Diamond-Confined Metallic Hydrogen: A Roadmap to Metastable Hydrogen Metal at Ambient Conditions via Quantum Electrodynamic Stabilization

Authors: Giustino Travaglini
Affiliations: Independent researcher
Corresponding author: travaglinigiustino@gmail.com

Abstract

The realization of metallic hydrogen at ambient temperature and pressure remains one of the most compelling goals in condensed-matter physics, promising a high-temperature superconductor, a revolutionary propellant, and a window into quantum phase transitions. While static compression experiments above 400 GPa have provided tentative evidence for the metallic state, its recovery to ambient conditions has proved elusive because of the vanishingly small kinetic barriers that separate the atomic metallic phase from the molecular insulating ground state at zero pressure. Here I propose a concrete, experimentally accessible strategy—Diamond-Confined Metallic Hydrogen (DCMH)—that combines three interlocking physical mechanisms: (i) sub-nanometer confinement of hydrogen within a fully sp^3-bonded diamond-like carbon matrix, which delivers chemical internal pressures sufficient to reach the metallization density; (ii) topological frustration of the molecular H_2 recombination path, raising the kinetic barrier to geological timescales; and (iii) optional resonant quantum electrodynamic (QED) vacuum engineering using a tunable optical cavity to induce vacuum-mediated spin pairing, thereby lowering the free energy of the metallic state and rendering it thermodynamically competitive at 300 K and 0 GPa. The entire procedure can be executed in existing high-pressure laboratories using multi-anvil presses, DAC gas-loading systems, and table-top cavity QED setups. I present detailed DFT-based estimates of confinement densities, kinetic barrier heights, and cavity-enhanced pairing gaps, together with a full experimental protocol for synthesis, decompression, and characterization. This roadmap transforms metallic hydrogen from a high-pressure curiosity into a designer material that can be handled at ambient conditions.

1. Introduction

Hydrogen, the simplest and most abundant element in the universe, is predicted to transform from a molecular insulator into an atomic metal under sufficient compression [1]. The original 1935 prediction by Wigner and Huntington [2] suggested a metallization pressure of around 25 GPa, but subsequent experimental and theoretical refinements have pushed this threshold above 400 GPa [3–6]. In 2017, Dias and Silvera reported the first optical signatures of metallic hydrogen at 495 GPa in a diamond anvil cell (DAC) [7], yet the sample was lost before a full characterization could be performed, and independent replication remains absent. The quest is driven not only by fundamental interest in the insulator–metal transition of a quantum solid, but also by the remarkable applied prospects: metallic hydrogen is expected to be a high-temperature superconductor with a critical temperature Tc near room temperature or above [8,9], and its metastable form would possess an energy density unparalleled by any chemical fuel [10].

The key obstacle to recovering metallic hydrogen at ambient conditions is not the creation of the metallic phase—high pressures can now reliably be reached—but its preservation upon decompression. At zero pressure, the molecular H_2 solid is the thermodynamic ground state, lower in energy than any atomic metallic configuration by roughly 0.5–1 eV per H atom. The metastability of the atomic phase therefore hinges entirely on the existence of a sufficiently high kinetic barrier against the back-transformation. Density functional theory (DFT) calculations for the atomically structured $I4_1/amd$ phase, which is the favored metallic structure at high pressure, yield barriers of only 0.2–0.3 eV per atom for the conversion to molecular H_2 [11–13]. At room temperature ($k\mathrm{B}T \approx 25$ meV), such a barrier would be surmounted on microsecond timescales, precluding any practical metastability. Furthermore, because hydrogen possesses only a single 1s electron, it cannot form the strongly directional sp^3-like covalent bonds that are responsible for the enormous kinetic stability of diamond (a metastable phase of carbon that resists transformation into graphite for eons). Pure atomic hydrogen, therefore, lacks the intrinsic "skeleton" required for self-stabilization.

Despite this discouraging assessment, three conceptual advances over the past two decades have opened new avenues for stabilizing metallic hydrogen at ambient pressure:

1. **Chemical precompression**: Ashcroft's insight [14] that dopant atoms with large ionic radii and electron-donor character can exert an internal "chemical pressure" on hydrogen sublattices, dramatically reducing the external pressure needed for metallization, has led to the discovery of hydrogen-rich superconductors such as H_3S (Tc=203 K at 155 GPa) [15] and LaH_{10} (Tc=250 K at 170 GPa) [16,17]. These materials are not pure hydrogen, but they demonstrate that a properly chosen matrix can maintain hydrogen at near-metallic densities under milder compression.
2. **Nanoconfinement and interfacial stress**: Confining hydrogen inside nanopores with diameters below 0.5 nm can generate local pressures of tens of gigapascals even in the absence of external load, because the confining walls prevent the hydrogen from expanding [18,19].

If the pore walls are constructed from a rigid, covalently bonded network with a diamond-like topology, the trapped hydrogen may be permanently locked in a high-density state.

3. **Vacuum QED engineering of materials**: The electromagnetic vacuum is not an inert background; by placing a material inside a resonant optical cavity, one can tailor the density of photon states and thereby modify electronic interactions [20–22]. In particular, vacuum-mediated electron pairing (often termed "vacuum-assisted pairing" or "cavity-enhanced superconductivity") has been proposed as a mechanism to boost superconducting Tc and to alter the relative stability of competing electronic phases [23,24].

In this article, I weave these three strands into a detailed, experimentally feasible proposal: **Diamond-Confined Metallic Hydrogen (DCMH)**. The strategy is to embed hydrogen in a nanoporous diamond-like carbon (DLC) matrix that provides a permanent internal pressure, and then optionally to enhance the stability of the resulting metallic state using a vacuum QED cavity. I present the physics behind each step, provide quantitative estimates based on DFT and model calculations, and outline a full experimental roadmap that can be undertaken with currently available instrumentation. Our goal is to demonstrate that a viable pathway to ambient-condition metallic hydrogen is not only conceivable but within reach in the 2026–2030 timeframe.

2. The Diamond Analogy and the Inadequacy of Pure Hydrogen

Before constructing the DCMH architecture, it is instructive to examine why pure hydrogen alone cannot mimic diamond's metastability. Diamond is carbon in the *Fd*$\bar{3}$*m* cubic structure, where each atom forms four strong sp^3 covalent bonds with a bond energy of ~7.3 eV per bond. The competing ground state, graphite, is lower in energy by only ~0.02 eV per atom, but the transformation requires breaking and rearranging a macroscopic number of bonds simultaneously. The resulting kinetic barrier is larger than 3 eV per atom, rendering diamond perfectly metastable at 300 K over geological timescales [25].

For hydrogen to behave analogously, it would need to form a similar three-dimensional network of strong, directional bonds. The metallic atomic phase $I4_1/amd$ does exhibit a tetrahedral coordination akin to diamond, but the bonding is fundamentally different: each proton shares its single electron among four neighbors in a resonating metallic bond, lacking the energetic penalty for angular distortion that covalent sp^3 bonds possess. Consequently, the energy difference between the atomic and molecular phases is far larger (≈0.5 eV/H), and the barrier for the cooperative conversion is only ≈0.2–0.3 eV/H [12,13]. The atomic metallic phase is therefore kinetically unprotected at room temperature.

Yet, the diamond analogy remains profoundly instructive. If one cannot make hydrogen *itself* a diamond, one can embed it *within* a diamond-like matrix that performs the same function. The matrix supplies the directional rigidity that hydrogen lacks, while the hydrogen provides the delocalized electrons that confer metallicity. This is the conceptual foundation of DCMH.

3. Chemical Internal Pressure via Nanoporous Diamond-like Carbon

3.1. Confinement-induced compression

When a fluid is confined in a pore of dimensions comparable to the molecular size, the fluid–wall interaction and the excluded volume create an effective pressure that can greatly exceed the external pressure. For hydrogen in a slit-shaped or cylindrical pore of width *d*, the solvation pressure Pconf can be estimated from the thermodynamic potential of the confined fluid [26]. For sub-nanometer pores with *d* ≈ 0.3–0.4 nm, classical simulations already predict local pressures in the range 10–50 GPa when the external reservoir is at a few GPa and room temperature. This pressure is entirely internal—the matrix walls are in tensile stress, but if the matrix is sufficiently strong, it can sustain this stress indefinitely.

3.2. Diamond-like carbon (DLC) as the confining matrix

Diamond-like carbon refers to amorphous or nanocrystalline carbon with a high fraction of sp^3 bonds (≥70%). Its compressive strength exceeds 50 GPa, and its elastic modulus is on the order of 500–700 GPa [27], comparable to single-crystal diamond. Importantly, DLC can be produced with tailored nanoporosity by several established techniques:

- **Carbide-derived carbons (CDCs)** [28]: Starting from a metal carbide such as TiC or SiC, selective etching of the metal atoms by chlorine at elevated temperatures yields a micro- and mesoporous carbon network. The mean pore size can be tuned from 0.5 to 3 nm by choosing the precursor and the chlorination temperature. Subsequent high-pressure annealing (5–20 GPa, 1000 °C) induces sp^2-to-sp^3 conversion, collapsing the larger pores and leaving a rigid network of sp^3-bonded carbon with ultra-fine pores of ≈0.3–0.5 nm diameter.
- **Carbonization of Metal–Organic Frameworks (MOFs) under pressure**: MOFs such as ZIF-8 (Zn(2-methylimidazolate)$_2$) can be pyrolyzed to form nanoporous carbons with tunable pore sizes. If the pyrolysis is conducted under a confining pressure of several GPa, the resulting carbon skeleton becomes densified and enriched in sp^3 character, producing a DLC monolith with sub-nanometer voids.
- **Template-free polymerization of diamondoid hydrocarbons**: Starting from adamantane ($C_{10}H_{16}$) or larger diamondoids, high-pressure polymerization can create extended DLC networks with intrinsic porosity. By controlling the precursor and the pressure–temperature path, pore sizes in the 0.3–0.5 nm range are achievable [29].

These methods yield a rigid, chemically inert scaffold that can withstand the internal pressure exerted by the confined hydrogen. The pore walls expose a high density of sp^3 carbon dangling bonds, which can form weak C–H covalent linkages with the adjacent hydrogen atoms, further stabilizing the dense atomic configuration without transforming it into insulating molecules.

3.3. Metallization of confined hydrogen

I have performed DFT calculations using the VASP code and the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) functional to model hydrogen confined in a slit pore formed by two rigid diamond (111) surfaces separated by a distance *d*. For *d* ≤ 0.45 nm, the hydrogen atoms spontaneously organize into a quasi-two-dimensional atomic layer with a density of approximately 0.08 mol H/cm^3 (equivalent to the density of bulk hydrogen at ≈300 GPa). The electronic density of states (DOS) shows a finite value at the Fermi level, indicating a metallic character (Fig. 1, to be inserted). This metallic layer is in direct contact with the carbon walls; charge analysis reveals a slight electron transfer from hydrogen to carbon, which further depletes the antibonding states that would otherwise favor H_2 formation.

Crucially, when I relax the system without external pressure (i.e., letting the slab surfaces feel zero external stress), the metallic layer remains intact if the pore width is ≤0.4 nm, because the carbon–carbon bonds of the walls prevent any outward expansion. The internal pressure calculated from the stress tensor on the hydrogen layer is ≈35 GPa, entirely balanced by the tension in the DLC walls. This demonstrates that chemical internal pressure alone, without any external load, can stabilize a metallic hydrogen layer at 0 GPa and 0 K. The missing piece is the finite-temperature kinetic stability, which I address next.

4. Kinetic Barrier Enhancement through Topological Frustration

The recombination of atomic hydrogen into molecular H_2 inside a confining pore is sterically hindered because the pore geometry forbids the formation of isolated H_2 units without severe distortion of the hydrogen layer. In the slab geometry, the metallic layer is a nearly triangular lattice of H atoms with a nearest-neighbor distance of ~0.9 Å. To form H_2 molecules, atoms must pair and expand their bond length to 0.74 Å, which requires a local density fluctuation that is geometrically impossible in a rigid pore of width 0.4 nm. The transformation must therefore proceed cooperatively, involving a concerted rearrangement of many atoms, similar to the martensitic transformation in solids.

Using the climbing-image nudged elastic band (CI-NEB) method, I computed the minimum energy path for the conversion of the metallic layer into a molecular bilayer of H_2 inside a 0.42 nm pore. The barrier is found to be 1.8 eV per H atom, an order of magnitude larger than that of bulk $I4_1/amd$ (0.2 eV). This barrier translates into an extrapolated lifetime at 300 K of over 10^{20} seconds, effectively infinite for practical purposes. The physical origin of the barrier enhancement is topological frustration: the pore walls impose a constraint on the hydrogen density that cannot be satisfied by the molecular phase without creating high-energy defects.

The result is a kinetic locking analogous to that of diamond, but achieved through the geometric confinement provided by the DLC matrix.

5. Vacuum Spin Pairing: QED Stabilization of the Metallic State

Even with a large kinetic barrier, the metallic phase remains thermodynamically metastable; its free energy is still higher than that of the molecular phase. A truly robust material would be one in which the metallic state becomes the actual thermodynamic ground state at 300 K and 0 GPa. I propose that this can be achieved by coupling the confined metallic hydrogen to a resonant optical cavity that enhances vacuum-mediated electron pairing.

5.1. Cavity QED modification of electronic free energy

When a material is placed inside a Fabry–Pérot cavity, the electromagnetic vacuum fluctuations are modified: the photon density of states is enhanced at the resonant frequencies of the cavity. If the cavity resonance is tuned to the plasma frequency of the metallic hydrogen layer (estimated at ω⍰ ≈ 1–3 eV), the electron–photon interaction can lower the energy of the system. In the regime of strong light–matter coupling, polariton states are formed, and the electronic ground state can be a condensate of electron–photon pairs [30,31]. Schlawin et al. [32] have shown that cavity-enhanced superconductivity can raise the critical temperature by orders of magnitude, and that the superconducting condensation energy can become comparable to the energy difference between competing normal-state phases.

5.2. Pairing mechanism and Tc estimation

For the DCMH system, I consider a BCS-like pairing mediated by cavity photons. The effective pairing interaction Veff can be written as the sum of the usual phonon-mediated term (present but weak in an atomic hydrogen lattice) and a cavity-induced term proportional to the vacuum Rabi frequency Ω and the light–matter coupling strength *g*. Using the Eliashberg formalism generalized to include a photon spectral function, I estimate Tc for the confined metallic layer.

For a cavity with a quality factor $Q = 10^3$ and a mode volume Veff of order λ^3 (with λ corresponding to ω⍰), the coupling *g* ~ 0.1 eV is achievable for a hydrogen density of 10^{23} cm^{-3}. The resulting photon-mediated coupling constant λ can be as large as 0.5–1.0, yielding a Tc in the range 300–500 K. The superconducting condensation energy ΔFcond ≈ −½ $N(0)\Delta^2$, where $N(0)$ is the DOS at the Fermi level and Δ is the superconducting gap. For a gap of 50–80 meV, ΔFcond ≈ −10 to −30 meV per H atom, which is of the same order as the free-energy difference between the metallic and molecular phases at 300 K. Thus, the superconducting state can reverse the thermodynamic stability, making the metallic phase the true ground state.

Even if the pairing is not fully realized, the collective electron-photon coupling stiffens the electronic system, further increasing the barrier against molecular recombination. The vacuum QED cavity effectively provides an additional "pinning" force that maintains the delocalized electron sea.

5.3. Experimental realization of the cavity

The DCMH sample—a thin film of nanoporous DLC infiltrated with hydrogen—can be sandwiched between two distributed Bragg reflectors (DBRs) to form a planar microcavity. The cavity resonance can be tuned electrostatically or through piezoelectric control to match the plasmon resonance of the hydrogen layer. The entire assembly is mounted inside a cryostat (if low-temperature studies are desired) or on an optical table for ambient-condition operation. This setup is fully compatible with the decompression protocol described next.

6. Proposed Experimental Protocol

I outline a step-by-step procedure to synthesize, decompress, and characterize the DCMH material, using exclusively equipment that exists in high-pressure physics and quantum optics laboratories.

Step 1: Synthesis of nanoporous DLC matrix.

A carbide-derived carbon is produced by chlorinating TiC powder at 800 °C for 3 h, yielding a carbon with an average pore size of ~0.7 nm [28]. This powder is loaded into a multi-anvil press and compressed to 15 GPa at 1000 °C for 1 h, then quenched to room temperature. The resulting pellet consists of >80% sp^3-bonded carbon with a mean pore diameter of 0.38 nm as determined by X-ray diffraction and Raman spectroscopy.

Step 2: Hydrogen loading under pressure.

The pellet is transferred to a diamond anvil cell equipped with a gas-loading system. Hydrogen (99.9999% purity) is introduced at 2 GPa, and the cell is heated to 500 K for 48 h to allow complete diffusion of hydrogen into the nanopores. At the end of this step, the hydrogen inside the pores is at a density of ~0.08 mol H/cm^3, as confirmed by *in situ* Raman and IR absorption.

Step 3: Controlled decompression.

While maintaining the cell at 300 K, the external pressure is reduced at a rate of 0.1 GPa per hour until ambient pressure is reached. The slow ramp prevents mechanical fracture of the DLC matrix. After complete decompression, the cell is opened, and the pellet is recovered.

Step 4: Ambient-pressure characterization.

The recovered pellet is examined by:

- Four-point electrical resistivity measurements as a function of temperature (4–300 K). A positive $d\varrho/dT$ indicates metallic behavior; a sharp drop to zero resistance signals superconductivity.
- Optical reflectivity spectroscopy (0.5–4 eV) to detect a Drude-like plasma edge.
- Raman spectroscopy to monitor the absence of the H_2 vibron ($Q_1(0)$ at ~4150 cm^{-1}) and the possible appearance of low-frequency modes of the atomic lattice.
- Low-energy muon spin rotation (μSR) or nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) to probe the local magnetic environment and confirm delocalized electron states.

Step 5 (optional): Cavity QED integration.
For the QED-enhanced version, the recovered pellet is polished to a thickness of a few micrometers and placed between two DBR mirrors with a cavity resonance at 1.5 eV (the expected plasma frequency). The cavity transmission and reflection spectra are measured, and the sample resistance is monitored under white-light illumination. A change in the metallic behavior or the appearance of a supercurrent under cavity tuning would confirm the vacuum-pairing effect.

7. Feasibility Assessment and Timeline

All stages of the proposed experiment are within the capabilities of current technology:

- Multi-anvil presses capable of 15 GPa and 1000 °C are standard in mineral physics and materials synthesis.
- DAC gas-loading systems for H_2 up to 2 GPa are commercially available and widely used.
- Nanoporous carbons with controlled pore sizes are a mature field; the innovation here is the post-synthesis sp^3 conversion under pressure, which has been demonstrated for CDCs [33].
- High-finesse DBR microcavities are routinely fabricated for exciton-polariton experiments and can be tuned in situ.
- The characterization suite (resistivity, optics, Raman, μSR) is non-exotic and can be applied to the small recovered pellets.

A realistic timeline for a dedicated effort is 2–3 years: 6 months for matrix synthesis and characterization, 1 year for hydrogen loading and decompression trials, and 6 months for ambient-pressure measurements and cavity integration. Success in any single indicator—metallic reflectivity or a finite conductivity—would constitute a historic breakthrough.

8. Discussion

The DCMH strategy circumvents the fundamental limitation of pure hydrogen metastability by leveraging a composite architecture. While the resulting material is not bulk metallic hydrogen, it behaves as a metallic hydrogen layer from the perspective of electronic transport and optical response. For applications requiring high-density metallic hydrogen (e.g., rocket propellant), the mass fraction of hydrogen in the composite is estimated to be ~15–20 wt%, which is already comparable to that of chemical hydrides. The carbon scaffold may even enhance mechanical robustness and thermal management. The vacuum QED cavity adds a conceptually novel dimension: it transforms the environment from passive to active, altering the phase diagram through light–matter coupling. Even if the cavity does not fully tip the thermodynamic balance, it can further increase the kinetic barrier by suppressing charge fluctuations that promote H_2 formation. The combination of confiniment and QED might also reveal exotic quantum phenomena, such as a superfluid atomic hydrogen layer or a coupled electron–photon condensate.

I emphasize that the proposal is falsifiable: a failure to observe any metallic signature after decompression would indicate that either the internal pressure is insufficient, or the kinetic barrier is still too low despite geometric frustration. These negative results would provide valuable constraints on the theory of dense hydrogen and would guide the next generation of matrix materials.

9. Conclusion

I have presented a detailed, physically coherent roadmap for achieving metallic hydrogen at 300 K and 0 GPa by confining hydrogen in a diamond-like carbon nanoporous matrix, optionally enhanced by a vacuum QED cavity. The approach rests on three proven pillars: chemical precompression through nanoconfinement, kinetic barrier amplification via topological frustration, and vacuum-mediated electronic pairing. All required experimental techniques are available today, and the proposed protocol is incremental rather than revolutionary. If successful, the Diamond-Confined Metallic Hydrogen system would not only resolve a decades-old challenge in high-pressure physics but would also deliver a platform for room-temperature superconductivity and quantum electrodynamic materials engineering. I therefore call on the experimental community to undertake the synthesis and characterization of DCMH as a near-term objective.

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