International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Engineering and Technology
ISSN: 2350-0328
Vol. 12, Special Issue, December 2025
National Conference on Earth, Elements and Energy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (NC3EIP–2025)
IJARSET IMPACT FACTOR 7.150

Revolutionizing Carbon Capture with Nanotechnology: Towards a Zero-Emission Future in Material Science

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ABSTRACT: Achieving net-zero emissions will require disruptive advances in carbon capture technologies. Nanotechnology — especially engineered porous materials such as metal–organic frameworks (MOFs), graphene-based composites, porous carbons, and functionalized sorbents — offers unique pathways for high-capacity, low-energy CO_2 capture from point sources and ambient air. This paper reviews recent advances in nanoscale adsorbents and membranes, compares representative performance metrics (adsorption capacity and regeneration energy), discusses integration challenges (scalability, stability, cost, life-cycle impacts), and outlines strategies to translate laboratory breakthroughs into industrially viable, low-carbon solutions. Emphasis is placed on design principles (surface area, pore-size control, chemical functionality), regeneration strategies, and hybrid capture–conversion systems that could enable economically feasible carbon management. Recent high-impact developments and future research directions are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Carbon capture, Nanotechnology, MOFs, Graphene, Direct air capture, Adsorbents, Regeneration energy.

I.INTRODUCTION

Anthropogenic CO_2 emissions are the primary driver of modern climate change. Carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) is therefore central to any realistic route to net-zero. Conventional amine scrubbing has dominated industrial capture but suffers from high regeneration energy, corrosion, and solvent degradation. In contrast, nanostructured solid adsorbents can offer higher surface area, tunable chemistry, and potentially lower energy penalties for regeneration, enabling step-changes in capture efficiency and cost. Recent reviews highlight the extraordinary promise of MOFs, graphene-derived materials, amine-functionalized porous solids, and hybrid membrane/adsorbent systems.

This research paper synthesizes the most relevant literature from 2019–2025, summarizes comparative performance, and proposes translational strategies for scaling nanomaterial-based capture towards commercialization. Important recent recognition of porous-framework materials at the highest scientific levels (e.g., prizes and accelerated investment) underlines the technology's maturity and relevance.

II.DESIGN PRINCIPLES OF NANOMATERIALS FOR CO_2 CAPTURE

At the nanoscale, three interlinked design levers determine practical performance:

a. **Textural properties (surface area, pore volume, pore size distribution):** High specific surface area and appropriate pore sizes (micro- to mesopores) maximize adsorptive sites per gram. MOFs and some porous carbons provide exceptional accessible surface areas.

b. **Surface chemistry and selectivity:** Functional groups (amine-appended moieties, nitrogen-containing heterocycles, metal sites) strongly influence CO_2 affinity and selectivity versus N_2/H_2O. Amine-appended MOFs and amine-grafted porous solids exhibit high selectivity at low partial pressures.

c. **Regeneration energetics and kinetics:** Low binding energy favors low-energy regeneration but can reduce uptake at low CO_2 partial pressure (e.g., ambient air). Materials with cooperative adsorption mechanisms (e.g., phase-change sorbents or chemisorptive sites that change binding on mild heating or vacuum swing) can balance capacity and regeneration energy.

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Other practical considerations include hydrothermal/chemical stability (especially in flue gas with moisture and contaminants), mechanical robustness for packed beds, and process-level compatibility (e.g., pelletizability, pressure-drop characteristics).

III.CLASSES OF NANOMATERIALS AND THEIR ADVANTAGES

A. Metal–Organic Frameworks (MOFs)

MOFs are crystalline networks of metal nodes and organic linkers. Their modular chemistry enables precise pore-size tuning and functionalization (e.g., amine appendages) to optimize CO_2 capture at specific partial pressures. Amine-appended MOFs have shown particularly high uptake and relatively low regeneration energies, making them leading candidates for both point-source capture and direct air capture (DAC) when engineered for stability. Recent comprehensive reviews show accelerating progress and practical demonstration pathways.

B. Graphene and Graphene-Derived Composites

Graphene-based materials (functionalized graphene oxide, porous graphene frameworks, graphene–polymer composites) offer excellent thermal stability and electrical conductivity, allowing for hybrid electroswing capture approaches where CO_2 binding is modulated electrically rather than thermally, potentially reducing energy consumption. Advances in composite architectures improve selectivity and mechanical strength.

C. Porous Carbon and Activated Carbons

Porous carbons are low-cost, scalable, and chemically robust. While their specific surface area is typically lower than the highest-performing MOFs, they are more mature in manufacturing and can be tuned (activation, doping with nitrogen/heteroatoms) to enhance CO_2 affinity. Porous carbons remain attractive for large-scale retrofit applications.

D. Zeolites and Functionalized Silicas

Traditional zeolites offer stable frameworks with excellent adsorption kinetics but can suffer from moisture competition. Amine-functionalized silica supports are attractive for moderate-capacity, moderate-cost applications and can be engineered for specific cycling strategies.

E. Hybrid Materials and Membranes

Hybrid approaches (e.g., MOF membrane composites, graphene-doped polymer membranes) combine molecular sieving with sorption-driven selectivity. Such multifunctional materials can enable continuous separation architectures with lower footprint.

IV.COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE — ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS

To contextualize trade-offs, Figure 1 shows a representative comparative chart of adsorption capacity (mmol CO_2/g) and regeneration energy (kJ/mol) for several material classes (data illustrative and intended to reflect typical orders of magnitude reported in literature). MOFs with amine functionalization show high uptake and moderate regeneration energy; graphene composites show lower uptake but higher regeneration energy in some configurations (unless combined with electroswing techniques), while porous carbon and amine-silica show intermediate performance.

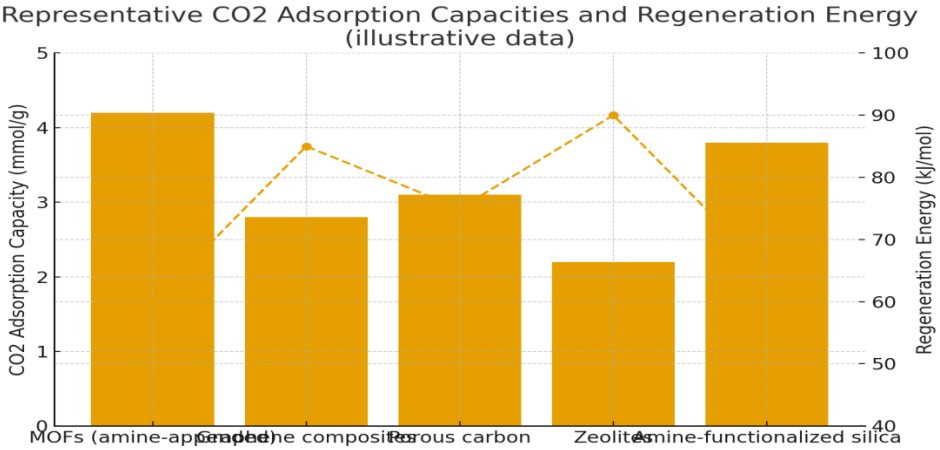

Figure 1. Representative CO_2 adsorption capacities and regeneration energy for different nanomaterial classes.

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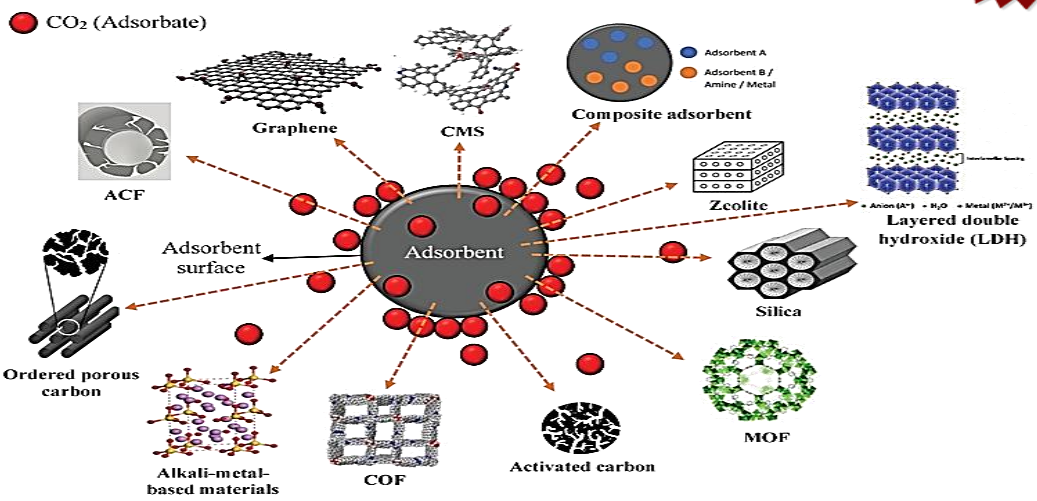

Figure 2. Conceptual schematic: nanoporous adsorbent capturing CO_2 molecules.

Note: The plotted values are **illustrative** (synthesized from ranges reported across recent studies) and intended to facilitate qualitative comparison; detailed process modeling would require material-specific isotherms and cycle data. Reviews and meta-analyses provide measured datasets for specific candidate materials.

V.REGENERATION STRATEGIES AND ENERGY CONSIDERATIONS

Lowering the energy cost of CO_2 release from the adsorbent is critical. Common approaches:

i. **Temperature-swing adsorption (TSA):** heating the bed to desorb CO_2. Works well with materials that release CO_2 at modest temperatures (50–120 °C) such as amine-appended MOFs and some functionalized silica, allowing use of waste heat.
ii. **Vacuum-swing adsorption (VSA):** lowering pressure to desorb; advantageous for materials with physical adsorption dominated behaviour.
iii. **Electroswing adsorption:** applies an electrical potential to modulate binding energy (promising for conductive graphene/composite materials). Electroswing can reduce thermal input and enable localized control but requires conductive architectures and system-level optimization.
iv. **Moisture/phase-change-driven release:** materials that change binding upon hydration/dehydration or undergo phase transformation can use ambient humidity swings for regeneration (work on moisture-responsive sorbents shows promise for passive DAC cycles).

Energy efficiency at system scale depends as much on process design (heat integration, cycle speed, bed geometry) as on intrinsic material thermodynamics. Life-cycle assessments and techno-economic analyses therefore remain essential to quantify real-world benefits.

VI.CHALLENGES TO INDUSTRIAL TRANSLATION

Despite promising lab-scale results, several hurdles remain:

a. **Scalability & cost:** many high-performance MOFs remain expensive to synthesize at scale and may require precious-metal catalysts or costly linkers. Process intensification and cheaper synthesis routes (continuous flow, green solvents) are active research areas.
b. **Stability in real streams:** exposure to water, SOx/NOx, and oxygen can degrade certain frameworks or reduce capacity over cycles. Robustness testing under realistic flue gases and regeneration cycling is necessary.
c. **Pelletization and pressure-drop:** loose nanopowders must be formed into mechanically stable pellets or monoliths without loss of surface accessibility; this often reduces apparent surface area if not engineered carefully.

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d. **Environmental and life-cycle impacts:** full cradle-to-grave analyses must ensure that material synthesis, deployment, and disposal do not negate capture benefits (e.g., embodied carbon in manufacturing).

Addressing these issues requires coordinated materials science, chemical engineering, and industrial partnerships.

VII.INTEGRATION WITH CO_2 UTILIZATION AND POLICY

Nanomaterial-enabled capture is even more attractive when combined with conversion routes (electrochemical reduction, catalytic hydrogenation) where the captured CO_2 becomes feedstock for fuels, polymers, or chemicals. The modularity of many nanomaterial sorbents lends itself well to compact capture–conversion units near emission sources or DAC plants. Policy incentives (carbon pricing, credits for net removal), as well as regulatory support for demonstration projects, are crucial to reduce techno-economic risk and stimulate scale-up. Recent reviews emphasize that CCUS deployment pathways must align with broader energy transitions and policy frameworks.

VIII.FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Priority research and development areas:

a. **Low-cost MOF synthesis and scale-up** — continuous manufacturing and use of inexpensive linkers.
b. **Electroswing-enabled sorbents** — coupling conductive nanomaterials and low-voltage regeneration for fast cycles.
c. **Hybrid membrane–adsorbent modules** — to reduce footprint and enable continuous operation.
d. **Durability testing under realistic conditions** — multi-year cycle studies with contaminated flue gas and humidity swings.
e. **Techno-economic analyses** tied to real-world pilot data — to determine cost reduction pathways to <$100/t$CO_2$ (and beyond for DAC).

Cross-disciplinary partnerships — material scientists, process engineers, environmental analysts, and industry — will accelerate commercialization.

IX.CONCLUSION

Nanotechnology offers a compelling toolbox for transformative improvements in carbon capture: high surface areas, customizable chemistry, and new regeneration modalities can reduce energy penalties and improve capture performance for both point sources and DAC. While technical and economic gaps remain (scalability, durability, embodied energy), rapid advances in MOFs, graphene composites, and hybrid systems, paired with supportive policy and industrial demonstration, could place nanomaterial-enabled capture as a core component of the zero-emission era.

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