

The Geo-Economics and Geopolitical Significance of Gwadar Port in the Changing Maritime Scenario

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China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a model project. The development of Gwadar port is an important part of it. This research posits the geo-economics and geopolitical importance of Gwadar port. A qualitative research approach (content analysis techniques) is used to examine the geo-economic effects of Gwadar port. This research has adopted a unique geo-economics theory approach to comprehensively examine Gwadar port's significance in China and Pakistan's economic and political relations. It follows the analysis of geographical, geopolitical, and economic determinants for the geo-economics, geopolitical, and maritime security significance of Gwadar port. Official reports and government documents are used for data analysis. The findings show that Gwadar port could be a solution to the economic security targets of China and Pakistan. China will gain economic, energy, and maritime security by finding an alternate, more secure route for the supply of oil and export of goods and better access to markets of Central Asia, Europe, and the USA. Moreover, Pakistan is expected to observe a significant rise in maritime trade capacity to support the dwindling economy. Furthermore, naval security will improve by reducing reliance on existing ports in Karachi, close to the Indian border.

Keywords: China, Pakistan, Gawadar Port, Maritime, Economic Security, Geopolitics, Energy Security

This research paper posits the geo-economics and geopolitical significance of Gwadar port for China and Pakistan in the context of the changing maritime scenario. Pakistan has more than 700 km of coastline long having significant strategic points: The ports of Karachi and Gwadar. The Karachi port is on the southeast side of Pakistan, sharing a border with India, whereas Gwadar port is on the south-western coast of Pakistan, sharing borders with Iran and Middle Eastern countries. The geostrategic position of Gwadar port is crucial due to its proximity to sea trade routes (Kalim, 2020). The location of Gwadar port provides an opportunity to choke, having key sea trade routes from Africa, and Europe through the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz, the Persian Gulf to East Asia, and the Pacific region making it even more vital for maritime trade route security. Gwadar is located in the Balochistan province on the western side of Pakistan. Although Balochistan is vital to

successfully implementing the CPEC projects, Balochistan is facing socio-economic development, has the lowest per capita income, and contributes only 4.3% to the national GDP. Nevertheless, the province is rich in natural resources, and access to these resources through CPEC infrastructure development is expected to make this region attractive for investment. However, the volatile security conditions of this region are the biggest challenges to implementing CPEC development projects (Hussain & Jamali, 2019; Ishaq et al., 2017; Kuszewska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). The terrorist groups, including Balochistan Liberation Army, seeking autonomous control over the province, have repeatedly attacked foreigners and local citizens, leading to a precarious security situation. The recent rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan further complicates the security of the situation in Balochistan.

Moreover, the challenges associated with the implementation of CPEC have been discussed by many researchers, but the economic and geopolitical significance of CPEC, particularly Gwadar port, has not been discussed in detail. The focus of most studies in this direction has remained on the economic benefits of CPEC for both countries. However, this research adopts a geo-economics theory perspective to comprehensively analyze the geostrategic importance of Gwadar port in accomplishing the political and economic benefits of CPEC and the BRI in general. The geo-economics means the geo-strategic use of economic power as a foreign policy tool and strategy to accomplish its geo-strategic and geo-political objectives (Li, 2020; Scholvin & Wigell, 2018; Wigell, 2016). Economic power played a dynamic role after the cold war era in international relations among power players in international politics.

Moreover, economic security is the top priority among national security preferences in the modern world. Several geopolitical and economic factors are used to analyze the significance of Gwadar port in the success of BRI and its implications for Pakistan and China. In addition, the economic security implications of Gwadar port are also discussed in detail. This paper examines the geo-economics and geopolitical significance of Gwadar port in the changing maritime scenario and dynamics. CPEC is a noteworthy mutual arrangement that can re-configure the geo-economics and geopolitics of the South Asian and Central Asian regions.

Geo-Economics Aspects of BRI

The BRI; the most remarkable economic development project of China, that aiming development in more than 140 countries to transform the lives of more than 60% of the world's population. It has received unprecedented attention at the global level and is widely discussed in political and economic development forums. In the international relations domain, several studies have analyzed BRI as a strategic tool to rise China's influence in the world in general and particularly in the region (Beeson, 2018; Gong, 2019; Li, 2020; Ohashi, 2018; Rahman, 2020). Wang (2016) highlighted that China had adopted a regional cooperation approach for transnational development in Asia, Africa, and Europe. On the contrary, studies by Benabdallah (2019), Parepa (2020), and Deng (2021) have used a cost-efficient approach to argue that inter-regional connectivity and trade benefits of BRI will lead to socio-economic development in the host countries.

Moreover, Gong (2019) and Liu (2020) argued that China adopted BRI in response to uncertain relations with neighboring countries in the region and the rising US influence over Asia. China has adopted "infrastructure diplomacy" to achieve its strategic objectives through connectivity projects and strengthen its relations with countries on its continental periphery (Garlick & Havlová, 2020; McConnell & Woon, 2021; Wilson, 2020). Thus, BRI

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may be a dealing approach to ease regional security risks and increase Chinese influence in the regional and international world order.

Moreover, the neo-realist school provided another perspective to look at BRI, China considers the U.S. presence in Asia as a threat to its national security (Chan, 2017). That's why, in response to US influence in Asia, China has initiated plans like BRI, Chinese Dream, or Asia for Asians, and established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to project China as a norm maker in global governance. Through these initiatives, China has rebalanced the influence of the US and its allies in Eurasia and enhanced economic relations with BRI partner countries. In addition, China ensures energy security and the development of Western parts through BRI (Hussain, 2021; Klingner, 2020).

The debate about the primary objective of BRI bringing economic development or a grand political strategy for China is ongoing; however, the desegregation of geopolitical and economic motives is rather a futile effort. We have used both economic and geopolitical factors to adopt a geo-economics approach to analyze the political and economic significance of Gwadar port and its implications for the successful implementation of BRI.

Significance of CPEC in BRI

CPEC is a pioneer project under BRI. It is a mix of roads, railways, communication, energy, and industry development to be completed by 2030 with an investment of more than USD 62 billion (the details of the projects are presented in Map-1). Moreover, Gwadar port is a strategically significant point for the security of the Maritime Silk Route (MSR). Under the CPEC a 3000 km long road, as well as a railway line, will be developed from the Chinese city Kashgar to Balochistan, Gwadar. That will increase the foreign direct investment (FDI) of Pakistan. The flow of FDI into Pakistan and energy and infrastructure development are very helpful for the fragile economy of Pakistan. In addition to increasing the bilateral trade between China and Pakistan, CPEC is a gateway to Africa.

Projects under CPEC



Source: (Ministry of Planning, Development, and Reform, 2017)

The CPEC is the pilot project of BRI, and it will have far-reaching implications on the economy and politics of the whole region, but notably, it can change the fate of Pakistan. According to estimates of Khan and Liu (2019), socio-economic development would be more evident in the regions along CPEC, and Balochistan will observe a rise of 6.4% in the social welfare index, followed by Sindh, KPK, and Punjab with an increase of 6.31%, 5.19%, and 3.5% respectively. The trade volume of Pakistan with its neighbors will increase more than three times its current trade and reach up to USD 58 billion per year (World Bank, 2020).

Moreover, CPEC is the gateway to Africa and the Middle East; therefore, it will work as a regional hub for trade activities, increasing tax collection and allowing convergence and spread of logistics, people, and information in the region.

The projects of CPEC are not just beneficial to China and Pakistan; rather, it offers valuable opportunities to Iran, Afghanistan, India, and the Central Asian region (Benabdallah, 2019). Besides trade benefits and development of China's Xinjiang province, CPEC will enhance the economic integration of south Asian countries to bring socio-economic and political stability. Thus, CPEC will enhance people-to-people contact, regional knowledge, cultural integration, business cooperation, and higher bilateral trade volumes. This win-win model of development will play a vital role in deciding the shared destiny of the region.

Theoretical Framework

The qualitative approach is utilized to analyze the Gwadar port in terms of its geo-strategic and geo-economic importance for BRI and CPEC. Data is collected from official documents, government reports, and developmental organizations. Geo-economics theory has been used to understand the developments (Gholizadeh et al., 2020; Kim, 2021). Several studies in the literature have investigated the Chinese motives behind BRI, focusing only on the political, geopolitical, or economic perspective. This hegemonic approach overlooks the interplay of economic, political, and geographic factors driving foreign policies in the modern world. According to Tsai and Liu (2017), economic security is the single most crucial concern, outweighing the earlier political and defense priorities, of the power players in international politics. Therefore, a geo-economic lens for analyzing foreign policy is the right approach to determining economic and geopolitical motives (Beeson, 2018; Gholizadeh et al., 2020). Thus, analyzing these developments using the geo-economics approach will enable us to understand the strategic space of Pakistan and the profound expansion of the strategy of China to increase its influence in global politics.

Geo-Strategic Significance of Gwadar Port for China and Pakistan

Pakistan has remained attractive to global powers due to its strategic geographical importance. Pakistan shares borders with India, China, Afghanistan, and Iran in the east, northwest, west, and southwest, respectively, whereas the southern border, has the Indian Ocean. Pakistan connects South, West, and Central Asian countries with the western regions of China.

The total coastline of Pakistan is approximately 700 km, having two international seaports functional in Pakistan: Karachi and Port Qasim. The Karachi port has a 200 km distance from the Indian border. The foundation of Karachi port was established during the British colonial period and is the largest port in Pakistan in terms of commercial and military. Though, the security depth of this port is compromised by its proximity to the India-Pakistan border (Kalim, 2020). For instance, in the 1965 war, India blocked this port and caused a huge security problem for Pakistan. Similarly, in the 1971 war, India attacked Karachi port and inflicted massive damage to several parts of the port and merchant ships.

In addition, the demand growth shows that these ports' capacity will be insufficient in the future and expansion programs are slow, creating a gap in demand and supply. The rapid expansion of the residential area of Karachi city has created physical space limitations for Karachi port; therefore, expansion plans cannot keep pace with the rise in demand (Ali, 2019). On the other hand, port Qasim has no space limitations; however, the upstream location of this port 40km away from the open sea; increases the turnaround time for ships

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and hampers further development of the port. This upstream location is not an issue for cargo shipments of industries near port Qasim; however, other locations have a cost disadvantage. Therefore, Pakistan has been pursuing the establishment of Gwadar port for a more secure passage to sea since 1964 (Gholizadeh et al., 2020; Kalim, 2020). Also, another international seaport to meet the rising demand is in the economic interest of Pakistan. Moreover, the demand is expected to escalate in the future; therefore, capacity for expansion should be part of the plan for Gwadar port.



Source: Rahman et al, 2021.

The location of Gwadar port has several strategic advantages. The strategic importance of the geographical position of Gwadar port makes it central to the developments in CPEC and BRI. Gwadar port is located at the mouth of the maritime trade route that connects the Pacific, the Persian Gulf, and East Asia which is merely 400km distance from the global energy supply channel. That way, Gwadar port has the ability as a choke point of the global maritime trade route of the red sea and influence trade routes connecting Africa and Europe. The control over Gwadar port will ensure energy security in China, providing safe passage to oil supplies (Chang & Khan, 2019). Moreover, proximity to the Persian Gulf will increase influence over maritime routes to East Asia and the Pacific region. China is investing in more ports along the Arabian sea to increase its influence in this region of political instability (Daniels, 2013; Ejaz & Jamshed, 2018).

Traditionally, the US has remained influential in the Persian Gulf region, and it would not want to relax security in this region. Therefore, China has abandoned the Persian Gulf and avoided a conflict of interest with the US. However, Gwadar port allows China to bypass the Persian Gulf. Thus, bypassing the Persian Gulf has provided China access to oil from African countries, increasing its energy security.

Moreover, the naval vessels of several navies are looking after the route of the Indian Ocean, and the Chinese navy is one of them, particularly in the Somalian naval region (Brewster, 2015; Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008). These naval vessels get fuel resupply from ports of Yemen and other countries, but deficient supplies have remained an issue. At present, Gwadar port is developed only for trade purposes; however, in the future, it can certainly be used to help the Chinese people's liberation army (PLA) to preserve the security of trade happenings in the Indian Ocean region. Thus, Gwadar port is vital to safeguard Chinese foreign trade interests (Hussain et al., 2021).

Geo-Economics Significance of Gwadar port for China and Pakistan

More than 60% of the maritime trade of Pakistan takes place through Karachi port. Therefore, if tension on the Indian border escalates or even a new military conflict, which is not unprecedented given the long-term tension history of both states, could significantly

disrupt the economic activity at Karachi port and hurt the fragile economy of Pakistan. Recently, during the military confrontation with India in 2019, the Indian Minister of Defense warned Pakistan quoting events from the wars of 1964 and 1971 (Gholizadeh et al., 2020). Therefore, it is vital for the economic security of Pakistan that an alternative to Karachi port is developed to gain secure access to free waters. Thus, the development of Gwadar port will provide economic security to Pakistan by reducing its reliance on Karachi port (Kalim, 2020).

For years, East Asian countries have posed several challenges at regional and international levels. For instance, Japan, South Korea, and the USA have remained cautious of the rising influence of China through BRI and formed an economic coalition to restrict or derail China's economic growth (Bae, 2021; Cha, 2010). India is another emerging power in South Asia with concerns about Chinese influence in the region. In these challenging geopolitical and economic circumstances, China has strengthened its diplomatic and economic-based relations with Asian countries to use economic and commercial opportunities and keep up the pace of economic development (Beeson, 2018; Benabdallah, 2019). As part of this economic security strategy of China, CPEC being a pioneer project of BRI can perform a dynamic and vibrant part in the accomplishment of Beijing's economic security targets.

Gwadar port can provide economic and energy security to China. More than 55% of China's oil imports are from Middle Eastern and North African countries and export a massive quantity of goods to Middle Eastern, African, and European countries. The present maritime oil transportation route from the Middle East to China is 14490 km long. The shipments take two to three months to reach China, and there is no alternate route through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait, making this maritime route a lifeline and security risk for the economy of China. Therefore, problems in this trade route can cause massive trouble for China's economic growth. The security of the trade route is important for China because of its economic growth and expansion of economic interest at the international level.

The Gwadar port is the shortest land route to China's Xinjiang province, saving transportation costs in trade activity (Conrad, 2017). The estimated reduction of transportation of goods and time is about 70% from Gwadar Balochistan to China and Central Asia (Anwar, 2020; Hussain, 2020). In addition, the railway connection from Gwadar to Kashgar will decrease 85% of the energy transportation mileage from the Middle East to China. Thus, a fully functional Gwadar port is an alternative to the Indian Ocean route as it connects China with the Strait of Hormuz and the Indian Ocean and provides energy and trade security (Gholizadeh et al., 2020; Hussain, 2020; Shibasaki et al., 2019).

Projects under CPEC

Investment in various areas	Investment in different Proportion	Total Investment Amount
Infrastructure	23.91 percent	\$11 billion ²¹
Development of Energy Resources	71.7 percent	\$33 billion
LNG	4.34 percent	\$ 2 billion ²²

Source: <http://cpec.gov.pk>

CPEC Infra-structure Projects in Pakistan

#	Project Name	Length (KM)	Estimated Cost(US\$ M)

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1	“KKH Phase II (Thakot -Havelian Section)”	118	1,315
2	“Peshawar-Karachi Motorway” (Multan-Sukkur Section)	392	2,889
3	“Khuzdar-Basima Road” N-30 (110 km)	110	19.19 Billion Rupee
4	“D.I.Khan (Yarik) - Zhob Upgradation, N-50 Phase-I (210 km)”	210	76 Billion Rupee
5	“KKH Thakot-Raikot N35 remaining portion” (136 Km)	136	
Rail Sector Projects			
6	“Expansion and reconstruction of existing Line” ML-1	1,830	6808
7	“Havelian Dry port (450 M. Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units)”		65

Source: The World Bank (2020)

Table 2

Energy Project in CPEC in Pakistan

#	Project Name	MW	Estimated Cost(US\$ M)
1	“Sahiwal 2x660MW Coal-fired Power Plant, Punjab”	1320	1912.2
2	2x660MW “Coal-fired Power Plants at port Qasim Karachi”	1320	1912.2
3	“HUBCO Coal Power Project, Hub Balochistan”	1320	1912.2
4	“Engro 2x330MW Thar Coal Power Project”	660	995.4
	“Surface mine in block II of Thar Coal field, 3.8 million tons/year”		630
5	“Quaid-e-Azam 1000MW Solar Park (Bahawalpur) Quaid-e-Azam”	400	520
		600	781
6	“Hydro China Dawood Wind Farm(Gharo, Thatta)”	49.5	112.65
7	“UEP Wind Farm (Jhimpir, Thatta)”	99	250
8	Sachal, Wind Farm, (Jhimpir, Thatta)	49.5	134
9	Three Gorges, Second, and Third Wind, Power Project	100	150
10	“SSRL Thar Coal Block-I 6.8 mtpa & Power Plant” (2x660MW) (Shanghai Electric)	1320	1912.12
11	“HUBCO Thar Coal Power Project” (Thar Energy)	330	497.70
12	“ThalNova Thar Coal Power Project”	330	497.70
13	“Karot Hydropower Station”	720	1698.26
14	“Suki Kinari Hydropower Station, Naran, Khyber Pukhtunkhwa”	870	1707
15	“Matiari to Lahore ±660kV HVDC Transmission Line Project”		1658.34
16	“300MW Imported Coal Based Power Project at Gwadar, Pakistan”	300	542.32
17	“Thar Mine Mouth Oracle Power Plant (1320MW) & surface mine”	1320	Yet to be determined

Source: The World Bank (2020)

Moreover, China has also planned to transport oil from the Middle East to China through an oil pipeline passing through the Gwadar port. The Gwadar port will reduce the distance of transportation from 12000 km to 2395 km as well as it will reduce Chinese dependence on the Strait of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean. The proposed routes and present routes are explained in Table 2. Beijing has also planned to build facilities for storage and refining oil to transport via the land route to Xinjiang.

The Xinjiang province is relatively less developed, but access to international waters through Gwadar port will provide new business opportunities and improve the region's economic conditions (Gong, 2019; Rizvi, 2014). Moreover, economic development in western and northwestern China will eliminate all internal security challenges, and the involvement of people in political and economic activity in these parts of China will improve the security of the western region. Thus, Gwadar port is vital to the success of BRI to achieve the political as well as diplomatic purposes of China.

The present and proposed routes for energy supply to China

Route	Description	Name
“Western Africa” to “China”	“Maritime route”	Route A
The Middle East to China	Maritime route	Route B
Western Africa to Myanmar to China	Maritime and pipeline route	Route C
The Middle East to Myanmar, and China	Maritime and pipeline route	Route D
The Middle East to Pakistan, and China	Maritime and pipeline route	Route E

Source: Shaikh et al. (2016)

CPEC will also allow China to access markets of Central Asia and improve the economic outlook of northwestern regions. An on-shore oil pipeline is also part of CPEC that will ensure a smooth supply to western provinces of China. Thus, China will get an alternative to the “Strait of Malacca” for oil trade with Middle Eastern countries, and it is short and more secure than the pirate-infested maritime route of the “Strait of Malacca”. The instability in maritime security of the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea will improve, and western regions of China will gain economic development opportunities (Shibasaki et al., 2019; Wood, 2021). Moreover, 85% of oil trade traffic between the Middle East and China will reduce this pipeline.

In addition, the successful completion of Gwadar port and naval base in Gwadar will substantially enhance the energy and trade security of the maritime routes of China. Also, in the future Chinese naval fleet will enter the Indian Ocean to further strengthen the security of Chinese international waters. The energy supply which remains under threat by the US will be secured by the oil pipeline from Gwadar to Xinjiang (Garlick, 2018; Javed & Ismail, 2021). Therefore, the successful completion of these development projects will enhance China's maritime security, energy security, and economic security.

Port: Significance for China and BRI Projects

Since 2010, the alliance of the US with Asian countries, including Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, as part of the “re-Asia Pacific 2.0” strategy, has tried to create problems for China in the eastern and southern waters (Auslin, 2020; Liff, 2019). This alliance tried to encircle and squeeze Chinese activities to stall economic growth. However, China has avoided this collision by turning to the west to develop Gwadar port and bridged its connection with South Asian countries.

China has a surplus production and capital volume in the present economic order of the world, and China wants to avoid slowing down its economic growth (Clarke, 2017). Therefore, China can use Gwadar port to expand its production capacity and invest excess capital in maintaining its rapid economic growth. China is not new in port construction; it has vast experience, updated technology, and excess capital. On the other hand, Pakistan needs infrastructural development to optimize its abundant natural resources, low-cost labor, and a market that needs industrialization (Kalim, 2020; Shibasaki et al., 2019). Thus, the Gwadar port is a win-win option for both stakeholders.

Moreover, the development of Gwadar port is an important part of BRI that has the potential to become a hub of regional business activity. It serves the economic objectives of China and Pakistan and connects markets of South Asian, Central Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. Gwadar port is crucial for landlocked Central Asia because, through CPEC, the partner countries will gain access to free waters (Anwar, 2020; Khetran & Khalid, 2019). Moreover, the Gwadar port provides secure access to the Middle East which is an energy

supplies line and is undoubtedly a crucial addition to regional infrastructure. Moreover, the presence of the U.S. and Japan in the Strait of Malacca has led to creating an energy security concern for China, and developing Gwadar port will significantly reduce this dependence.

The Gwadar port is situated at the heart of Asian commercial maritime routes connecting the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. The gateway of global energy supply is the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, which are situated east of Gwadar port. According to the U.S. “Energy Information Administration (EIA)” the Strait of Hormuz a maritime route is used for more than 20% of the worldwide oil supply (EIA, 2020). Therefore, being at the choke point of this energy hub provides additional strategic benefits to Gwadar port.

Conclusion

Economic security is the top priority of the Chinese government, and due to recent economic threats, China has initiated the security of its maritime and land routes. Gwadar port is one such initiative as part of BRI. Gwadar port provides economic security against external threats, particularly in western China and South Asia. The economic benefits for Pakistan are also significant, and it will also provide better access to international waters. The geostrategic position also increases the importance of Gwadar port in China-Pakistan bilateral relations. Gwadar port will improve China's energy security by providing an alternative to the Malacca Strait maritime route. The Middle East and Russia are the leading suppliers of crude oil to China, and the crude oil from Russia is transported through an oil pipeline to western China. However, oil imports from the Middle East and North Africa use the maritime route of the Strait of Hormuz and Malacca Strait. Malacca Strait is strategically important in this route, and Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia claim sovereign positions over it. However, a recent coalition of the USA and Japan has tried to influence trade activity in the Malacca Strait. The fully functional Gwadar port will be an alternate route for Chinese oil imports. Ultimately, the “Strait of Malacca” will be replaced by Gwadar port soon and provide energy security to China.

On the other hand, Gwadar port and other infrastructural and economic developments under CPEC are vital to the “China-Pakistan friendship”. These developments will improve the fragile economic conditions of Pakistan, and Kashgar will become the hub of economic activity in China, making it another Shanghai. The current trade route “China cargo to Shanghai through train to shipments through Malacca to Europe and Africa” will be replaced by “China Cargo to Kashgar through train to Gwadar through China-Pakistan railway to shipments to Europe and Africa”. Thus, Gwadar will be the hub of trade activity in Pakistan, and Kashgar will be the new trade hub in China. The concentration of economic activity in Kashgar and energy imports through this route will improve the economic outlook of this relatively less developed northwestern part of China. That is why BRI is vital for the economic growth plans of China and regional development. Pakistan and China are neighbors and boast long-term friendships. Security is equally important for both countries. After developments under CPEC and its vital role in BRI, it can be said that “insecurity in Pakistan will also hurt China”. The success of BRI depends on the completion and security of CPEC and Gwadar port. However, the secure and fully functional corridor will also bring huge benefits to the fragile economy of Pakistan. Therefore, the developed and fully functional Gwadar port will play an essential role in the region's geostrategic, geopolitical, and geoeconomics conditions.

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