in reducing E_g ; for instance, a shear stress $\sigma_{zx} = 20$ GPa at $\varepsilon_{zx} = 0.06$ along the (010)[001] direction reduces E_g at hydrostatic pressure of 200 GPa to approximately E_g at 250 GPa. Remarkably, a shear stress $\sigma_{zx} = 33$ GPa along the (001)[010] direction causes a complete bandgap closure at 250 GPa (Fig. 1*E*), which occurs at 370 GPa under hydrostatic conditions. At higher pressures, bandgap closure occurs at smaller shear strains, as shown in Fig. 1*E* for selected cases (see *SI Appendix*, Fig. S1 for more comprehensive results).

We also examine the evolution of E_g with excess uniaxial compressive strain (ε_{zz}) added to compressive strains induced by hydrostatic pressure. The results show a reduction of E_g at

the rate of about 20 meV/GPa ($\Delta E_g/\Delta\sigma_{zz} = 0.9$ eV/45 GPa), which is greater than 16 meV/GPa ($\Delta E_g/\Delta P = 2.4$ eV/150 GPa) of E_g reduction under hydrostatic pressure (Fig. 1 *D* and *F*). The metallization can be realized at 350 GPa by introducing an additional normal compressive stress of about 23 GPa. Additional results on the compressive stress–strain and corresponding E_g –strain relations presented in *SI Appendix*, Fig. S2 indicate that anisotropic compressive stresses can also play a role but are less effective compared with shear stresses in inducing the metallization.

The stress distribution of samples in DACs at multimegabar pressures can be highly complex. Experimental studies show that samples can be significantly deformed under such loading, resulting in both cupping of the anvils and flow of the gasket around the sample in response to differences in elasticity, strength, and plasticity of the anvil, sample, and gasket material (7, 28, 29). Indeed, the true stress states of such samples are in general triaxial and can depart from the biaxial symmetry of ideal compression of a symmetrical disk-shaped sample surrounded by gasket and anvils. In addition to this complexity in the true stress states, there is a lack of information about crystal orientations and texture of the polycrystal samples. Moreover, the crystal structure considered here has relatively low symmetry. Given the above, the effects of uniaxial compressive stress and shear stress are used here as perturbations to the pure hydrostatic pressures that have been considered in all previous theoretical work on highly compressed hydrogen.

We calculated stresses and bandgap variations associated with uniaxial strains along [100], [010], and [001] for a single crystal of $C2/c$ structured molecular hydrogen. The results show that the stress and bandgap variations are insensitive to the direction of the uniaxial stress (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S2). At 350 GPa, for example, where metallization occurs under uniaxial stress in all three directions, the stress and bandgap responses in the [010] and [001] directions are nearly degenerate with those in the [100] direction, with bandgap closure occurring at a slightly (1%) lower strain in the [100] direction. Moreover, all real samples deform to some degree at these conditions, thereby giving rise to potentially significant anisotropic stresses as discussed above. In this first attempt to explore how the anisotropic stress conditions affect the properties of hydrogen at static multimegabar DAC loading conditions, we find that the uniaxial compression has a small effect, even under the most favorable [100] case, compared to that of shear strains in inducing bandgap closure and metallization in the $C2/c$ phase of solid molecular hydrogen.

Shear-Induced Metallization of Molecular Hydrogen. To further elucidate the appreciable modifications of electronic properties in nonhydrostatic environments, we performed a quantum theory of atoms in molecules (QTAIM) analysis of changes of charge states in response to stress-induced structural variations. We examine the bonding structures and charge density at bond critical points (BCPs) to evaluate the bonding strength and charge transfer. When hydrostatic pressure increases from 250 to 300 GPa, the charge density values at the BCPs of the hydrogen molecules remain unchanged (2.07 to 2.07 and 2.12 to 2.12) and the values between hydrogen molecules rise by about 0.08 a.u. (0.62 to 0.70, 0.61 to 0.69, and 0.59 to 0.67) (see *SI Appendix*, Fig. S4 for more details), implying almost constant bond length of H_2 molecules and increased intermolecular interactions, producing pressure-induced energy-band broadening and E_g decrease (Fig. 2 *C* and *D*). Shear deformation drives intramolecular charge delocalization and differential evolution of hydrogen atomic distance (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S5 *A* and *B*) while enhancing intermolecular

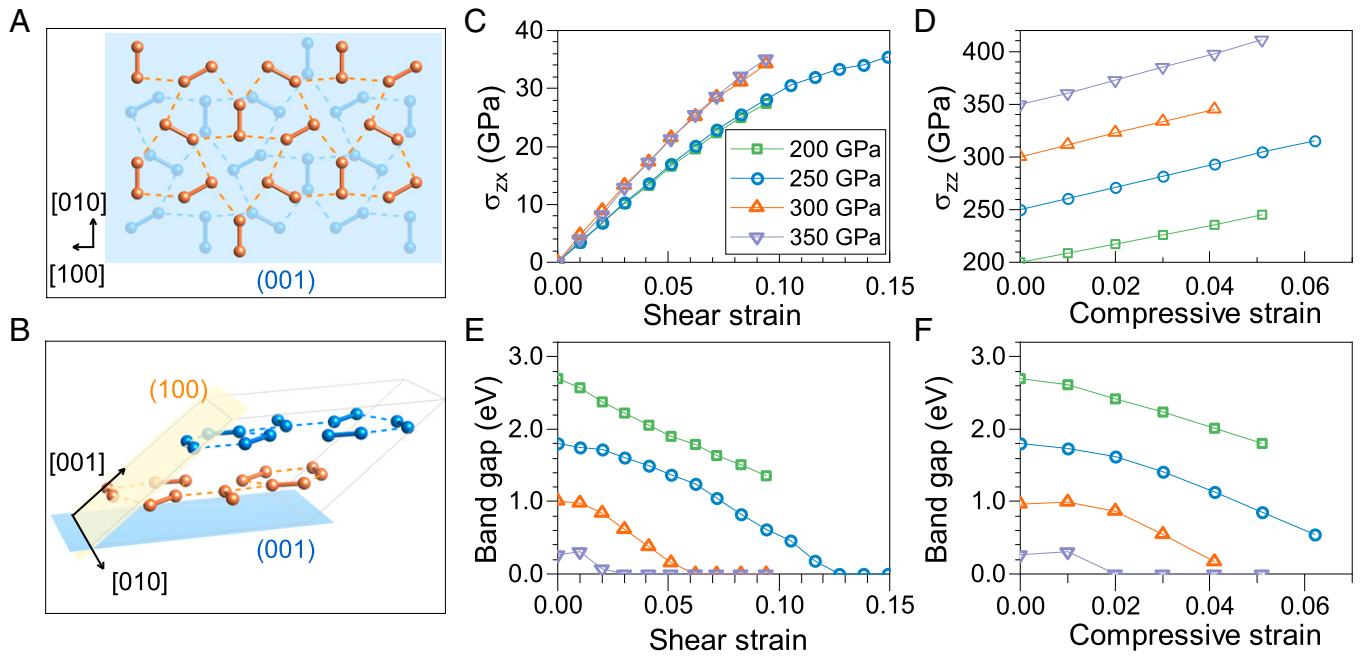


Fig. 1. Structure and stress and bandgap responses of solid molecular hydrogen to anisotropic stresses. (A and B) Top (A) and polyhedral (B) views of the $C2/c$ phase. The thick solid lines represent the intramolecular covalent bonds of H_2 and the thin dashed lines are intermolecular links. The light gray lines outline the unit cell. (C) First-principles-determined stable stress responses to shear strains along the (010)[001] direction (the loading path with the steepest descent of E_g) at hydrostatic pressures of 200, 300, and 350 GPa and along the (001)[010] direction (the loading path with the easiest metallization of E_g) at 250 GPa. (D) First-principles-determined stable stress responses to compressive strains in the [100] direction at 200, 250, 300, and 350 GPa. (E and F) Shear and compressive strain-modified E_g along the above selected loading paths.

interactions and breaks the degeneracy of electronic states due to symmetry reduction. The change of charge density at BCPs of the $C2/c$ structure under combined hydrostatic pressure of 250

GPa and shear stress of $\sigma_{zx} = 35$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.149$) in the (001)[010] direction (Fig. 2A) shows an in-plane charge transfer from intramolecular to intermolecular regions (the distance of

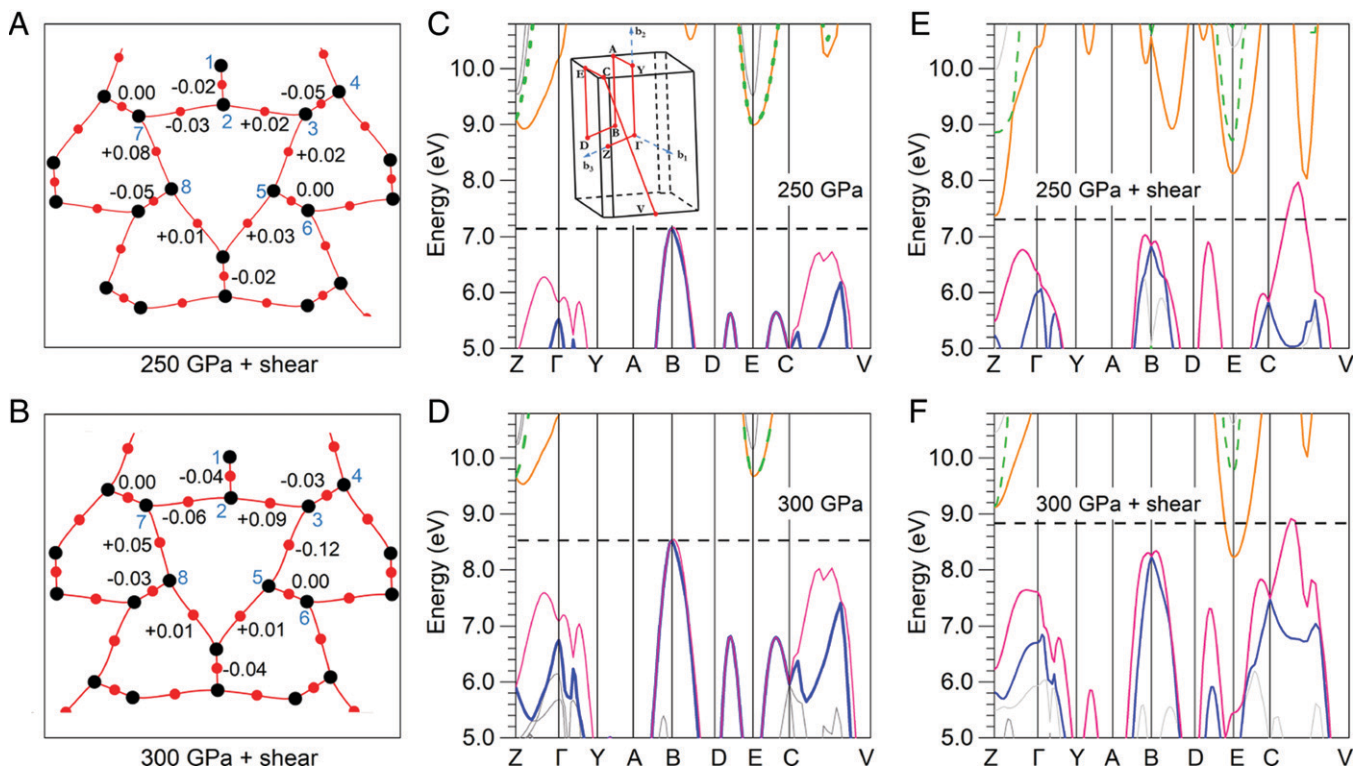


Fig. 2. Electronic properties of shear-deformed $C2/c$ hydrogen. (A and B) QTAIM analysis of charge states in the (001) plane of shear-deformed $C2/c$ -based structure at 250 and 300 GPa. The large (small) black (red) spheres represent hydrogen atoms and BCPs, respectively. The change of charge density for BCPs is given in the atom unit. (C and D) Electronic band structures at the hydrostatic pressure of 250 and 300 GPa. *Inset* shows the Brillouin zone path for calculating the band structures. (E and F) Electronic band structures of shear-deformed $C2/c$ -based structure at $\sigma_{zx} = 35$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.149$) in the (001)[010] direction at 250 GPa and at $\sigma_{zx} = 34$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.094$) in the (010)[001] direction at 300 GPa. The black dashed lines mark the Fermi energy. The bands are colored to exhibit band shifts and splits.

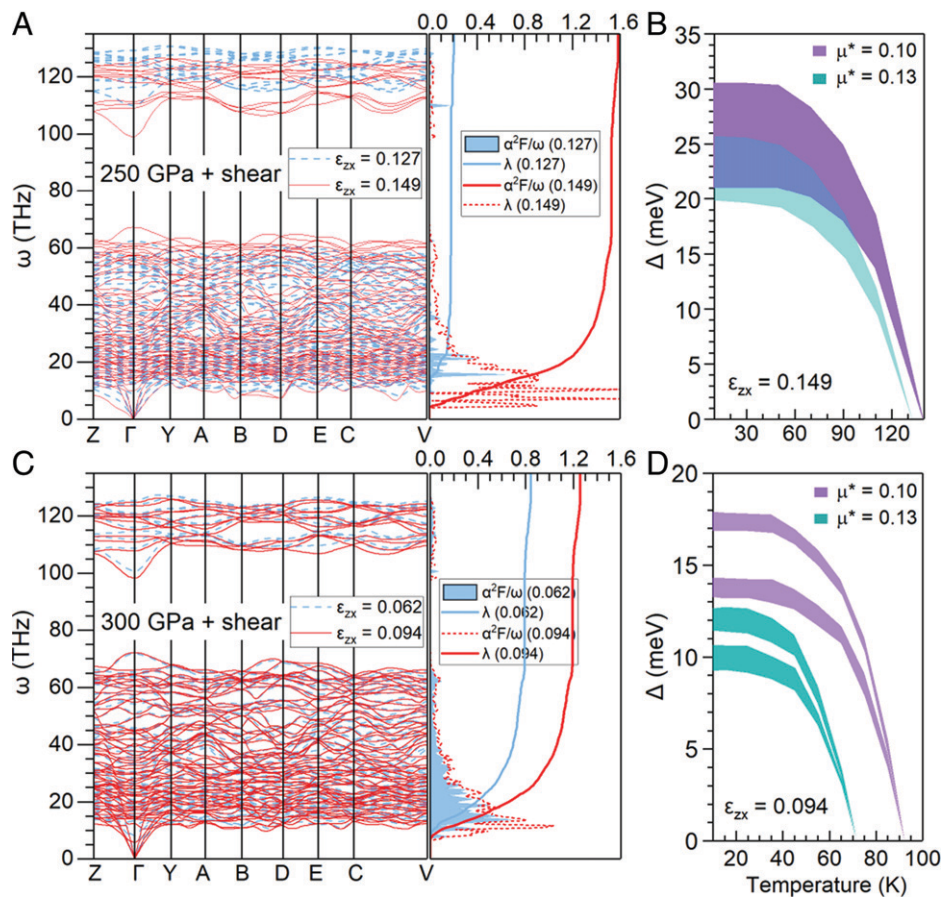


Fig. 3. Shear-induced superconductivity in C2/c hydrogen. (A and B) Phonon dispersion relations $\omega(k)$ and Eliashberg spectral function $\alpha^2F(\omega)/\omega$ and $\lambda(\omega)$ at $\sigma_{zx} = 33$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.127$) and $\sigma_{zx} = 35$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.149$) (A) and the anisotropic superconducting gap (Δ) and superconducting critical temperatures (T_c) at shear strain $\epsilon_{zx} = 0.149$ in the (001)[010] direction (B) at 250 GPa. (C and D) Phonon dispersion relations $\omega(k)$ and Eliashberg spectral function $\alpha^2F(\omega)/\omega$ and $\lambda(\omega)$ at $\sigma_{zx} = 25$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.062$) and $\sigma_{zx} = 34$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zx} = 0.094$) (C) and the anisotropic superconducting gap (Δ) and T_c at shear strain $\epsilon_{zx} = 0.094$ in the (010)[001] direction (D) at 300 GPa.

H7 to H8 from 1.190 to 1.134 Å and H3 to H5 from 1.190 to 1.171 Å), weakening the intramolecular bonds, elongating the H₂ units, and resulting in hole-type bands (Fig. 2E). Meanwhile, shear deformation causes the growth of charge distribution in the interlayer region under shear strains in the (010)[001] direction at 300 GPa (Fig. 2B) with decreasing interlayer spacing (the distance of H3 to H5 from 1.145 to 1.260 Å). The antibonding states of H₂ molecules start to be filled, lowering the conduction band minimum, producing the electron-type band crossing at the Fermi energy, and mediating an indirect band gap closure (Fig. 2F).

Superconductivity in Shear-Deformed Molecular Hydrogen.

There have been extensive theoretical studies of potentially very high- T_c superconductivity in molecular hydrogen induced by hydrostatic compression (37–39). The present work expands such studies by introducing additional tuning mechanisms via anisotropic stresses, which drives metallization of the molecular solid at considerably reduced pressures. We further examine superconductivity of solid molecular hydrogen under shear strains along the easiest metallization paths in the (001)[010] direction at 250 GPa and the (010)[001] direction at 300 GPa. We find enhanced electron–phonon coupling under shear strains. To expose the underlying mechanism, we have calculated the phonon dispersion relations and the Eliashberg spectral function (Fig. 3). Major contributions to the electron–phonon coupling parameter λ come from the low-frequency branches (acoustic phonons and librions) around 10 to 20 THz corresponding to the translational and rotational motions of the H₂ molecules.

The phonons characterize the centers-of-mass molecular motions and the librions correspond to coupled restricted rotations (40). The distinguishable high-frequency vibrons are coupled stretchy vibrations of the H₂ molecules; notably these give rise to large peaks in the Eliashberg spectral function $\alpha^2F(\omega)$ at some q points but the high phonon frequency ω limits their contributions to the electron–phonon coupling parameter. For the (001)[010] shear loading path at 250 GPa, the in-plane charge transfers from the intramolecular to intermolecular regions, which weakens the covalent diatomic molecular bonds and softens the vibrons, reducing the intermolecular repulsion and softening the librions (Fig. 3A). Meanwhile, the hole-type band crosses the Fermi energy along the Brillouin zone path C \rightarrow V (SI Appendix, Fig. S6 A and B), producing superconducting critical temperatures (T_c) of 132 K ($\mu^* = 0.13$) to 140 K ($\mu^* = 0.10$) at shear strain $\epsilon_{zx} = 0.149$ (Fig. 3B). For the (010)[001] shear loading path at 300 GPa, the incremental accumulation of interlayer electrons with rising strains contributes to the electron–phonon coupling at $\epsilon_{zx} = 0.094$ by initiating new topologies of the Fermi surface (SI Appendix, Fig. S6 C and D) and softening phonons (Fig. 3C). The change produces a two-gap superconducting state stemming from the anisotropic and varied Fermi surface structures with a T_c of 72 K ($\mu^* = 0.13$) to 93 K ($\mu^* = 0.10$) (Fig. 3D).

Molecular Hydrogen under Anisotropic Compressive Strains.

We also examined C2/c hydrogen under anisotropic compressive strains at 350 GPa (Fig. 4). The degeneracy of the conduction

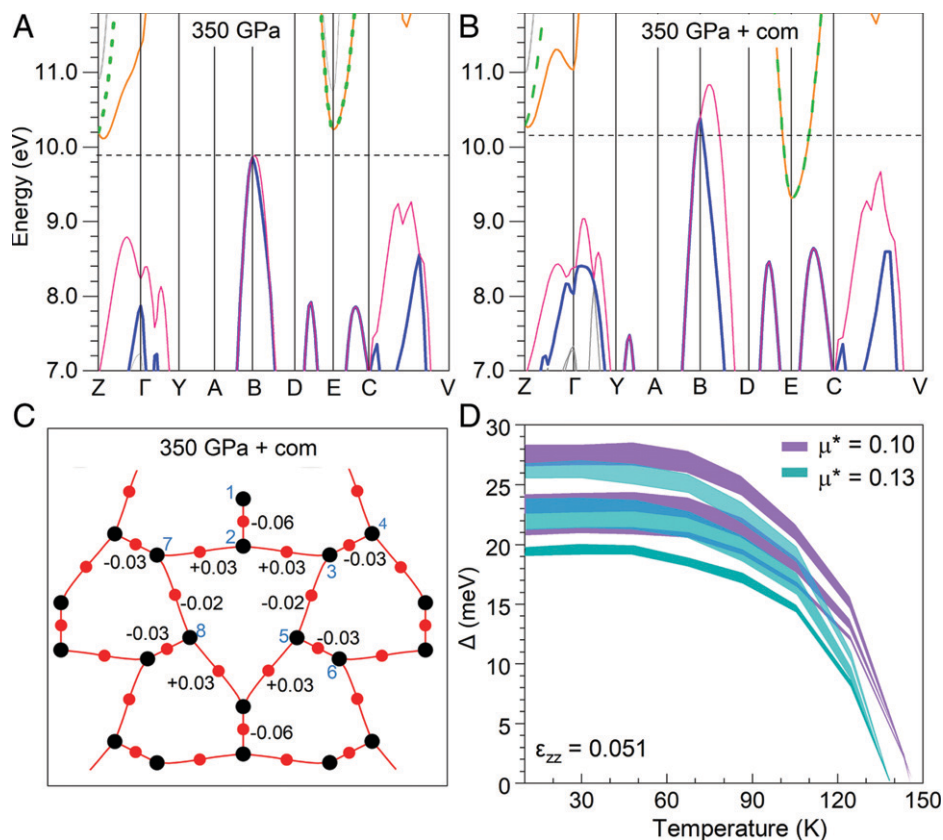


Fig. 4. Electronic properties of C2/c hydrogen under anisotropic strain at 350 GPa. (A and B) Electronic band structures at 350 GPa and at $\sigma_{xx} = \sigma_{yy} = 350$ GPa, $\sigma_{zz} = 411$ GPa ($\epsilon_{zz} = 0.051$) in the [100] direction. The black dashed lines mark the Fermi energy. The bands are colored to exhibit band shifts and splits. (C) The structure and charge density based on QTAIM analysis of C2/c hydrogen under conditions in B. (D) The corresponding superconducting gap (Δ) and T_c .

band remains intact, but the conduction band minimum drops as in the shear-deformed cases (Fig. 4 A and B). In contrast to the hydrostatic and shear-strain cases, the bond lengths of the hydrogen molecules increase here (SI Appendix, Fig. S5C), indicating more intramolecular electron transfer to the intermolecular (in-plane and interlayer) regions, in agreement with the charge density analysis of BCPs from QTAIM (Fig. 4C). These new charge states produce complex band characteristics and Fermi surfaces (SI Appendix, Fig. S6 E and F), resulting in a multigap superconducting state with T_c of 138 K ($\mu^* = 0.13$) to 145 K ($\mu^* = 0.10$) at $\epsilon_{zz} = 0.051$ under the anisotropic compressive stress conditions $\sigma_{xx} = \sigma_{yy} = 350$ GPa and $\sigma_{zz} = 411$ GPa (Fig. 4D).

Discussion

First-principles calculations of stress-strain relations indicate that phase III of solid hydrogen can sustain large anisotropic stresses at megabar pressures, and the accompanying reversible deformations in the elastic region notably alter the crystal symmetry, charge distributions, and bonding behavior. The resulting band shifts, splittings, and enhanced electron-phonon coupling of the phase can dramatically exceed those induced by pure isotropic compression. The effects lead to band gap closure and ensuing superconductivity at significantly reduced compressive stresses compared to hydrostatic conditions. Most notable is shear deformation causing hydrogen to become metallic and superconducting at 250 GPa, which is about 120 GPa (i.e., >30%) lower than that obtained under hydrostatic conditions predicted at the same level of calculation. These results provide specific predictions that could be tested on hydrogen under extreme compression by additional stress conditions that are achievable in the laboratory. Since such stress

anisotropy is in general highly sample and P-T path dependent, the present results may help to explain apparent discrepancies in previously reported experimental results, including variations in rate of bandgap closure and onset of electrical conductivity in solid molecular hydrogen (7, 8, 10–12). Furthermore, stress anisotropy in such compressed materials can be both controlled (e.g., by varying the geometry of thin samples and thermal annealing) and measured with various spectroscopic, diffraction, and imaging techniques (28, 29, 33).

As discussed above, strong deformation of samples can occur under DAC loading, giving rise to potentially significant anisotropic strains (28, 29). Although lateral motion of the anvil can shear the sample due to friction at the sample-anvil interface (30), it should be pointed out that anisotropic strains in the sample in general develop, an effect that is controlled by the elastic/plastic response of the component materials in the biaxial or triaxial stress field produced within the DAC at these conditions. As a result, such complex biaxial or triaxial stress fields can induce significant shear strains in the sample material, as mentioned above. These effects give rise to pressure gradients that can be measured in DAC samples under a variety of conditions (28, 29). These gradients, which are controlled by the sample geometry as well as its elasticity, strength, and plasticity, will project shear stresses into multiple slip planes of the compressed sample (SI Appendix).

We now comment on the possible impact of quantum and thermal effects on the present findings. It has been proposed that the prototypical quantum crystal, low-density solid ^4He , may develop giant nonclassical plasticity (41), but it was also pointed out that the observed phenomenon may be primarily rooted in thermal rather than quantum effects (42), and a later study showed (43) that the stress responses are well described

by classical mechanical theory. Moreover, strength enhancement of solid helium under pressure has been documented (44), and analogous results were observed in hydrogen (45). Experimental studies of other low-Z systems, such as Li, LiH, and LiF, document significant contributions of both thermal (e.g., Debye–Waller) effects and quantum zero-point effects on their lattice dynamics (46, 47). For phase III of hydrogen, anharmonic finite-temperature effects have been shown to reduce the electronic band gaps (24). The quantum nature of the protons and anharmonicity are also predicted to increase the intramolecular distance and enhance superconductivity in molecular hydrogen (48). Thermal effects tend to soften crystals and reduce compressive and shear strengths (49), but probably do not have a large influence on the structural and mechanical behavior at the pressure–temperature regimes of interest here (>200 GPa and <300 K).

In conclusion, this study opens a different avenue and perspective on the metallization and potential high- T_c superconductivity in dense hydrogen under stress conditions possible in high-pressure experiments, most notably static compression studies using diamond anvil cells. The results provide an instructive comparison to many benchmark theoretical studies of molecular hydrogen, i.e., as a classical crystal at the same level of theory under hydrostatic pressures (13, 21–25, 27, 37–39) versus the nonhydrostatic conditions considered in this work. While quantum and thermal effects may modify some predicted quantitative aspects, these effects are not expected to change the trends and alter our principal conclusions about the impact of anisotropic stresses on the electronic properties of hydrogen under pressure. Moreover, the findings have implications for other molecular solids and related systems, which are likely to sustain even higher shear stresses than dense solid hydrogen. These materials include hydride high- T_c superconductors (34, 35, 50–53), whose stability ranges and properties may be significantly altered by anisotropic stresses.

Materials and Methods

We have performed the structural relaxation and stress-strain relation calculations using the Vienna ab initio simulation package (VASP) code,

adopting the projector-augmented wave method and the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof generalized-gradient approximation (GGA-PBE) exchange–correlation functional (XC) with 900 eV cutoff energy and $8 \times 9 \times 10$ Monkhorst–Pack k mesh. The stress–strain relations are determined with a strain increment of 0.01, where at each step the applied the shear or compressive strain is fixed to determine the shear stress σ_{xz} or compressive stress σ_{zz} , respectively, while the other five independent components of the strain tensors and all atomic positions are simultaneously relaxed. The second version of the van der Waals density functional (vdW-DF2) XC has been used to calculate the bandgap E_g , electronic band structure, and Fermi surface of molecular hydrogen implemented in VASP code. We have used the QTAIM analysis implemented in Atoms in Molecules–Universidad de Carabobo (AIM-UC) software. The lattice dynamics and electron–phonon coupling calculations were performed using the QUANTUM ESPRESSO code, adopting an energy cutoff of 80 Ry and an $8 \times 8 \times 8$ k mesh and $4 \times 4 \times 4$ q mesh (see *SI Appendix, Fig. S7* for the convergence test). The anisotropic superconducting gap and T_c are calculated using the open-source electron–phonon Wannier code. More computational details can be found in *SI Appendix*.

Data Availability. All study data are included in this article and/or *SI Appendix*.

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