Activating Pyrimidines by Pre-distortion for the General Synthesis of 7-Aza-indazoles from 2-Hydrazonylpyrimidines via Intramolecular Diels−Alder Reactions

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Ⓢ *Supporting Information*

ABSTRACT: Pyrimidines are almost unreactive partners in Diels−Alder cycloadditions with alkenes and alkynes, and only reactions under drastic conditions have previously been reported. We describe how 2-hydrazonylpyrimidines, easily obtained in two steps from commercially available 2-halopyrimidines, can be exceptionally activated by trifluoro-acetylation. This allows a Diels−Alder cycloaddition under very mild reaction conditions, leading to a large diversity of aza-indazoles, a ubiquitous scaffold in medicinal chemistry. This reaction is general and scalable and has an excellent functional group tolerance. A straightforward synthesis of a key intermediate of Bayer's Vericiguat illustrates the potential of this cycloaddition strategy. Quantum mechanical calculations show how the simple *N*-trifluoroacetylation of 2-hydrazonylpyrimidines distorts the substrate into a transition-state-like geometry that readily undergoes the intramolecular Diels−Alder cycloaddition.
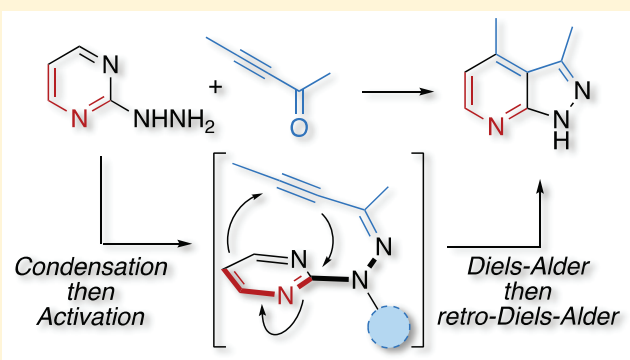
INTRODUCTION

Cycloaddition reactions are unique tools that enable the rapid elaboration of complex scaffolds with control over regio- and stereochemistry. Applications of these pericyclic reactions, and in particular the Diels−Alder cycloaddition, can be found in natural products synthesis and the preparation of pharmaceutically relevant molecules.[1,2] From a strategic standpoint, the inverse-electron-demand Diels−Alder cycloaddition of azines 1[3−5] is of great interest, as it generates nitrogen-containing heterocycles 2, a privileged scaffold in life-science research and industry (Scheme 1a).[6−8] High reactivity is generally observed with an increasing number of nitrogen atoms in the azine, which reduces the aromaticity of the 6π system and also favorably influences both distortion and interaction energies required to reach the transition state of the Diels−Alder cycloaddition.[9] 1,2,4,5-Tetrazines is a prototypical example of a highly reactive aza-diene that reacts with a diversity of

dienophiles, especially electron-rich, under mild conditions.[5] This rapid Diels−Alder reaction is central to numerous chemical biology studies and drug activation chemistries.[10−12] Triazines can also be reactive as aza-dienes, as demonstrated by studies by Boger[13,14] and applications in chemical biology by Prescher.[15]
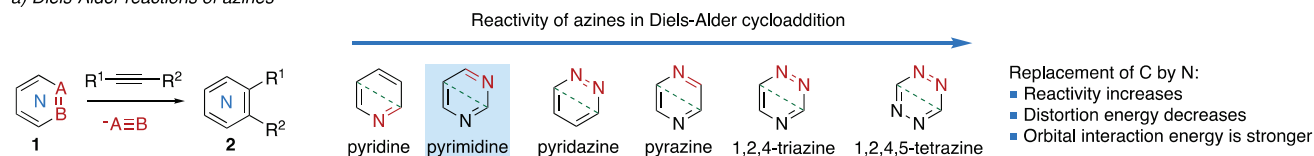
By contrast, near the other end of the azine spectrum, pyrimidines stand as unreactive 4π partners.[9,16,17] Seminal studies by Neunhoeffer[18] and van der Plas[19,20] demonstrated some decades ago that the lack of reactivity of pyrimidines 3 in inter- or intramolecular Diels−Alder cycloadditions has to be overcome by an exceptionally reactive dienophile (e.g., ynamines[18,21−23]) or harsh reaction conditions (up to 280 °C in batch[24] and 310 °C in continuous flow[25]) and long

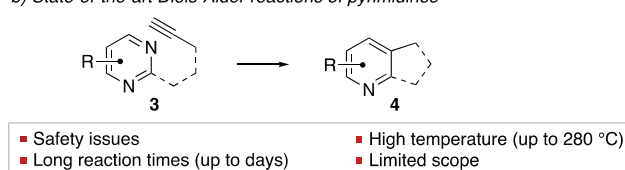**Scheme 1. Diels−Alder Cycloadditions of 2-Hydrazonylpyrimidines: An Entry to Relevant *N*-Containing Heterocycles**

a) Diels-Alder reactions of azines

Reactivity of azines in Diels-Alder cycloaddition

pyridine   pyrimidine   pyridazine   pyrazine   1,2,4-triazine   1,2,4,5-tetrazine

Replacement of C by N:
■ Reactivity increases
■ Distortion energy decreases
■ Orbital interaction energy is stronger

b) State-of-the-art Diels-Alder reactions of pyrimidines

■ Safety issues
■ Long reaction times (up to days)
■ High temperature (up to 280 °C)
■ Limited scope

c) This work, Diels-Alder of 2-hydrazonylpyrimidines under mild conditions

Hydrazine then — Activation 20 or 60 °C

■ Pyrimidines **5** are commercially available, inexpensive, structurally diverse
■ Activation of **7** occurs under mild conditions
■ Broad functional group tolerance
■ Amenable to a one-pot process from **12**
■ Gram scale
■ Synthetic application
■ Outstanding activation of **7** revealed by quantum mechanical calculation
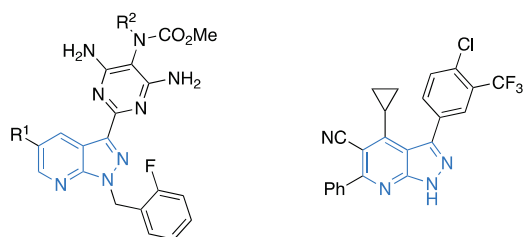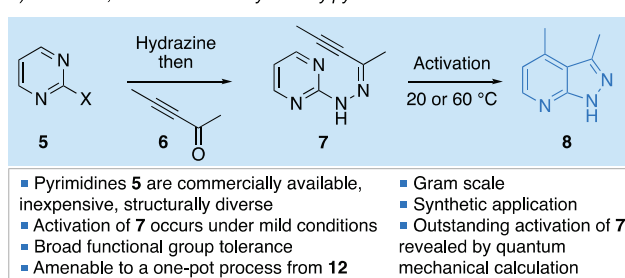
■ **9**, Adempas® (Riociguat), R[1] = H, R[2] = Me
■ **10**, Vericiguat, R[1] = F, R[2] = H (Bayer)

■ **11**, BMT-145027 (Bristol-Myers Squibb)

d) Reaction design based on distortion into a transition state-like geometry

condensation then domino-Diels−Alder/retro-Diels-Alder

Activating group

retro-Diels-Alder then H₂O

then activation

*s-trans,Z-***7** [unreactive conformer]   *s-cis,Z-***7** [reactive conformer]   Diels-Alder

■ Pre-organization of **7** via *s-cis* and *s-trans* conformational equilibria
■ Activating group imposes distortion of **7** into a transition state-like geometry
■ Spontaneous retro-Diels-Alder of **13**
■ Activating group is removed upon hydrolysis

*e) Classical reactions of (hetero)arylhydrazone with **6** lead to pyrazoles*

■ Potential formation of pyrazoles
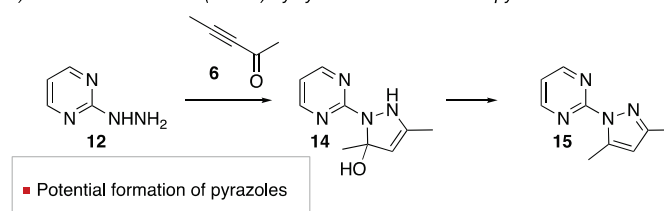
reaction times (up to several days) (Scheme 1b).[26] The scope of these early studies remained very limited, and only a handful of applications were reported.[26]

Because of their low reactivity, the potential of the Diels−Alder cycloadditions of pyrimidines remains untapped. If the reactivity challenge posed by pyrimidines could be met, it would be of high significance in terms of heterocyclic chemistry and would constitute a fertile ground for theoretical explanation. Indeed, pyrimidines are small building blocks that possess key advantages: a large collection of structurally diverse pyrimidines is accessible at a low price, which stands in sharp contrast with the triazines or tetrazines (see Supporting Information).

We have discovered that 2-hydrazonopyrimidines **7** can be activated toward Diels−Alder cycloaddition under mild conditions (20 or 60 °C, microwave irradiation or classical heating, Scheme 1c), in sharp contrast with previous observations about pyrimidine reactivity. The corresponding cycloadducts are aza-indazoles **8**, obtained in a straightforward three-step sequence from 2-halopyrimidines **5** that are commercially available, inexpensive, and structurally diverse chemicals. 7-Aza-indazoles **8** are relevant nitrogen-containing heterocycles[27] that can be found in the marketed drugs Adempas (**9**, Bayer[28]), Vericiguat (**10**, Bayer and Merck &
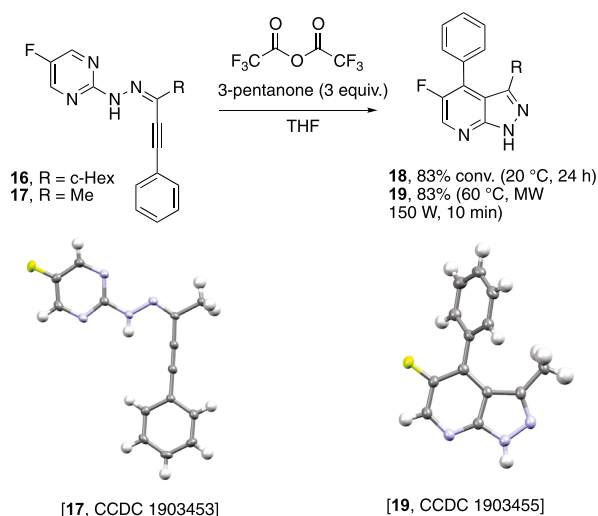
Co.,[29] actually in phase III clinical trials), and BMT-145027 (**11**, Bristol-Myers Squibb[30]). This conceptually new approach to the synthesis of 7-aza-indazoles **8** has a very wide scope, is amenable to a one-pot procedure, and could be performed on a gram scale. We also report quantum mechanical calculations of this Diels−Alder reaction that shed light on the exceptional activation of the 2-hydrazonopyrimidines **7**. Indeed, this phenomenon can be explained by the formation of an activated conformer, *s-cis,Z-***7**, that is distorted into a transition-state-like geometry (Scheme 1d). After Diels−Alder cycloaddition, a spontaneous retro-Diels−Alder reaction and hydrolysis of the activating group deliver the desired 7-aza-indazole **8**. The nature of the activating group is thus central to prevent *N*-cyclization to the corresponding pyrazole **15** (Scheme 1e),[31,32] to pre-organize the system through conformational equilibria, and to dramatically increase the reactivity (and thus functional group tolerance) of the overall process.

■ **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Unsubstituted pyrimidines are particularly challenging substrates: the intramolecular cycloaddition of *N*-(but-3-yn-1-yl)pyrimidin-2-amines into 7-aza-indolines at 210 °C was reported to only lead to decomposition.[33] The hydrazone **7**

was found to undergo very slow and inefficient intramolecular Diels–Alder reactions. We thus screened activating groups that could be easily introduced on the hydrazone **7** to enhance reactivity.[34] Trifluoroacetic anhydride (TFAA) was identified as the optimal N-acylating agent, allowing a clean cyclo-addition of model substrate **16** into 7-aza-indazole **18** at room temperature in THF in the presence of 3-pentanone as a formonitrile trap[25] (Scheme 2). This dramatic increase in

Scheme 2. Diels–Alder Cycloadditions of Pyrimidines under Mild Conditions

16, R = c-Hex
17, R = Me

18, 83% conv. (20 °C, 24 h)
19, 83% (60 °C, MW 150 W, 10 min)

[**17**, CCDC 1903453]

[**19**, CCDC 1903455]

reactivity of pyrimidines in Diels–Alder cycloaddition is unprecedented and opens new avenues in terms of synthetic applications. Further optimization of the reaction temperature and time with hydrazone **17** demonstrated that a complete conversion to **19** could be obtained in only 10 min at 60 °C under microwave irradiation. This latter set of conditions was selected for the exploration of the scope of this Diels–Alder/retro-Diels–Alder cycloaddition (Table 1).

This new method efficiently converts unsubstituted pyrimidines into reactive aza-dienes upon treatment with TFAA, leading to 7-aza-indazoles **20** and **21** in 93% yield (Table 1). 5-Bromopyrimidines are symmetrical pyrimidines that delivered 7-aza-indazoles **22** and **23** possessing an alkyl or cycloalkyl group on the 3-position in 76–81% yield. With unsymmetrical aza-dienes such as 4-trifluoromethyl-pyrimi-dines, 7-aza-indazoles **24–27** were obtained in 78–90% yield. Although two pathways could be envisaged for the retro-Diels–Alder cycloaddition,[35,36] a single cycloadduct was observed in each case in the crude reaction mixture.

The largest number of examples involve substituted 5-fluoro-pyrimidines, leading to aza-indazoles **29–48** in good to excellent yields. Systematic variations of the electronic and steric natures of the R^1, R^2, and R^3 substituents of the cycloaddition precursor demonstrated that a broad range of motifs and functional groups are tolerated, leading to a unique collection of 7-aza-indazoles. Aromatic and heteroaromatic groups could be introduced on the 3- or 4-position of the cycloadduct, as in **29** (87%), **36** (63%), **41** (99%), and **42** (64%). Halo-substituted aromatics are also compatible with the process, as shown by **35** obtained in 88% yield. The latter is poised for metal-catalyzed cross-coupling, leading to further chemical diversity. Esters can be present in the 3-position of the 7-aza-indazoles (**32** 67%, **40** 85%) as well as n-alkyl (**19**

83%, **42** 64%), cycloalkyl (**30** 65%, **43** 83%, **44** 94%), or saturated N-heterocycles such as a piperidin-4-yl motif in **45** (70%).

To further expand the chemical space in these series, the synthesis of 7-aza-indazoles with two classes of substituents frequently used in drug design was studied. Cycloadducts **46** and **47**, possessing a C3-bicyclo[1.1.1]pentane as a relevant mimic of a *para*-disubstituted aromatic group,[37,38] were obtained in good yields (86% and 89%, respectively). Finally, we investigated spirocyclic substituents, as their reduced lipophilicity, their high sp^3/sp^2 carbon atoms ratio, and their intrinsic positioning of bond vectors make them attractive rigid scaffolds for medicinal chemistry;[39] the 7-aza-indazole **48** was obtained in 74% yield as a single compound.

Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were carried out to understand the origin of the activation of pyrimidines. Gas-phase geometry optimization was carried out at the M06-2X/6-31G(d) level of theory, followed by single-point energy calculations using 6-311+G(d,p) basis set with a CPCM solvation model. Studies of the pyrimidine–alkyne cyclo-additions revealed that the Diels–Alder reaction is the rate-determining step, while the following retro-Diels–Alder reaction has a low activation barrier and is significantly exergonic with the release of formonitrile (Supporting Information).[36] Based on the broad scope of this reaction, we first studied the impact of N-trifluoroacetylation on the activation of three simplified pyrimidines, **49**, **50**, and **51** (Scheme 3).

Scheme 3a shows the transition-state structures involved in these reactions, with the forming bond lengths labeled (in Å) and the activation energies shown below (in kcal/mol). The 4-trifluoromethyl and 5-fluoro groups on the pyrimidine scaffold lower the activation energy slightly (0–2 kcal/mol, **TS3** and **TS5** vs **TS1**). On the other hand, the N-trifluoroacetyl group has an enormous impact, decreasing the reaction barriers by 12–14 kcal/mol (**TS2**, **TS4**, and **TS6** vs **TS1**, **TS3**, and **TS5**, respectively). To understand the N-trifluoroacetyl effect, we studied the corresponding intermolecular reactions and analyzed the results with the distortion/interaction model (Scheme 3b). The 3-trifluoromethyl group, 5-fluoro atom, and N-trifluoroacetyl group lower the activation barriers by 2–3 kcal/mol by improving interaction energies. Analysis of the molecular orbital energies (Supporting Information) showed that the N-trifluoroacetyl group lowers the energy of the second lowest unoccupied molecular orbital (LUMO+1), which interacts with the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) of alkyne, increasing the stabilizing interaction energy due to charge transfer in this inverse-electron-demand Diels–Alder reaction. However, in the intermolecular cyclo-addition case, the activation from trifluoroacetyl group is small (~2 kcal/mol), far less than in the intramolecular cyclo-addition case.

To explain the origin of this powerful effect for the intramolecular reaction, we propose a two-phase model, dividing the intramolecular reaction into pre-organization and cycloaddition phases (Scheme 4a). The pre-organization phase refers to the process in which the reactant undergoes conformational change from the ground state to a reactive state where the aza-diene and the dienophile (pyrimidine and alkyne in this case) are close in proximity in order to react. These conformational changes can be described through the dihedral angle θ and the degree of pyramidalization φ of the N1-

Table 1. Scope of the Diels−Alder Cycloaddition[a]
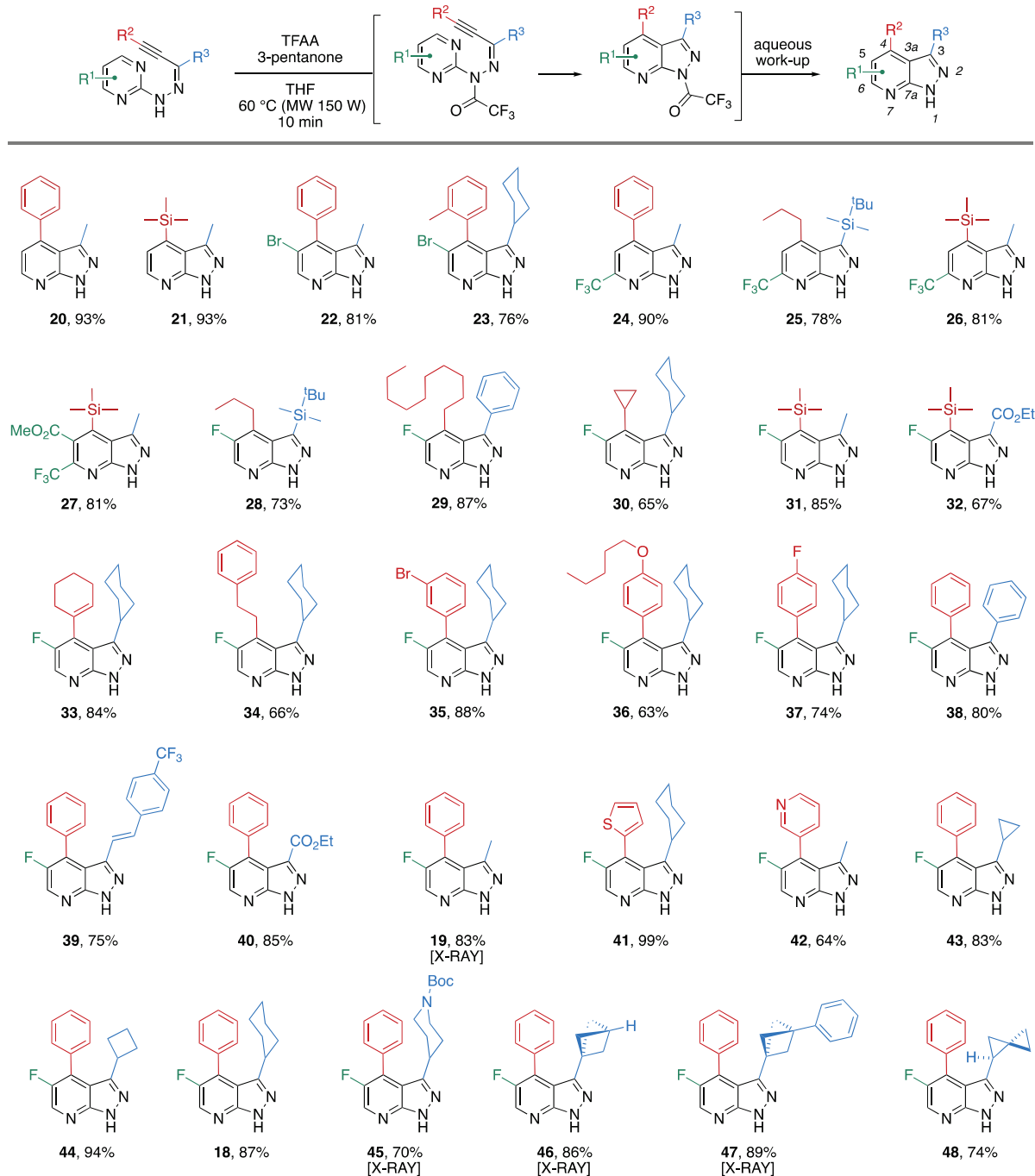
[a] Reaction conditions: 2-hydrazonopyrimidine (1 equiv), 3-pentanone (3 equiv), TFAA (1.5 equiv) in THF ([0.2 M]) at 60 °C (microwave irradiation, 150 W, ramp time: 45 s) for 10 min. Yields were determined after chromatography on silica gel. X-ray crystallographic structures were obtained for **19**, **45**, **46**, and **47**. Boc = *tert*-butoxycarbonyl.
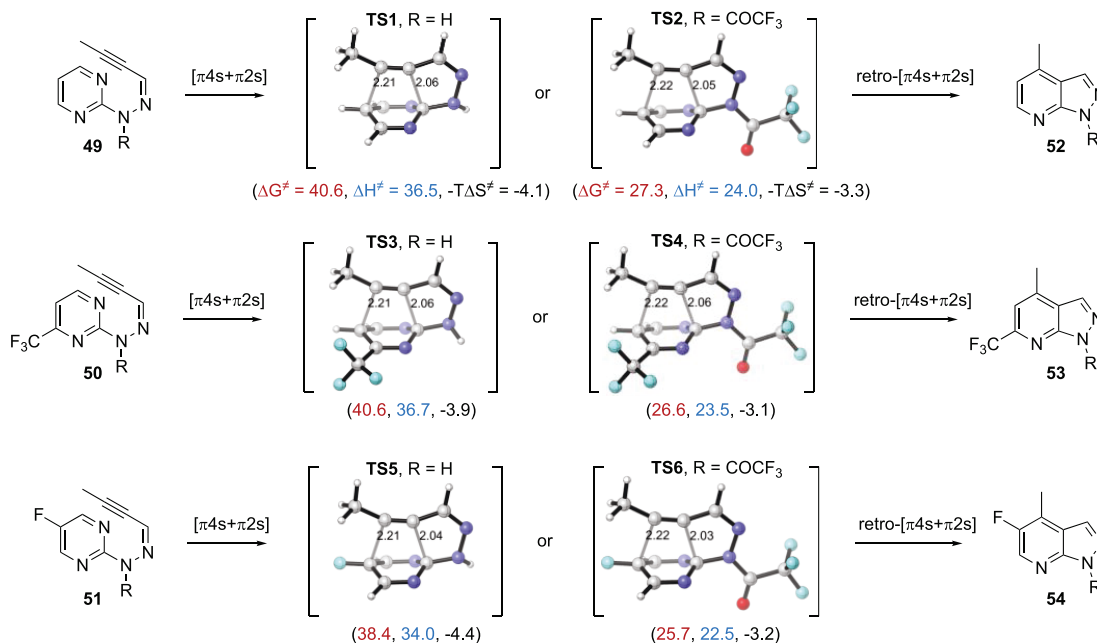
nitrogen atom (Scheme 4b). The cycloaddition phase refers to the actual bond-forming/cleavage process.

As shown in Scheme 4c, the ground-state structure of 2-hydrazonopyrimidine **51a** adopts a planar geometry ($\theta = 0°$). This extended geometry is supported by X-ray crystallography of alkynyl-pyrimidine **17** (Scheme 2).
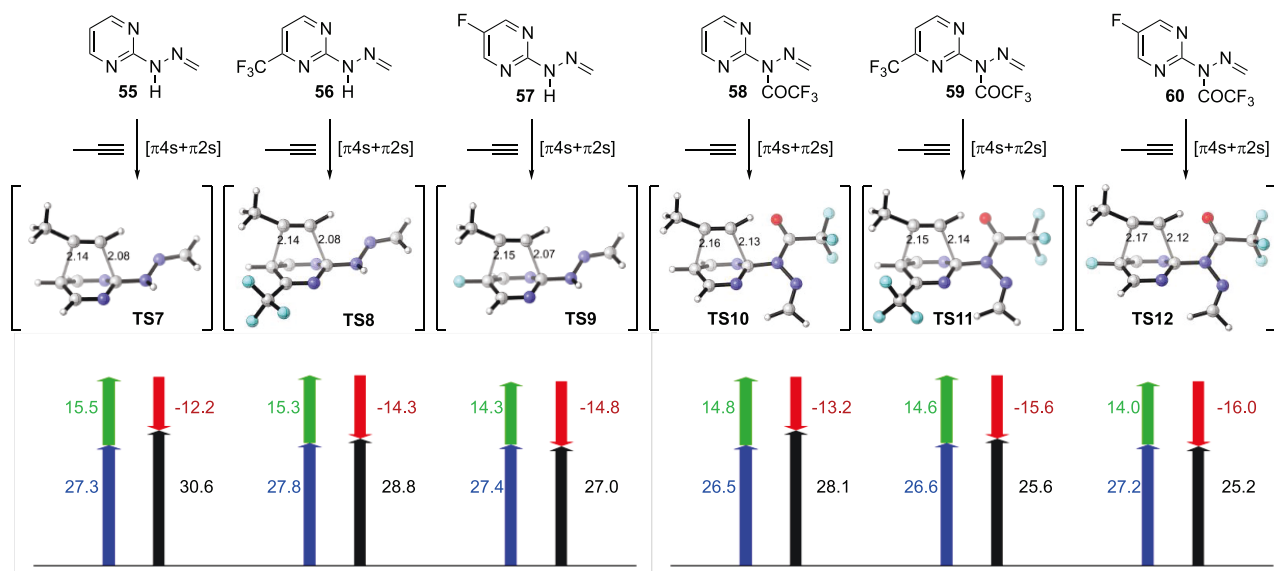
Bringing the triple bond closer to the pyrimidine moiety costs 7.6 kcal/mol, and even in the reactive state, the triple bond of **51a** orients away from the perfectly perpendicular position ($\theta = 143°$ and $\varphi = 144°$). However, when an N-

trifluoroacetyl group is present, as in **51b**, due to the steric repulsion between the pyrimidine N and carbonyl O, the triple bond is naturally positioned over the pyrimidine moiety, perfectly in position for the cycloaddition reaction ($\theta = 0°$ and $\varphi = 180°$). In this case, the ground state is also the reactive state. In addition, in the cycloaddition phase, the N-trifluoroacetyl group further lowers the activation barrier by 5.8 kcal/mol due to the larger interaction energy.

This DFT study shows that the N-trifluoroacetyl group pre-organizes the triple bond, not only changing the *s-trans*

Scheme 3. Density Functional Theory Calculations[a]

a) Transition state structures and computed activation energies for the non-activated (R = H) and for the activated (R = COCF₃) cases

$(\Delta G^{\ddagger} = 40.6, \Delta H^{\ddagger} = 36.5, -T\Delta S^{\ddagger} = -4.1)$ $(\Delta G^{\ddagger} = 27.3, \Delta H^{\ddagger} = 24.0, -T\Delta S^{\ddagger} = -3.3)$

(40.6, 36.7, -3.9)   (26.6, 23.5, -3.1)

(38.4, 34.0, -4.4)   (25.7, 22.5, -3.2)

b) Distortion/Interaction analysis on the intermolecular Diels-Alder cycloadditions reactions of substituted pyrimidines with propyne

TS7	TS8	TS9	TS10	TS11	TS12
15.5 / -12.2	15.3 / -14.3	14.3 / -14.8	14.8 / -13.2	14.6 / -15.6	14.0 / -16.0
27.3 / 30.6	27.8 / 28.8	27.4 / 27.0	26.5 / 28.1	26.6 / 25.6	27.2 / 25.2

[a]In panel a, ΔG‡, ΔH‡, and −TΔS‡ are given in red, blue, and black, respectively, in kcal/mol. In panel b, the sum of the distortion energy of pyrimidine (blue arrow), distortion energy of propyne (green arrow), and interaction energy (red arrow) gives the activation energy of the process (black arrow). Energies are in kcal/mol.

hydrazone conformation to *s-cis* but also rotating the Ar−N bond so that the hydrazone is perpendicular to the diazine, placing the alkyne in perfect position for cycloaddition. The activation by the *N*-trifluoroacetyl group is thus due to the electronic substituent effect, pre-organization, and more favorable entropy.

To gain further insights into the reaction mechanism, the cycloaddition reaction of **16** was followed by ¹⁹F NMR in THF at 20 °C for 24 h (Scheme 5a). A clean transformation of **16** into its trifluoroacetylated analog **61** was observed almost instantaneously, followed by the slow formation of **63** and its

hydrolyzed counterpart **18** due to traces of water. Tricyclic intermediate **62** was not observed, nor was protonated **63** or **18**. The measured half-life is about 8 h, which corresponds to an activation free energy of 23.3 kcal/mol, according to the Eyring equation and first-order rate law. The computed activation free energy from DFT calculations is 24.2 kcal/mol, close to experimental data.

From a practical point of view, this Diels−Alder cyclo-addition of 2-hydrazonopyrimidines is amenable to gram scale in a one-pot process, as demonstrated with the synthesis of **22** in 81% yield from commercially available compounds (Scheme

Scheme 4. Pre-organization Phase and Cycloaddition Phase during the Intramolecular Diels–Alder Reaction of Pyrimidine[*a*]
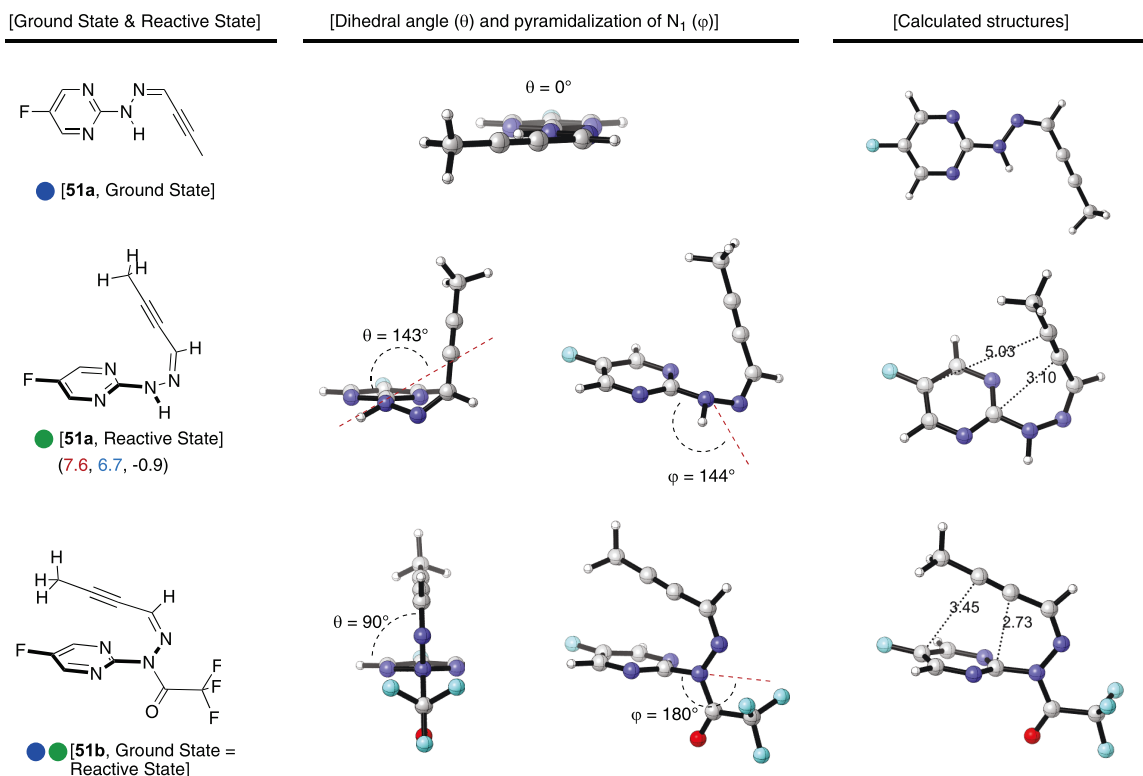
a) Two distinct phases are proposed for the intramolecular cycloadditions of 2-hydrazonopyrimidines
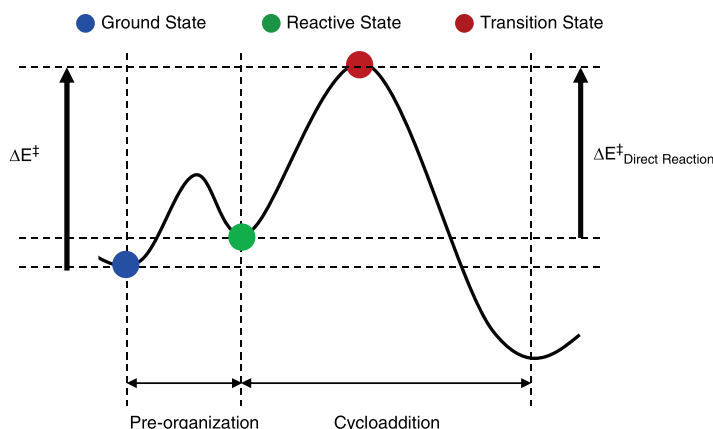
b) Two parameters of the pre-organization phase, dihedral angle (θ) and pyramidalization of the N1 atom (φ)
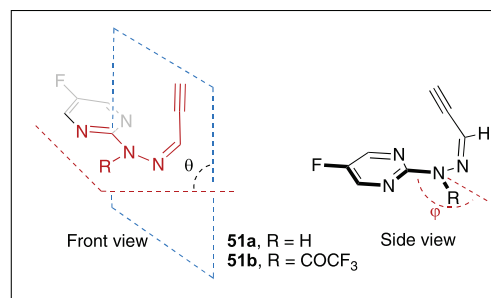
*c) Ground states and reactive states of 2-hydrazonopyrimidines **51a** and **51b***

[Ground State & Reactive State]   [Dihedral angle (θ) and pyramidalization of N₁ (φ)]   [Calculated structures]

[**51a**, Ground State]

[**51a**, Reactive State] (7.6, 6.7, -0.9)

[**51b**, Ground State = Reactive State]

[*a*]$\Delta G^{\ddagger}$, $\Delta H^{\ddagger}$, and $-T\Delta S^{\ddagger}$ in red, blue, and black, respectively, in kcal/mol; calculated structures with distances in Å.

5b). 5-Bromo-2-chloropyrimidine **64** can be transformed into the corresponding 5-bromo-2-hydrazinopyrimidine **65** in quantitative yield using hydrazine monohydrate in ethanol at 60 °C for 40 min. Crude **65** could then be reacted with commercial ynone **66** using a catalytic amount of trifluoroacetic acid (5 mol%) in THF at 60 °C (classical heating) for 20 min. When the hydrazone formation is complete, TFAA and 3-pentanone are added. After 1 h at 60 °C, the 7-aza-indazole **22** is obtained as the only product in the crude reaction mixture; after purification by silica gel chromatography, 6.2 g of analytically pure **22** could be obtained.
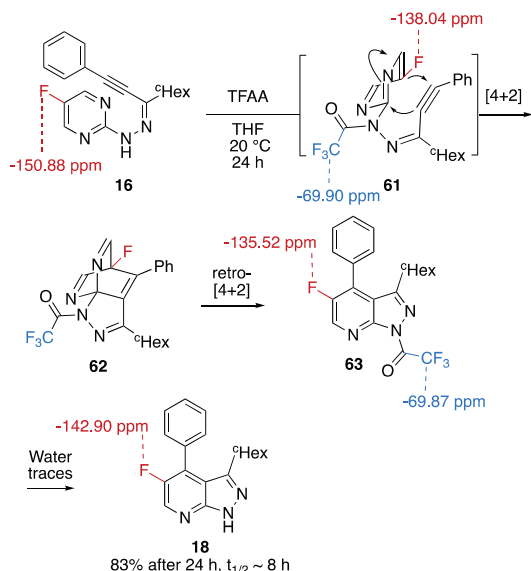
The relevance of this extraordinary reactivity of 2-hydrazonopyrimidines in Diels–Alder reactions under mild

conditions was further explored with the synthesis of an intermediate to Vericiguat (BAY 1021189 from Bayer), a soluble guanylate cyclase (sGC) stimulator for the treatment of chronic heart failure in Phase III clinical trials (Scheme 5c).[28] Vericiguat possesses a 7-aza-indazole scaffold substituted by a 2-fluorobenzyl on N1, a pyrimidine motif on C3, and a fluorine atom on C5; this compound could be obtained in five steps according to the Bayer medicinal chemistry route. In contrast, the latter was obtained in this work in only three steps (including a one-pot reaction) from commercially available compounds **67** and **68**.
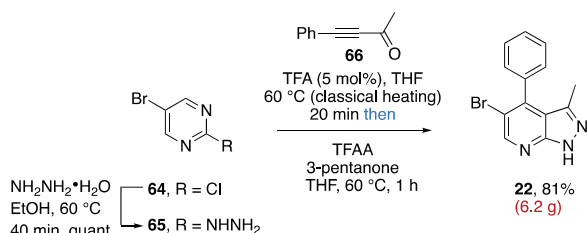
The one-pot condensation/domino Diels–Alder reaction proceeds smoothly at 60 °C (classical heating) and yields a

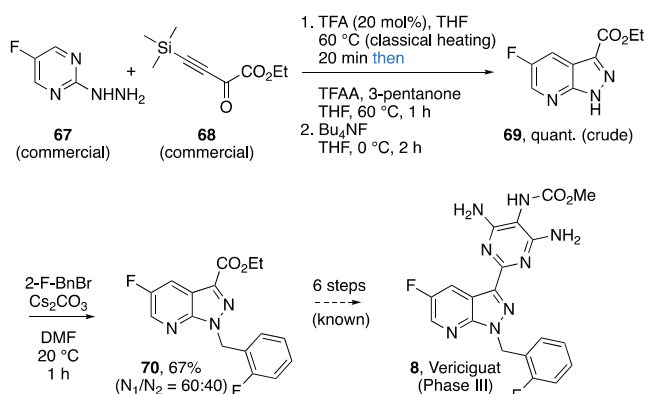## Scheme 5. NMR Insights, Gram-Scale One-Pot Reaction, and Synthetic Applications

a) ^{19}F NMR insights of the Diels-Alder cycloaddition of 16

b) One-pot two-step procedure on gram scale

c) Synthesis of the key intermediate 70 of the Bayer synthesis of Vericiguat

pensive, and structurally diverse building blocks. We show that 2-hydrazonopyrimidines can be profoundly activated using a simple trifluoroacetyl group, leading to a domino Diels–Alder/retro-Diels–Alder cycloaddition even at room temperature. This reaction is general, presents an excellent functional group tolerance, and can be scaled up on a gram scale in a convenient one-pot process. A straightforward synthesis of a key intermediate of Bayer's Vericiguat, a soluble guanylate cyclase (sGC) stimulator for the treatment of chronic heart failure in Phase III clinical trials, illustrates the potential of this cycloaddition strategy. Central to this method is the impressive lowering of the activation energy of the Diels–Alder reaction, which was analyzed by density functional theory calculations, including an application of the distortion/interaction–activation strain model to intramolecular reactions. The trifluoroacetyl activating group pre-organizes the cycloaddition precursor, electronically activates the aza-diene, and confers a favorable entropy on the transition state of the Diels–Alder cycloaddition.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

ⓢ Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications website at DOI: 10.1021/jacs.9b07037.

> X-ray crystallographic data for **17** (CCDC 1903453) (CIF)
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> X-ray crystallographic data for **19** (CCDC 1903455) (CIF)
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> X-ray crystallographic data for **45** (CCDC 1911671) (CIF)
>
> X-ray crystallographic data for **46** (CCDC 1911386) (CIF)
>
> X-ray crystallographic data for **47** (CCDC 1911387) (CIF)
>
> Experimental procedures, characterization data, and copies of NMR spectra for all products; computed energy components, Cartesian coordinates, and vibrational frequencies of all of the DFT-optimized structures (PDF)

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Notes
The authors declare the following competing financial interest(s): Christophe Salome and Thomas Fessard are Team Leader and CEO (respectively) of Spirochem, a Swiss CRO company selling the building blocks leading to compounds 45-48.

single compound that is treated with tetrabutylammonium fluoride in THF at 0 °C. The disubstituted 7-aza-indazole **69** is finally converted to **70** using 2-fluorobenzyl bromide and cesium carbonate in DMF at room temperature in 67% yield (N1/N2 benzylation ratio = 60:40). This synthesis of **72** requires only a single chromatography at the very last step.

■ CONCLUSIONS

Pyrimidines are intrinsically unreactive aza-dienes in Diels–Alder cycloadditions, and this lack of reactivity under mild conditions has hampered the access to a diversity of original nitrogen-containing heterocycles from these simple, inex-

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