

STUDY

THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS AND THE NEW WORLD ORDER

August 10, 2022

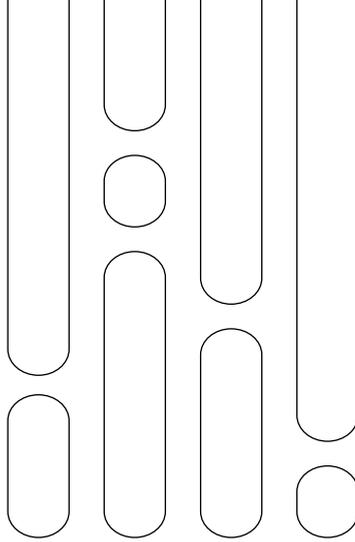
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Introduction

Before the war in Ukraine (2022) and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan (August 2021), the dominant idea in Western strategic circles was to defend the concept of a “rules-based international order.” According to this idea, the international order was based on the notion of having a “benevolent hegemon;” the United States — as it promotes itself. The current situation in Ukraine is leading the world toward new realities and major changes. Indeed, the view from Moscow is different; this conflict is not about Ukraine but rather one between Russia and the West. In 2022, a new international order is emerging in light of a rising Russian-Chinese axis confronting a declining West. This decline will not be short-lived because the European continent will remain at war and fragmented as long as the military confrontation in Ukraine continues.

In the hypothesized scenario of a long-term confrontation between Russia and the West, one possibility is to see the revival of a new non-aligned movement with a growing number of countries (including countries in Europe such as Serbia and to a lesser extent Hungary) unwilling to take a side in this confrontation. This potential new trend of “neutrality” can be best explained by a number of factors: the economic costs of opposing Russian military action in Ukraine, the unconvincing nature of Western legal arguments and the Russian ability to develop a counter-discourse to challenge the Western narrative. This potential new trend of neutrality is also linked to the fear of the Third World countries of a war involving nuclear-capable great powers.

In Europe, the European Union (EU) member countries disagree regarding the idea of disconnecting Russia from the West and the globalized international system (the international financial system based on the US dollar). Indeed, disconnecting Russia from the global economy is not the same as disconnecting Iran, Syria, or North Korea. The different positions of the EU member countries explain the delay in imposing sanctions on Russia. Further, there is a dominant view that sanctions must not hit European countries harder than the Russian state. The European countries fear that sanctioning Russia could have the unintended consequence of self-sanctioning their own economies, as has been the case since 2014 with the sanctions

against the export of European agricultural products to Russia. This explains why in April 2022, the EU has not been functioning at its optimal level: Brussels is once again incapable of acting quickly and strongly. At the beginning of the war, there was a sense of Europe standing up and acting as a great power capable of bringing about change whereas one month later, this was not the case anymore.

This fragmented European bloc is also divided by a debate about how to secure long-term European interests. The first option is to push for a diplomatic compromise while moderating divergent positions on Ukraine. The second option is to choose a confrontational policy toward Russia while supporting the Ukrainian resistance and exporting weapons to Kyiv. To end the conflict, the European states can be part of the diplomatic solution offering security guarantees for Ukraine: the European countries' engagement to support Ukraine's security could be supported by Article 5 of NATO. Another possibility could be to reassure the Ukrainian ally by offering EU membership, including some security guarantees and facilitating Ukraine's membership through Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty. This has been the preferred choice with the decision to award Ukraine EU candidate status. This is a political decision and largely a symbolic one given the long-term process to become an effective EU member state which could take years to complete.

This paper will shed light on the international perceptions of the new world order as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, and the likely global changes, including in the Middle East. The main issue relates to whether or not the Ukrainian war represents the confirmation of the emergence of a post-Western international order.

Europe's Geopolitical Awakening

During the first weeks of the crisis, the Western bloc appeared coherent and stronger. The proven threat that Moscow poses to NATO member countries' borders, from the Arctic to Ukraine via the Baltic states, has been a central element of NATO's strategic review in the summer of 2022. The alliance has suddenly regained its *raison d'être* and its cohesion. Another key point for the NATO strategic review has been the new focus on China, whose "declared ambitions and assertiveness present systemic challenges for the international order," according to the press release from the Brussels Summit

held on June, 2021 ,14. But since the start of the war in Ukraine, the rivalry with Beijing has undoubtedly appeared to be less of a priority for certain NATO member countries. Moreover, the strategic coherence always sought between NATO and the EU, which must also produce a framework document on security and defense – has been reinforced in the short-term. But NATO's strategic cacophony is not completely invisible⁽¹⁾ as the initial fear of the war with Russia will be replaced by competing economic interests toward Russia. This is a unique opportunity for France to promote within NATO and the EU its vision of European strategic autonomy which will help to strengthen, but not compete with transatlantic solidarity. According to Josep Borrel, "This crisis has made it even clearer that we live in a world shaped by raw power politics, where everything is weaponized and where we face a fierce battle of narratives." He also underlined European overdependence on Russia. According to his view, "Energy plays a disproportionate role in EU-Russia relations and that Russia has used energy as a political weapon. We are now fully mobilized to cut our excessive dependence on Russia energy imports."⁽²⁾

It was in this context that Brussels published the definition of a European strategic agenda outlining the complementary nature of the NATO-EU security agenda. The Strategic Compass as defined by the EU is to guide the necessary development of European security and defense agendas for the next 10 years in a contested multipolar world.

At the same time, it is clear that the French plan to bring the EU and Russia closer together in the name of forming a "Greater Europe" in a multipolar world is unlikely to materialize because of the Ukrainian situation and because of the positions of Washington and a number of Eastern European countries.⁽³⁾

Despite this limitation to European autonomy, significant work should be done – particularly at the European level – to "de-Westernize" the response to Russian military actions against Ukraine. As a reaction to the perceived Western hostility, Russia will invest in deepening its international partnerships in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. This new strategy will have several impacts on the international system in geopolitical and economic terms such as the long-term weakening of the dollar-dominated international trade system and the fear of US sanctions by non-Western regional and international powers. This is why the Europeans will have to confront a twofold challenge: to be

united and to manage the potential role of the United States to push them to embrace a maximalist position and prevent a short-term diplomatic solution even if they define a common position to solve the Ukrainian crisis.

This will have negative outcomes for all the parties on the European side as well as on the Chinese side because the United States could further challenge Brussels' objective to defend European economic interests in China. This need for Europe to choose the US camp against the Russian-Chinese bloc could be a consequence of the war in Ukraine.

In geopolitical terms, the difficulty of the West in convincing the world of the urgent need to confront Russia will accelerate the emergence of a post-Western international order. Indeed, the dominant view from Africa, the Middle East and Asia (except for Japan and South Korea) is that the war in Ukraine is a regional war and not an international one.

The Debate on the Origins of the War

The war in Ukraine also sparked debate regarding the role of intelligence agencies both in France and in the United States. This debate was about the nature of Russian intentions before the invasion of Ukraine as well as the strength of the Russian army. Indeed, one has to consider the failure of US intelligence on the perceived superiority of the Russian army. According to Phillips Payson O'Brien, "The resilience of Ukrainian resistance is embarrassing for a Western think-tank and military community that had confidently predicted that the Russians would conquer Ukraine in a matter of days."⁽⁴⁾

The surprise was also on the Russian side. "Russian President Vladimir Putin has run into unanticipated, stiff resistance from the Ukrainians and harsh sanctions from an unexpectedly unified West."⁽⁵⁾ This perceived Russian "surprise" depends on the definition of the political objectives of the Russian army. If the Russian military target is to focus on the eastern part of Ukraine, Russia could possibly proclaim a victory before the end of 2022 whereas if the objective remains regime change in Kyiv, it is more probable that the conflict will last for several more years.

On the French side, the evaluation of the strength of the Russian army was more accurate. The perceived cost (economic and military) led French intelligence assessments to downplay the prospect of a Russian military invasion. This possibility was excluded by the French intelligence community because it forecasted that the Russian decision-making process was based on a cost/benefit analysis and not driven by notions such as prestige or ideological preferences. This inability to accurately evaluate Russian intentions was one of the reasons explaining why the head of the French Directorate of Military Intelligence (DRM) was dismissed at the end of March 2022. There is also a debate inside the French strategic community on the importance of the Ukrainian factor in explaining this political decision. The decision of Emmanuel Macron to dismiss the chief of the DRM General Eric Vidaud could be “the result of an error of casting of the French President when he directly appointed him last summer” (in 2021).⁽⁶⁾ Another possibility is that General Vidaud might have been critical of the French hardline position toward Russia, hence his dismissal could have been the outcome of the general expression of his political opinion. It is indeed highly unusual for a general in this position to be dismissed after seven months. Nevertheless, it is clear that the DRM has been criticized for providing insufficient feedback from the ground in Ukraine and for not having seen that the Russians were going to invade Ukraine, but the aforementioned do not constitute the main reasons for the general’s dismissal according to several security sources.

Beyond the French internal debate on the origins of the war, there are also some internal tensions inside the German government. There are divisions within the ruling coalition in Berlin on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. In recent weeks, several media outlets have reported on the standoff between the Ministry of Defense, led by the Social Democrat Party’s (SPD) Christine Lambrecht and the Minister of Economy and Climate Robert Habeck. During a trip to Ukraine in the spring of 2021, the latter, who was then the co-president of the Greens, spoke out in favor of the delivery of defensive weapons to Kyiv. His voice remained totally isolated, and the German chancellor is not keen to pursue heavy weapons delivery to Ukraine. It can be

interpreted as a political choice rather than a supply problem for German exporters.⁽⁷⁾

The Internal Debate in Europe and the Return of the US “Gendarme of Europe”

From 80,000 US soldiers in Europe to 100,000, this was an increase of 20,000 soldiers during the first two months of the war (mid-February-mid-April 2022). This US military presence on European soil is now at the same level as in 1997. At the end of the Cold War, in 345,000 ,1991 US military personnel were stationed in Europe (224,000 in Germany). In the context of an increasing US military presence on European soil, there is a debate about the priority that should be given to a different set of objectives: firstly, the ambition for European strategic autonomy and, secondly, the quest for a US security guarantee. In the coming months, it is highly probable that we are going to see an increase in European military and energy dependency on the United States. At the same time, the expected rise of European military purchases from the United States will soon become a new hurdle to building an independent European industrial-military complex. Strengthening their military industry remains an indispensable condition to achieving European strategic autonomy. Europe is no longer a balancing power between Moscow and Washington, and since the start of the Ukrainian crisis, countries such as Turkey, Israel and China have been playing this diplomatic role.

In this new military context, there is a need for a debate on what should be the future vision of European defense. The project of a European rapid reaction force (5,000 soldiers) may appear fragile, but some experts are calling for the creation of a federal European army. Of course, this would mean the end of EU member countries monopolizing the legitimate use of violence, and the creation of a federal army will result in a parallel assertion of “European military sovereignty.” Admittedly, this is unlikely to solve all the security problems facing Europe, but it has the advantage of setting a truly ambitious horizon that diminishes the prospects of national rearmament programs. Lastly, this ambitious horizon (a federal army) is a befitting political response commensurate with the challenge generated by the return of war to Europe.⁽⁸⁾

Beyond the limits of a theoretical debate about European strategic autonomy, some are calling to start a new process based on European

military realities on the ground. “The question is not to know whether or not we are in favor of NATO, Defense Europe or Franco-German cooperation, but to define a strategy based on realities, including those who bother us.”⁽⁹⁾ It is clear that Russia and the West will find themselves locked in a protracted confrontation for years to come. The only open questions are the following: “Will this confrontation be global in nature or confined to Europe? Will the confrontation be all-encompassing or limited? Will the confrontation be regulated by some residual rules or totally anarchic?”⁽¹⁰⁾

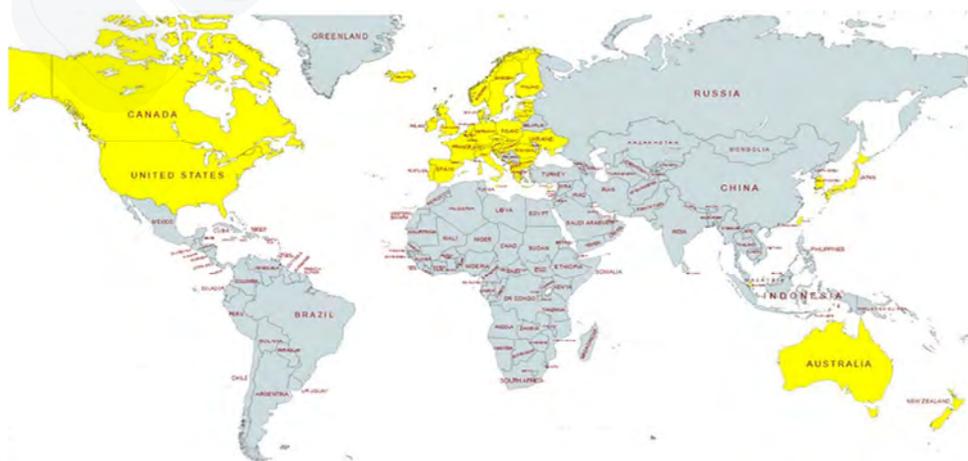
There is also a debate in Europe about the level of military support that should be granted to the Ukrainian ally, and whether a safe haven should be created, or a non-fly zone imposed. In addition, the Europeans need to think about the prospect of a long term exit strategy for Russia that has to be prepared without rewarding Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine. Supposedly, this strategy of maintaining diplomatic/political dialogue with Moscow⁽¹¹⁾ is to avoid the prospect of Russia’s rapprochement with the non-Western world: the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. For many centuries, Russia was not separated from Europe (at least since the 16th century). In the coming months, what is certain is that there will be no return to a state of Russia-Europe relations as was in place before February 24, 2022. A return to the relationship that prevailed before 2014 and the annexation of Crimea is even less probable.

Economic Sanctions Against Russia and the Risk of Divisions Among European Countries

The future of the sanctions coalition will depend on the political objective of the sanctions regime: is this sanctions policy designed to end the war or rather to raise the economic costs of the Russian military intervention for Moscow? Richard Nephew explains that “sanctioning all of Russia’s oil and natural gas exports would deal a serious blow to the Russian economy — but doing so would also exacerbate the budding energy crisis, given European and global reliance on Russian energy flows.”⁽¹²⁾ In other words, it is better for the sanctions to hurt Russia more than European interests. Moreover, one has to consider that “disruptions in energy, food, agricultural goods, and trade routes will generate friction within the sanctions coalition —which currently counts Australia, Canada, Japan, South Korea, the United

States, and the European Union among its members — especially if the burdens seem unbalanced or unfair.”⁽¹³⁾ This ability to share the burden of sanctions will be a key factor in the capability of European countries to sustain the sanctions regime in the long-term. Another challenge facing the new sanctions regime is that it is only supported by a minority of countries worldwide (see Map 1).

Map 1: Countries That Have Imposed Economic Sanctions on Russia



Source : Ollie Vergas on Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3xBSymc>.

The Regional Consequences of the War in Ukraine

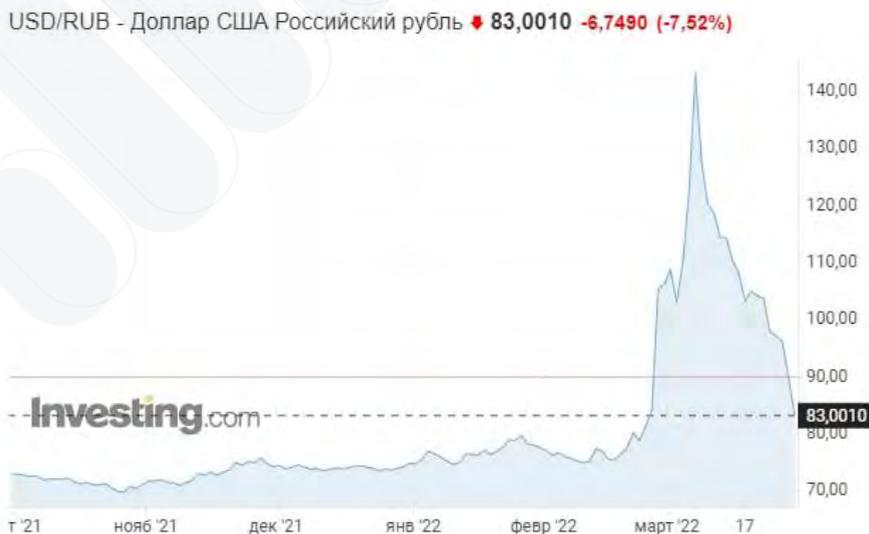
In the former Soviet space, there is a dominant perception that there will be a relative decline in Russian power due to the war in Ukraine. This does not suggest that Russia will no longer be the regional hegemon, but rather, it will be a less powerful hegemon. In the former Soviet space, there are states that are tacitly supporting Ukraine and states that are tacitly supporting Russia. “The one state within the region that deviates from this posturing is Armenia, for understanding the inapplicability of ‘silence’ or ‘neutrality,’ and noting the impossible position that it finds itself in, Armenia has selected to utilize the policy of ‘strategic shirking.’”⁽¹⁴⁾ This policy does not aim to distance Yerevan from Moscow but rather to insulate Armenia from the geopolitical consequences of the Ukrainian conflict itself.

The new geopolitical outcomes are also negative for Washington’s geopolitical influence worldwide: the rapprochement between Russia and China, the instability in Eastern Europe, the need to reinforce the

US military presence in Europe and the difficulty in finalizing the pivot to Asia to focus on the so-called Chinese threat.⁽¹⁵⁾ Indeed, this conflict means the return to power politics and this will create a new geopolitical approach based on the idea promoted by some countries (such as Russia) to act in terms of historical rights and zones of influence, rather than adhering to internationally agreed rules and principles and uniting to promote international peace and security (the rules-based international order promoted by the benevolent US hegemon).

A New Russia-India-China Bloc?

The European refusal to use the ruble as a currency for trade (except for Hungary and Slovakia) could be best explained by the political risk of accepting such a decision under Russian pressure. Indeed, what Russia calls “unfriendly countries” represent 70 percent of Russian gas sales and half of Russian global trade. If the European countries accept the ruble for their gas purchases this could open a Pandora’s box for other commodities such as fertilizers and oil. This will also be a significant step toward the de-dollarization of international trade. Sanctions against Russia threaten to erode the dominance of the US dollar, says the IMF.⁽¹⁶⁾ Therefore, there is a risk of “fragmentation” in the global financial system. Nevertheless, “China’s yuan is unlikely to be a global challenger to the US dollar in the short term because it is still not freely convertible.”⁽¹⁷⁾ For now, “the US dollar remains the most fungible, secure, and best store of value. There are no serious competitors to the rules-based international financial system, in place since the end of World War II.”⁽¹⁸⁾ There are nevertheless proposals to bypass US sanctions such as a new Indo-Russian transaction platform. “The system, seen as an alternative to the Belgium-based SWIFT (the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication), is likely to ensure the seamless transfer of import or export documents for rupee-ruble trade settled through a rupee debt account.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Figure 1: The Limited Decline of the Ruble

Source: Arnaud Dubien on Twitter, <https://bit.ly/3vuq3US>.

In 2022, the ruble experienced its biggest drop in value since 2014. But this decline was short-lived because in June 2022, the ruble rose to its highest level in seven years despite Western sanctions. For Russia and China, one has to consider the official bilateral trade target of \$200 billion by 2024, announced in early February 2022 during Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing. This objective remains unchanged and could be reached sooner than expected. In any case, this will still be well below the current volume of trade between China and the EU (\$586 billion in 2020, according to the European Institute of Statistics) or with the United States (\$555 billion in 2020), which remain by far Beijing's most important trading partners. In this context, and as the Biden administration increases its pressure to dissuade China from strengthening its support for Moscow, it will be rational to anticipate an adjustment of the Chinese position in order to manage relations with its top trading partners.⁽²⁰⁾

The EU approach toward China is based on skepticism. The EU is expected to recalibrate its relationship with one of its top trading partners.⁽²¹⁾ Indeed, the Ukraine situation has definitely pushed the EU

position closer to the United States. This will have negative outcomes for all the parties on the European side as well as on the Chinese side because US pressure on European economic interests in China will be stronger as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. Moreover, whereas Merkel put trade at the center of her China policy, the new German coalition government has proposed a more values-based approach.

The Consequences of the Ukrainian War on the Middle East

Russia has received some diplomatic support from the Middle Eastern countries: Syria voted in favor of Russia at the United Nations and the UAE abstained at the UNSC from condemning Russia's war in Ukraine. Moreover, further cooperation with regional organizations, including the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), will continue to be favored by Moscow.⁽²²⁾ Russia will take advantage of the concerns of the Middle Eastern countries now that the United States is focusing more on the challenges rising from China and Russia than on Middle Eastern affairs.

There is also a political will among the GCC member countries to prove to the United States "its credibility as an ally and establish a 'new' equation of relations that improves their standing."⁽²³⁾ The choice of "neutrality" by some Arab countries is reflective of a change in US policy toward the Middle East.⁽²⁴⁾ At the same time, Russia's war in Ukraine is altering Middle Eastern diplomacy and forcing the United States to reassess the political costs of reviving the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.⁽²⁵⁾ There is a temptation in Washington to allow the (legal) return of Iranian oil exports amid the energy sanctions on Russia (this oil factor also explains the Biden administration's attitude toward Venezuela).

Regarding Iran, Washington has not managed to delink the Iranian nuclear file from the increasing tensions between itself and Moscow over Ukraine. This was clear in the Russian request for guarantees for its cooperation in sensitive fields with Iran (military, space, cyber, nuclear). In Syria, coordinated actions between the United States and Russia are at risk due to the war in Ukraine.⁽²⁶⁾ The prospect of a new US-Gulf partnership is a possibility, especially if the Iran nuclear deal cannot be renewed for political reasons (the delisting of the IRGC from the US terror list will be extremely costly for the Biden administration).

Some experts hold that “only a more effective, transparent, and comprehensive dialogue, supported by leadership on both sides, can get this roughly eight-decade-long partnership on a new track.”⁽²⁷⁾ Assuming that Russia and the West have entered a new era of confrontation, it remains to be seen if this new confrontation will destabilize the region or if the great powers are going to be able to delink their regional cooperation from other developments such as the negotiations process on the Iranian nuclear deal. What is certain is that the credibility of US security guarantees is not on the rise after the war in Ukraine. A NATO response to reassure the countries near the frontline was mentioned by European member states at the beginning of the war when the risk of a rapid Russian conquest of Ukraine was perceived as a first step potentially leading to more conquests (Moldavia, Romania).

Conclusion

Is Russia a regional power (Obama), a great power or a semi-great power? What is clear is that Russia has repositioned itself as a strong adversary that cannot be sidelined to focus on the so-called Chinese threat. The Biden administration will therefore review its overall project and prepare to manage two fronts (Russia and China) of tensions in the years to come. The new fluidity of the international system will no longer allow the United States to identify allies and adversaries in a simplistic way but it will have to adapt to ambivalent relations, combining cooperation in one area, competition in another, potentially confrontation in a third, and giving more autonomy and space to second-tier players. The United States will be called upon to recognize, year after year, that Europe has a different vision of its relationship with Russia and that the two partners may share common values but have divergent strategic priorities.

The new international order will see a more coherent Western bloc on security questions, but the coalition of sanctions will remain fragile. There is also a question regarding Russia’s capability to maintain the regional order in the former Soviet space and on its borders. The diplomatic tests for Russia could be the peace process in the Caucasus between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, and the situation in Georgia.

A weakened Russian hegemon in the former Soviet space could rely more on countries such as Iran to challenge the Western narrative there. Indeed, further alienation between Russia and the West is seen as an opportunity by Tehran to strengthen an anti-Western axis with Russia and China. From the Iranian perspective, the worse the relationship between Russia and the West is, the more Russia is likely to approach Iran in a positive way. From Tehran's point of view, the war in Ukraine offers an opportunity to consolidate common interests with Russia and China, and to create new opportunities and possibilities for Iranian foreign, economic and security policies. This new political-security order has one limit: the difficulty for non-Western regional and international powers to overcome an international financial system under the domination of the US currency, the dollar. It remains to be seen if the war in Ukraine could accelerate a de-dollarization of the international financial system.

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