
The Utility of Military Force and the Global War on Terror (GWOT): Strategic or Tactical?

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Abstract

Contemporary and persuasive evidence suggests that military force has less utility as an instrument of policy in the 21st century, particularly in the face of terrorism, than it did in times past. Before 9/11 there was no coherent strategy in many states for dealing with this type of threat. The events of 9/11, a terrorist attack on the pentagon and the World Trade Center, introduced a new dimension into the debate on the use of force in addressing the problem of terrorism in terms of the objects of the attack and the extent of the damage caused, as well as the fact that it was carried out by terrorists outside the state being attacked. The Unites States (US) response was a declaration of war against terrorism and terrorists anywhere in the world. However, in spite of the origin and aim of the Global War on terror (GWOT), there have been several criticisms of the war, one of which is that its is an ideology of fear and repression that creates enemies and promotes violence rather than mitigating acts of terror and strengthening security. This particular criticism is directly related to the issue of the utility of force in prosecuting this war. This paper aims to address this issue by answering the question of the role of military force against a non-state transnational terrorist organization in dealing with the global threat of terrorism. Using a documentary method, within the framework of the Theory of Modern War as put forward by Rupert Smith, the paper attempts to support the argument that military force is mainly of tactical utility in the global war on terror, given the nature of transnational terrorism, the environment of conflict where terrorism thrives and the impact of technology on terrorism.

Key Words: *Utility of Force, Terrorism, Counterterrorism, Modern War, 9/11*

1. Introduction

The 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in the United States (US) has had a significant effect on the entire world (Rowe, 2003). As a result of the tragedy, more than 2,500 people from over 80 countries representing different races and religions were killed (Global Terrorism Index, 2015). Following 9/11, President George Bush declared a Global war on terror (GWOT) against those he called “the enemies of freedom” (Bush, 2001). In a very elaborate statement, President Bush declared that “the attack took place on American soil but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilized world - and the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st Century. A war against all those who seek to export terror and a war against those

governments that support or shelter them” (Bush, 2001). According to the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (2006:7) the GWOT is a US strategy (adopted globally to a large extent, and adapted to local contexts) that has two main strategic visions: first, a short-term goal to kill or capture those individuals who have irrevocably crossed the line into violent extremism; second, a long-term goal to create a global environment that is inhospitable to these and future violent. To achieve this vision, the actions to be taken include “preventing attacks by terrorist networks, denying weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s) to rogue states and terrorist allies who seek to use them, deny terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states, deny terrorists control of any nation they would use as a base and launching pad for terror, advance effective democracies as the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism, lay the foundations and build the institutions and structures needed to carry the fight forward against terror and help ensure ultimate success” (National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 2006:7.) These actions have been adopted not only by the US, but by many other states tackling the threat of terrorism within their borders, in the global fight against terrorism. However, while this strategy has led to the killing and capturing of members of terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda, it has led to the deaths of thousands of civilians, Muslim and Christians, who may not have been extremists but mere casualties of war (Dobrot, 2007:13).

Although the grammatical correctness of the phrase GWOT has also been questioned given that terrorism is not a person, place or tangible entity but an action, its aim remains to defeat terrorist organizations with global reach (Walker, 2005:1). The global community has in recent times recognized the right of states to employ unilateral force against terrorists in self-defense (Tams, 2009:359). It is true that military force can have a distinct effect and result when used in a traditional sense of war against another state, it is also true that deterrence and/or the threat of the use of force has its own place as well; however, everything else in-between ranging from counter-insurgency operations, peacekeeping and peace operations, state-building operations, stabilization operations, humanitarian interventions to counterterrorism appears a bit more complicated (Angstrom and Duyvesteyn, 2010:3). The use of force in International Law is generally prohibited except in self-defense, by United Nations Security Council Resolution or with consent from the leader of the state to be invaded (William, 2011:563). However, while the US invasion of Afghanistan, arguably, passes for a war of self-defense many have questioned the proportionality of the regime toppling intervention that took place (Milanovic, 2010) under the guise of the GWOT. In spite of the origin and aim of the GWOT, it has been criticized for being an ideology that promotes fear and violence, drives repression and creates enemies instead of diminishing terrorist acts and increasing security and stability (Global Policy Forum, 2016). This particular criticism is directly related to the issue of the utility of force in prosecuting this war. Given that in the statement that rolled out the drums for this war, former President Bush acknowledges clearly that this was a new kind of war (see previous page), this paper aims to contribute to this discourse by focusing on the role of military force in fighting against a non-state transnational terrorist organization in the name of dealing with the global threat of terrorism. It aims to pull together both the pros and the cons of this argument in order to corroborate the argument that military force is mainly of tactical utility in the global war on terror.

2. Theoretical Framework

Deciding upon a theoretical framework when dealing with the utility of force is difficult but necessary in understanding the conditions under which force has or does not have utility. The theoretical framework for this paper is Rupert Smith’s Theory of Modern War. Smith (2005) identifies six themes that describe the new paradigm of war. First, the ends for which we fight

are changing from the hard objectives that decide an outcome to those of establishing conditions in which the outcome may be decided; second, we fight amongst the people not on the battle field; third, our conflicts tend to be timeless, even unending; fourth, we fight so as to preserve the force rather than risking all to gain the objective; fifth, on each occasion, new uses are found for old weapons and organizations are the products of industrial war; and finally, the sides are mostly non-state, comprising some form of multinational grouping against some non-state party or parties (Smith, 2005:5). Smith (2005) argues that war, as we knew it with the clash of national armies, would never occur again. He argues that we must be prepared to adapt tactics to each conflict or risk losing the ability and capacity to protect ourselves, and defend our way of life. Smith (2005) draws from his experience in Bosnia, Kosovo and Northern Ireland to analyze modern war and calls for new military thinking to reflect the changes that have taken place and that distinguish traditional war from contemporary wars. The core of his argument is that armed forces do not solve political problems even though they can win battles. Modern conflicts, he argues must be understood as intertwined political and military events. A one-size-fits-all approach is ill equipped to deliver solutions to contemporary issues. Wars are now fought among civilian populations and not on traditional battlefields (Smith, 2005). Although some would argue that the dichotomy between new and “old wars” do not seamlessly exist, and is often overemphasized, Smith’s analysis drives home the point that the character of war is not completely the same and even if the change is insignificant it is still a change that explains why large armies of developed countries cannot defeat small groups of non-state actors that challenge international peace and security even after long drawn out battles. Smith’s theory is helpful here in that it recognizes the limitation of the use of force in relation to contemporary conflicts, particularly in asymmetric conflicts involving terrorism.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a documentary research method meaning the analysis of materials that contain relevant information about the issues under study (Bailey, 1994). It uses both primary and secondary documents, where primary documents are original accounts of people who experienced the particular event or the behavior we intend to study, while secondary documents include those materials already produced, compiled and documented from primary sources. It depends on government sources (reports and statements), journal articles, books and news reports. It categorizes, investigates, interprets and identifies the limitations of these documents (Mogalakwe, 2006:221) in order to provide arguments that address the question of the utility of force in the global war on terror. It consults the works of seasoned scholars on the subject regardless of their position with a view to presenting an objective argument. The argument put forward is organized around three main themes, the nature of transnational terrorism, the environment of conflict in which terrorism thrives and the ambivalent role and impact of information/communication technology in terrorism.

4. The Utility of Force: The Debates

Scholars like Angstrom and Duyvesteyn (2010:142) argue that there are three core debates that have contributed to the conceptualization of war and the employment of military force. These are: the renewed interest in the changed purposes of war, the question of how the modern social construct of war should be conceptualized; and the suggestion that the definition of military victory and defeat has been adjusted since the end of the cold war (Angstrom and Duyvesteyn, 2010:142). Utility of force in relation to interstate wars has been widely researched and debated giving rise to concepts such as deterrence, compellance, and brute force, brinkmanship, to name a few (Angstrom and Duyvesteyn, 2010:3). On the other hand, literature on the utility of force in irregular warfare or modern warfare is still

developing and a lot of work is being done in this regard. Traditionally, the achievement of military victory is the aim of war. The use of force by states is controlled by international law and is directed towards defending the territorial integrity or political independence of a state. To say that force has utility is to imply that force is a tool of policy with the ability to compel our enemy to do our will; and as Clausewitz (1976:75) argues, war is the continuation of policy by other means. So by utility of force here we mean that force can be used to compel our opponent to do what we want. In the context of contemporary warfare, the debate on the utility of force can be classified roughly into two schools, the optimists and the pessimists.

The optimist's school of thought challenges the traditional strategic paradigm and argues that international politics works through the power of political systems and not military force particularly in relation to nuclear weapons (Luard, 1992). Scholars within this school also argue like Mueller (1989) that war is only an idea or an institution that, with time, can disappear from human affairs. He further opines that the high cost of war and the ever-growing hunger for economic prosperity around the world has rendered conventional war undesirable and ineffective. Others like Smith (2005) argue that the "all-out sort of struggle that disfigured the 20th century is no more and the wars of today are fought among the people. While many contend with his categorical statement of 'war is no more', and argue that 'new wars' are not so new after all, Smith still believes that the industrial wars, 'which is the fight to win, fight only as a last resort, fight with overwhelming force, fight only for vital interest and finish it quickly' type of war is over (Smith, 2005:5). He argues that today's wars do not fit that kind of mold but is rather a war of wills not a trial of strength (Smith, 2005:5), as Clausewitz posits. In all, the discourse on the utility of force originally centers round the question of nuclear weapons. Some have argued that nuclear weapons and conventional weapons can be used together; but the dominant perspective is that of McNamara (1983:59) who argues that nuclear weapons serve no military purpose and are useful only for deterrence. The contexts of the constraints of military force today lies in the idea that the costs are much too high and the rewards very minimal and whether or not warfare is intended to deliver national interests, it requires persuasive legal justification, given that it remains a 'servant of the national interest' (Gray 2011:7, 8) for it to fly in the face of public opinion. It is however often challenging for states to provide this requisite legal justification. The objective of modern war is not to crush but to change minds, and winning the hearts and minds of disaffected people, in places where terrorism thrives has to be central to the campaign against terrorism (Mockaitis, 2003:21). Although, scholars like Jones and Smith (2010:81) raise the question of whose hearts and whose minds are being fought for in the curious case of global counter-insurgency, we can observe that the focus of traditional war, as we knew it, appears to have changed. Kaldor (2013:2) further observes that the logic in, and of, contemporary violent conflicts is unique; and is derived from the fact that the actors, goals, methods and forms of finance in these modern conflicts give it a nature that require a different kind of response than traditional military combat (or 'Old Wars').

For the pessimist school of thought, force is still a useful tool of policy regardless of the development of nuclear weapons (Gray, 1999:334). For instance, a nuclear statement can trigger local action with conventional weapons and limited military actions can retain their usefulness depending on the character and scale of a conflict (Kaufman, 1956:237). Orme (1998:138) also argues that development is not irreversible and so even if it appears that force is declining in utility, the incoming scarcity can potentially trigger conditions where utility can be revived. This is a point that Gray (2011:4) supports when he states that military force indeed has less utility as an instrument of policy in the 21st century than it did in times past but this does not mean that before the 20th century it was without utility, meaning that

situations can be reversed. According to Nohr (2012) and Gray (2011) the utility of force is contextual. Although there are some that would insist that force has utility in modern warfare, scholars like Gray (2011: v), who makes the following plausible arguments that the hard power of military force is more difficult to use in contemporary times than was the case in the past. Reasons could be traced to the increase in demand for the respect for global humanitarian values in international and domestic affairs and the idea that the utility of military force is not a fixed or universal universally and so varies with culture (Gray, 2011:v). Gray does not make these observations because he believes that military force is obsolete, rather he makes these arguments in relation to the utility of soft power in international politics. However, these arguments are particularly relevant here in the sense that they show, correctly, that military force is not completely without utility in contemporary international relations, but need to be reappraised as they are applied to the phenomenon of terrorism.

5. Military Force: Tactical versus Strategic Utility

Strategy and tactics are central to how war is conducted. Clausewitz (1976) explains that tactics has to do with using troops in battle while strategy involves of using battles to win the war. Although the two are interdependent, they have their place in military operations. Strategy identifies clear goals that advance and organize resources in an organization while tactics deploy specific means to achieve the goals of defined missions (Owyang, 2013). One of the critical aspects of strategy is the ability to harness force effectively and the concentrate superior force at critical points - that is, the economy of force and mass (Goodman, 1993). Although strategy and tactics must work together to match thoughts with action, each of them has a specific contribution to make (Owyang, 2013). By strategic utility we mean a situation where force is intended to decide a political dispute. However, our argument is that the use of force in modern warfare is mainly tactical combined with the precarious effectiveness of the other instruments of statecraft. By tactical utility we mean a situation where force is used, not to decide a political dispute, but to create an environment where the strategic result is achieved (Smith and Bet-el, 2005). When a terrorist bombs a shopping mall, he employs tactics to pull this off but the strategic impact of that action is not the destruction of a mall per se or the people killed, but the terror created to force the target to change its behavior or stance on a particular issue. By tactical utility, therefore, we mean the ability of an action to create the environment where the actual strategic goal can be achieved. So when we suggest that military force is only of tactical utility in the GWOT, we are suggesting that it should not be the end in itself but the means to an end. It should be used not for itself but in a way that would allow for an environment where the long-term strategic goals of peace and security could be achieved. The strategic intent of the GWOT is to stop terrorist attacks around the world and achieve victory in the sense of isolating and destroying terrorist organizations through sustained military effort (National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, 2003:11, 14). Arguably, conflicts and wars can be complex phenomena and one should not rush into judgment on the utility of force in this regard (Gray, 2011:6), but the use of force to deliver victory in the traditional sense of war is difficult in the context of terrorism and should be discussed.

6. The Utility of Military Force and the Global War on Terror

This section of this paper attempts to show the complexity of the situation and suggests that because of the nature of the terrorist threat, the environment of conflict, and the information/communication technology terrorist groups are exposed to, the strategic intent of the GWOT cannot be achieved through the unilateral use of force alone.

6.1 The Nature of Transnational Terrorism

Terrorism is defined as the “premeditated, planned, intentional, deliberate, calculated, preconceived, willful and purposive use, or threat to use, violence by individuals or subnational groups against noncombatants to obtain political or social objectives through the intimidation of a large audience, beyond that of the immediate victims” (Gaibulloev, Sandler and Saul, 2013:14). Terrorism refers to “the systematic use of violence and threats of violence by non-state groups, designed to cause dislocation, consternation and submission on the part of a target population or government” (Roberts, 2005:101). Although some will argue that terrorism itself is a criminal act, what the above definition clearly means is that any terrorist activity without a political or social motive is criminal and any act with one or both of these motives should not be classified as a crime. The GWOT is an ideological war in itself because if the ‘enemy’ or the terrorist group in question is one whose goal is to unify a particular religion under one banner against the rest of the world, then “the very nature and circumstances of this war” is one that no state, not even the United States, can win militarily (Dobrot, 2007:14). Brown (2017) rightly argues that as a result of globalization, political, social, cultural and economic events in one state can very quickly spill over to others with significant consequences. While this spillover could have positive implications, in relation to the phenomenon of terrorism the impact is negative. Globalisation alters the structure of terrorist groups with time, changes the dynamics of operation, their access to resources and even their reasoning and motivations (Brown, 2017). It has been suggested that transnational terrorism does not pose a security threat and should be treated as a crime, hence, appropriate response should not go beyond intelligence and policing (Krasner, 2014:1). While this is plausible, the reality is also that transnational terrorism should be treated as an existential threat for three main reasons; first, terrorist attacks designed to impose mass casualties are highly improbable but not impossible; second, the level of destruction resulting from an attack can approximate that of a conventional war; finally, because human behavior is largely driven by emotion, intuition and non-reflection rather than rational and calculating (Kahneman, 2011). The most rational response in this unpredictable situation is to do everything reasonably possible to prevent such attacks from happening at all. The use of force should be to prevent the attacks from happening at all. In transnational terrorism, counterterrorism and political policies in one country could potentially have significant implications for the “political and economic environment of another country” (Rosendorff and Sandler, 2005:172). The wrong use of force could trigger or escalate conflicts that would affect both states and result in instability. A look at the case of Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon in their collective efforts against terrorism reveals that actions in one country can trigger events in others particularly neighboring states. The external effects of counterterrorism strategies mean that effective coordination is required at the international and national level (Heal and Kunreuther, 2005). The franchise-like nature of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda also make it easy for them to be involved with smaller groups around the world through their financial, logistical and material involvement (Brown, 2017). Where necessary efforts should rather be targeted at preventing the spread of radical ideologies and disrupting terrorist financing across borders.

6.2 The Environment of Conflict in which terrorism thrives

The use of force in transnational terrorism pushes terrorists into neighboring countries and tends to ignore the enabling causes of the phenomenon which requires a focus on the conflicts within which terrorism thrives and the socio-economic challenges of many societies dealing with the threat. Terrorism thrives in an environment of conflict (Williams, 2016). In all the countries where the threat is high, it has been observed that there are underlying conflicts that have created an enabling environment for terrorism (Williams, 2016:173). For

this reason the use of force in already volatile societies tends to further escalate the situation and create more insecurity. Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Yemen, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Somalia, India and Syria are countries most affected by terrorism. These countries also have experienced protracted conflicts that have given rise to humanitarian conditions that provide safe-havens for terrorists. Reveron and Murer (2013:278) observe that as pressure mounts on traditional sanctuaries, international terrorists are likely to seek new safe havens among sympathetic populations, in countries with weak or even supportive government, or in areas of high conflicts that can be employed to gain local allies. Using Sudan as a case study, Reveron and Murer (2013:279) show that terrorism thrives in a chaotic environment with the ultimate breeding ground being the failed or failing state as a result of catastrophic internal conflicts. Factors such as youth unemployment, access to small arms and light weapons, faulty electoral processes, intractable conflicts, corruption, inequality and high crime rates (Global Terrorism Index 2015:5), directly and indirectly create an environment of conflict in some countries making it conducive as safe havens for terrorists. In these situations, while some may argue that the use of force could be used to deal with terrorism, in actual fact addressing the underlying causes of conflict could yield more sustainable results as in the case of Nigeria (Williams, 2016: 173). In these societies already experiencing conflicts, the use of military force primarily to address the threat of terrorism has negative implications, although some will argue that the use of force helps to contain the threat. In the first instance since civilians are difficult to determine from combatants, military force in these circumstances often create huge distrust between soldiers and the communities they are supposed to protect. Where such distrust exists, policing is difficult as civilians may be forced to protect terrorists having been made to believe that the military is the enemy when they kill civilians in violent counterterrorism efforts. Secondly, without geographical boundaries, escalation of conflicts in one part of the world could trigger violent responses, in protests, in neighboring countries or other parts of the world. Thirdly, since there is no actual measure for determining victory or the end of a conflict, military interventions could be mistaken for an extension of the conflict when in actual fact they are interventions meant to end the conflicts. While a distinction can be made between the violence of military force and that of terrorist groups or conflict parties, what remains evident is the destruction of lives, properties and communities regardless of the source of this violence; these actions of violence, particularly in an environment of conflict, only serve to escalate the situation rather than restore peace, order and security (Gray, 2011:1). One of the aims of the GWOT is to create, ultimately an environment that will not be conducive for violent extremists, then states, while demonstrating the capacity and ability to use military means to locate, capture and kill these extremists, cannot with the same violent means create the desired global environment that is intended to keep extremists away in the long-term (Dobrot, 2007:14).

6.3 Information/Communication Technology and Terrorism

The information/Communication Technology (ICT) revolution has affected the character and nature of international terrorism (Finaud, 2006:2). Technology is the foundation of modern society, it governs its dynamics and so, naturally, terrorism benefits from it (Infosec Institute, 2017). Increasingly greater speed of data transmission, increased capacity for data storage, increased mobility and integration of various functions (Finaud, 2006:3), has enhanced the ability to reach a wide audience, and as such has aided terrorism as well as counterterrorism. Cyberspace is an environment without boundaries and so it is easy for terrorists to organize and launch attacks from anywhere in the world. Social media platforms can be considered arenas for public deliberation and the formation of public opinions (Dau and Martin, 2017:50). Social media has become a core element of modern terrorism as it allows terrorists recruit, communicate effectively and under the radar, as well as make propaganda (Infosec

Institute, 2017). Terrorist attacks are choreographed circumspectly to attract the electronic media and international press because its targets are not the dead but the living, those watching (Jenkins, 1974:4). Far from being mindless violence, terrorist attacks are directed towards targets whose death or destruction does not directly benefit the terrorists. Although many feel that the notion of cyber-terrorism is highly exaggerated and politicized, the potential threat posed by it has provoked considerable alarm (Weimann, 2004:1). The resources at risk include sensitive information stored on cyber space and all components of states infrastructure (Elliot, 2002:2). Military action is often reactive but given the changes that terrorist tactics have developed over time, it has become increasingly necessary to be proactive rather than reactive in developing technologies that protect the public (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992:3). Rather than depend on the use of force, governments have been encouraged to use IT also as a counterterrorism intelligence tools for surveillance, detection of planned attacks, countering ideological support and mitigation of future attacks (Finaud, 2006:2). In a situation where “terrorists can do more damage with a keyboard than with a bomb” (Weimann, 2004:1), what then is the strategic role of the actual deployment of military force? The threat may be ambiguous but it is a potential threat (Weimann, 2004:11). Information attacks appear to be replacing traditional military attacks in this regard (Elliot, 2002:1). Although Cyber threats do not readily fit into traditional security frameworks (Wallace, 2013), governments have been forced to develop tools, strategies and policies to deal with cyber-attack that could be fatal (Elliot 2002:12). Under the traditional security framework, law enforcement was used to protect societies from internal threats while military force was used to deter external aggression (Wallace, 2013). While Cyber threats are mostly external making it difficult for law enforcement to deal decisively with them, they are not even significant enough to warrant the use of force given that vast majority of cyber security breaches fall below the threshold that could be labeled an ‘act of war’. Military response is often not the best or even a legal response to a cyber attack.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we argue that the nature of terrorism, the environment of conflict where terrorism thrives and the influence of Information/Communication Technology are some of the factors that make it difficult for military force to deliver strategic victory in counterterrorism. Very often military power appears to fall short as an instrument of policy in this regard and for this reason, many argue that it is becoming obsolete, if not totally anachronistic (Lovelace, 2011:iii). While military force could be losing its relative value because it is counterproductive or ineffective in the war against terror or other wars of irregular character, it is not completely without utility in this regard. The strategic value of military force against terrorism may be diminished but it is the tactical utility that will deliver the goals of counterterrorism today. When the problem of terrorism is seen as a war it is because it is viewed through the strategic lens of international politics as is common with the United States. However perceiving it in the context of domestic politics where solutions lie in social and economic policies and better policing, as is the case with European countries, takes it out of the realm of war in a traditional sense. Military force will remain an essential instrument of policy in international politics (Gray, 2011:ix) but when it comes to the GWOT, issues may have to be perceived in the context of domestic politics for effective and sustainable results. Military force is not the solution but only a part of the solution in contemporary conflicts and for the use of force to remotely succeed in the war against terror, it has to be combined with political initiatives which would subdue the enabling conditions for terrorism and prevent it, even if this does not put a total end to it (Smith, 2005). Efforts directed at prevention will produce less emphasis on the use of military force (Ulfstein, 2003:165). Although armed forces have both domestic and external functions, handling

problems related to domestic violence and internal security is the basic function of the police department along with the maintenance of law and order (Tyagi, 2015). For this reason effective policing within states has to be encouraged. Military force may achieve local military success but it may not deliver on political promise (Smith, 2005:18) in this war. The environment of conflict is different on several counts, line between civilians and combatants, and between military and law enforcement activity is blurred. There are no clear geographic boundaries, no clear index for defining victory and signaling a clear end of conflict. When the problem of terrorism is seen as a war it is because it is viewed through the strategic lens of international politics as is common with the United States. Military force is not the solution but only a part of the solution in modern war, particularly the GWOT, and as Smith (2005) rightly argues, for it to succeed it has to be combined with political initiatives which would subdue the conflicts involved, prevent attacks and prevent the spread of extremist ideology and violence.

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