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Structural mechanisms of pump assembly and drug transport in the AcrAB-TolC efflux system

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eLife Assessment

Ge et al here report a structural study of the native tripartite multidrug efflux pump complexes from Escherichia coli that identifies a novel accessory subunit, YbjP, the structure of the native TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex, as well as structures of the AcrB protein in L, T, and O conformations. The strength of the structural data is **compelling**, and the importance of the findings is potentially **fundamental**. However, additional analysis and comparison with pre-existing data would help to put the obtained data and its impact in the proper context, and the inclusion of functional data would help to substantiate some claims that are currently **incompletely** supported.

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Abstract

Tripartite multidrug efflux pumps that span the cell envelope are essential for antibiotic resistance in Gram-negative bacteria. Here, we report cryo-EM structures of two native efflux complexes from *Escherichia coli*: a TolC–YbjP subcomplex at 3.56 Å resolution and the complete TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ pump at 3.39 Å. Structural analysis reveals that YbjP, a previously uncharacterized lipoprotein, binds TolC in a 3:3 stoichiometry, bridging its protomers at the equatorial domain. Clear density of the mature YbjP's N-terminal Cys19 indicates that YbjP is anchored to the outer membrane by an N-terminal lipid moiety. Notably, YbjP remains bound as TolC undergoes AcrA-induced opening, suggesting that this accessory protein accommodates the conformational change. The AcrB trimer simultaneously presents three distinct conformational states (L, T, O), capturing a complete transport cycle. These high-resolution structures provide insights into the architecture and mechanism of clinically relevant efflux machinery, identifying YbjP as a previously unrecognized structural component that contributes to TolC positioning and may assist in its membrane localization—offering potential new targets for therapeutic intervention.

Introduction

Tripartite efflux pumps are essential for Gram-negative bacteria to expel a wide range of toxic compounds, including antibiotics, across their dual-membrane cell envelope[1–5]. Among these systems, the AcrAB–TolC complex of *Escherichia coli* is one of the most thoroughly studied[2,6]. It comprises the inner membrane RND (Resistance–Nodulation– Division) transporter AcrB, the periplasmic membrane fusion protein AcrA, and the outer membrane channel TolC[4,6–9]. AcrA, anchored to the inner membrane via N-terminal lipidation, bridges AcrB and TolC, mediating conformational signaling essential for TolC gating[10–12]. Structural studies have shown that TolC transitions from a closed to an open state in response to AcrAB assembly, a process crucial for efflux activation[13,14].

Despite significant progress in structurally characterizing the AcrAB–TolC system, fundamental questions remain regarding how TolC is positioned and retained in the outer membrane. Unlike homologous channels such as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* OprM[15] and *E. coli* CusC[16], which possess covalently attached N-terminal lipids, TolC lacks a lipid anchor. This raises the possibility that *E. coli* may utilize accessory factors to localize and stabilize TolC during pump assembly. Furthermore, while prior studies using crystallography and low-to-medium resolution cryo-EM have revealed snapshots of the assembled pump[10–14,17], the limited resolution and conformational heterogeneity in those structures impeded accurate modeling of flexible regions and may have masked the presence of additional subunits.

Here, we address these knowledge gaps by determining two high-resolution cryo-EM structures of the TolC-based efflux machinery in *E. coli*. The first is a 3.56 Å structure of a TolC–YbjP subcomplex, and the second is a 3.39 Å structure of the fully assembled TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ pump. These structures reveal a previously uncharacterized outer membrane lipoprotein, YbjP, bound to TolC, and shed light on how TolC is secured and transitions to the open state. Together, these findings enhance our understanding of the architecture, assembly, and regulation of this clinically important efflux pump.

Results

Structure of a TolC–YbjP closed-state complex

Native purification of *Escherichia coli* membranes yielded a stable assembly containing the outer-membrane channel TolC. Cryo-EM analysis resolved the complex at 3.56 Å resolution (Figure S1, Supplementary Table 1). TolC forms a homotrimer composed of a β-barrel that spans the outer membrane and an elongated periplasmic α-helical domain (Figures 1A-D). The periplasmic α-helical domain comprises an α-helical barrel extended by two helix-turn-helix (HTH) motifs at its periplasmic extremity (TolC repeat 1: helices H3-H4; repeat 2: helices H7-H8). These structural elements converge at an equatorial domain (green in Figures 1C-D). The inward-bending HTH coiled-coils occlude the periplasmic tunnel, maintaining TolC in a closed conformation—consistent with previous crystal structures[10] (Figure 1C).

An unexpected density at the periplasmic face of TolC indicated the presence of an additional component (wheat in Figures 1A-B). An initial backbone trace, followed by a DALI search[18] tentatively matched Tai3, a periplasmic type IV immunity protein associated with the T6SS amidase effector Tae3 (PDB ID: 4HZ9)[19] from *Ralstonia pickettii.* However, discrepancies in side chain density and species origin indicated that the match was likely incorrect. Systematic screening of the AlphaFold Database[20] using CryoNet[21] identified *E. coli* YbjP (UniProt P75818) as the top candidate, with all side chains matching the experimental density (Figure S2). YbjP features a globular domain and a structured N-terminal loop stabilized by a Cys36-Cys144 disulfide bond (Figures 1E-F). The N-terminal loop of YbjP adopts an extended conformation parallel to the first α-helix of TolC's α-helical barrel, forming substantial intermolecular interfaces. Buried surface area (BSA) analysis reveals 787 Å² of contact with the primary TolC protomer (green in Figure 1F), and 1037.4 Å² with the adjacent protomer (light green), suggesting asymmetric binding energetics. The N-terminal density extends to Cys19, which corresponds to the predicted signal peptide cleavage site, positioning the lipoprotein at the periplasmic face of the outer membrane.

UniProt predictions indicate that YbjP is dually lipidated via N-palmitoyl and S-diacylglycerol modifications, allowing its anchorage to the outer membrane. This represents an elegant evolutionary solution, as while many Gram-negative TolC homologs (*e.g.*, *Pseudomonas* OprM[15], *E. coli* CusC[16]) possess native lipid anchors, *E. coli* TolC instead recruits YbjP as a dedicated membrane-tethering partner. The YbjP globular domain nestles between adjacent TolC equational domains, forming a stable 3:3 complex (Figure 1B). The identification of YbjP, along with its defined membrane anchoring and structural compatibility with TolC, suggests a new class of outer membrane partners that may regulate the TolC-dependent pathways.

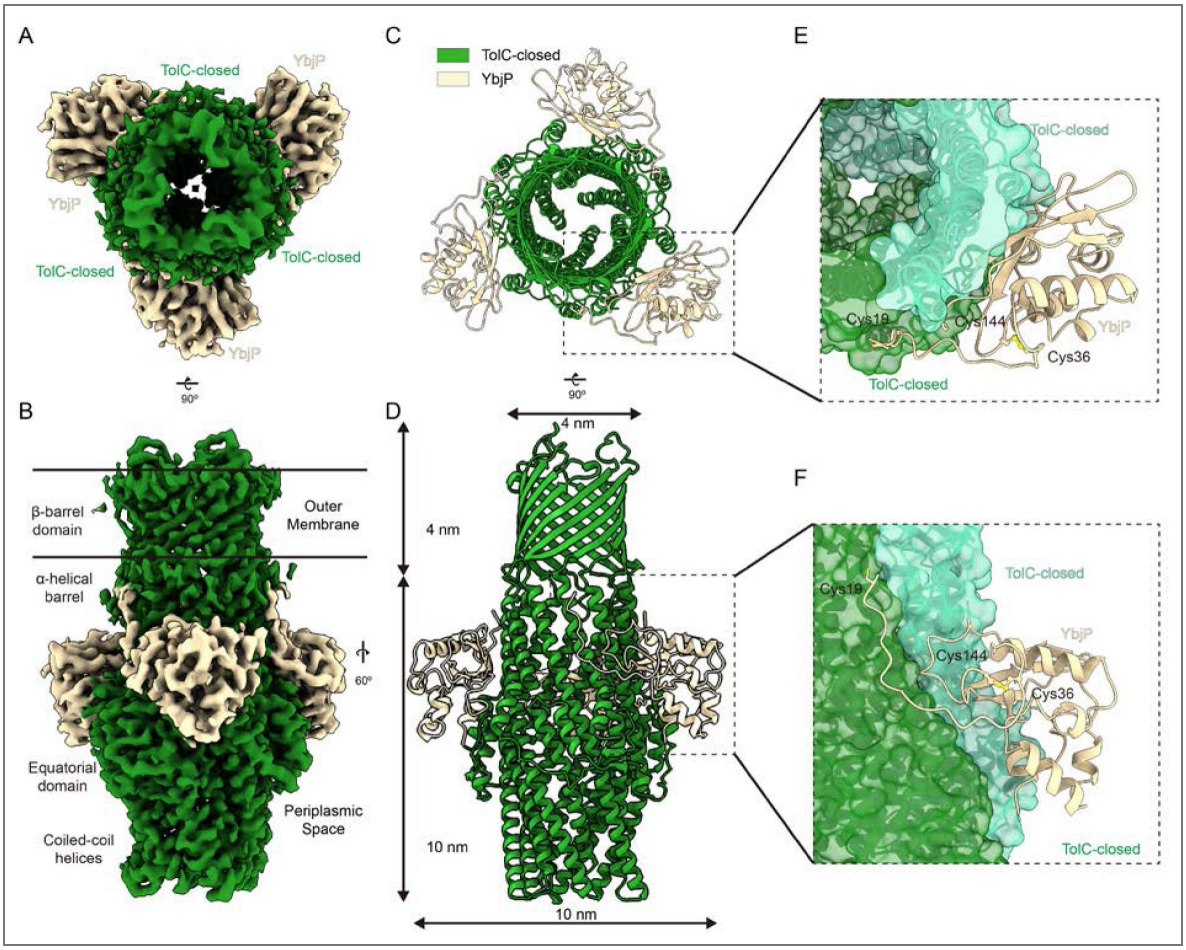

Figure 1. Structure of the TolC–YbjP complex (closed state).

(A,B) Cryo-EM density map of the endogenous TolC–YbjP complex at 3.56 Å resolution, shown in top and side view, spanning the outer membrane (OM) and periplasmic space. TolC forms a homotrimeric "channel-tunnel" ~14 nm long, with its 12-stranded β-barrel embedded in the OM and periplasmic coiled-coils sealed at the tip. YbjP (wheat) wraps around the equatorial domain of TolC, with continuous density linking YbjP's N-terminal Cys19 into the OM micelle region. **(C,D)** Top view (from the outer membrane) and side view of the TolC–YbjP cartoon model, showing three YbjP molecules arranged symmetrically around TolC's threefold axis. **(E,F)** Each YbjP straddles the interface between two TolC protomers, occupying a groove on the TolC surface. TolC is shown as surface (each protomer in a different green color) and YbjP in wheat cartoon. YbjP's globular domain inserts between TolC protomers, while an N-terminal linker connects to the OM.

Structure of TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex

An improved 3.39 Å resolution structure of the endogenous AcrAB–TolC complex from *E. coli* was determined, revealing well-resolved density across the entire assembly (Figure S3, Supplementary Table 1). This structure allows for the accurate modeling of side-chain interactions throughout the tripartite channel, surpassing earlier models in completeness and resolution[14] (Figures S4, S5). YbjP remains bound to TolC, suggesting that this lipoprotein is stably retained during pump assembly and functions as a molecular clamp that anchors TolC to the outer membrane during AcrA and AcrB engagement (Figures 2A-D).

The TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ complex adopts a funnel-like architecture spanning the cell envelope, consistent with prior models of tripartite pumps[14] (Figure 2B). TolC, tethered to YbjP, caps the outer-membrane end and docks onto a hexameric ring of AcrA adaptors in the periplasm, which in turn surrounds the AcrBZ trimer embedded in the inner membrane (Figures 2B, 2D). The full assembly is about 33 nm tall, matching the distance between the two membranes. The complex was purified directly from *E. coli* as a stoichiometric assembly, without the need for artificial fusion or crosslinking.

Cryo-EM density reveals six AcrA molecules beneath each TolC trimer (Figure 2D), yielding a 3:6:3 stoichiometry for TolC:AcrA:AcrB. AcrA therefore forms an elongated hexamer that bridges TolC and AcrB. Three sets of interfaces stabilize the pump: contacts between the AcrB trimer and the basal regions of AcrA, extensive AcrA– AcrA interactions within the hexameric ring, and tip-to-tip junctions between the upper AcrA α-helical hairpin and TolC (Figure 2D). While each AcrA protomer maintains the characteristic four-domain architecture—comprising the α-helical hairpin, lipoyl, β-barrel, and membrane-proximal domains—functional asymmetry is observed in their interactions (Figure 2E). The trimeric TolC, which contains six HTH motifs due to internal repeats (TolC repeat 1/2), engages the AcrA hexamer via quasi-equivalent binding: adjacent AcrA and AcrA* protomers interact differentially with the intra- and inter-protomer grooves of TolC, respectively (Figure 2F). The primary structural difference between AcrA and AcrA* lies in the configurations of their membrane-proximal (MP) domains (Figure 2E).

AcrB assembles as a homotrimer on the inner membrane, with each protomer comprising three distinct domains: a funnel domain, a porter domain, and a transmembrane domain (Figure 2D). The funnel domain consists of DN and DC subdomains (Figure 2G). The porter domain is organized into four subdomains (PN1, PN2, PC1, and PC2) arranged in a clockwise orientation when viewed from the periplasmic side, with PN1 positioned closest to the central axis of the trimer. In the hexameric AcrA assembly, the lipoyl and β-barrel domains form two stacked concentric rings. While the lipoyl domains remain uninvolved in AcrB binding, the β-barrel domains specifically engage the funnel domain of AcrB. Strikingly, the membrane-proximal (MP) subdomains of AcrA exhibit asymmetric binding: AcrA-MP interacts with the DC and PC1 subdomains of AcrB, whereas AcrA*-MP contacts PN1 and DN via an extended loop, respectively (Figures 2G-H). This differential engagement of MP subdomains establishes the structural basis for the observed structural divergence between AcrA and AcrA* (Figure 2E).

Our density maps clearly resolve the small transmembrane protein AcrZ (49 amino acids) bound to each AcrB protomer (Figures 2C, 2D). AcrZ adopts a helical structure that is embedded within a hydrophobic groove formed by the transmembrane helices of AcrB at the predicted interaction site, forming an $AcrB_3AcrZ_3$ complex. Although AcrZ is not essential for pump assembly, its consistent presence in natively purified complexes and its role in stabilizing otherwise flexible regions—particularly the transmembrane helices—suggest that AcrZ may serve an allosteric role in modulating conformational dynamics for specific substrates[22]. Collectively, these interactions illustrate the sophisticated assembly mechanism of the pump: AcrZ reinforces AcrB's transmembrane domain, AcrB's funnel and porter domains anchor AcrA, and AcrA's α-helical hairpins engage TolC. Notably, the holocomplex remained intact throughout purification, indicating a high-affinity assembly between components, consistent with prior *in vitro* reconstitution studies[23].

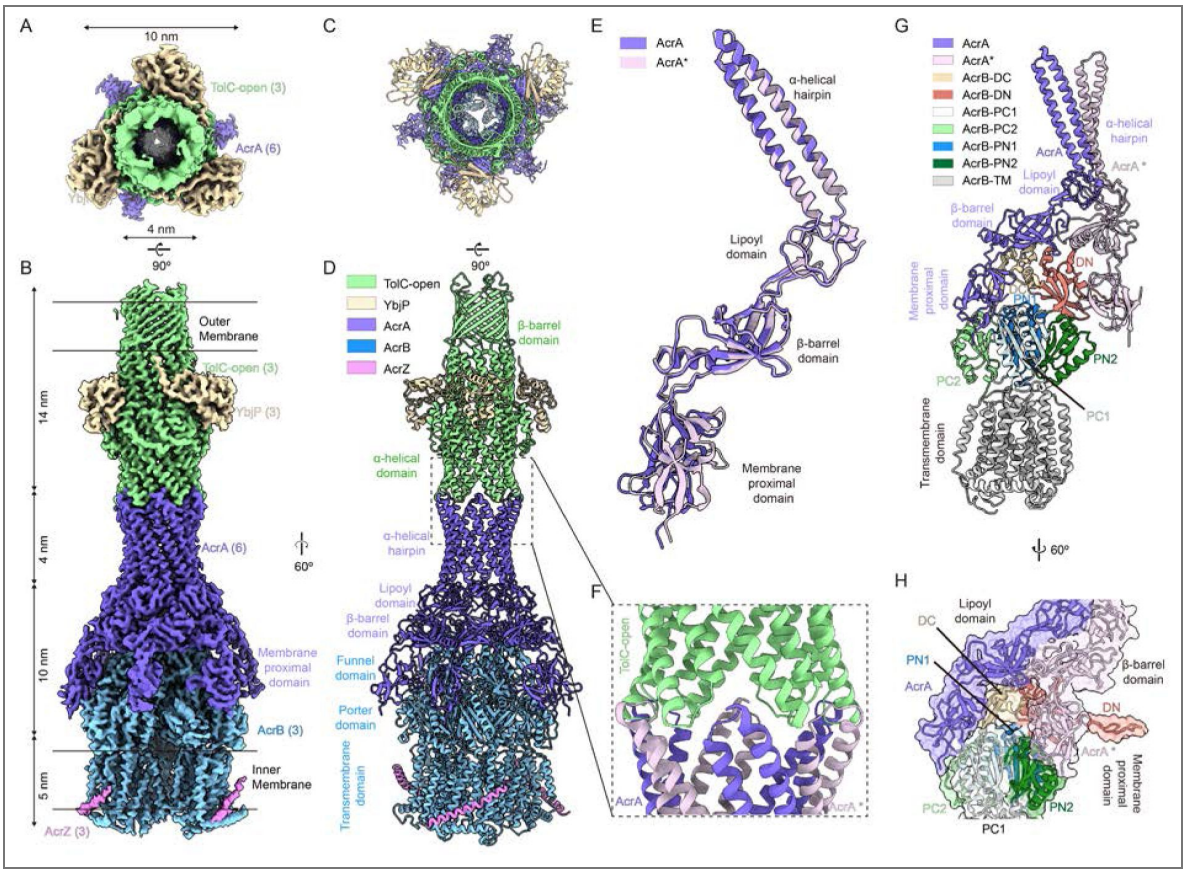

Figure 2. Architecture of the fully assembled TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ efflux pump.

(A,B) Top and side view of the cryo-EM density map (3.39 Å) of the endogenous TolC– YbjP–AcrABZ complex, with the inner membrane (IM) and outer membrane (OM) boundaries indicated (black bars). The map reveals the complete pump spanning 33 nm. Densities for TolC (green) are supposed to be in the OM region, AcrB (blue) in the IM region as a trimer, and six AcrA protomers (purple) forming an elongated barrel bridging TolC and AcrB. Three AcrZ protomers (pink) are seen at the periphery of the AcrB trimer in the IM region. **(C,D)** Cartoon models of TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ in top view and side view. Three AcrB protomers (blue) form a trimeric base, surrounded by six AcrA molecules (purple) and three AcrZ helices (pink). Each AcrB protomer consists of funnel, porter, and transmembrane domains. **(E)** Structural alignment of the two AcrA conformations (AcrA and AcrA*) reveals differences in the orientation of membrane proximal domain. **(E)** Zoomed-in view of the TolC–AcrA interface, show the tight interaction between TolC's periplasmic helix-turn-helix motifs and AcrA's α-helical hairpin domain. **(G,H)** Close-up views of the interface between AcrA (purple), AcrA* (light purple), and AcrB. Panel (g) shows the frontal cartoon representation; panel (h) displays a 60° rotated view, highlighting the intimate packing of AcrA with AcrB.

Structural rearrangements underlying TolC's closed-to-open transition

A comparative structural analysis of TolC in its closed and open states reveals a striking iris-like dilation mechanism at the periplasmic entrance that facilitates transition to the fully open conformation (Figures 3A-B). Throughout this conformational transition, the transmembrane β-barrel and α-helical barrel domains maintain remarkable structural rigidity, whereas the coiled-coil helices undergo dramatic rearrangement. These helices pivot around the equatorial domain, undergoing a 27° rigid-body superhelical rotation (Figure 3C), which constitutes a major structural rearrangement. In the closed state, a complex network of interprotomer hydrogen bonds stabilizes the structure by constricting the pore to its narrowest point at Asp396 (Figures 3D,3F). Upon disruption of this network in the open state, the pore expands significantly, reaching a diameter of approximately 2 nm (Figures 3E-F). Notably, YbjP remains stably association with TolC in both conformational states – the closed resting state and the open activated state (Figure 3C). This persistent interaction suggests that YbjP serves as a structural scaffold: anchoring TolC in the outer membrane, accommodating conformational changes during activation, and functionally compensating for TolC's lack of intrinsic lipidation. These findings not only support existing models of allosteric pump activation[12,17], but also suggest how *E. coli* might utilize YbjP to fulfill the membrane-anchoring role typically provided by intrinsic lipid modifications in other bacterial TolC homologs, such as OprM and CusC[24,25].

Mechanism of substrate transport in the AcrB module

The AcrAB-TolC efflux system actively transports substrates against their concentration gradient, moving them from regions of low to high concentration. This energetically unfavorable process is driven by proton motive force (PMF), with the AcrB trimer harnessing the electrochemical potential of protons to power substrate translocation[26].

Structural and functional studies support an asymmetric rotary mechanism, wherein each AcrB protomer sequentially transitions through three conformational states: L (loose), T (tight), and O (open)[17,27]. This concerted conformational rotation – analogous to the functional cycling of F_1F_0 ATP synthase during ATP synthesis – enables continuous vectorial transport through the pump complex[28].

Our high-resolution cryo-EM structure of the endogenous TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex captures the AcrB trimer in three distinct conformational states (L, T, O), providing key mechanistic insights (Figure 4A). While the transmembrane domain remains largely conserved between the L and T states (Figure 4B, upper panel)— maintaining salt bridges between Lys940 (TM10) and Asp407/Asp408 (TM4), the T→O transition entails a coordinated rotation of TM2, TM4, TM5, and TM6, disrupting these interactions (Figure 4B, lower panel). Substrate entry occurs between PC1 and PC2 in the L state (Figure 4C, left panel), followed by an 8 Å shift of PC2 toward PC1 during the L→T transition (Figure 4D, lower panel and Figure S6), facilitating drug transfer from the access pocket to the high-affinity deep binding pocket (Figure 4C, middle panel).

Remarkably, PC1 remains in contact with AcrA throughout the cycle (Figure S6). Proton translocation through the transmembrane domain induces three coordinated events: (1) a further 5 Å compaction between PC2 and PC1 (Figure 4D, T, O states in lower panel); (2) inward rotation of PN2's cytoplasmic face (Figure 4D, T, O states in upper panel); and (3) outward opening of PN1's periplasmic side—together expelling the substrate into the central channel. This rotary mechanism, reminiscent of F_1F_0 ATP synthase, is completed when the pump resets to the L state, initiating a new catalytic cycle.

Discussion

Based on our structural data, we propose a model for the assembly and function of the AcrABZ–TolC multidrug efflux pump, emphasizing the anchoring and orienting role of YbjP. As shown in Figure 5, the assembly begins with TolC priming. In the absence of AcrAB, TolC is embedded in

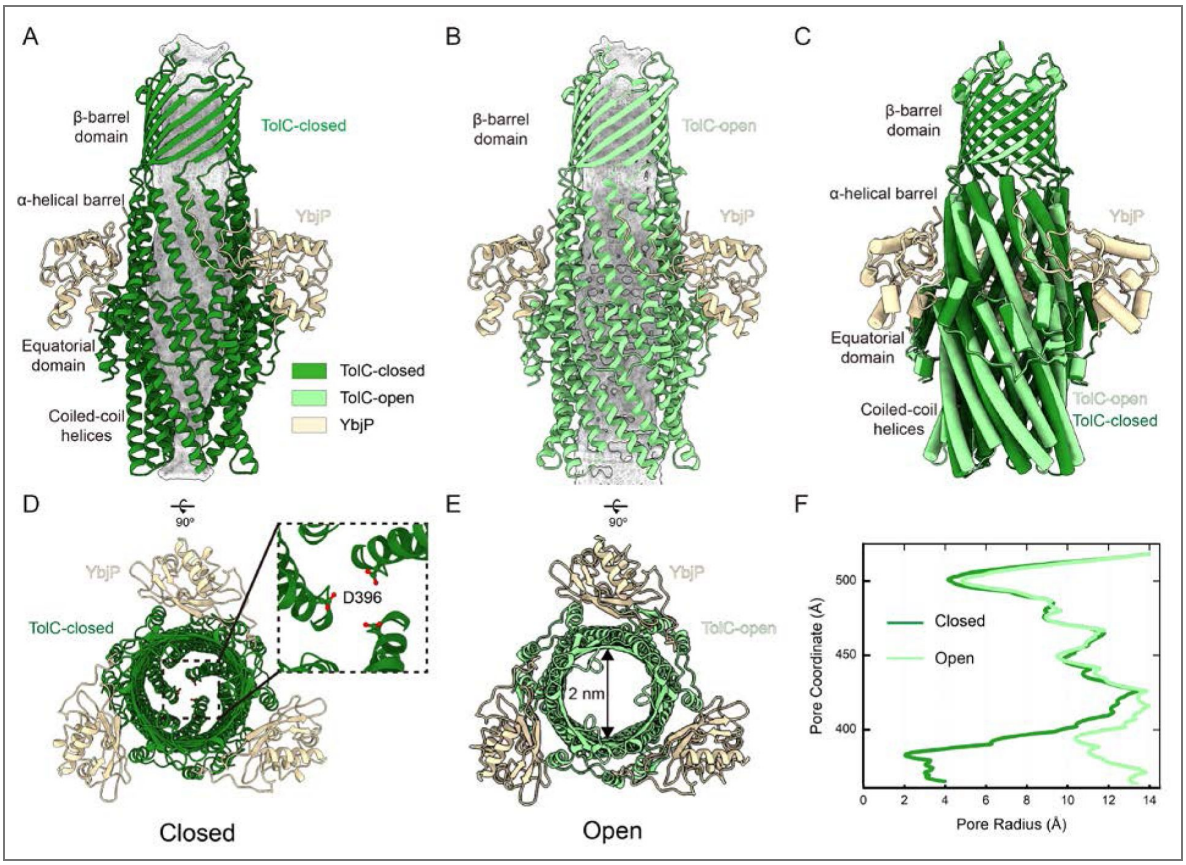

Figure 3. Conformational changes upon pump assembly: closed to open TolC transition with YbjP.

(A) Side view of TolC–YbjP complex. TolC is closed by coiled-coil helices. **(B)** Side view of TolC–YbjP part in TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ complex. TolC is in open state. **(C)** Comparison of TolC in the TolC–YbjP complex (closed state, forest green) and in the TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ pump (open state, pale green). Upon assembly with AcrABZ, these contacts are disrupted and the TolC helices tilt outward, enlarging the aperture. The OM β-barrel domain remains static. YbjP positions are consistent in two structures. **(D,E)** Top views of TolC-YbjP in closed vs. open states. In the closed conformation, the coiled-coil helices bundle tightly, leaving a ~4 Å diameter sealed pore. In the open state (pale green), the helices are splayed apart, creating a ~20 Å diameter open channel. **(F)** Quantitative comparison of pore radii in closed and open TolC, as computed using HOLE software[44].

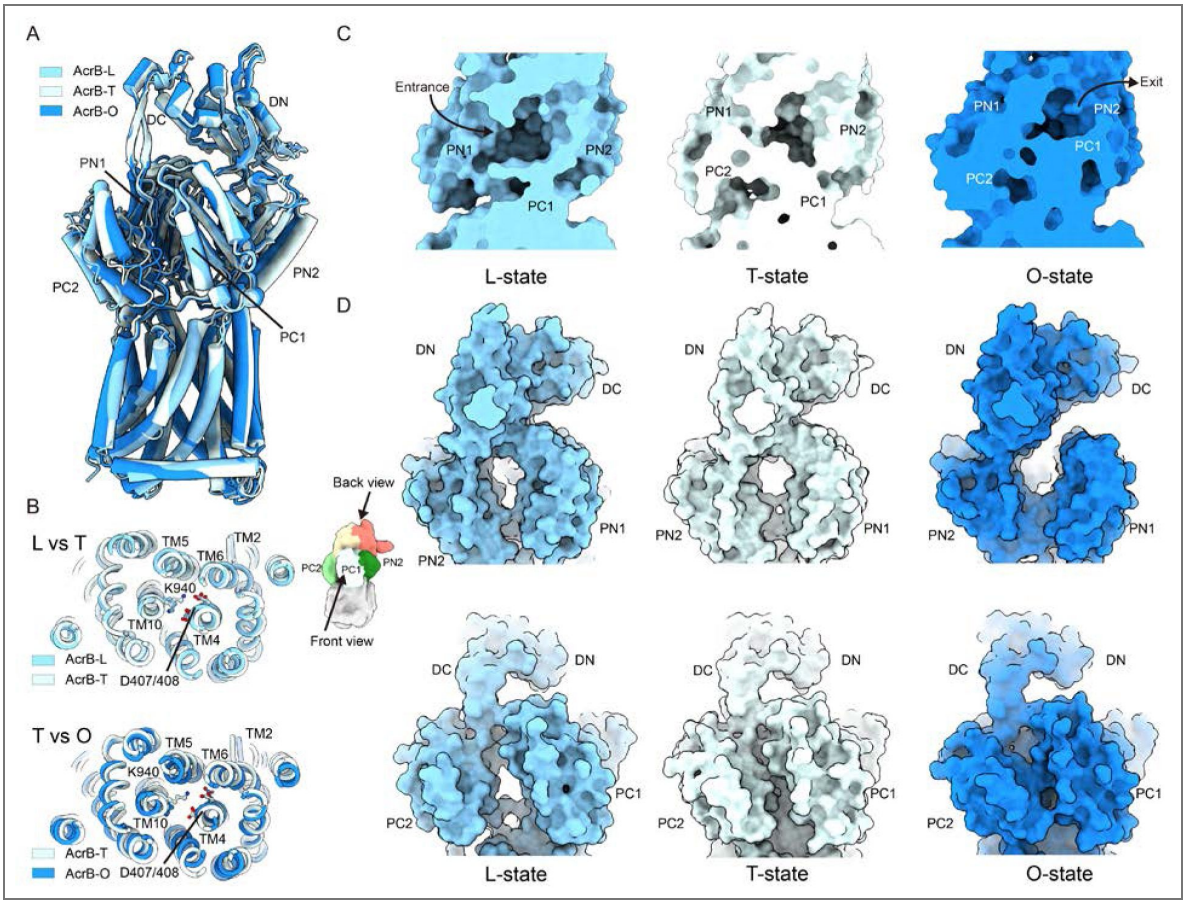

Figure 4. **Conformational cycling of AcrB monomers within the functional trimer.**

(A) Structural superimposition of the three AcrB protomers (L, T, O states) showing their sequential conformational transitions during the transport cycle. **(B)** Conformational changes in the transmembrane domain associated with proton translocation. **(C)** Substrate-binding pocket architecture in a single protomer, highlighting subdomains involved in drug recognition. **(D)** Large-scale structural rearrangements in the porter domain that facilitate substrate translocation.

the outer membrane in a closed conformation, stabilized by its interaction with YbjP. The lipid moiety of YbjP inserts into the inner leaflet of the outer membrane, possibly interacting transiently with the peptidoglycan layer to help position TolC within the periplasmic space. Such anchoring likely ensures optimal orientation of TolC's periplasmic end for interaction with incoming AcrA.

Upon synthesis and membrane insertion, AcrB (complexed with AcrZ) and AcrA form an inner membrane–periplasmic subcomplex[29,30]. A conserved cysteine residue in AcrA, located near the inner membrane, may aid in anchoring or stabilizing the complex. The complete tripartite pump likely assembles via stochastic encounters between the AcrAB subcomplex and the TolC–YbjP complex in the periplasm. Stabilization likely occurs through tip-to-tip interactions between the hairpin domains of AcrA and TolC[31]. YbjP may facilitate this docking by stabilizing TolC in a fixed, properly oriented conformation, thereby increasing its local availability to AcrAB and lowering the energy barrier for assembly. In this context, YbjP may act as a structural placeholder that guides AcrA toward the TolC entrance. Although its exact function remains to be confirmed, YbjP's consistent presence in our cryo-EM reconstructions and its predicted lipoprotein features suggest an anchoring role. Based on our structural observations and UniProt annotations, we propose that YbjP contributes to TolC stabilization in the outer membrane and facilitates its spatial orientation for efficient pump assembly.

Once assembled, the AcrABZ–TolC complex becomes active for drug efflux, allowing substrates such as antibiotics and dyes to enter AcrB from the periplasm and be expelled through TolC[32,33]. At the core of this process is the conserved D407–D408 proton relay pair in AcrB's transmembrane domain, which functions as both the proton-binding site and the mechanochemical coupling hub[34,35]. Protonation of these residues initiates conformational changes that propagate from the transmembrane domain to the porter domain via an allosteric mechanism.

The AcrB trimer operates via an asymmetric rotary cycle[17,27], with each protomer sequentially transitioning through three distinct conformational states (L → T → O) to drive peristaltic drug transport. This concerted conformational rotation – bearing striking similarity to the catalytic cycle of F_1F_0 ATP synthase[28] – enables continuous, vectorial substrate transport against concentration gradients, powered by proton translocation.

In conclusion, we identify YbjP as a previously unrecognized lipoprotein associated with the AcrAB–TolC efflux system. Although its precise function requires further validation, YbjP's structural positioning suggests a role in anchoring TolC and promoting tripartite pump assembly—critical for bacterial resistance to antibiotics and toxic compounds. Notably, our structure captures all three conformational states of the AcrB trimer (L, T, O) within the context of the fully assembled, native AcrABZ–TolC complex for the first time. While these states have been observed in isolated AcrB previously, our data reveal subtle but functionally relevant conformational differences that arise in the intact pump. This study exemplifies how high-resolution cryo-EM, in combination with integrative modeling, can reveal previously uncharacterized protein factors and enhance our understanding of complex membrane-spanning systems in bacteria.

Method details

Cell preparation and membrane protein extraction

Escherichia coli C600 cells were cultured to mid-log phase and then infected with a high-titer λ phage to increase cellular stress. Cells were harvested by centrifugation and resuspended in buffer containing 25 mM Tris-HCl and 150 mM NaCl (pH 8.0).

Lysozyme was added to a final concentration of 10 mg/mL, followed by incubation at 37 °C for 2 hours to facilitate cell lysis. Following removal of cell debris by centrifugation at 24,793 × g for 20 min, membrane proteins were extracted from the supernatant using 2% n-dodecyl-β-D-maltoside (DDM). The membrane fraction was subsequently subjected to size-exclusion chromatography using a SR6 Increase column.

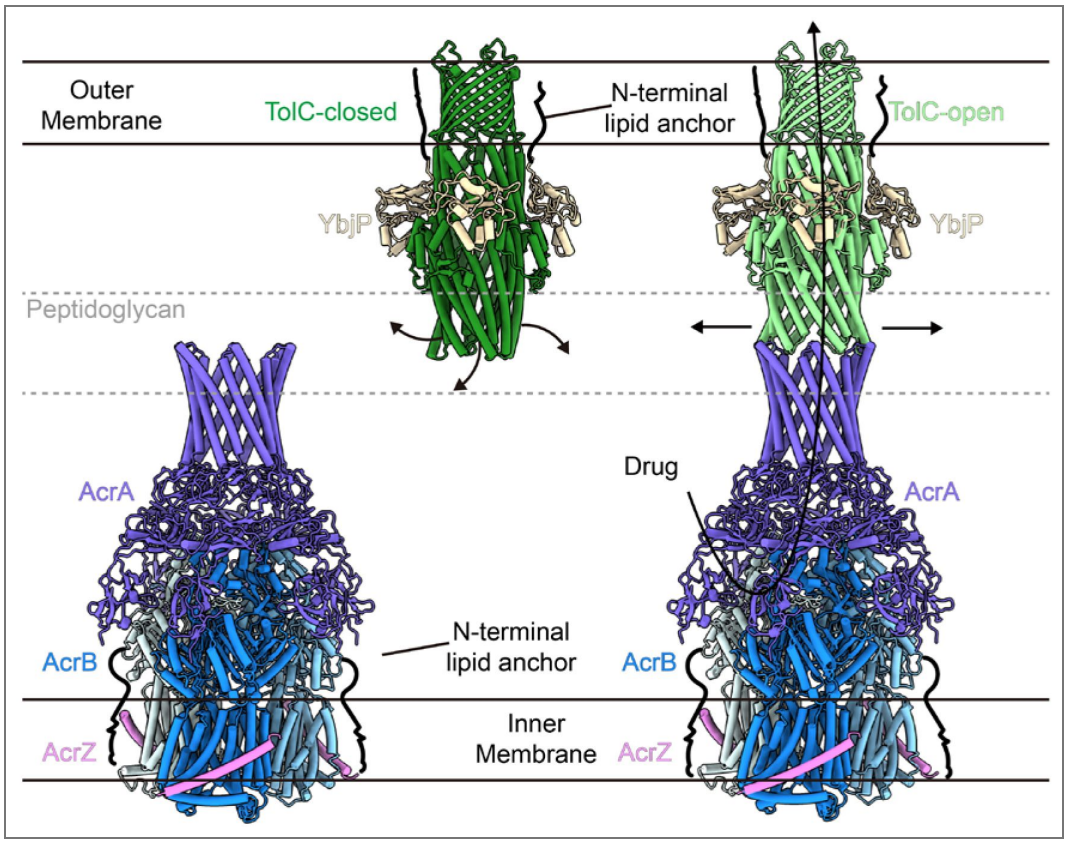

Figure 5. Proposed model of pump assembly and membrane anchoring.

Schematic illustration of the TolC–YbjP–AcrABZ efflux pump within the Gram-negative cell membrane. YbjP is hypothesized to associate with the outer membrane via its N-terminal Cys19, which may undergo lipidation *in vivo*. YbjP lies just beneath the outer membrane and above the peptidoglycan layer, according to prior electron tomography studies[13]. In the absence of AcrABZ, TolC adopts a closed state stabilized by inward-pointing periplasmic helices. AcrA, also likely lipid-anchored at its N-terminus, stabilizes the AcrBZ trimer near inner membrane. Upon engagement with AcrA's α-helical hairpin domain, TolC helices rotate outward in a left-handed (counterclockwise) manner to open the channel, and enables small-molecule substrates to be exported through the fully assembled complex.

Fractions around 12 mL, which were enriched for target proteins, were collected, diluted, and used for negative staining. Transmission electron microscopy revealed the presence of target particles.

Cryo-EM grid preparation

The sample was concentrated to 0.7 mg/mL. A volume of 4 µL was applied to a glow-discharged Au Quantifoil R1.2/1.3 300 mesh grid (glow discharge: medium setting, 30 s). To enhance the concentration of protein on the grid, sample loading was repeated ten times: after each loading, excess solution was gently removed using a pipette tip, and a fresh 4 µL aliquot was applied. The grid was then plunge-frozen in liquid ethane pre- cooled with liquid nitrogen using a Vitrobot Mark IV (Thermo Fisher Scientific).

Blotting was performed for 3.5 s after a 30 s wait time, under 100% humidity at 8 °C.

Cryo-EM data collection

A total of 3452 movies were acquired using a 300 kV Titan Krios transmission electron microscope (Thermo Fisher Scientific) equipped with a Gatan K3 Summit direct electron detector. The calibrated pixel size was 0.675 Å. Each movie was recorded with a total electron dose of ~50 $e^-/Å^2$, and defocus values ranged from -1.2 to -1.8 µm. Data collection was automated using the AutoEMation software[36].

Image processing

Motion correction and contrast transfer function (CTF) estimation were carried out in CryoSPARC[37]. Poor-quality micrographs were manually excluded. 43,200 particles corresponding to TolC were identified during 2D classification. Ab-initio reconstruction and NU-refinement applied with C3 symmetry generated a reference model for further picking. Template picking, *ab-initio* reconstruction in C1 symmetry, and NU-refinement in C3 symmetry followed. The resulting map at 4.17 Å resolution was further improved to 3.56 Å after reference-based motion correction (RBMC), CTF refinement, and NU-refinement.

From the same dataset, TolC-AcrABZ particle selection was performed using blob picking, followed by particle extraction and several rounds of 2D classification, which yielded 19,396 high-quality particles. These were used for ab-initio reconstruction and non-uniform (NU) refinement to generate an initial 3D model, which was subsequently used for template picking. After template picking and further 2D classification, a total of 35,092 particles were selected. Final refinement steps—including NU-refinement, RBMC, and local CTF refinement—resulted in a 3D map at 3.23 Å resolution. Since the AcrB subunit exhibits intrinsic structural asymmetry, C3 symmetry was initially relaxed through symmetry expansion combined with 3D classification without rotational/translational alignment. One predominant class was selected after deduplication of symmetry-expanded particles. Local refinement in C1 symmetry better resolved the asymmetric AcrB region. A subsequent masked 3D classification revealed a particle subset containing distinct extra densities, which underwent local refinement with re-applied C3 symmetry to enhance resolution of symmetric structural components.

Protein model building and structure refinement

The atomic models of TolC, AcrA, AcrB, AcrZ were rigid-body fitted into their corresponding cryo-EM maps using UCSF Chimera[38]. To identify the extra densities observed in both EM maps, a backbone model was manually traced. Protein identity was assessed using the “Protein Searching without Sequence” function in CryoNet[21]. YbjP (P75818) was ranked highest among *E. coli* proteins in the AlphaFold Database (AFDB, strain 4364). Side-chain densities in the final EM maps were manually compared to the predicted model, allowing confirmation of YbjP as the protein corresponding to the extra density. Subsequent manual adjustments to the models were performed using COOT[39]. The refinement of the protein structures was conducted using either

PHENIX[40] or Refmac5[41]. Statistical details regarding the 3D reconstruction and model refinement processes are provided in Supplementary Table S1. Visual representations of the structures were generated using PyMol[42] or UCSF ChimeraX[43].

Data availability

Cryo-EM maps and the associated structural coordinates have been respectively deposited into the Electron Microscopy Data Bank (EMDB) and the Protein Data Bank (PDB) under the following accession codes: EMD-64784 / 9V52 (TolC-YbjP); EMD-64785 / 9V53 (TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ); and EMD-64787 / 9V55 (TolC-YbjP-AcrA local).

Supplementary figures and tables

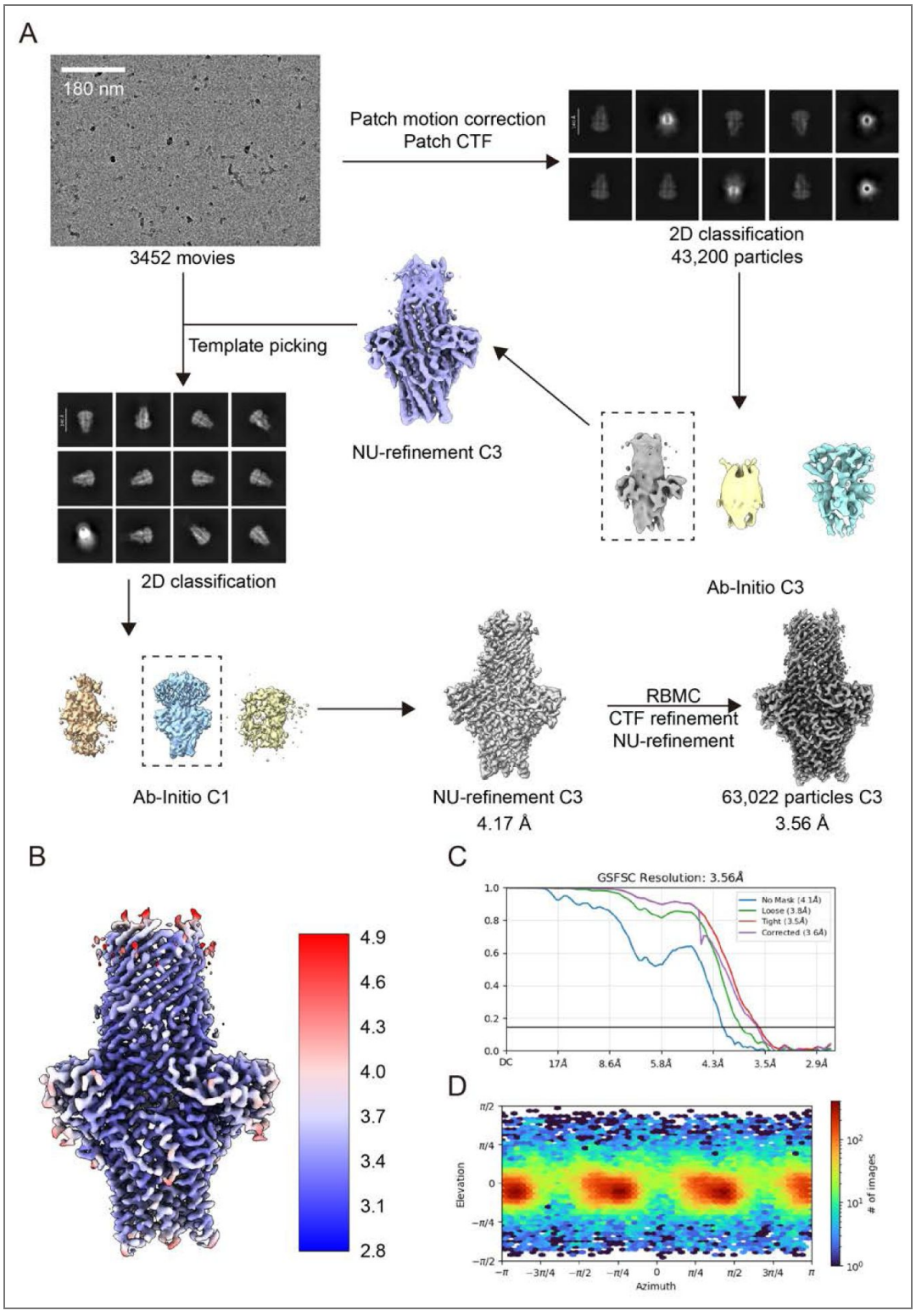

Figure S1. **Cryo-EM processing workflow for TolC-YbjP complex. A.** Cryo-EM processing workflow. **B.** Local resolution distribution in final map[1]. **C.** Gold-standard Fourier Shell Correlation curves for final reconstruction[2]. **D.** Angular distribution plot for final map.

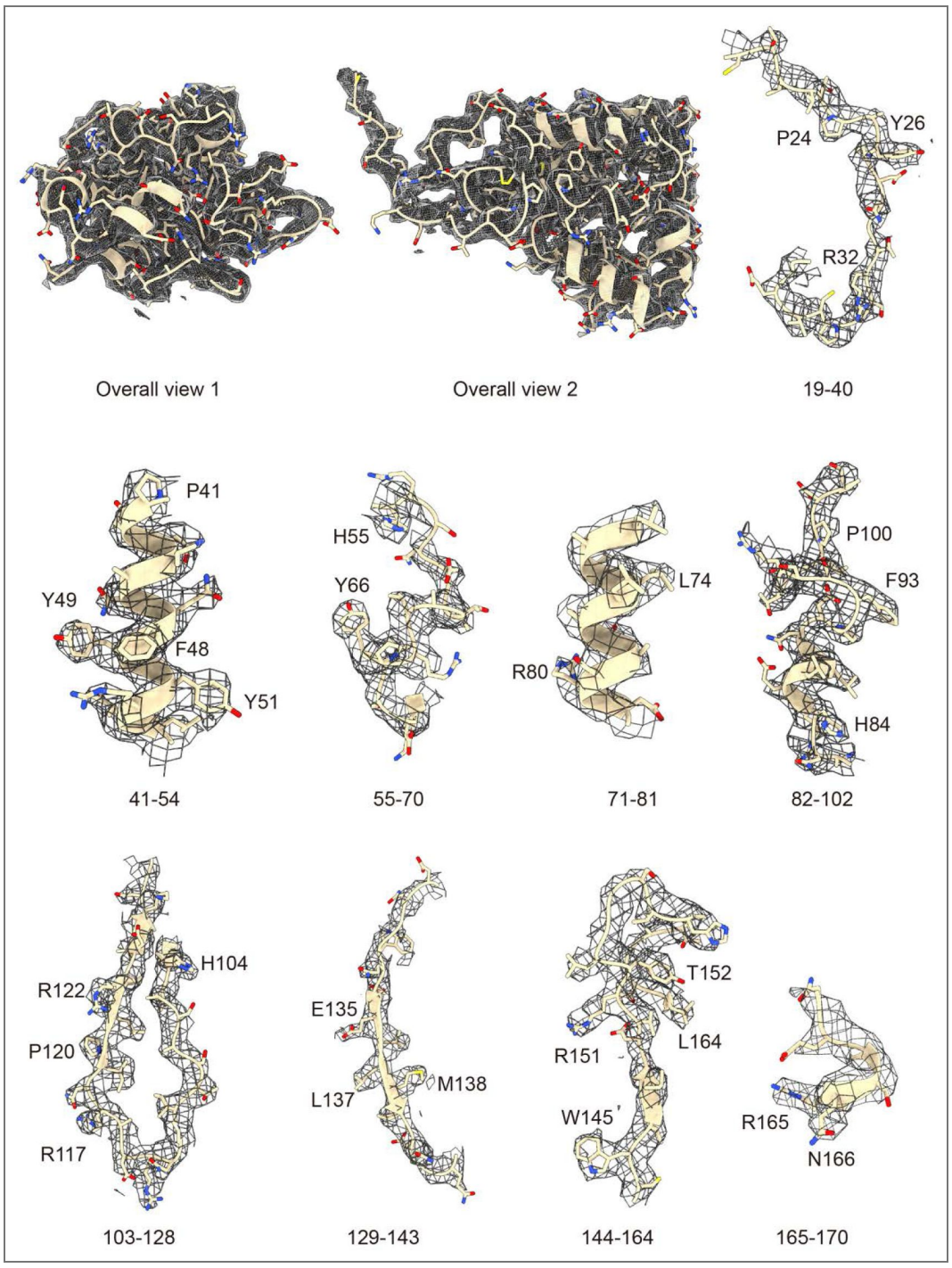

Figure S2. Local EM-density of YbjP in TolC-YbjP complex.

The region and some bulky residues are labelled. EM density threshold: 8σ.

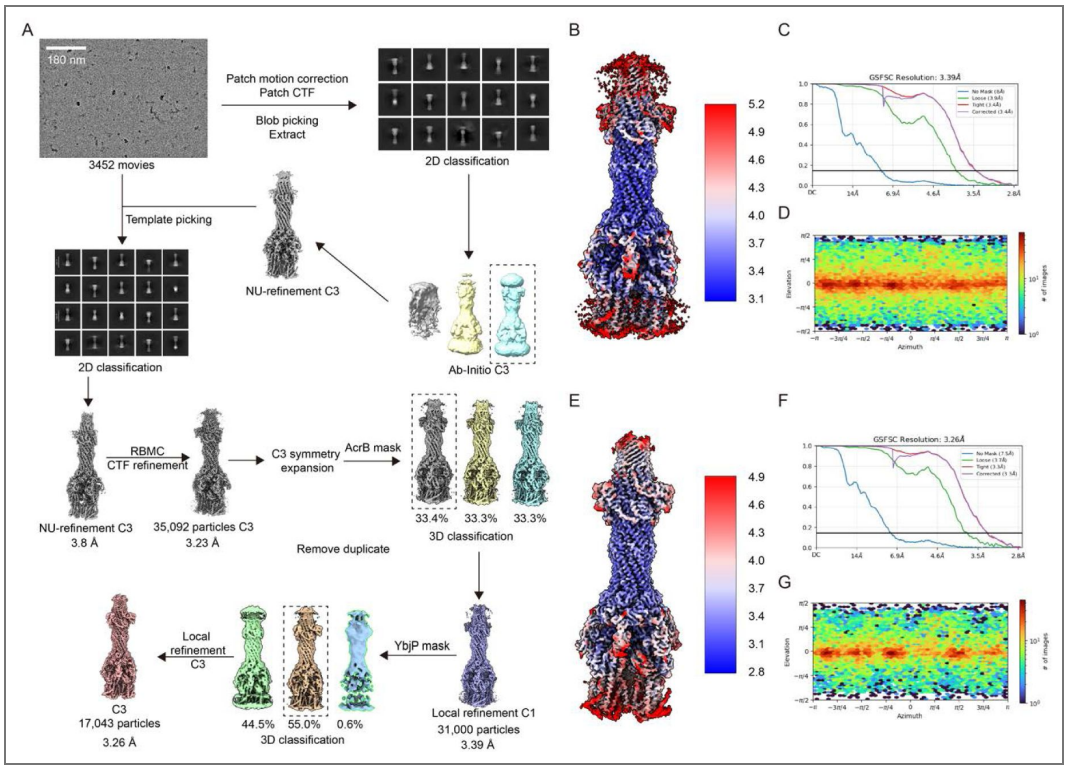

Figure S3. Cryo-EM processing workflow for TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex.

A. Cryo-EM processing workflow. **B.** Local resolution distribution in C1 final map[1]. **C.** Gold-standard Fourier Shell Correlation curves for C1 final reconstruction[2]. **D.** Angular distribution plot for C1 final map. **E.** Local resolution distribution in C3 final map[1]. **F.** Gold-standard Fourier Shell Correlation curves for C3 final reconstruction[2]. **G.** Angular distribution plot for C3 final map.

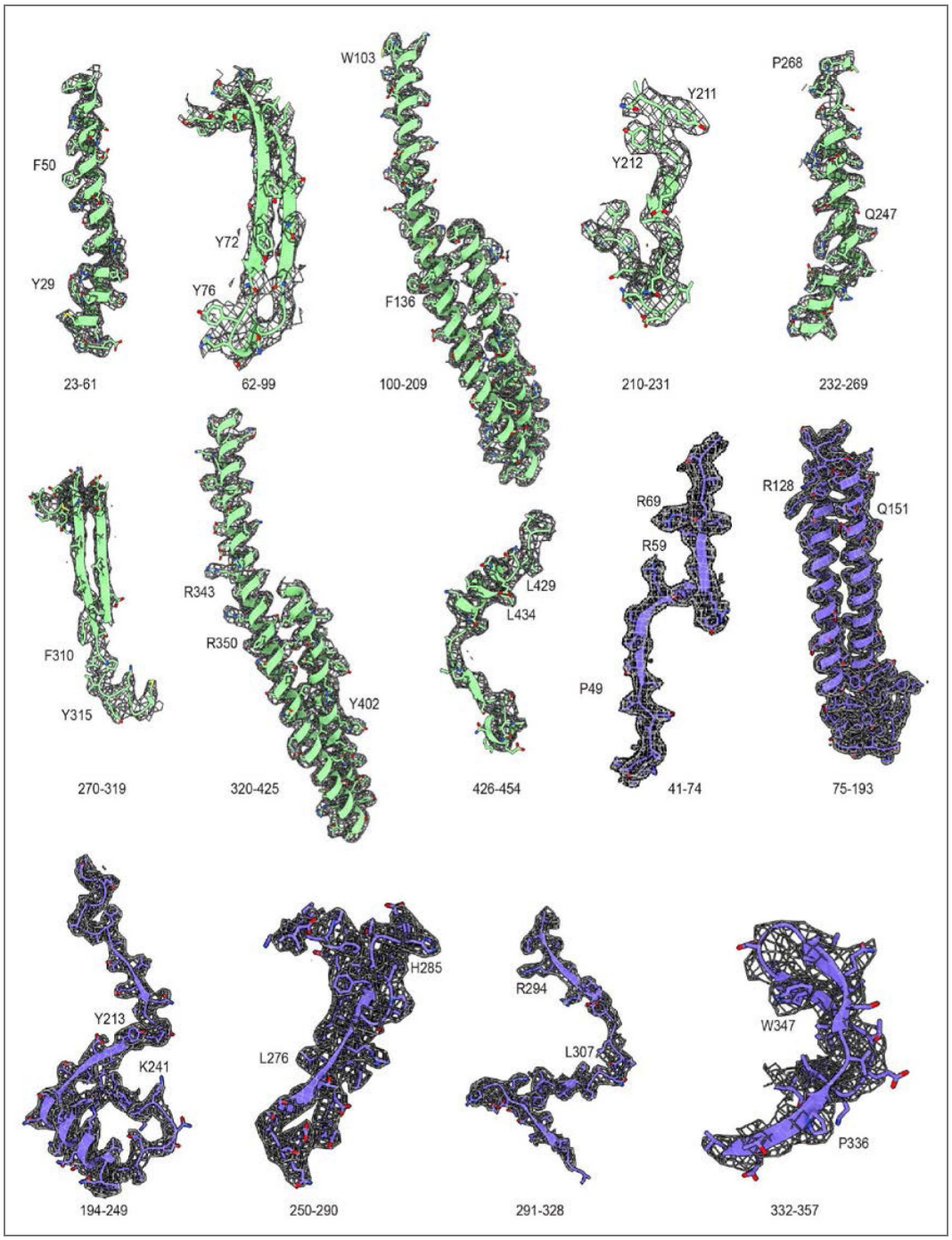

Figure S4. Local EM-density of TolC and AcrA in TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex.

The region and some bulky residues are labelled. EM density threshold: 8σ.

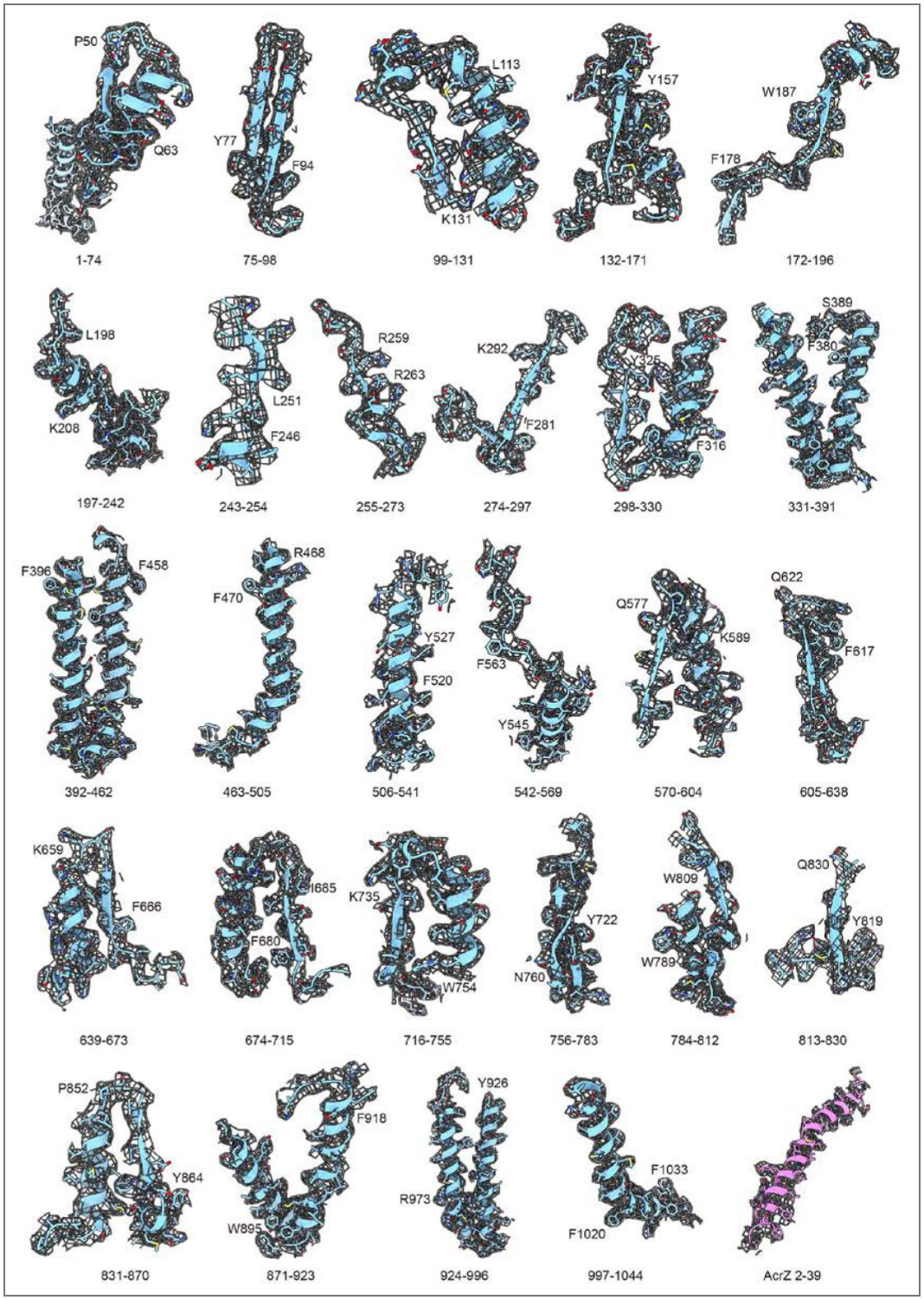

Figure S5. Local EM-density of AcrB in TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex.

The region and some bulky residues are labelled. EM density threshold: 5σ.

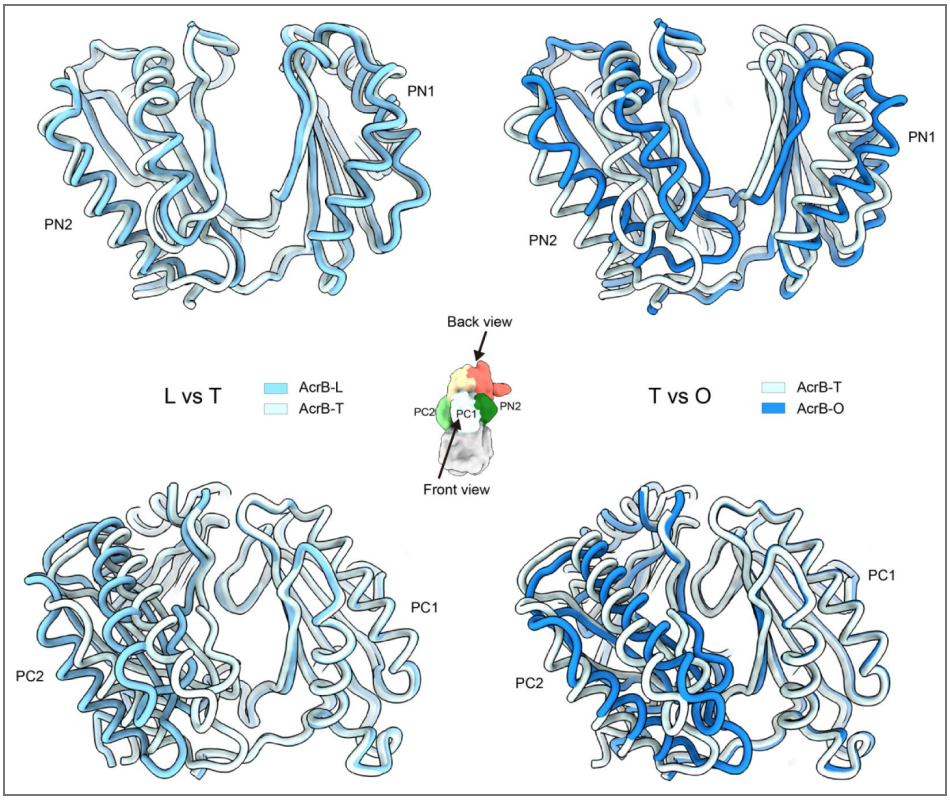

Figure S6. Conformational transitions in AcrB's porter domain during the transport cycle.

Structural superposition of porter domain (subdomains PN1, PN2, PC1 and PC2) of monomers between L and T states and T and O states, revealing key conformational rearrangements.

	TolC-YbjP	TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ	TolC-YbjP-AcrA (local)
Voltage (kV)	300		
Electron exposure ($e^-/Å^2$)	50		
Defocus range (μm)	-1.2～-1.8		
Pixel size (Å)	1.35		
Micrographs (no.)	3452		
Symmetry imposed	C3	C1	C3
Final particle images (no.)	63,022	31,000	17,043
Map resolution (Å) 0.143 FSC threshold	3.56	3.39	3.26
Map sharpening B factor ($Å^2$)	-134.5	-66.6	-74.7
CC (model vs. data)	0.7945	0.8727	0.8456
Model composition			
Chain count	6	18	12
Non-hydrogen atoms	13,539	53,464	29,061
Protein residues	1,752	7,037	3,816
B factors ($Å^2$)			
Proteins	40.66	99.69	115.5

Table S1. Cryo-EM data collection, refinement and validation statistics.

R.m.s. deviations			
Bond lengths (Å)	0.006	0.003	0.006
Bond angles (°)	0.665	0.498	0.697
Validation			
MolProbity score	2.05	1.63	1.77
Clashscore	11.62	7.22	7.94
Poor rotamers (%)	0.41	0.12	0.13
Ramachandran plot			
Favored (%)	92.47	96.49	95.15
Allowed (%)	7.36	3.36	4.56
Disallowed (%)	0.17	0.16	0.29
PDB code	9V52	9V53	9V55
EMDB code	EMD-64784	EMD-64785	EMD-64787

Table S1. (continued)

Acknowledgements

We are thankful to the Tsinghua University Branch of the China National Center for Protein Sciences (Beijing) for their generous assistance with cryo-EM facility support and computational resources on the Bio-Computing Platform cluster. Additionally, we appreciate the valuable technical support from J. Lei, X. Li, and F. Yang. This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant Nos. 32501078 to X.G. and 32371254, 32171190 to J.W.).

Additional information

Author contributions

X.G. and J.W. conceived the project. X.G. and Z.G. optimized the preparation of cryo-grids, recorded the cryo-EM data, and processed this data. J.W. built the atomic models.

X.G. and J.W. wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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MOST | National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC)	32171190	Jiawei Wang

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Peer reviews

Reviewer #1 (Public review):

Summary:

This manuscript investigates the biological mechanism underlying the assembly and transport of the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump complex. By combining endogenous protein purification with cryo-EM analysis, the authors show that the AcrB trimer adopts three distinct conformations simultaneously and identify a previously uncharacterized lipoprotein, YbjP, as a potential additional component of the complex. The work aims to advance our understanding of the AcrAB-TolC efflux system in near-native conditions and may have broader implications for elucidating its physiological mechanism.

Strengths:

Overall, the manuscript is clearly presented, and several of the datasets are of high quality. The use of natively isolated complexes is a major strength, as it minimizes artifacts associated with reconstituted systems and enables the discovery of a novel subunit. The authors also distinguish two major assemblies-the TolC-YbjP sub-complex and the complete pump-which appear to correspond to the closed and open channel states, respectively. The conceptual advance is potentially meaningful, and the findings could be of broad interest to the field.

Weaknesses:

(1) As the identification of YbjP is a key contribution of this work, a deeper comparison with functional "anchor" proteins in other efflux pumps is needed. Including an additional supplementary figure illustrating these structural comparisons would be valuable.

(2) The observation of the LTO states in the presence of TolC represents an important extension of previous findings. A more detailed discussion comparing these LTO states to those reported in earlier structural and biochemical studies would improve the clarity and significance of this point.

https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.109684.1.sa3

Reviewer #2 (Public review):

Summary:

This manuscript reports the high-resolution cryo-EM structures of the endogenous TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex and a TolC-YbjP subcomplex from E. coli, identifying a novel accessory subunit. This work is an impressive effort that provides valuable structural insights into this native complex.

Strengths:

(1) The study successfully determines the structure of the complete, endogenously purified complex, marking a significant achievement.

(2) The identification of a previously unknown accessory subunit is an important finding.

(3) The use of cryo-EM to resolve the complex, including potential post-translational modifications such as N-palmitoyl and S-diacylglycerol, is a notable highlight.

Weaknesses:

(1) Clarity and Interpretation: Several points need clarification. Additionally, the description of the sample preparation method, which is a key strength, is currently misplaced and should be introduced earlier.

(2) Data Presentation: The manuscript would benefit significantly from improved figures.

(3) Supporting Evidence: The inclusion of the protein purification profile as a supplementary figure is essential. Furthermore, a discussion comparing the endogenous AcrB structure to those obtained in other systems (e.g., liposomes) and commenting on observed lipid densities would strengthen the overall analysis.

https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.109684.1.sa2

Reviewer #3 (Public review):

Summary:

The manuscript "Structural mechanisms of pump assembly and drug transport in the AcrAB-TolC efflux system" by Ge et al. describes the identification of a previously uncharacterized lipoprotein, YbjP, as a novel partner of the well-studied Enterobacterial tripartite efflux pump AcrAB-TolC. The authors present cryo-electron microscopy structures of the TolC-YbjP subcomplex and the complete AcrABZ-TolC-YbjP assembly. While the identification and structural characterization of YbjP are potentially novel, the stated focus of the manuscript-mechanisms of pump assembly and drug transport - is not sufficiently addressed. The manuscript requires reframing to emphasize the principal novelty associated with YbjP and significant development of the other aspects, especially the claimed novelty of the AcrB drug-efflux cycle.

Strengths:

The reported association of YbjP with AcrAB-TolC is novel; however, a recent deposition of a preceding and much more detailed manuscript to the BioRxiv server (Horne et al., *https://doi.org/10.1101/2025.03.19.644130*) removes much of the immediate novelty.

Weaknesses:

While the identification of YbjP is novel, the authors do not appear to acknowledge the precedence of another work (Horne et al., 2025), and it is not cited within the correct context in the manuscript.

Several results presented in the TolC-YbjP section do not represent new findings regarding TolC structure itself. The structure and gating behaviour of TolC should be more thoroughly introduced in the Introduction, including prior work describing channel opening and conformational transitions. The current manuscript does not discuss the mechanistic role of helices H3/H4 and H7/H8 in channel dilation, despite implying that YbjP binding may influence these features. Only the original closed TolC structure is cited, and the manuscript does not address prior mutational studies involving the D396 region, though this residue is specifically highlighted in the presented structures.

The manuscript provides only a general structural alignment between the closed TolC-YbjP subcomplex and the open TolC observed in the full pump assembly. However, multiple open, closed, and intermediate conformations of AcrAB-TolC have already been reported. Thus, YbjP alone cannot be assumed to account for TolC channel gating. A systematic comparison with existing structures is necessary to determine whether YbjP contributes any distinct allosteric modulation.

The analysis of AcrB peristaltic action is superficial, poorly substantiated and importantly, not novel. Several references to the ATP-synthase cycle have been provided, but this has been widely established already some 20 years ago - e.g. *https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1131542*.

The most significant limitation of the study is the absence of functional characterization of YbjP in vivo or in vitro. While the structural association between YbjP and TolC is interesting, the biological role of YbjP remains unclear. Moreover, the manuscript does not examine structural differences between the presented complex and previously solved AcrAB-TolC or MexAB-OprM assemblies that might support a mechanistic model.

https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.109684.1.sa1

Author response:

> ***Public Reviews:***
>
> ***Reviewer #1 (Public review):***
>
> *Summary:*
>
> *This manuscript investigates the biological mechanism underlying the assembly and transport of the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump complex. By combining endogenous protein purification with cryo-EM analysis, the authors show that the AcrB trimer adopts three distinct conformations simultaneously and identify a previously uncharacterized lipoprotein, YbjP, as a potential additional component of the complex. The work aims to advance our understanding of the AcrAB-TolC efflux system in near-native conditions and may have broader implications for elucidating its physiological mechanism.*
>
> *Strengths:*
>
> *Overall, the manuscript is clearly presented, and several of the datasets are of high quality. The use of natively isolated complexes is a major strength, as it minimizes artifacts associated with reconstituted systems and enables the discovery of a novel subunit. The authors also distinguish two major assemblies-the TolC-YbjP sub-complex and the complete pump-which appear to correspond to the closed and open channel states, respectively. The conceptual advance is potentially meaningful, and the findings could be of broad interest to the field.*
>
> *Weaknesses:*
>
> *(1) As the identification of YbjP is a key contribution of this work, a deeper comparison with functional "anchor" proteins in other efflux pumps is needed. Including an additional supplementary figure illustrating these structural comparisons would be valuable.*

We appreciate this helpful suggestion. We will expand the comparative analysis between YbjP and established anchoring or accessory components in other efflux pumps, and we will add a new supplementary figure illustrating these structural relationships.

> *(2) The observation of the LTO states in the presence of TolC represents an important extension of previous findings. A more detailed discussion comparing these LTO states to those reported in earlier structural and biochemical studies would improve the clarity and significance of this point.*

We agree. In the revised manuscript we will expand our discussion of the LTO conformations, including a direct comparison with previously reported structural and biochemical

observations, to better contextualize the significance of our findings.

> ***Reviewer #2 (Public review):***
>
> *Summary:*
>
> *This manuscript reports the high-resolution cryo-EM structures of the endogenous TolC-YbjP-AcrABZ complex and a TolC-YbjP subcomplex from E. coli, identifying a novel accessory subunit. This work is an impressive effort that provides valuable structural insights into this native complex.*
>
> *Strengths:*
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> *(1) The study successfully determines the structure of the complete, endogenously purified complex, marking a significant achievement.*
>
> *(2) The identification of a previously unknown accessory subunit is an important finding.*
>
> *(3) The use of cryo-EM to resolve the complex, including potential post-translational modifications such as N-palmitoyl and S-diacylglycerol, is a notable highlight.*
>
> *Weaknesses:*
>
> *(1) Clarity and Interpretation: Several points need clarification. Additionally, the description of the sample preparation method, which is a key strength, is currently misplaced and should be introduced earlier.*

Thank you for pointing this out. We will reorganize the text to introduce the sample preparation strategy earlier and clarify the points that may cause ambiguity.

> *(2) Data Presentation: The manuscript would benefit significantly from improved figures.*

We agree and will revise the figures to improve clarity, consistency, and readability. Additional schematic illustrations will also be included where appropriate.

> *(3) Supporting Evidence: The inclusion of the protein purification profile as a supplementary figure is essential. Furthermore, a discussion comparing the endogenous AcrB structure to those obtained in other systems (e.g., liposomes) and commenting on observed lipid densities would strengthen the overall analysis.*

We appreciate these suggestions. We will add the purification profile and expand the comparison between our endogenous AcrB structure and previously reported structures from reconstituted systems, including a more detailed discussion of lipid densities.

> ***Reviewer #3 (Public review):***
>
> *Summary:*
>
> *The manuscript "Structural mechanisms of pump assembly and drug transport in the AcrAB-TolC efflux system" by Ge et al. describes the identification of a previously uncharacterized lipoprotein, YbjP, as a novel partner of the well-studied Enterobacterial tripartite efflux pump AcrAB-TolC. The authors present cryo-electron microscopy structures of the TolC-YbjP subcomplex and the complete AcrABZ-TolC-YbjP assembly. While the identification and structural characterization of YbjP are potentially novel, the stated focus of the manuscript-mechanisms of pump assembly and drug transport - is not sufficiently addressed. The manuscript requires reframing to emphasize the principal novelty associated with YbjP and significant development of the other aspects, especially the claimed novelty of the AcrB drug-efflux cycle.*

> *Strengths:*
>
> *The reported association of YbjP with AcrAB-TolC is novel; however, a recent deposition of a preceding and much more detailed manuscript to the BioRxiv server (Horne et al., https://doi.org/10.1101/2025.03.19.644130) removes much of the immediate novelty.*
>
> *Weaknesses:*
>
> *While the identification of YbjP is novel, the authors do not appear to acknowledge the precedence of another work (Horne et al., 2025), and it is not cited within the correct context in the manuscript.*

We thank the reviewer for rasising this important point regarding the independent nature of our work.

Our study indeed progressed independently. The process began with our purification of an endogenous protein sample containing the AcrAB-TolC efflux pump. During our cryo-EM analysis, we observed an unassigned density in the map, for which we built a preliminary main-chain model. A subsequent search of structural databases, including AlphaFold predictions, allowed us to identify this density as the protein YbjP. It was only after this identification that we became aware of the related preprint by Horne et al. on BioRxvi (Posted March 19, 2025).

Therefore, our structural determination of YbjP was conducted entirely independently. We fully acknowledge and respect the work by Horne *et al.* and have already cited their reprint in our manuscript. While their detailed structural data, maps, and coordinates are not yet publicly available, we have described their findings appropriately. We agree that our manuscript can better reflect this context and will carefully check for any missing citations to ensure that their contribution is properly and clearly acknowledged.

We also believe that the two studies are mutually complementary and collectively reinforce the emerging understanding of YbjP.

> *Several results presented in the TolC-YbjP section do not represent new findings regarding TolC structure itself.*

We agree that the TolC features we describe are consistent with previously reported structural characteristics. However, these observations could only be confirmed in the context of the newly determined TolC–YbjP subcomplex, which was not available prior to this study. We will clarify this point in the revision to avoid overstating novelty.

> *The structure and gating behaviour of TolC should be more thoroughly introduced in the Introduction, including prior work describing channel opening and conformational transitions.*

We appreciate this suggestion and agree that a more comprehensive overview of TolC gating and conformational transitions will strengthen the Introduction. We will revise the text to incorporate relevant prior structural and functional studies.

> *The current manuscript does not discuss the mechanistic role of helices H3/H4 and H7/H8 in channel dilation, despite implying that YbjP binding may influence these features.*

Thank you for this comment. The primary novel contributions of this manuscript are the identification of YbjP and the structural characterization of AcrB in three distinct states. The discussion of the dilation mechanism, while included because we observed the closed TolC-

YbjP state, is a secondary point. In the revised manuscript, we will expand this discussion as suggested.

> *Only the original closed TolC structure is cited, and the manuscript does not address prior mutational studies involving the D396 region, though this residue is specifically highlighted in the presented structures.*

We appreciate the reviewer drawing attention to this oversight. We will add citations to the relevant mutational and mechanistic studies, including those involving the D396 region, and more clearly discuss these findings in relation to our structural observations.

> *The manuscript provides only a general structural alignment between the closed TolC-YbjP subcomplex and the open TolC observed in the full pump assembly. However, multiple open, closed, and intermediate conformations of AcrAB-TolC have already been reported. Thus, YbjP alone cannot be assumed to account for TolC channel gating. A systematic comparison with existing structures is necessary to determine whether YbjP contributes any distinct allosteric modulation.*

We agree with the reviewer's assessment and appreciate the constructive suggestion. In our revised manuscript, we will expand the structural comparison to include previously reported open, closed, and intermediate AcrAB–TolC conformations. This expanded analysis will more clearly position our findings within the existing structural framework.

> *The analysis of AcrB peristaltic action is superficial, poorly substantiated and importantly, not novel. Several references to the ATP-synthase cycle have been provided, but this has been widely established already some 20 years ago - e.g. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.1131542.*

We thank the reviewer for this comment. We fully acknowledge the foundational studies that established the AcrB functional cycle and its analogy to the ATP-synthase mechanism. While previous work indeed defined the LTO (Loose, Tight, Open) cycle of AcrB, those structures were obtained using AcrB in isolation. In contrast, our endogenous sample, which includes the native constraints of AcrA from above and the presence of AcrZ, reveals conformational changes in the transmembrane and porter domains that differ from those previously reported. We interpret these differences as reflecting a more physiologically relevant mechanism. In our revision, we will provide a detailed discussion to contextualize these distinctions within the existing literature.

> *The most significant limitation of the study is the absence of functional characterization of YbjP in vivo or in vitro. While the structural association between YbjP and TolC is interesting, the biological role of YbjP remains unclear.*

We agree that the lack of functional characterization is a limitation of the present work. Our study focuses on structural elucidation and structural analysis. Although the recent preprint you mentioned suggests that YbjP deletion may not produce a strong phenotype, we are still interested in conducting additional experiments to explore its potential roles in future work. We will revise the text to clearly acknowledge this limitation.

> *Moreover, the manuscript does not examine structural differences between the presented complex and previously solved AcrAB-TolC or MexAB-OprM assemblies that might support a mechanistic model.*

We thank the reviewer for this suggestion. We will incorporate a more detailed comparative analysis with existing AcrAB–TolC and MexAB–OprM structures and highlight similarities and differences that may inform mechanistic interpretation.

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