

University of Piraeus

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**Title**

**U.S. Grand Strategy in the post-Cold War Era**

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## Introduction

The purpose of both this paper and presentation today is to examine American Grand Strategy in the post-Cold War era in relation to the Presidents that were active during that time and to depict how the different individuals affected the overall Strategy. I would thus like to begin with a quote by Mearsheimer: The U.S. led post-Cold War order is liberal and international, and thus differs in fundamental ways from the bounded order the United States dominated during the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2019).

Although Grand Strategy is something that is considered by every nation, more or less, changes in leadership will always pose its effect on this. The case study that I have chosen to focus on has been the United States due to its position at the end of the Cold War. America was not all-powerful in world affairs but it surpassed others in its military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities (Henricksen, 2017). As such, the USA has proven to be a superpower capable of projecting its strength on a global scale and one that influences the status quo (rather than being influenced by it). Furthermore, it has been at the top in every field- militarily, economically, diplomatically and technologically speaking- having no main adversary in any of these areas, while concurrently being at the helm of various intergovernmental organisations. More specifically, after World War II the U.S. was confronted by new challenges (e.g. national, regional, ideological, economic and environmental) in an international setting of greater complexity and variation. These provoked the rise of new actors on the international political terrain. In the 1990s, non-governmental organizations and private voluntary organizations emerged, pursuing ambitious agendas in numerous areas. Traditional national security concerns faded and a core shift took place. The U.S. accelerated its efforts by engaging in collective security agreements with other countries. Both multilateral and bilateral treaties with individual countries were put into practice to solidify relationships and sustain security. Further to this, the NATO Alliance, which ensures the unity of like minded and other states wishing to fall under that umbrella, constituted one of the most crucial treaties and played a role in determining U.S. foreign policy in the post- Cold War era.

At this moment it is worth noting that whilst the U.S. was considered a “dominant player in a unipolar world,” including in the short years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the situation has greatly changed today. New powers have risen giving birth to a multipolar world, The bipolar, traditionally Westphalian state system of the Cold War has given way to a more multipolar system featuring a militarily and economically dominant, but not all-powerful, United States; a rising China and India; a resurgent Russia; an economically potent but militarily declining Europe; an unstable and violence-prone Middle East, wracked by the Sunni-Shia divide, economic and governmental underperformance, and the Arab-Israeli problem; a proliferation of weak and failed states, particularly in Africa, the

Middle East, and the Russian periphery; and empowered international and nongovernmental organizations and non-state actors (Hooker, 2014). Conversely and in a more concise manner one could say that “this is what is happening with the rise of China, which, along with the revival of Russian power, has brought the unipolar era to a close” (Mearsheimer, 2019). A further question that arises, “ Will the situation develop into a bipolar system with new competition between West and East?” (Arvanitopoulos, 2003), granted that the USA remains overall the most powerful country but has now been challenged across different areas (e.g. economic and/or military affairs). Perhaps the redistributive force between other great powers (Germany, China, Japan, USA, Russia) could lead to the establishment of a multipolar system. Ultimately, the U.S. has been asked to intervene in other matters of global interest, i.e. tackling global terrorism or building resilience against the impacts of climate change, which is why it is of interest to study how U.S. Grand strategy has shifted, if its values have changed, and how it has been influenced by its leadership.

### Grand Strategy

“What is grand strategy? What does it aim to achieve? Does it have relevance—and, if so, applicability—beyond questions of war and peace? And what differentiates it from normal strategic thought—what, in other words, makes it “grand”?” (McKnight Nicols & Preston)(Borgwardt et al., 2021)

In this paper the first challenge that we come across is giving a concise interpretation to the term Grand Strategy. Throughout the bibliography there are numerous definitions, interpretations or classifications of grand strategy. In the words of Hal Brands “the most common fallacy in the study of Grand Strategy is a definitional one” (Hall Brands) (Borgwardt et al., 2021). Often the descriptions given to the term Grand strategy are subject to the point that the author is trying to make or on the scope examined. It can refer to specific policies or on generalised approaches, be it on the domestic or international level. As McKnight Nicols & Preston put it “it is possible to consider, and even reach, a more capacious understanding of grand strategy, one that still includes the battlefield and the negotiating table but can also expand beyond them. While the concept of strategy is undoubtedly military in origin, and although strategic culture retains a high degree of its original military character, there is no reason to confine grand strategy solely to the realm of warfare” (McKnight Nicols & Preston)(Borgwardt et al., 2021).

“An exclusive focus on military force appears inconsistent with the contemporary environment of world politics.” A theory that bears little resemblance to the reality around us every day—in which gender, race, the environment, public health, and a wide range of cultural, social, political, and economic issues are not only salient but urgently pressing—can only be so useful. (McKnight Nicols & Preston)(Borgwardt et al., 2021)

From another perspective, namely that of Posen: “A grand strategy is a nation-state’s theory about how to produce security for itself” (Posen, 2014) and should only be concerned about matters of security. “A grand strategy is a key component of a state’s overall foreign policy, but foreign policy may have many goals beyond security, including the improvement of the prosperity of Americans at home, or the economic welfare or liberty of people abroad. (Posen, 2014)”. As Adam Smith put it, “defense is more important than opulence” (Art, 2003).

Although it has proven hard to incorporate all of the functions of Grand Strategy into one interpretation, Art (2003) gives us a concise list of the various policies:

- DOMINION: aims to rule the world
- GLOBAL COLLECTIVE SECURITY: to keep the peace everywhere
- REGIONAL COLLECTIVE SECURITY: to keep the peace in some places
- COOPERATIVE SECURITY: to reduce the occurrence of war by limiting the offensive military capabilities of states
- CONTAINMENT: to hold the line against specific aggressor states
- ISOLATIONISM: to stay out of most wars and to keep a free hand for the United States
- OFFSHORE BALANCING: to do that and in addition to cut down any emerging Eurasian hegemon
- SELECTIVE ENGAGEMENT: to do a selected number of critical tasks

These incorporate the various attitudes that states employ in order to achieve their short and long term goals. At this juncture, it is important to note that in the case of the US during the post-Cold War era, no single approach was strictly employed, rather a combination of all, depending on the situation, the goals and the leadership at the time. This insinuated that the core values of the U.S. had to always be taken into consideration and safeguarded. As Art (2003) maintains:

- First, prevent an attack on the American homeland;
- Second, prevent great-power Eurasian wars and, if possible, the intense security competitions that make them more likely;
- Third, preserve access to a reasonably priced and secure supply of oil;
- Fourth, preserve an open international economic order;
- Fifth, foster the spread of democracy and respect for human rights abroad, and prevent genocide or mass murder in civil wars, and
- Sixth, protect the global environment, especially from the adverse effects of global warming and severe climate change.

Taking into consideration that this text was written almost twenty years ago, we can see that the goals have expanded, i.e. focus has been placed on environmental and cyber security

issues, but by no means have these goals been diminished or changed. Despite a welter of theory and debate, grand strategy as a practical matter is remarkably consistent from decade to decade, with its means altering as technology advances and institutions evolve but its ends and ways showing marked continuity (Hooker, 2014).

## Presidents

Having discussed the significance of Grand Strategy and the importance that the U.S. plays worldwide, the next issue is to explore how each Presidential Administration implemented the principle of Grand Strategy respectively during their presidencies. The time period that this paper examines is the post-Cold War era of the U.S. Therefore the following Presidencies will be examined: the Clinton Administration, Bush Jr's Administration, Obama's Administration and ultimately the Trump Administration.

### Clinton

Bill Clinton's presidency is characterized by a shift in the internal affairs and the economy. The 1992 recession led Bush to be defeated, despite his important foreign policy achievements, and effectively forced the new president to focus on the economy. Even though in his security strategy he stated that: The general approach of this strategy is "globalist" with "selective engagement" in areas and events in which the US has particular interest (National Security Strategy 1994), his focus remained largely inward looking which comes in accordance with his pre-election focus: The presidential aspirant promised his audiences to "focus like a laser" on rehabilitating the ailing economy (Henricksen). Despite that it was as early as his inaugural speech where he "committed the United States to the role of world policeman" or to be more precise he stated that " the will and conscience of the international community is defied; we will act, with peaceful diplomacy whenever possible, with force when necessary" (Henricksen, 2017).

Traditional attention is paid to military interventions when nations or multilateral coalitions decide to involve themselves in international affairs but this leaves out other areas such as diplomatic negotiations, political and strategic affairs, peace and security and a wide range of social, economic and cultural issues. President Clinton's first major international involvement and part of his national security interest was to project U.S. economic prosperity through the ratification of NAFTA and WTO. Although the effort was handed over to him by his predecessor, it was Clinton who brought it to its conclusion. More pointedly, this was the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), linking together over 450 million people. A notable achievement, which not only served the mandate of the president to aid the economy internally but also increased the trade and financial

investments across borders. Successively, this set forth America's membership in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Taking the view that the WTO and NAFTA were called for stimulating American economic growth, they also contributed to global development. Subsequently, the Clinton administration took advantage of the US leadership in the international system and moved forward in pursuing an ideological foreign policy by engaging in four interventions for so-called humanitarian reasons: in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Serbia in Kosovo.

What stigmatised perhaps the most the Clinton Presidency was what came to be known as the Black Hawk Down incident. The US had undertaken "Operation Restore Hope" which was set out to provide relief to the Somali population; food distribution was a major concern. A year later, the leadership of the operation was transferred to the UN and the majority of the American troops left the country; those that remained were incorporated into the UN forces that had stayed behind. Paradoxically, Washington's step back from the lead role coincided with a step up in UN operations, which directly involved the remaining US military forces in street battles (Henricksen, 2017). As the situation was boiling over, the US military manned an operation to capture two Aidid confidants as a means to bring peace to Somalia. It was there that two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down by militants in the streets. Notwithstanding that the American troops and their prisoners managed to escape, the backlash in Washington was tremendous, especially because in the eyes of the public this was supposed to be a humanitarian intervention. The significance of this incident lies on how it affected the administration in the future decision making process. The President realized that adventuresome actions overseas had to be curtailed because they stood to jeopardize his domestic priorities (Henricksen, 2017). This led him to be hesitant about when, whether and how he would interfere in other troubled areas such as Haiti, Rwanda and Bosnia later on. For example, in the case of Rwanda the administration was hesitant to get involved and only after widespread media coverage about the Rwandan genocide did they commit to a humanitarian venture providing water-producing equipment, food supplies and other items. Further to that any military activities that could drag it into another incident like Somalia were avoided. In a similar non-militaristic manner the Clinton administration reacted to the Haitian crisis by placing sanctions. Despite his rhetoric as a presidential candidate - in which he criticized President Bush for not engaging more on returning the rightly elected President Aristide to power- once elected Clinton backtracked from this initial rhetoric and toned down his internationalism.

Another important fact that needs to be addressed during President Clinton's administration is US interventionism in the Balkans: a) in Bosnia and b) in Kosovo. Former President Bush avoided handling the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, which began in 1991 and essentially left Europe responsible. The Yugoslav crisis that began in 1991 with the Serbo-Croatian war and continued in 1993-1995 in Bosnia brought an end to a peaceful period in Europe. As mentioned, Bush was predisposed to let Europe sort out their problems and even Clinton originally wanted to stay clear from this crisis. Being a humanitarian crisis,

he was criticised for his stance and as a result his policy shifted thereby increasing the US role in Bosnia. He committed via sanctions and employed airstrikes pursuing a troopless approach. Further to that it must be mentioned that the Kremlin especially resented the Clinton-initiated Kosovo bombing and the NATO expansion into the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Albania (Henricksen, 2017).

## Bush

George W. Bush's doctrine (2002) of "preemption against state and non-state actors" in relation to the U.S. war on terror gave different dimensions to the U.S. policies of multilateralism, promotion of democracy, and the intensification of militarization through a vehement use of force. Unquestionably, Bush was committed to the same discourse as his predecessors, i.e. "America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are one" (Brands, 2016). Moreover, Henriksen (2017) argues that "George Walker Bush's foreign policy veered sharply from the caution, disengagement, and hesitancy of his predecessor to a forceful interventionism that surpassed other post-Cold War presidencies." For example: "We will defend the peace by fighting terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. We will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent." (Gaddis, 2009)

Events such as the 9/11 attacks, shaped the U.S. foreign policy practice under both the Bush and Obama administrations. Regardless of to what extent Bush sought "to create a balance of power" initially, he failed to do so. The outgoing Clinton administration had tried hard to tell him that he shouldn't underestimate the challenge that Al-Qaeda posed but these efforts did not convince the Bush team to step up terrorism on his priority list. Bush administration officials later claimed that throughout the summer of 2001, they worked to prevent a possible Al Qaeda attack. He expressly vowed to "win the war against terrorism," and later zeroed in on al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan" and eventually called on "the Taliban regime to deliver to the United States authorities all the leaders of al-Qaeda who hide in their land," or share in their fate." (Timeline, Council on Foreign Relations) Bush's reputation was damaged badly due to his decision to declare an enduring and costly war against Iraq (2003).

A joint resolution was later signed, which authorized the use of force against those responsible for attacking the United States on 9/11. This resolution is later referred to as a legal rationale by the Bush administration to take extensive measures to combat terrorism (from invading Afghanistan, to monitoring U.S. citizens without a court order, to creating the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba). Events such as the 9/11 attacks expanded the connotation of grand strategy policy analysis and thus shaped the U.S. grand strategy discourse for the years to come. What is more, "the war on terrorism and its main initial components—the war in Afghanistan and dealing with what Bush would call the "axis of

evil”—represented the logical outcome of the Bush worldview following the terrorist attacks of September 11. The world did not change that day, but the threat Bush intended to confront, the relative priority of foreign policy on his agenda, and his political freedom to act on his beliefs, clearly did.”

The 9/11 attack significantly impacted America and the Bush administration but did not transform Bush’s foreign policy. Rather, these attacks affirmed the administration’s conviction that “this dangerous world could be made secure only by the confident application of American power, especially its military power.”(Daalder and Lindsay, 2003)

## Obama

When Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, he became the first African American to hold the office. Directly after he announced his candidacy in 2007, and while only having two years in the Senate, he went against Hillary Clinton, who had been New York’s representative since 2001. Obama then chose Joe Biden, a foreign policy expert at the time and Senator since 1972 as his Vice Presidential nominee; a choice that strengthened the Democratic credentials on foreign policy. In the November 4, 2008 election, Barack Obama received the highest percentage of Democratic nomination. He got 53% of the votes. Obama’s allies relied on minorities while getting large percentages from Latinos, women and young people. The number of blacks who went to the polls was unusually high (Papasotiriou, 2018).

An early sign of his intention for the presidency can be deduced from the fact that during his presidential campaign, Obama’s advisers emphasized the use of “soft power diplomacy” rather than the hard power of the Bush junior era (Henricksen, 2017). He sought to rebalance the U.S. grand strategy by shifting it away from the military power of the Bush era (Afghanistan, Iraq and “war on terror”) towards a non-military American power. In addition, he placed greater emphasis in diplomacy and multilateralism to solve conflicts, thereby focusing his attention on the U.S. role in promoting the rule of law and human rights in the international sphere. Obama also “advocated a re-seizing of the “American moment,” which he judged needed to be reclaimed by “rebuilding alliances, partnerships, and institutions necessary to confront common threats” (Henricksen, 2017). What was remarkable to denote was that President Obama visited 21 different countries in 2009, the most of any first-year U.S. President (Lasher and Rinehart 2016).

President Obama From first setting foot in the White House, moved to execute policies distinct from his predecessor. As time went on, he put forth policies in Libya and Syria, along with Iraq and Afghanistan, which reflected his disassociation from the muscular actions of the prior administration (Henricksen, 2017). His focus was on “nation building at home.” This can also be seen from his strategy paper. His strategy paper departed from previous ones by

noting the security imperative of “affordable health care” and “redeveloping our infrastructure” (Henricksen, 2017). It is also worth noting that one of his first actions while in the White House was to ban torture and to shut down the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

He was characterised as cautious and hesitant due to his persistent requests for additional options, i.e. tended to delay decision-making and infrequently acted, which meant that he averted committing American forces. This differentiated him from his predecessor’s presidency. Obama’s words are his only tool unless, of course, his counterterrorism policies are considered. In this arena, and only in this arena, is Obama proactive and decisive (Lasher and Rinehart 2016).

He expressed in his introduction that the “burdens of a young century cannot fall on American shoulders alone. Indeed, our adversaries would like to see America sap our strength by overextending our power” (NSS, 2010).

Regarding Russia he dispatched Robert Gates to Russia with a proposal for collaboration on East European missile defence. Moscow rejected the defense secretary’s proposal unless the United States first scrapped elements of the antimissile system (Henricksen, 2017). The US changed the missile strategy and replaced it with a naval anti-missile defense. These concessions laid the foundation for the Russian - American strategic weapons agreement and later on Russian backing on sanctions against Iran. Obama worked towards repairing Russian-American relations which had taken a blow since the Clinton administration’s involvement in Yugoslavia. This is further supported by the fact that President Obama and President Medvedev initiated the new START treaty for nuclear arms-control further decreasing the number of nuclear warheads and launchers.

Barack Obama’s drone strikes played into his retrenchment strategy, for offensive air bombardments permitted—and gave political cover to—the president to reduce ground forces while keeping terrorist networks off balance by killing their leadership (Henricksen, 2017).

At the outset of his first term, Obama elucidated that his administration would combine climate change and energy issues with technology, employment and other economic issues in order to re-establish the prominent role played by the US in global climate negotiation. When re-appointed, Obama underscored the urgency and importance of combating climate change and progressing clean energy technologies in his inaugural speech and other public statements.

## Trump

The most unconventional president of the United States was elected in 2016 and the only one in the history of the country who did not previously have a political or military position. He has been a prominent social figure in New York since the 1980s, and journalists had been asking whether he intended to run for president (Papasotiriou 2018).

Donald defeated Hillary Clinton in the election. For many he was considered the outsider to a clearly more experienced politician with decades of career as well as the wife of President Bill Clinton. Initially and within the party, Trump had to deal with resounding Republican figures plus the media and so he made sure to create a war against them. Donald Trump's presidency is characterized by the change of the American establishment but also the reversal of international agreements. In this context, he targeted China as a rising world power. Trump is the only president who received nicknames such as: road runner, typhoon amongst others, acting more as an impulsive businessman and less as a world leader. In fact, Trump is the only one who changed ministers, government officials and advisers every so often.

A president's ability to alter foreign policy at its core is limited. Trump's appointments showed more agreement than rupture with fixed long-term US policies such as the open international economic system and NATO. President Trump restricted the challenge of free trade in symbolic moves (with the exception of the US exit from the free trade agreement, but that had not been ratified by its members). His associates also urged him to publicly confirm articles of NATO which is a prerequisite for the alliance's deterrent force. In essence, Trump was presented as the leader who would maintain the open economic system and NATO, ensuring but with best terms for the US against traders or allied "moochers."

In the multilateral world, President Trump withdrew from the Paris climate accord, the Iran nuclear deal/JCPOA, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. His administration defunded and disengaged from the United Nations cutting the funding or leaving global cooperation pacts and bodies (i.e. Human Rights Council, WHO, UNESCO, UNRWA, Global Compact for Migration) while incapacitating the World Trade Organization. During this period, Trump also changed America's reputation from being a global first responder and tackling global issues to diminishing the US's ability to form the international agenda and push for collective action.

"That being said, Trump's actions have raised concerns about future U.S. capabilities to coalition-build after scrapping multilateral deals such as the TPP and the Paris Accord and seriously questioned others like NAFTA or even NATO." (Brands, 2018) This trend, Brands worries, might lead to the growing global leadership role of states like China and Russia at the expense of U.S. national interests. Such an example can be seen on how "the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, reacted to early uncertainties regarding American intentions by suggesting that the Trump administration's behaviour meant that Europe must be more self-reliant, and 'take our fate into our own hands'. Read closely, however, the Chancellor's

words imply not (necessarily) the end of NATO, but rather an alliance less reliant on American leadership.” (Dombrowski, Reich, 2017)

In terms of regional crises, Trump, in contrast to his neo – isolationism rhetoric, continued to support air forces in Syria and Iraq that clashed with the so-called Islamic State. In Afghanistan he increased the forces that clashed with the Taliban. In the North Korean nuclear program, both Trump and Kim Jong Un, adopted fiery rhetoric for negotiation purposes without pursuing a deliberate war.

Far beyond the danger of the Thucydides trap with Athens – Sparta taking on the roles of China-US, there is a significant asymmetry between China and the US, namely China has no defensive alliances. Its occasional cooperation with Russia is not based on a defensive guarantee of Article 5 of NATO (attack on a member is equal to attacking all members). Nor are BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries of a normal geopolitical coalition. In fact, the BRICS includes China and India which are geopolitical rivals.

China’s economy is growing faster than the US and it’s likely that in the near future Chinese GDP will surpass that of the United States. China with a population of 1.3 billion people versus US 320 million, even with a large difference in living standards, is likely to outperform the United States in economic activity. However, it will not displace the US from the centre of the open international economic system as it will remain a more developed economy.

The USA does not stand alone but leads an international coalition that includes the E.U., Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Israel.

The total power factor in the West far exceeds 50% of the global power. Therefore, as long as the West remains united China will not be able to seriously threaten it (Papasotiriou 2018).

## Conclusion

The literature regarding Grand strategy is extensive, thus a concrete interpretation cannot be given. The definitions vary from an oversimplified focus only on military matters, to attempting to incorporate topics ranging from domestic to international issues, economic or military power, each president's own views and agenda as well as everything in between. Grand strategy is effectively the way to combine the countries' means in order to achieve its interests.

Moreover among those “interests” are those that are vital interests like homeland security, WMD proliferation, climate change as well as others that gain their significance depending on the situation, the state of current affairs, the president's individual agenda, etc.. This further reinforces our view that the search for a logically coherent, internally consistent grand strategy is futile (Dombrowski, 2017).

The focus of this paper is on the United States of America, that is because for the time period that we examine it is considered to be a Superpower, one that is capable of interacting on a global scale and will be able to do so for the near future at least.

The five main reasons why the US will continue to play a leading role are:

- 1.They have the ability to display power all over the world like no other “player”.
- 2.They play an important role in the Eurasian environment
- 3.They have a particularly important role in the global economy.
- 4.They provide security against future revisionist tendencies by nuclear forces
- 5.They have a decisive leadership in the international arena.

(Arvanitopoulos, 2003)

All in all, all grand strategies have shortcomings and they are differentiated depending on who is at the helm. From Clinton’s democratic enlargement to George W. Bush’s global war on terrorism to Barack Obama’s Yes we can and finally to Donald Trump’s America First approach, we can agree that some strategies have been more successful than others, but none has captured the totality of the United States’ interests so far. In reality, some grand strategies are little more than messaging exercises, providing a unifying justification for a broad range of disparate policies; others elevate one or two goals above all else (Fuchs, 2019).

Grand strategies have their uses. They can help clarify priorities in a complex world and can foster stability by signaling U.S. intentions to allies and adversaries (Fuchs, 2019).

Grand strategy is therefore related to, but not synonymous with, National Security Strategies, National Military Strategies, Quadrennial Defense Reviews, or Defense Strategic Guidance. Grand strategy transcends the security pronouncements of political parties or individual administrations (Hooker, 2014).

When America leads the way, it can produce transformative breakthroughs — brokering peace between Israel and Jordan and Egypt; supporting a united Europe during and after the Cold War; ending the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo; the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris climate agreement (Fuchs, 2019).

So in conclusion what we can deduce is that the U.S. grand strategy has featured strong elements of both continuity and change over time. Change because even though the President’s approach shifts or the threats that each administration changes/evolves with the course of time. As there is an ever shifting international system and new threats and opportunities arise. But at the same time we have continuity since the main “goal” which is to serve the Vital Interests of the United States will always be the top priority of each

administration.

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