

THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL ORDER: REALISM, LIBERALISM, AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Abstract

This article critically examines the explanatory power of four dominant international relations theories – balance of power realism, hegemonic stability realism, liberalism, and constructivism – across three major historical junctures: international relations during the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, and the evolution of the global economic order over the past half-century. While realism provides a compelling framework for understanding Cold War power dynamics and strategic rivalries, it struggles to account for the ideological and normative shifts that precipitated the collapse of the Soviet Union, where constructivism offers a more robust explanation. Meanwhile, liberalism and hegemonic stability theory help elucidate the workings of the international economic system, highlighting the role of institutions, interdependence, and U.S. dominance in shaping post-Cold War globalization. Drawing on empirical evidence, this study argues that no single theory fully captures the complexity of these historical transitions. Instead, an integrated theoretical approach that synthesizes power politics, institutional cooperation, and ideational transformation provides a more comprehensive understanding of the international order and disorder. By reassessing the strengths and limitations of each theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on the relevance of traditional paradigms in contemporary global politics. It further situates this debate within the contemporary shift toward unbalanced multipolarity, in which the diffusion of power toward China, India, and other Global South actors, alongside the rise of artificial intelligence as a domain of great-power competition, is reshaping the empirical terrain on which these theories are tested. The study concludes that no single theory adequately explains the complexities of global politics. Thus, future research should examine the role of emerging global powers, non-state actors, and technological advancements in shaping the evolving international order.

Keywords: Balance of power, Cold War, constructivism, liberalism, realism

Introduction

This study explores the relevance and articulation of contending theories in underscoring the understanding of international order. Specifically, the realist strands of the balance of power and hegemonic stability theories, as well as the alternative liberal and constructivist approaches were used to explore three empirical patterns: international relations during the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, and the workings of the international economic system in the past half-century. To examine each pattern, we provide empirical evidence from the literature to highlight which theory best suits each era and why. This comparative exercise is more relevant than ever given the current understanding of the post-Cold War order as a shift towards an unbalanced multipolarity, where the relative decline of the United States and the rise of the emerging powers of the Global South are reshaping the empirical landscape from which these theories were developed (Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2024).

Realism is a useful analytical tool for understanding state behavior, the reasons for conflict in the international system, and ways to prevent it. It underscores the selfish nature of man and the desire for power and control (Toledo, 2012). However, to ensure that stronger states do not overrun weaker ones, the idea of balance of power theory emerged within the realist school to engender a form of power control and equilibrium (Wu, 2018). This is aptly put by Deudney & Ikenberry (2021a) that “particularly prominent among American realists is a view of the world stressing the balance of power as the necessary and sufficient basis for international order” (p. 9). Meanwhile, another strand within the realist school of thought, the hegemonic stability theory, holds that the presence of a dominant power in global politics is required for stability in the international system. However, the absence of such a power, or hegemon leads to disarray and chaos in the international system, with far-reaching consequences for states (Snidal, 1985). As Gavris (2019) puts it, “There exists a strong causal relationship between hegemony and systemic stability” (p. 1)

However, alternative approaches to the realist conception of an international order emerged in liberal and constructivist approaches. The liberal school argues that engendering a successful international order is dependent on democratic values and economic interdependence. According to Deudney & Ikenberry (2021a) “American international success depended not just on raw American power but on the combination of power, liberal-democratic ideas and liberal-internationalist projects” (p. 25). Liberals opine that liberalism is instrumental in shaping the post-imperial world order by advocating for state independence and recognizing them as sovereign within a global Westphalian system (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021b). Meanwhile, constructivists such as Wendt argue that a key idea in constructivist social theory is that people act based on the meanings they assign to objects or other actors. For example, states behave differently toward enemies and friends because enemies are seen as threats, while friends are not (Behraves, 2011; Wendt, 1992).

Theories

Balance of Power Realism

Balance of power realism advocates for the stability of power in international order (Wu, 2018). One of the major contributors to the theory of balance of power is Kenneth Waltz. The core assumptions of his theory are that because of the anarchical structure of the international system, states will act in ways to ensure the balance of power and that successful states will inspire a form of competition and socialization among other states who seek to act similarly. For Waltz, the need for the balance of power is necessitated by the anarchic nature of the international system. That is, the absence of a centralized authority and the desire of states to survive engenders a balance of power (Wu, 2018).

Morgenthau categorizes the balance of power as both a situation and a policy. As a situation, the balance of power could be perceived as an equilibrium or disequilibrium. In the former, the power of a state is counterbalanced by another as evidenced during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, or the Warsaw Pact and NATO. While in disequilibrium, power is disproportionately distributed among states to the benefit of a stronger state, or hegemon. Here, such imbalance increases the risk of the dominant state abusing its power to neutralize its opposition, as evidenced in the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, when viewed as a policy, the balance of power focuses on attempts by states

to ensure equilibrium and counteract the effect of unbalanced power and the threat it poses to the international system (Toledo, 2012).

As Mearsheimer argues, great powers are never content with power but continuously seek means to grab power and become hegemons by shifting the balance of power in their favor. Meanwhile, defensive realism consisting of scholars such as Waltz, Walt, and Jerviz posits that aggression is unlikely and only permissible in countering threats or when diplomacy fails. They argue that the anarchical nature of the international system forces states to behave in a restrained manner given that expansion provokes opposition and alliance (Lobell, 2016). A more recent trend in neoclassical realism has been to apply this logic to today's great-power competition, in which secondary states are said to pursue hedging strategies rather than balancing or bandwagoning (Marston, 2024).

Hegemonic Stability Realism

The main proponents of this theory are Kindleberger, Keohane, Ruggie, and Gilpin (Gavris, 2019; Walter, 1996). The elementary proposition of the theory is that "an open or 'liberal' international economic order requires the existence of a hegemonic or dominant power" (Walter, 1996:3). According to Snidal (1985), Hegemonic stability theory is "centered around two main propositions: that 'order in world politics is typically created by a single dominant power', and 'the maintenance of order requires continued hegemony'" (Snidal, 1985:8). Snidal (1985) identifies three logical conditions for hegemonic stability theory: jointness, nonexclusion, and impossibility of collective action. The first condition assumes that states in the international system jointly benefit from a collective good. Nonexclusion theorizes that states cannot exclude others from benefitting from a collective good even when they do not contribute to its provision. The impossibility of collective action assumes that collective action among states is impossible. If not, states would jointly provide a public good without a hegemon. This was further buttressed by Walter (1996) that "Without international government, only a hegemonic state can provide collective goods. The hegemon will provide such goods because its size ensures that associated costs of provision are less than the economic benefits that accrue to it" (p. 5).

Liberalism

Liberalism holds a compelling advantage over realism, in the area of political order for three major reasons. First, liberal theory provides a comprehensive account of the threat states face as well as possible restraints on state behavior. Second, liberalism better explains states' interdependence and how well they adapt to the resulting dynamics. Third, liberalism advocates for an international system devoid of chaos or strict control (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021b). Liberalism emphasizes the relevance of state preferences and the role of domestic factors in shaping its operations. That is, it is concerned with how state behavior is shaped by state-society relations and domestic institutions. This has been encapsulated in principles such as economic interdependence, and democratic peace theory (Moravcsik, 1997).

Moravcsik (1997) argues that this relationship rests on three key assumptions: social actors, the state, and the international system. From this emerges three variants of liberalism: ideational, commercial, and republican. The ideational variant is concerned with how state behavior emerges as a result of conflict among collective social values; commercial focuses on how transnational economic exchange influences state behavior; and republican highlights how

domestic representation systems influence social groups and state behavior. According to Deudney & Ikenberry (2021b), liberalism, led by the US and other liberal democracies, creates a cooperative international order. This approach addresses issues relating to interdependence while protecting liberal values and institutions. For one, liberalism contends that institutional change is pivotal to preventing crises and meeting basic needs. Deudney & Ikenberry (2021a) further that “The United States was ascendant in part because the liberal-democratic ideal, as manifested in modern America, was profoundly appealing to people all over the world. American leadership in solving global problems and building international institutions to advance liberal-democratic and capitalist goals was a multifaceted effort to make the world safe for democracy” (p. 25) But the liberal rise to power has been put under renewed scrutiny. Wijaya and Jayasuriya (2024) argue that the current multipolar world is not so much a struggle between the liberal and illiberal camps. Still, the rise of new business classes and distinct regulatory geographies in both Western and non-Western States indicates that the institutional frameworks advanced by liberal theorists are built on social foundations that are also being restructured.

Moravcsik (1997) identifies three core assumptions of liberalism. First, individuals and private groups are the major players in international politics, working together to pursue their interests. They may cooperate or disagree depending on their beliefs, power inequalities, and competition for resources. This is a bottom-up approach that prioritizes individual needs ahead of those of social groups. Second, the state as a representative institution acts on behalf of the interests of the groups within it. These groups, although without equal influence, move the state to adopt policies that align with their interests. Third, the interaction between states’ preferences shapes state behavior. That is, states consider the interests of other states in taking action. The variation in state preferences influences international interactions.

Constructivism

Although initially referred to as ‘reflectivist’ by Robert Keohane, Wendt toed the path of Nicholas Onuf and described it as constructivism, perhaps due to its focus on social construction (Wendt, 1992). Wendt (1992) emphasizes the nexus between identities, interests, and the structure of the international system. Wendt’s argument rests on three cultures of anarchy: enmity, rivalry, and friendship, each of which represents how states perceive one another. This idea is drawn from the philosophical positions of Immanuel Kant, John Locke, and Thomas Hobbes. A key concept in constructivism as conceived by Wendt is identity, considered crucial to interpersonal and international interactions.

Constructivism focuses on how norms, ideas, and shared knowledge influence human actions and interactions in the material world. The theory draws attention to the role of non-material factors such as norms, culture, and collective beliefs in shaping international politics. Constructivism contends that shared understanding and human consciousness are key to international dynamics. Its assumptions include the primacy of ideas, shared beliefs, and constructed identities (Jung, 2019). As a theory, it seeks to explain the nature of social life and change. For constructivists, “understanding the constitution of things is essential in explaining how they behave and what causes political outcome” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

Drawing from the works of philosophers such as Searle and Wittgenstein, constructivists argue that social reality is shaped by language, speech, and communication. For instance, Onuf suggests language constructs human identity and is a key mechanism in interpreting social

structures (Jung, 2019). In recent constructivist research on emerging technologies, this focus on discursive construction of identity and interest has been reflected. AI is not just a material phenomenon that alters the balance of power, but also a discursive one that states engage in constructing competing narratives of leadership, threat, and legitimacy that go a long way in shaping the understanding and enactment of great-power identities and rivalries, as argued by Baele et al. (2024).

Discussion: During the Cold War, End of the Cold War and The International Economic System in the Past Half-Century

The Cold War era was characterized by the conflict between socialist communism and liberal democracy championed by the Soviet Union and the United States respectively (Wenger & Zimmerman, 2003). Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War significantly transformed International Relations in 1945 by redefining global power dynamics and challenging the analytical frameworks in the field. This led to the plurality of theoretical explanations in understanding the causes, consequences, and implications of the era. Contrary to realism which emphasizes power dynamics as central to international politics, this newly entrenched pluralism opened the field to more frameworks from the standpoint of economic structure, transnational movements, international organizations, and technology (Roberts, 2008). As a result, this section explores frameworks such as balance of power realism, hegemonic stability realism liberalism, and constructivism to provide insights into these periods.

Balance of Power Realism

At its core, realism emphasizes power, conflict, and anarchy in the international system as factors shaping state behavior and international politics. Meanwhile, balance of power in its most basic definition describes a strategy to maintain or alter power equilibrium in global politics. It is aimed at preserving state sovereignty and fostering a pluralist international system (Toledo, 2012). The Cold War era was predominantly bipolar dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States with each boasting of nuclear weapons to ensure Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) (Porumbescu, 2018; Wenger & Zimmerman, 2003). An example of this form of balance was the Cuban Crisis of 1962, referred to as “the most serious military confrontation of the Cold War” (Lebow, 2000:1). The Soviet Union under the control of Khrushchev provided support to Fidel Castro and Cuba decided to ship weapons to Cuba to forestall any attack or invasion on the country by the United States. In response, the United States under Kennedy was prepared to protect its territory and ensure that missiles were not shot into the US.

After a series of showmanship and engagements, the United States was committed to not invading Cuba while Khrushchev withdrew his troops (Lebow, 2000; Lebow & Pelopidas, 2023). For scholars, both countries averted war due to the stabilizing effect of nuclear prowess on both sides. As Lebow (2000) puts it, “The crisis was resolved because both leaders rejected any course of action they thought might lead to an unstoppable spiral of military escalation” (p. 13). In addition, the establishment of military alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty and the Warsaw Pact by the United States and the Soviet Union respectively, was a measure to avoid confrontation between these blocs but rather engage in proxy wars (Porumbescu, 2018). It appears from this analysis that in the period during the Cold War, the most acceptable theoretical explanation would be the balance of power realism. The bipolar nature of the era

ensured that both the United States and the Soviet Union avoided direct military confrontation, as evidenced in the Cuban Crisis, further avoiding unprecedented military and political scenarios. However, the balance of power theory finds it difficult to explain the voluntary resignation of Mikhail Gorbachev and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For instance Serhi Plokhyy in the book 'The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union' "challenges the triumphalist interpretation of the Soviet collapse as an American victory in the Cold War" (xv), asking "Why did the leadership of a country allegedly locked in combat with a Cold War adversary adopt such a policy?" (xvi). The answer may however be interpreted from Toledo's (2012) interpretation of Morgenthau that balance of power can be achieved either by weakening a stronger state or strengthening a weaker one. This could be achieved through maintaining divisions in a hostile state as evidenced in the Soviet Union.

Concerning the international economic system in the past half-century, the notion of power politics and military dimensions of international politics has been overtaken by the rise in economic relations and the prioritization of economic cooperative frameworks, especially in the global south.

The transitioning of the Global South from being 'rebels', to 'responsive participants' and then 'active agents', Zhou (2024) argues, has influenced the international system. Moreover, the rise in other non-state actors continues to influence state behavior. According to Lopez-Claros, Dahl, & Groff (2020), this period was characterized by "a novel redistribution of power among states, markets, and civil society" (p. 124) where states share powers with businesses, international organizations, and private groups. This is part of a growing trend of increasingly unbalanced multipolarity, as the increasing diversification of economic relationships – as seen in the strengthening of South-South cooperation, such as the expansion of BRICS and enhanced China-Africa and Russia-Africa partnerships – suggests a gradual shift away from the structural dominance that used to be held by Western-led institutions (Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2024).

Hegemonic Stability Theory

The theory is often used to underscore the recent decline in the United States' leadership leading to more chaos in the international system compared to the years after World War II when the US led the world (Snidal, 1985). Deudney & Ikenberry (2021b) described hegemonic realism "as the wellspring of disasters in American foreign policy" (p. 64). However, because proponents of the theory believe in the idea of a non-selfish leader, they hold that the decline in US leadership is bad for the world. To this end, the theory assumes that the presence of a dominant power creates stability in the international system (Snidal, 1985). To this end, this theory has limited applicability to the Cold War era due to the bipolar nature of the era which meant that the US could not exercise hegemon, but rather led its pack under the NATO umbrella while the Soviet Union maintained its sphere of influence on the Eastern bloc using the Warsaw Pact. Scholars maintained that the US exercised some influence in Western Europe through the Marshall Plan.

Titled "History's Most Successful Adjustment Program" (De Long & Eichengreen, 1991), the Plan provided foreign aid, prevented economic deterioration, discouraged communist expansion, and stimulated production in postwar Europe (Tarnoff, 2018). It is worth noting that despite playing a major role, the United States did not unilaterally see to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, thus weakening the Hegemonic Stability thesis. For instance, the Helsinki Accords signed in 1975 between the United States, Canada, and 33 European States which

demanding the Soviet Union's recognition of the relationship between Europe and North America, was facilitated by the United States, West German government, and other allies (Richter, 2015). As Morgan (2018:17), submits, "The signing of the Final Act was a watershed in the Cold War".

However, what has obtained in the past half-century is a Unipolar world led by the United States (Lopez-Claros et al., 2020). In addition to the centrality of the dollar as a primary reserve currency, the US has leveraged its influence in leading institutions to shape an economic order. This view was held by Mazarr et al. (2020) that "many ordering mechanisms in the postwar order reflect the influence of U.S. power. The order's entire superstructure was created in service of the U.S. vision of a peaceful, liberal trading system. Specific mechanisms, such as economic institutions and regional alliances, were proposed, shaped, funded, and, in some cases, enforced by the powerful United States" (p. 35). As Ikenberry (2022) argues, even when there are concerns about post-Western values, "The U.S.-led order isn't in decline". However, this evaluation is now under dispute, with more recent studies indicating that the unipolar order that Mazarr et al. (2020) identified is being superseded by an unbalanced multipolar order, where the power of the US in global decision-making is diminishing, but there is no clear alternative hegemon emerging to replace it (Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2024).

Given the above, this theory better explains the prevalent economic world order as it captures the US dominance and centrality in the international system. This is further underscored by the centrality of the US currency, its involvement, and leadership in leading institutions such as the Bretton Woods, and its relevance in global trade. However, its explanatory power is constrained by the empirical facts of the here and now, and the growing dispersion of economic power to new centres makes it difficult to be certain that order is synonymous with a single dominant state (Wijaya & Jayasuriya, 2024).

Liberalism

Liberalism emphasizes cooperation, economic interdependence, and the role of international institutions in fostering peace. According to Deudney & Ikenberry (2021a), "Throughout the twentieth century, liberals advanced a wide array of projects to respond to problems related to growing interdependence, such as public health and environmental protection" (p. 27). During the Cold War, the United States promoted economic cooperation using the Marshall Plan to rebuild post-war Europe. This was succinctly put by Deudney & Ikenberry (2021a) that "America that won the Second World War, prevailed in the Cold War and brought unprecedented peace, prosperity, and security to the international system" (p. 25). Meanwhile, other international institutions such as the World Bank financed part of the Marshall Plan (Tarnoff, 2018) while the IMF also supported the Western bloc (Woods, 2024).

Meanwhile, it is believed that the era saw an active role being played by international economic organizations. To this, Sargent (2013) submits:

"the Cold War, by contrast, was a conflict between economic orders: one more or less liberal, existing under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT); the other socialist, organized around the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) and the bilateral arrangements that the USSR made with other planned economies" (394).

Liberalism at the end of the war was captured in the Helsinki Accords, which according to Richter (2015), includes principles of non-interference, equality, and international law,

underscoring the promotion of cooperation and democratic peace. In the words of Richter (2015), “Western states managed to add the principle of respect for human rights and basic freedoms including the individual freedoms of thought, conscience, religion and conviction” (p. 7).

Moreover, the United States placed an embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union, straining its economy (Evans, 2024). The post-Cold War era witnessed an increase in trade agreements, financial assistance, and dispute resolution, lending credence to the relevance of liberalism. According to Lopez-Claros et al. (2020), “the end of the Cold War prompted a more active approach to peace enforcement and conflict management and prevention by the UN” (p. 156). Mazarr et al. (2020) observe that “aspects of the order’s liberalism, from human rights norms and compacts to calls for good governance, have become integral to the postwar version of order” (p. 16).

Constructivism

Constructivism emphasizes the role of norms, culture, and identities in shaping state behavior in the international system. Behraves (2011), argues that identity shapes the motivations and behaviors of actors in the international system, rooted in self-understanding and influenced by the perceptions of others. To this end, Wendt identifies four types of identity: personal, type, role, and collective identity representing self, values, norms, and a merger of self and other respectively.

The Cold War era was a contest of ideology and identity such as communism versus liberal democracy. As Morgan (2018) puts it, it was a conflict of “rival ideologies” (p. 7). As a result, the construction of national identity became a dominant tool used in propagating the respective ideologies (Siddi, 2018). During this period, the United States sold itself as the champion of democracy, civil rights, and freedom. It adopted propaganda, otherwise “public diplomacy” in framing the American virtues while opposing the spread of communism by discrediting it (Yarrow, 2009:3). It is believed that constructivism provided an acceptable framework for the end of the Cold War following Mikhail Gorbachev’s ideational shift.

Much of these ideas may have come from transnational actors who influenced Soviet policy through nuclear testing, missile defenses, and force reduction (Snyder, 2005). It is believed that the world order in the past half-century has been driven by a change in norms from power politics to emphasis on liberal values and an ideological shift to free trade and investment. As Woods (2001) argues, “constructivists pay more attention to how governments, states, and other actors construct their preferences” (p. 22). For instance, states tend to prioritize ideas rooted in globalization such as internationalization, technological advancement, and liberalization as dominant interests. This is surmised by Woods (2001) that “internationalization describes the increase in economic transactions across borders which has been taking place since the turn of the century but which some argue has undergone a quantitative leap in recent decades” (p. 14). In recent years, this lens has been expanded to the development of competing narratives on the nature of artificial intelligence, where three main visions for technological power are being put forward by the United States, China, and the European Union, amidst a new sense of legitimate and threatening presence in today’s geopolitical order (Baele et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the varying explanatory strengths of balance of power realism, hegemonic stability realism, liberalism, and constructivism in understanding key historical patterns in international relations. The Cold War era was best explained through the balance of power realism, as bipolar competition between the United States and the Soviet Union maintained global stability through deterrence. However, realism alone failed to fully account for the ideological transformations that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, where constructivism provides a more convincing explanation by emphasizing the role of ideas, identities, and leadership perceptions in shaping political outcomes. Similarly, while realism highlights power struggles and hegemonic stability theory explains the role of U.S. dominance in structuring global economic institutions, liberalism captures the growing role of international cooperation, democratic governance, and economic interdependence in sustaining the global order post-Cold War.

The rise of institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and regional economic blocs underscores the increasing relevance of liberal values. Meanwhile, constructivism contributes insights into how changing global norms and perceptions influence state behavior and cooperation. Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a pluralistic approach to international relations. No single theory adequately explains the complexities of global politics; rather, an integrated perspective that incorporates power dynamics, institutional cooperation, and ideational shifts offers a more comprehensive understanding. In this perspective, the unbalanced multipolarity, which is the subject of much literature and is now present, as well as artificial intelligence (AI), a domain of material power and ideational contestation, constitutes a challenge to realist, liberal, and constructivist explanations.

Given the complexities of international relations, future scholarship should embrace a multidisciplinary approach that integrates the elements of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Although power dynamics remain central to global politics, the increasing influence of economic interdependence, international institutions, and evolving norms cannot be ignored. Researchers should explore how these factors interact to shape state behavior, particularly in an era of shifting power structures, emerging multipolarities, and digital transformations. By moving beyond traditional paradigms that treat these theories in isolation, scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of global affairs.

Moreover, policymakers should recognize that relying solely on power-based strategies or economic dominance is insufficient for maintaining stability and fostering cooperation. While military capabilities and economic strength remain crucial, the role of ideational factors such as national identity, political legitimacy, and shared global norms must be acknowledged in diplomatic engagements. Therefore, governments should invest in diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and soft-power strategies to build sustainable international relations. Initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue, democratic governance, and mutual economic benefits can enhance global stability beyond the conventional power struggles.

Additionally, given the evolving nature of international conflicts and economic systems, institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and regional bodies should adapt to contemporary challenges. Strengthening multilateral frameworks through more inclusive decision-making processes and reforms that reflect the shifting global balance of power is essential. Addressing issues such as economic inequality, climate change, and cyber threats requires collective action that goes beyond state-centric approaches. Thus, greater

collaboration between states, non-state actors, and civil society will be key to ensuring a more equitable and stable international system.

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