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OXIDATION OF ALKYLAROMATIC COMPOUNDS**FIELD**

[0001] The present invention relates to a process for oxidizing alkylaromatic compounds and for converting the oxidation product to phenol and the corresponding ketone.

BACKGROUND

[0002] Phenol is an important product in the chemical industry and is useful in, for example, the production of phenolic resins, bisphenol A, ϵ -caprolactam, adipic acid, and plasticizers.

[0003] Currently, the most common route for the production of phenol is the Hock process. This is a three-step process in which the first step involves alkylation of benzene with propylene to produce cumene, followed by oxidation of the cumene to the corresponding hydroperoxide and then cleavage of the hydroperoxide to produce equimolar amounts of phenol and acetone. However, the world demand for phenol is growing more rapidly than that for acetone. In addition, the cost of propylene relative to that of butenes is likely to increase, due to a developing shortage of propylene.

[0004] Thus, a process that uses butenes or higher alkenes instead of propylene as feed and coproduces methyl ethyl ketone (MEK) or higher ketones, such as cyclohexanone, rather than acetone may be an attractive alternative route to the production of phenols. For example, there is a growing market for MEK, which is useful as a lacquer, a solvent and for dewaxing of lubricating oils. In addition, cyclohexanone is used as an industrial solvent, as an activator in oxidation reactions and in the production of adipic acid, cyclohexanone resins, cyclohexanone oxime, caprolactam and nylon 6.

[0005] It is known that phenol and MEK can be produced from sec-butylbenzene, in a process where sec-butylbenzene is oxidized to obtain sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide and the peroxide decomposed to the desired phenol and methyl ethyl ketone. An overview of such a process is described in pages 113-121 and 261-263 of Process Economics Report No. 22B entitled "Phenol", published by the Stanford Research Institute in December 1977.

[0006] For example, in our International Patent Publication No. WO06/015826, we have described a process for producing phenol and methyl ethyl ketone, in which benzene is contacted with a C₄ alkylating agent under alkylation conditions with a catalyst comprising zeolite beta or a molecular sieve having an X-ray diffraction pattern including d-spacing maxima at 12.4±0.25, 6.9±0.15, 3.57±0.07 and 3.42±0.07 Angstrom to produce an alkylation effluent comprising sec-butylbenzene. The sec-butylbenzene is then oxidized to produce a hydroperoxide and the hydroperoxide is decomposed to produce phenol and methyl ethyl

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ketone. The oxidation step can be conducted with or without a catalyst under conditions including a temperature between about 70°C and about 200°C, such as about 90°C to about 130°C, and a pressure of about 0.5 to about 10 atmospheres (50 to 1000 kPa). Suitable catalysts are said to include the N-hydroxy substituted cyclic imides described in Published U.S. Patent Application No. 2003/0083527.

[0007] There is a need to find an oxidation process for sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene that is highly selective to sec-butylbenzene or cyclohexylbenzene hydroperoxide, that is less sensitive to the presence of impurities than the existing oxidation processes, and that allows efficient commercial scale production of phenol and MEK or phenol and cyclohexanone.

[0008] It is known from, for example, U.S. Patent Nos. 6,852,893 and 6,720,462 that certain cyclic imides, such as N-hydroxyphthalimide, in combination with free radical initiators, such as peroxy compounds or azo compounds, are effective catalysts in the catalytic oxidation of a wide variety of aliphatic or aromatic hydrocarbons, including alkyl aromatic hydrocarbons, such as cumene, cyclohexylbenzene, cyclododecylbenzene and sec-butylbenzene, to the corresponding hydroperoxides. The patents teach that the oxidation can be conducted over a wide range of process conditions including a temperature of 0 to 500°C and a molar ratio of the catalyst to the hydrocarbon to be oxidized between 10^{-6} mol % and 10 mol %. However, no suggestion is provided in either patent as to the efficacy, or the preferred conditions, of the process for the selective oxidation of sec-butylbenzene to sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide or cyclohexylbenzene to cyclohexylbenzene hydroperoxide.

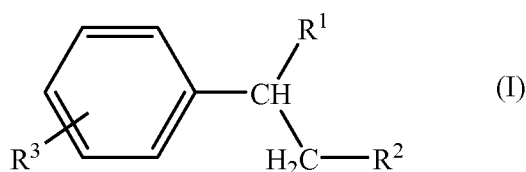
[0009] U.S. Patent No. 7,038,089 discloses a process for preparing hydroperoxides from their corresponding hydrocarbons which comprises oxidizing the hydrocarbons, particularly ethylbenzene, at a temperature in the range between 130 and 160°C with an oxygen containing gas in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide compound and an alkali metal compound. In particular, the '089 patent teaches that when oxidation of ethylbenzene is carried out in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide and an alkaline metal compound, simultaneously high reaction rate and high selectivity to the corresponding hydroperoxide are obtained, superior to those which are obtained when both components from the catalytic system are used independently. In contrast, according to the '089 patent, when the cyclic imide alone is used as the catalyst, high imide concentrations have to be avoided for cost and product impurity reasons, but reducing the imide concentration to tolerable levels, requires a rise in temperature to increase reaction rate, leading to a decrease of the selectivity to hydroperoxide to unacceptable levels.

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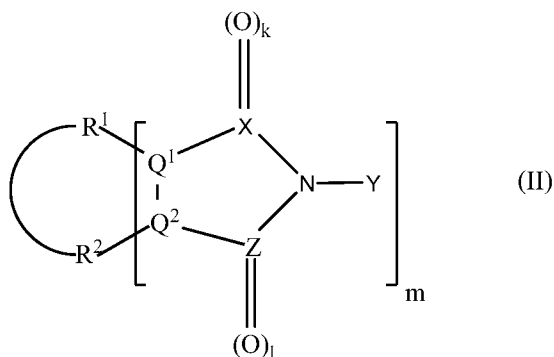
[0010] According to the present invention, it has now been found that, with sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene, oxidation can be conducted at commercially viable conversion rates and sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivities in the presence of a cyclic imide catalyst, without the addition of alkaline metal compound, provided the conversion is conducted over a relatively narrow range of temperature and cyclic imide concentration. Contrary to the teaching in U.S. Patent No. 7,038,089, with sec-butylbenzene oxidation and cyclohexylbenzene, it has been found that the presence of an alkaline metal compound significantly reduces the activity and hydroperoxide selectivity of the oxidation catalyst.

SUMMARY

[0011] In one aspect, the present invention resides in a process for oxidizing an alkylaromatic compound to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide, the process comprising contacting an alkylaromatic compound of general formula (I):



[0012] in which R¹ and R² each independently represents hydrogen or an alkyl group having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms, provided that R¹ and R² may be joined to form a cyclic group having from 4 to 10 carbon atoms, said cyclic group being optionally substituted, and R³ represents hydrogen, one or more alkyl groups having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms or a cyclohexyl group, with oxygen in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide of the general formula (II):



wherein each of R¹ and R² is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or from the groups SO₃H, NH₂, OH, and

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NO₂ or from the atoms H, F, Cl, Br, and I, provided that R¹ and R² can be linked to one another via a covalent bond;

each of Q¹ and Q² is independently selected from C, CH, CR³;

each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH₂, N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table;

Y is O or OH;

k is 0, 1, or 2;

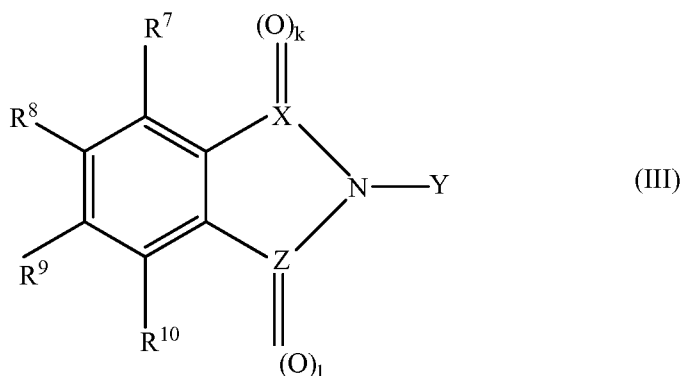
l is 0, 1, or 2;

m is 1 to 3; and

R³ can be any of the entities listed for R¹; and

wherein said contacting is conducted at a temperature of about 90°C to about 150°C, said cyclic imide is present in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 5 wt% of the alkylaromatic in said feed, and said catalyst is substantially free of alkali metal compounds, said contacting oxidizing at least part of the alkylaromatic in said feed to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide.

[0013] Conveniently, said cyclic imide obeys the general formula (III):



wherein each of R⁷, R⁸, R⁹, and R¹⁰ is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or from the groups SO₃H, NH₂, OH and NO₂, or from the atoms H, F, Cl, Br and I;

each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH₂, N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table;

Y is O or OH;

k is 0, 1, or 2; and

l is 0, 1, or 2.

[0014] Conveniently, said alkylaromatic compound of general formula (I) is selected from ethylbenzene, cumene, sec-butylbenzene, p-methyl-sec-butylbenzene, 1,4-

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diphenylcyclohexane, sec-pentylbenzene, sec-hexylbenzene, cyclopentylbenzene, cyclohexylbenzene and cyclooctylbenzene, with sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene being preferred.

[0015] Conveniently, said contacting is conducted at a temperature of between about 120°C and about 150°C, such as between about 125°C and about 140°C, and at a pressure between about 15 kPa and about 500kPa, such as between 15kPa to about 150kPa.

[0016] Conveniently, said cyclic imide is present in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 5 wt% of the alkylaromatic in said feed during said contacting.

[0017] Conveniently, said contacting converts at least 4 wt% per hour of said alkylaromatic with a selectivity to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide of at least 90 wt%.

[0018] In one embodiment the process of the invention further comprises converting the hydroperoxide into a phenol and an aldehyde or ketone of the general formula $R^1COCH_2R^2$ (IV) in which R^1 and R^2 have the same meaning as in formula (I).

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0019] Figure 1 is a graph plotting sec-butylbenzene conversion against time on stream (T.O.S) in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at 115°C without N-hydroxyphthalimide (NHPI) according to the process of Example 1 and in the presence of 0.43 wt% NHPI according to the process of Example 2.

[0020] Figure 1(a) is a graph plotting sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivity against sec-butylbenzene conversion in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at 115°C without NHPI according to the process of Example 1 and in the presence of 0.43 wt% NHPI according to the process of Example 2.

[0021] Figure 2 is a graph plotting reaction rate and sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide yield against NHPI concentration in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at 115°C with varying amounts of NHPI according to the process of Example 3.

[0022] Figure 3 is a graph plotting sec-butylbenzene conversion and sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivity against NHPI concentration in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at 115°C with varying amounts of NHPI according to the process of Example 3.

[0023] Figure 4 is a graph plotting sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivity against sec-butylbenzene conversion in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at 125°C with varying amounts of NHPI according to the process of Example 4.

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[0024] Figures 5(a) and (b) are graphs plotting sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivity against sec-butylbenzene conversion in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene at varying temperatures between 115°C and 150°C in the presence of 0.05 wt% NHPI [Figure 5(a)] and 0.10 wt% NHPI [Figure 5(b)] according to the process of Example 5.

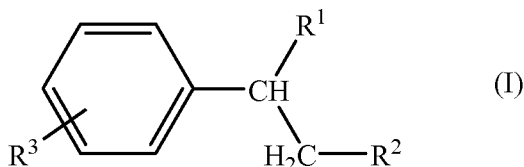
[0025] Figures 6(a) and (b) are graphs plotting reaction rate and sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide selectivity against temperature in the oxidation of sec-butylbenzene in the presence of 0.05 wt% NHPI [Figure 6(a)] and 0.10 wt% NHPI [Figure 6(b)] according to the process of Example 5.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

[0026] The terms "group", "radical", and "substituent" are used interchangeably in this document. For purposes of this disclosure, "hydrocarbyl radical" is defined to be a radical, which contains hydrogen atoms and up to 20 carbon atoms and which may be linear, branched, or cyclic, and when cyclic, aromatic or non-aromatic. "Substituted hydrocarbyl radicals" are radicals in which at least one hydrogen atom in a hydrocarbyl radical has been substituted with at least one functional group or where at least one non-hydrocarbon atom or group has been inserted within the hydrocarbyl radical.

[0027] As used herein, the new numbering scheme for the Periodic Table Groups is employed as disclosed in Chemical and Engineering News, 63(5), 27 (1985).

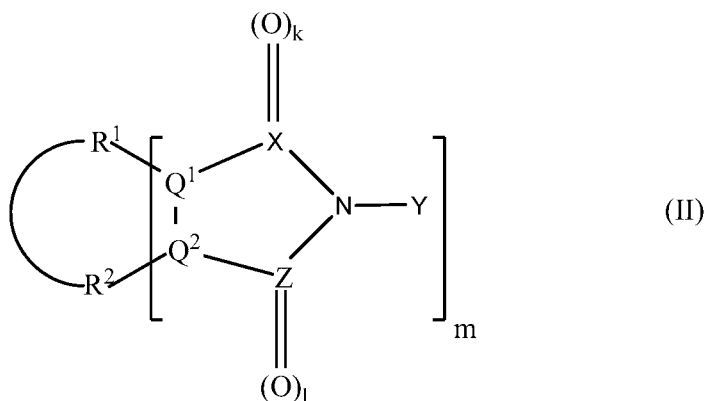
[0028] Described herein is a process for oxidizing an alkylaromatic to the corresponding hydroperoxide and optionally for cleaving the resultant hydroperoxide produced in (a) to produce phenol and the corresponding ketone. The oxidation process comprises contacting a feed comprising an alkylaromatic compound to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide, the process comprising contacting an alkylaromatic compound of general formula (I):



[0029] in which R¹ and R² each independently represents hydrogen or an alkyl group having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms, provided that R¹ and R² may be joined to form a cyclic group having from 4 to 10 carbon atoms, said cyclic group being optionally substituted, and R³ represents hydrogen, one or more alkyl groups having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms or a

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cyclohexyl group, with oxygen in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide of the general formula (II):



wherein each of R¹ and R² is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or the groups SO₃H, NH₂, OH and NO₂, or the atoms H, F, Cl, Br and I, provided that R¹ and R² can be linked to one another via a covalent bond; each of Q¹ and Q² is independently selected from C, CH, CR³; each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH₂, N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table; Y is O or OH; k is 0, 1, or 2; l is 0, 1, or 2; m is 1 to 3; and R³ can be any of the entities (radicals, groups, or atoms) listed for R¹. The oxidation is conducted at a temperature of about 90°C to about 150°C, with the cyclic imide being present in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 5 wt% of the alkylaromatic in the feed and the catalyst being substantially free of alkali metal compounds.

[0030] The phrase “provided that R¹ and R² may be joined” and so on is used herein to mean that, as an alternative to each of R¹ and R² being a (“monovalent”) alkyl group, the two “alkyl” entities designated “R¹” and “R²” are joined into a (“divalent”) hydrocarbyl chain (having 2 to 8 carbons in that chain), with respective ends of that “divalent” chain begin linked to the C atoms specifically shown in formula (I) to form a ring. Thus, in an embodiment, R¹ and R² together constitute a hydrocarbyl moiety that connects to the carbon atoms of formula (I) form a cyclic group having from 4 to 10 carbon atoms, conveniently a cyclohexyl group, which may be substituted with one or more alkyl group having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms or with one or more phenyl groups. Examples of suitable alkylaromatic compounds are ethylbenzene, cumene, sec-butylbenzene, p-methyl-sec-butylbenzene, 1,4-diphenylcyclohexane, sec-pentylbenzene, sec-hexylbenzene, cyclopentylbenzene, cyclohexylbenzene and cyclooctylbenzene, with sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene being preferred. It will also be understood that in the case where R¹ and R² are joined to form

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a cyclic group, the number of carbons forming the cyclic ring is from 4 to 10. However, that ring may itself carry one or more substituents, such as one or more alkyl groups having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms or one or more phenyl groups, as in the case of 1,4-diphenylcyclohexane.

Sec-butylbenzene Production

[0031] In one embodiment, the alkylaromatic compound may be sec-butylbenzene which may be produced by alkylating benzene with at least one C₄ alkylating agent under alkylation conditions in the presence of a heterogeneous catalyst. The alkylation conditions conveniently include a temperature of from about 60°C to about 260°C, for example between about 100°C and about 200°C. The alkylation pressure is conveniently 7000 kPa or less, for example from about 1000 to about 3500 kPa. The alkylation is conveniently carried out at a weight hourly space velocity (WHSV) based on C₄ alkylating agent of between about 0.1 and about 50 hr⁻¹, for example between about 1 and about 10 hr⁻¹.

[0032] The C₄ alkylating agent conveniently comprises at least one linear butene, namely butene-1, butene-2 or a mixture thereof. The alkylating agent can also be an olefinic C₄ hydrocarbon mixture containing linear butenes, such as can be obtained by steam cracking of ethane, propane, butane, LPG and light naphthas, catalytic cracking of naphthas and other refinery feedstocks and by conversion of oxygenates, such as methanol, to lower olefins. For example, the following C₄ hydrocarbon mixtures are generally available in any refinery employing steam cracking to produce olefins and are suitable for use as the C₄ alkylating agent: a crude steam cracked butene stream, Raffinate-1 (the product remaining after solvent extraction or hydrogenation to remove butadiene from the crude steam cracked butene stream) and Raffinate-2 (the product remaining after removal of butadiene and isobutene from the crude steam cracked butene stream).

Cyclohexylbenzene Production

[0033] In a further practical embodiment, the alkylaromatic compound of general formula (I) is cyclohexylbenzene and is preferably produced by contacting benzene with hydrogen in the presence of a heterogeneous bifunctional catalyst which comprises at least one metal having hydrogenation activity, typically selected from the group consisting of palladium, ruthenium, nickel and cobalt, and a crystalline inorganic oxide material having alkylation

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activity, typically at least one molecular sieve of the MCM-22 family (as defined below). The contacting step is conveniently conducted at a temperature of about 50°C to about 350°C and/or a pressure of about 100 to about 7000 kPa and/or a benzene to hydrogen molar ratio of about 0.01 to about 100 and/or a WHSV of about 0.01 to about 100.

[0034] In the case where the alkylaromatic compound that is oxidized according to the invention is cyclohexylbenzene, the oxidation product is cyclohexylbenzene hydroperoxide and the cleavage product comprises phenol and cyclohexanone. The crude cyclohexanone and crude phenol from the cleavage step may be subjected to further purification to produce purified cyclohexanone and phenol. A suitable purification process includes, but is not limited to, a series of distillation towers to separate the cyclohexanone and phenol from other species. The crude or purified cyclohexanone may itself be subjected to dehydrogenation in order to convert it to phenol. Such dehydrogenation may be performed, for example, over a catalyst such as platinum, nickel or palladium.

[0035] The alkylation catalyst is conveniently zeolite beta, which is describe din detail in U.S. Patent No. 3,308,069, or more preferably is at least one molecular sieve of the MCM-22 family. As used herein, the term "MCM-22 family material" (or "material of the MCM-22 family" or "molecular sieve of the MCM-22 family" or "MCM-22 family zeolite"), includes one or more of:

- molecular sieves made from a common first degree crystalline building block unit cell, which unit cell has the MWW framework topology. (A unit cell is a spatial arrangement of atoms which if tiled in three-dimensional space describes the crystal structure. Such crystal structures are discussed in the "Atlas of Zeolite Framework Types", Fifth edition, 2001, the entire content of which is incorporated as reference);
- molecular sieves made from a common second degree building block, being a 2-dimensional tiling of such MWW framework topology unit cells, forming a monolayer of one unit cell thickness, preferably one c-unit cell thickness;
- molecular sieves made from common second degree building blocks, being layers of one or more than one unit cell thickness, wherein the layer of more than one unit cell thickness is made from stacking, packing, or binding at least two monolayers of one unit cell thickness. The stacking of such second degree building blocks can be in a regular fashion, an irregular fashion, a random fashion, or any combination thereof; and
- molecular sieves made by any regular or random 2-dimensional or 3-dimensional

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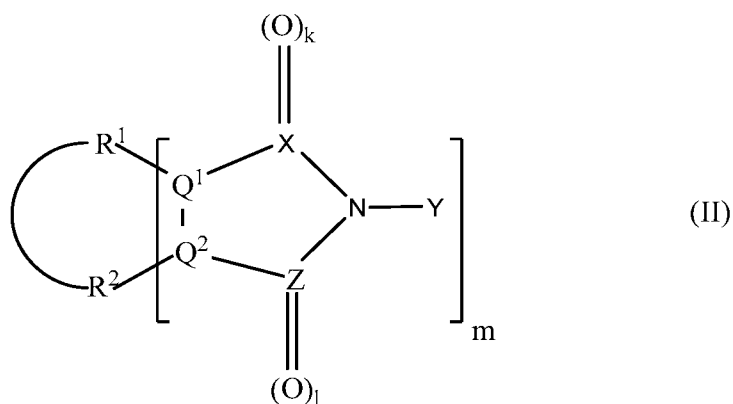
combination of unit cells having the MWW framework topology.

[0036] Molecular sieves of the MCM-22 family include those molecular sieves having an X-ray diffraction pattern including d-spacing maxima at 12.4 ± 0.25 , 6.9 ± 0.15 , 3.57 ± 0.07 and 3.42 ± 0.07 Angstrom. The X-ray diffraction data used to characterize the material are obtained by standard techniques such as using the K-alpha doublet of copper as incident radiation and a diffractometer equipped with a scintillation counter and associated computer as the collection system.

[0037] Materials of the MCM-22 family include MCM-22 (described in U.S. Patent No. 4,954,325), PSH-3 (described in U.S. Patent No. 4,439,409), SSZ-25 (described in U.S. Patent No. 4,826,667), ERB-1 (described in European Patent No. 0293032), ITQ-1 (described in U.S. Patent No. 6,077,498), ITQ-2 (described in International Patent Publication No. WO97/17290), MCM-36 (described in U.S. Patent No. 5,250,277), MCM-49 (described in U.S. Patent No. 5,236,575), MCM-56 (described in U.S. Patent No. 5,362,697), UZM-8 (described in U.S. Patent No. 6,756,030), and mixtures thereof. Molecular sieves of the MCM-22 family are preferred as the alkylation catalyst since they have been found to be highly selective to the production of sec-butylbenzene, as compared with the other butylbenzene isomers. Preferably, the molecular sieve is selected from (a) MCM-49, (b) MCM-56 and (c) isotypes of MCM-49 and MCM-56, such as ITQ-2.

Oxidation Process

[0038] The oxidation step in the present process is accomplished by contacting a feed comprising an alkylaromatic compound such as sec-butylbenzene and cyclohexylbenzene with an oxygen-containing gas in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide of the general formula (II):

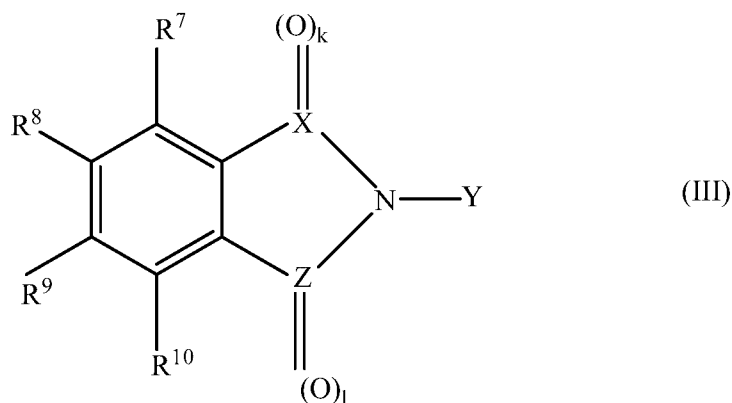


wherein each of R^1 and R^2 is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or the groups SO_3H , NH_2 , OH and NO_2 , or

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the atoms H, F, Cl, Br and I provided that R^1 and R^2 can be linked to one another via a covalent bond; each of Q^1 and Q^2 is independently selected from C, CH, CR^3 ; each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH_2 , N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table; Y is O or OH; k is 0, 1, or 2; l is 0, 1, or 2; m is 1 to 3 such as 1, 2 or 3, and R^3 can be any of the entities (radicals, groups, or atoms) listed for R^1 . Conveniently, each of R^1 and R^2 is independently selected from aliphatic alkoxy or aromatic alkoxy radicals, carboxyl radicals, alkoxy-carbonyl radicals and hydrocarbon radicals, each of which radicals has 1 to 20 carbon atoms.

[0039] Generally, the cyclic imide employed as the oxidation catalyst obeys the general formula (III)



wherein each of R^7 , R^8 , R^9 , and R^{10} is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or the groups SO_3H , NH_2 , OH and NO_2 , or the atoms H, F, Cl, Br and I; each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH_2 , N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table; Y is O or OH; k is 0, 1, or 2, and l is 0, 1, or 2. Conveniently, each of R^7 , R^8 , R^9 , and R^{10} is independently selected from aliphatic alkoxy or aromatic alkoxy radicals, carboxyl radicals, alkoxy-carbonyl radicals and hydrocarbon radicals, each of which radicals has 1 to 20 carbon atoms.

[0040] In one practical embodiment, the cyclic imide catalyst comprises N-hydroxyphthalimide.

[0041] The cyclic imide catalyst is added to the oxidation feed in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 5 wt%, generally between about 0.1 wt% and about 1 wt%, of the alkylaromatic in said feed. Furthermore, the cyclic imide catalyst may be added to the oxidation feed in an amount between (i) about 0.05 and about 0.10 wt%; (ii) about 0.1 wt% and about 0.2 wt%; (iii) about 0.2 wt% and about 0.3 wt%; (iv) about 0.3 wt% and about 0.4 wt%; (v) about 0.4 wt% and about 0.5 wt%; (vi) about 0.1 wt% and about 0.5 wt%, and (vii) about

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0.1 wt% to 0.3 wt% of the alkylaromatic compound in said feed. Moreover, the oxidation is conducted in the substantial absence (less than 0.00001 % by weight of the oxidation reaction mixture) of alkali metal compounds.

[0042] The oxidation step is conducted at relatively high temperature of between about 90°C and about 150°C, such as between about 120°C and about 150°C, for example between about 125°C and about 140°C, since it is found that, with alkylaromatic compound oxidation in the presence of N-hydroxyphthalimide, the hydroperoxide selectivity against conversion reaction profile is not affected by increasing the temperature. The oxidation step is conveniently carried out at a pressure between about 15 kPa and about 500kPa, such as between 15kPa to about 150kPa. By controlling the cyclic imide catalyst concentration and oxidation temperature as described herein, it is found that said alkylaromatic compound conversion rates of at least 4 wt% per hour can be achieved with a selectivity to the corresponding hydroperoxide of at least 90 wt%.

Production of Phenol

[0043] The hydroperoxide produced by the present oxidation process can be converted by acid cleavage to phenol and the corresponding ketone. The phenol can of course then be reacted with acetone to produce bisphenol A, a precursor in the production of polycarbonates and epoxy resins.

[0044] The hydroperoxide cleavage reaction is conveniently effected by contacting the hydroperoxide with a catalyst in the liquid phase at a temperature of about 20°C to about 150°C, such as about 40°C to about 120°C, and/or a pressure of about 50 to about 2500 kPa, such as about 100 to about 1000 kPa and/or a liquid hourly space velocity (LHSV) based on the hydroperoxide of about 0.1 to about 100 hr⁻¹, preferably about 1 to about 50 hr⁻¹. The hydroperoxide is preferably diluted in an organic solvent inert to the cleavage reaction, such as methyl ethyl ketone, cyclohexanone, phenol, sec-butylbenzene or cyclohexylbenzene, to assist in heat removal. The cleavage reaction is conveniently conducted in a catalytic distillation unit.

[0045] The catalyst employed in the cleavage step can be a homogeneous catalyst or a heterogeneous catalyst.

[0046] Suitable homogeneous cleavage catalysts include sulfuric acid, perchloric acid, phosphoric acid, hydrochloric acid and p-toluenesulfonic acid. Ferric chloride, boron trifluoride, sulfur dioxide and sulfur trioxide are also effective homogeneous cleavage catalysts. The preferred homogeneous cleavage catalyst is sulfuric acid

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[0047] A suitable heterogeneous catalyst for use in the cleavage of the hydroperoxide includes a smectite clay, such as an acidic montmorillonite silica-alumina clay, as described in U.S. Patent No. 4,870,217 (Texaco), the entire disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0048] The invention will now be more particularly described with reference to the following non-limiting Examples.

Example 1. SBB oxidation without NHPI

[0049] 150 gm of sec-butylbenzene (SBB) supplied by TCI America was weighed into a 300 ml Parr reactor fitted with a stirrer, thermocouple, gas inlet, sampling port and a condenser containing a Dean Stark trap for water removal. The reactor and contents were stirred at 700 rpm and sparged with nitrogen at a flow rate of 250 cc/minute for 5 minutes. The reactor was then pressurized with nitrogen to 690 kPag (100 psig) while maintained under a nitrogen sparge and was then heated to 115°C. When the reaction temperature was reached, the gas was switched from nitrogen to air and the reactor was sparged with air at 250 cc/minute for 6 hours. Samples were taken hourly and analyzed by gas chromatography. After 6 hours, the gas was switched back to nitrogen and the heat was turned off. When the reactor had cooled, it was depressurized and the contents removed. The conversion results are shown in Figure 1, and the selectivity results plotted against the conversion results are shown in Figure 1(a).

Example 2. SBB oxidation in the presence of NHPI

[0050] The process of Example 1 was repeated but with 0.64 gm (0.43 wt%) of N-hydroxyphthalimide (NHPI) being weighed into the Parr reactor with the 150 gm of sec-butylbenzene (SBB). Again the conversion results are shown in Figure 1, and the selectivity results are shown in Figure 1(a), from which it will be seen that addition of the NHPI dramatically improved the SBB conversion level. The addition of the NHPI also improved the selectivity to sec-butylbenzene hydroperoxide (SBBHP) based on equivalent conversion levels.

Example 3: SBB oxidation at different levels of NHPI

[0051] The procedure of Example 2 was repeated with the addition of different amounts of NHPI, namely 0.05, 0.125, 0.215 and 0.43 wt%. The results are plotted in Figures 2 and 3 and show the impact of NHPI concentration on reaction rate and sec-butylbenzene

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hydroperoxide yield (the product of SBB conversion and SBBHP selectivity). The data show that the selectivity to the SBB hydroperoxide is flat at different yields and NHPI content.

Example 4: SBB oxidation at different NHPI concentrations and temperature of 125°C

[0052] The procedure of Example 3 was repeated with the addition of NHPI in amounts of 0.05, 0.215 and 0.43 wt% and with the reaction temperature increased to 125°C. The results are plotted in Figure 4 and show that at 125°C the hydroperoxide selectivity and the SBB conversion are significantly affected by increasing the NHPI concentration. At higher NHPI concentration, higher selectivities are achieved at the same conversion level.

Example 5: SBB oxidation at different temperature and NHPI concentrations of 0.05 and 0.10 wt%

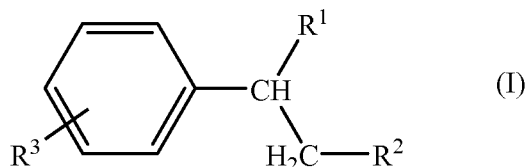
[0053] The procedure of Example 3 was repeated with the addition of NHPI in amounts of 0.05 and 0.10 wt% and with the reaction temperature being varied between 115°C and 150°C. The results are plotted in Figures 5 and 6 and show at these NHPI concentrations varying the temperature between 115 and 125° C has no impact on the selectivity against conversion profile.

[0054] While the present invention has been described and illustrated by reference to particular embodiments, those of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate that the invention lends itself to variations not necessarily illustrated herein. For this reason, then, reference should be made solely to the appended claims for purposes of determining the true scope of the present invention.

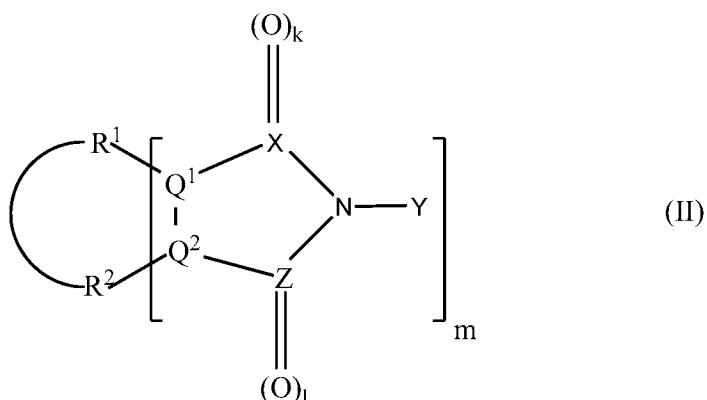
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PCT CLAIMS

1. A process for oxidizing an alkyaromatic compound to the corresponding alkyaromatic hydroperoxide, the process comprising contacting an alkyaromatic compound of general formula (I):



in which R¹ and R² each independently represents hydrogen or an alkyl group having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms, provided that R¹ and R² may be joined to form a cyclic group having from 4 to 10 carbon atoms, said cyclic group being optionally substituted, and R³ represents hydrogen, one or more alkyl groups having from 1 to 4 carbon atoms or a cyclohexyl group, with oxygen in the presence of a catalyst comprising a cyclic imide of the general formula (II):



wherein each of R¹ and R² is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or from the groups SO₃H, NH₂, OH, and NO₂ or from the atoms H, F, Cl, Br, and I, provided that R¹ and R² can be linked to one another via a covalent bond;

each of Q¹ and Q² is independently selected from C, CH, CR³;

each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH₂, N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table;

Y is O or OH;

k is 0, 1, or 2;

l is 0, 1, or 2;

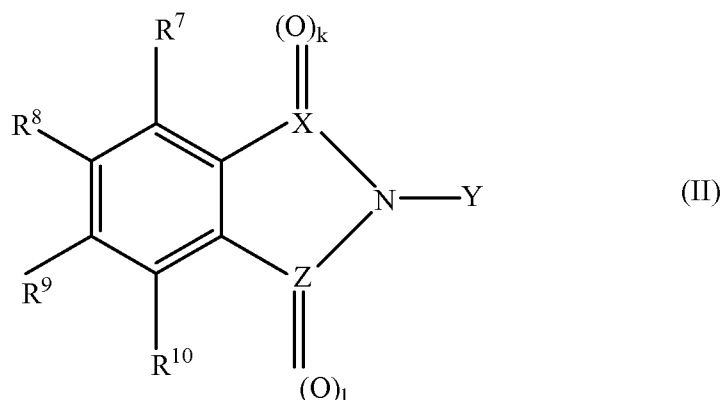
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m is 1 to 3; and

R³ can be any of the entities listed for R¹; and

wherein said contacting is conducted at a temperature of about 90°C to about 150°C, said cyclic imide is present in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 5 wt% of the alkylaromatic compound in said feed, and said catalyst is substantially free of alkali metal compounds, said contacting oxidizing at least part of the alkylaromatic compound in said feed to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide.

2. The process of claim 1, wherein said cyclic imide obeys the general formula (II):



wherein each of R⁷, R⁸, R⁹, and R¹⁰ is independently selected from hydrocarbyl and substituted hydrocarbyl radicals having 1 to 20 carbon atoms, or from the groups SO₃H, NH₂, OH, and NO₂ or from the atoms H, F, Cl, Br, and I,

each of X and Z is independently selected from C, S, CH₂, N, P and elements of Group 4 of the Periodic Table;

Y is O or OH,

k is 0, 1, or 2, and

l is 0, 1, or 2.

3. The process of any preceding claim, wherein said cyclic imide comprises N-hydroxyphthalimide.

4. The process of any preceding claim, wherein said contacting is conducted at a temperature of between about 120°C and about 150°C and a pressure of between about 15 kPa and about 500kPa.

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5. The process of any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein said contacting is conducted at a temperature of between about 125°C and about 140°C and a pressure of about 15kPa to about 150kPa.
6. The process of any preceding claim, wherein said cyclic imide is present in an amount between about 0.1 wt% and about 1 wt% of the alkylaromatic in said feed during said contacting.
7. The process of any one of claims 1 to 5, wherein said cyclic imide is present in an amount between about 0.05 wt% and about 0.5 wt% of the alkylaromatic in said feed during said contacting.
8. The process of any preceding claim, wherein said contacting converts at least 4 wt% per hour conversion of said alkylaromatic compound with a selectivity to the corresponding alkylaromatic hydroperoxide of at least 90 wt%.
9. The process of any preceding claim wherein said alkylaromatic compound is selected from cumene, sec-butylbenzene, and cyclohexylbenzene.
10. The process of any preceding claim wherein said alkylaromatic compound is selected from sec-butylbenzene.
11. The process of any preceding claim wherein said alkylaromatic compound is selected from cyclohexylbenzene.
12. The process of any preceding claim further comprising the step of :
cleaving the alkylaromatic hydroperoxide to produce phenol and the corresponding ketone.
13. The process of claim 12, wherein the cleaving is conducted in the presence of a catalyst.
14. The process of claim 12, wherein the cleaving is conducted in the presence of a homogeneous catalyst.

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15. The process of claim 14 wherein said homogeneous catalyst comprises at least one of sulfuric acid, perchloric acid, phosphoric acid, hydrochloric acid, p-toluenesulfonic acid, ferric chloride, boron trifluoride, sulfur dioxide and sulfur trioxide.

16. The process of claim 12, wherein the cleaving is conducted in the presence of a heterogeneous catalyst.

17. The process of claim 16, wherein said heterogeneous catalyst comprises a smectite clay.

18. The process of claim 12, wherein the cleaving is conducted at a temperature of about 40°C to about 120°C, a pressure of about 100 to about 1000 kPa, and a liquid hourly space velocity (LHSV) based on the hydroperoxide of about 1 to about 50 hr⁻¹.