

## Metal Ceramics

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## A Series of MAX Phases with MA-Triangular-Prism Bilayers and Elastic Properties

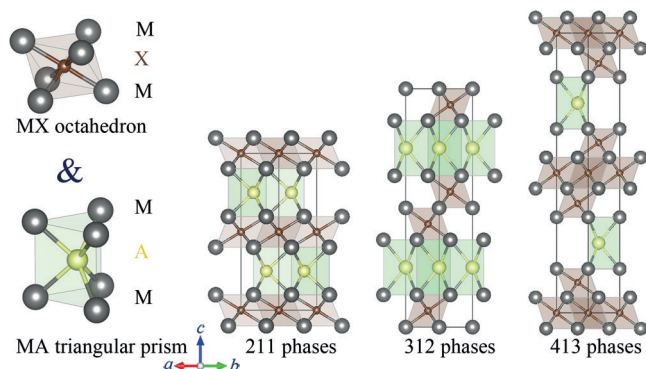
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**Abstract:** We report a new type of MAX phase ( $M$  = transition metals,  $A$  = main group elements, and  $X = C/N$ ),  $Nb_3As_2C$ , designated as 321 phase. It differs from all the previous  $M_{n+1}AX_n$  phases in that it consists of an alternate stacking of one MX layer and two MA layers in its unit cell, while only one MA layer is allowed in usual MAX phases. The new 321 phase exhibits a bulk modulus of  $Nb_3As_2C$  up to 225(3) GPa as determined by high-pressure synchrotron X-ray diffraction, one of the highest values among MAX phases. Isostructural 321 phases  $V_3As_2C$ ,  $Nb_3P_2C$ , and  $Ta_3P_2C$  are also found to exist. First-principles calculations reveal the outstanding elastic stiffness in 321 phases. Among all 321 phases,  $Nb_3P_2C$  is predicted to have the highest elastic properties. These 321 phases, represented by a chemical formula  $M_{n+1}A_nX$ , were added as new members to the MAX family and their other properties deserve future investigations.

MAX phases<sup>[1]</sup> belong to a family of non-van-der-Waals-type layered compounds with a general formula of  $M_{n+1}AX_n$  ( $n = 1, 2, 3$ ) in which  $M$  = transition metals,  $A$  = main group elements, and  $X = C/N$ . MAX phases are also termed as metallic ceramics<sup>[2]</sup> for their combined characteristic properties of both ceramics and metals. Some of them host high thermal and electrical conductivity, good elastic performance, excellent resistance to corrosion, oxidation, and thermal shock, easy machinability and unusual damage-tolerance.<sup>[2a,3]</sup> These combined elastic, electrical and thermal properties enable them to be promising materials for various applications,<sup>[4]</sup> especially in the structural or conductive components under high temperatures. Besides, MAX phases also have drawn much attention as the precursor of MXenes.<sup>[5]</sup> Owing to the relatively weak bonding of  $M-A$  in MAX phases,

a series of two dimensional transition-metal carbides can be obtained from acid etching of selected MAX phases.<sup>[6]</sup>

The study of MAX phases started from 1960s when the H-phases were found by Nowotny's group.<sup>[7]</sup> Now, over 60 MAX phases are found. Depending on the value of  $n$ , the  $M_2AX$ ,  $M_3AX_2$ , and  $M_4AX_3$  phases are usually named as 211, 312, and 413 phases, respectively.<sup>[1b]</sup> The crystal structures of MAX phases usually share a common symmetry with space group  $P6_3/mmc$ . Each X atom is coordinated by six M atoms forming an octahedron, and each M atom by six A atoms forming a hexagonal prism as shown in Figure 1.  $M_{n+1}AX_n$  can be regarded as an alternate stacking of  $n$  MX layers consisting of the edge-shared  $M_6X$  octahedrons and one MA layer consisting of edge-shared  $M_6A$  triangular prisms. It should be



**Figure 1.** The crystal structure of  $M_{n+1}AX_n$  phases. Schematic representation of the  $M_6X$  octahedron and  $M_6A$  triangular prism in MAX phases, and the crystal structure of 211, 312, and 413 phases viewed from [110] direction.

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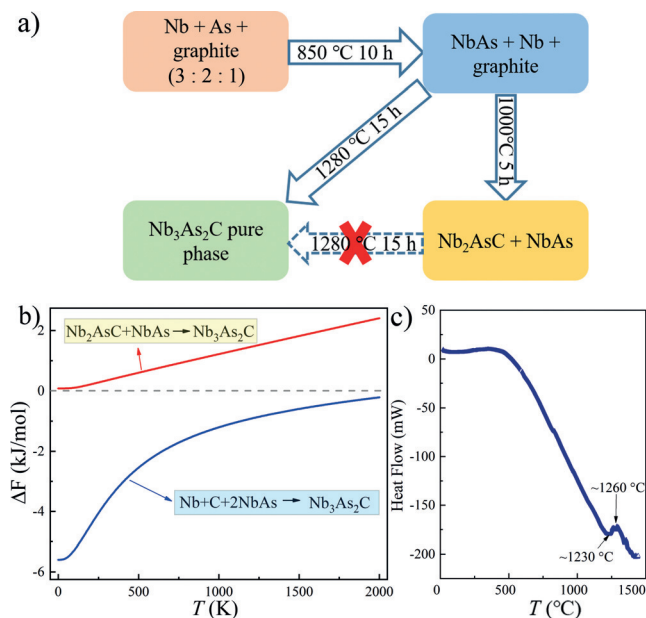
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noted that two and three MX layers can be combined into edge-shared bilayer and trilayer as in 312<sup>[8]</sup> and 413<sup>[9]</sup> phases, respectively. Besides, Mo<sub>2</sub>Ga<sub>2</sub>C,<sup>[10]</sup> Ta<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>C, Ta<sub>2</sub>Se<sub>2</sub>C,<sup>[11]</sup> and Nb<sub>2</sub>S<sub>2</sub>C,<sup>[12]</sup> named as 221 phases, also have a similar structure with M<sub>n+1</sub>AX<sub>n</sub> phases, where two layers of A atoms exist between the MX layers. The multi-layering of MA layers, however, has never been found among the known MAX phases.

Herein, we report new MAX phases in As-, P-containing systems, namely, Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, V<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C, and Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C. Their crystal structures are determined by X-ray diffraction (XRD) and high resolution transmission electron microscopy (HRTEM). These isostructural phases can be regarded as formation from the alternate stacking of one MX layer and two MA layers in their unit cell. They can be expressed as M<sub>n+1</sub>A<sub>n</sub>X (n=2), henceforth referred to as 321 phases. In contrast to the known MAX phases, the multi-layered MA layer is first observed in 321 phases. The pure phase of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C was obtained by an optimized synthesis process. It is found that Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C has a bulk modulus up to 225(3) GPa as revealed by high pressure synchrotron XRD (HPXRD) study with pressure up to 47 GPa, which is confirmed by the results from the first-principles calculations. These 321 phases form a new class of the MAX family.

The 321 phases were synthesized by a two-step process. Take Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C as an example, the process is illustrated in Figure 2a. High purity Nb, As and graphite powders were mixed and sealed in an evacuated quartz tube, then heating the quartz tube to 850 °C in 20 hours, and kept for 10 hours. The main by-products are NbAs, Nb, and graphite as revealed by XRD (see Figure S1 in the Supporting Information). Secondly, the as-prepared powder was pulverized, pelletized, sealed in a quartz tube, and heated to 1280 °C in 8 hours and kept for 15 hours. The end-product is Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C with grain size

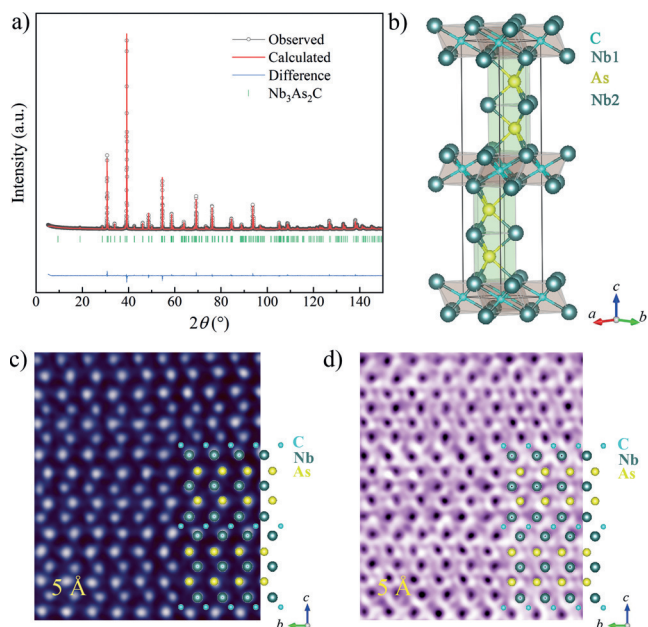


**Figure 2.** The synthesis of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C phase. a) The synthetic process of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. b) The theoretical free energy of two reaction paths. c) Differential thermal analysis of 850 °C sintered sample (NbAs + Nb + C).

2–10 μm (Figure S2). The elemental composition determined by inductively coupled plasma-atomic emission spectrometry is Nb:As:C = 2.9:1.9:1, very close to the nominal composition. We found that long-time sintering around 1000 °C always leads to the formation of Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC (see Figure S3), and we cannot obtain 321 phase with further sintering at 1280 °C. Thermodynamic calculations (see Figure 2b) indicate the reaction path Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC + NbAs = Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C is unfavored as the free energy ( $\Delta F$ ) is positive. In comparison, the free energy for the reaction NbAs + Nb + C = Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C is negative, meaning that this path is possible. The differential thermal analysis (see Figure 2c) confirms this. An exothermic peak at 1260 °C should be an indication of the reaction temperature, in agreement with our synthetic temperature. It is noted that Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C will decompose under high vacuum when the sample was heated up to about 1600 °C (see Figure S4).

All peaks in the powder XRD pattern can be well indexed as  $a = 3.36056(6)$  Å, and  $c = 18.69508(35)$  Å with space group No. 194,  $P6_3/mmc$  as shown in Figure 3a. The crystal structure of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C was solved by direct method using EXPO2014 program suite.<sup>[13]</sup> The Rietveld refinements converge to the agreement factors  $R_p = 4.11\%$  and  $R_{wp} = 5.45\%$ . The atom positions of 321 phases are listed in Table S1. For Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C,  $z_M = 0.05951(4)$ ,  $z_A = 0.15849(5)$ .

As shown in Figure 3b, the crystal structure of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C exhibits distinct structural features from the conventional M<sub>n+1</sub>AX<sub>n</sub> phases. There are two Nb positions in Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C in the unit cell, as labeled by Nb1 and Nb2. Each As atoms is coordinated by three Nb1 atoms and three Nb2 atoms forming a triangular prism; Each C atom is coordinated by six Nb1 atoms forming an octahedron. Different from M<sub>n+1</sub>AX<sub>n</sub> phases, the MA-triangular-prism layers here are bilayers. The crystal structure of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C could be seen as an



**Figure 3.** Crystal structure of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. a) The Rietveld refinement of the XRD data of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. b) The crystal structure of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. c) The HADDF image of the atomic arrangement of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C viewed from [100] direction. d) The ABF image.

alternate stacking of MX-octahedron layer and MA-triangular-prism bilayer. Similar to most MAX phases, the Nb, As, and C atoms of 321 phases are all in hexagonal closed packing positions.

The atomic arrangement in the unit cell was examined by high-angle annular dark-field (HAADF) and annular-bright-field (ABF) scanning transmission electron microscopy (STEM) as shown in Figure 3c,d. The atomic stacking of Nb and As atoms along the [001] direction were clearly observed in HAADF and ABF images, matching well with the solved structure. Due to the low contrast of C atoms, it is hard to observe the C atoms<sup>[14]</sup> in HAADF image. But in ABF image, C atoms can be identified lying in between the Nb atom layers. The atomically resolved HAADF and ABF images justify the reliability of the solved structure.

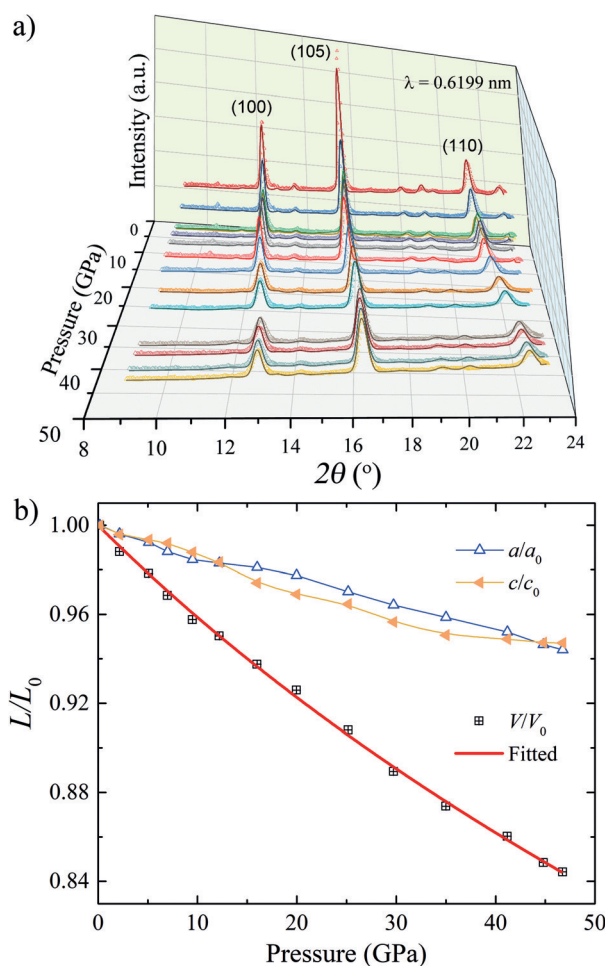
For Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C,  $d_{\text{Nb1-C}} = 2.2365 \text{ \AA}$  is slightly shorter than the  $d_{\text{Nb-C}} = 2.2422 \text{ \AA}$ ; the average of  $d_{\text{Nb1-As}}$  (2.6814 Å) and  $d_{\text{Nb2-As}}$  (2.5867 Å) is close to the  $d_{\text{Nb-As}}$  (2.6343 Å) in Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC. This suggests the strong Nb-C and Nb-As bonding in Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C as the case in Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC. The strong bonding strengths in this 321 phase are expected to exhibit high elastic performance as in As-, P-, S-containing 211 phases.<sup>[15]</sup>

HPXRD under pressures of up to 47 GPa were applied to determine the bulk modulus of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. As shown in Figure 4a, no new peak appears with the increasing pressure, indicating the excellent stability of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C under high pressures. The strongest three peaks (105), (100), and (110) can be obviously seen to shift to high angles with increasing pressures. The pressure dependence of the normalized lattice parameters  $a/a_0$ ,  $c/c_0$  are shown in Figure 4b. Similar to the case with Zr<sub>2</sub>SC,<sup>[15d]</sup> the compressibility of this 321 phase are quite isotropic, while are strong anisotropic<sup>[16]</sup> for most MAX phases. Both  $a$  and  $c$  shrink by less than 6%, and the cell volume by about 16% at the pressure of 47 GPa. The pressure-dependent  $V/V_0$  can be well fitted by the Birch-Murnaghan<sup>[17]</sup> equation of state with a correlation coefficient  $R^2 = 0.9987$ , [Eq. (1)]

$$P = 3/2B_0[(V/V_0)^{-7/3} - (V/V_0)^{-5/3}] \times \{1 + \frac{3}{4}(B'_0 - 4)(V/V_0)^{-2/3} - 1\} \quad (1)$$

where  $B_0$  is the bulk modulus and  $B'_0$  its first pressure derivative. The fitted  $B_0$  and  $B'_0$  are 225(3) GPa, and 2.6(3) GPa, respectively. The value of  $B_0$  of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C is nearly equal to the  $B_0 = 224(2)$  GPa for Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC,<sup>[15b]</sup> and quite close to the highest  $B_0 = 261(2)$  GPa for  $\beta$ -Ta<sub>4</sub>AlC<sub>3</sub>.<sup>[18]</sup> This result shows that the existence of more Nb-As bonds in Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C does not cause a decrease in bulk modulus, which provide further evidence of that the M-A bonding and M-X bonding are close in strength in the As-containing MAX phases.

First-principles calculations have been used to evaluate the elastic constants  $c_{ij}$  of most MAX phases within an accuracy of about 10%.<sup>[19]</sup> We performed the first-principles calculations of the elastic constants of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C along with other 321 phases. For hexagonal symmetry, there are five independent elastic constants:  $c_{11}$ ,  $c_{12}$ ,  $c_{13}$ ,  $c_{33}$ , and  $c_{44}$



**Figure 4.** High-pressure XRD study of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. a) The pressure dependence of the XRD patterns of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, the solid lines are the results of refinements. b) Pressure-dependent relative cell parameters ( $a/a_0$ ,  $c/c_0$ , and  $V/V_0$ ). The red curve is the fit to data by the Birch-Murnaghan equation of state.

as shown in the Equation S1.<sup>[19]</sup> The calculated elastic constants  $c_{ij}$  are listed in Table S2. The bulk modulus  $B_V$ , Young's modulus  $E_V$ , shear modulus  $G_V$  and Poisson ratio  $\nu$  as listed in Table 1 were then calculated by the Voigt method using Equations S2–S5.<sup>[19]</sup> The Poisson ratio  $\nu$  of 321 phases are in the range of 0.22–0.24. For Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, the bulk modulus  $B_V$  is 198.3 GPa. The calculated  $B_V$  for Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC by the same method is near 200 GPa, consistent with the results 204 GPa calculated by Mekour et al.<sup>[20]</sup> Accordingly, the ab initio calculations tend to underestimate the elastic properties of As-, P- containing MAX phases. The elastic modulus and shear modulus of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C ( $E_V = 306.5$  GPa,  $G_V = 123.4$  GPa)

**Table 1:** The theoretical lattice parameters  $a'$  and  $c'$  and elastic parameters of 321 phases.

Phase	$a'$ [Å]	$c'$ [Å]	$G_V$ [GPa]	$E_V$ [GPa]	$B_V$ [GPa]	$\nu$
Nb <sub>3</sub> As <sub>2</sub> C	3.3857	18.9088	123.4	306.5	198.3	0.24
Nb <sub>3</sub> P <sub>2</sub> C	3.3334	18.2091	152.0	371.8	223.6	0.22
Ta <sub>3</sub> P <sub>2</sub> C	3.3128	18.1167	149.0	365.3	222.0	0.23
V <sub>3</sub> As <sub>2</sub> C	3.1657	17.8618	121.4	297.8	181.2	0.23

are slightly smaller than Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC ( $E_V=313$  GPa,  $G_V=126$  GPa).<sup>[21]</sup>

As shown in Table 1, the bulk modulus of Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C and Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C are 223.6 GPa and 222.0 GPa, respectively. Because of the underestimation of the bulk modulus in the case of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, the experimental bulk modulus of Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C and Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C might be higher than that for Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C. It can be seen that the P-containing 321 phases are better elastically performed than As-containing 321 phases. Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C ( $E_V=371.8$  GPa,  $G_V=152.0$  GPa) performed best among 321 phases, even better than the calculated results in Nb<sub>2</sub>PC ( $E_V=333$  GPa and  $G_V=134$  GPa).<sup>[21]</sup> More interestingly, the calculated results of Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C also higher than the experimental results in Nb<sub>4</sub>AlC<sub>3</sub>, which are the best values among the MAX phases ( $E_V=365$  GPa,  $G_V=149$  GPa parallel to basal plane, and  $E_V=353$  GPa,  $G_V=153$  GPa vertical to basal plane).<sup>[22]</sup> Considering the possible best elastic performance, relatively low theoretical density and low toxicity, Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C is a more promising material for application among these 321 phases.

Until now, the known As- or P- containing conventional MAX phases include Nb<sub>2</sub>AsC, Nb<sub>2</sub>PC, V<sub>2</sub>AsC, and V<sub>2</sub>PC.<sup>[7,23]</sup> The synthesis of other As- or P- containing 321 phases Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C, Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C and V<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C were tried. We find these phases exist but the secondary phases MX, M<sub>2</sub>AX or MA are often present. For instance, the main phase Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C content is 57.7(6) mol %, and the secondary phases are NbC (5.2(1)%), Nb<sub>2</sub>PC (22.7(2)%), NbP (14.4(2)%), see Figure S5. The Rietveld refinements were performed for Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C and Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C samples. For V<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, there are many unknown peaks in the PXRD pattern as shown in Figure S6, so we only indexed the peaks belonging to V<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C to obtain its lattice parameters. The lattice parameters, atomic positions, phase content, and agreement factors of 321 phases are listed in Table S1. The structural information including the bond lengths and bond angles are listed in Table S3.

In conclusion, a new series of MAX phases, Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, V<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C, Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C, and Ta<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C, named as 321 phases, were added to the family of MAX phases. With the optimized synthesis method, pure phases of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C can be obtained, and we suggest the reaction path should follow  $2\text{NbAs} + \text{Nb} + \text{C} \rightarrow \text{Nb}_3\text{As}_2\text{C}$ . XRD and TEM results revealed that the 321 phases share common symmetry and constituent units with the conventional M<sub>n+1</sub>AX<sub>n</sub> phases. The structure of 321 phases consists of alternate stacking of MX-octahedron layers and MA-triangular-prism bilayers. The First-principles calculations and HPXRD reveal the outstanding elastic performance of 321 phases. The experimental bulk modulus of Nb<sub>3</sub>As<sub>2</sub>C is up to 225(3) GPa, which is close to the highest values among MAX phases. The predicted the elastic stiffness ( $E_V=371.8$  GPa,  $G_V=152.0$  GPa,  $B_V=223.6$  GPa), relative low density and low toxicity of Nb<sub>3</sub>P<sub>2</sub>C make it a most promising material for future application. These 321 phases are the first series of MAX phases that can be expressed as M<sub>n+1</sub>A<sub>n</sub>X with  $n > 1$ . Their novel structure and outstanding elastic stiffness in 321 phases are interesting, which is encouraging to search for new M<sub>n+1</sub>A<sub>n</sub>X phases.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Keywords:** carbides · elastic constants · high pressure XRD · layered compounds · MAX phases

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