

**CHINESE HEGEMONY,  
ECONOMIC TIES AND  
NATIONAL SECURITY:  
EXPLAINING CHINA'S  
TIES WITH ARMED  
NON-STATE ACTORS IN  
THE MUSLIM WORLD**



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**Abstract:** In recent decades, China has fast emerged as a rising regional if not global superpower with its military spending and technological advances among the best in the world. Simultaneously, the nation has also been taking a more aggressive and proactive foreign policy to establish its presence globally. Amidst these ventures, it is natural that the nation would come face to face with several state and (armed) non-state actors. Despite many such encounters, the current scholarship does not often study the broad approach that China adopts to such groups. China's foreign policy and approach to armed non-state militant actors diverges from the methodology adopted by Western nations such as the United States among others. This paper examines China's approach to these groups specifically looking at Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban (before it took power in Afghanistan). It offers a brief history of how China has engaged with these groups or used them to its own benefit. It then argues that the nation's policies toward such groups are mainly guided by trade, anti-Western sentiments and national security. This paper is intended to inform policy makers and scholars on how China views such actors and vice versa.

## **Introduction**

Since the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the ruling party of China in 1949, the country has gone through many phases of domestic and international development. While China was treated as a pariah throughout the Cold War due to its communist ideology, since its opening up to the world in the 90s it has grown to be the second largest economy in the world just behind the United States and is now among the most dominant actors in the world, even leading the way in fields such as 5G technology, among others.<sup>1</sup>

In its quest to become one of the strongest powers of the world, its approach with various nations and armed non-state actors have been calculated and rigorous. This brief therefore explores the driving factors behind Chinese ties with violent non-state actors designated as terrorist groups by a significant number of nations globally. Specifically, it studies China's relation with Hezbollah (designated as a terrorist group by many Western nations), Hamas and the Taliban (before it ascended to power in 2021), all three being violent Islamist organizations.

The brief is organized as follows, first it studies the three different groups in depth explaining the history as well as developments that have taken place over the past decades. In each of these case studies, it illustrates the factors that prompted China to take certain steps to either align with or move away from such militant actors. Subsequently, it summarizes the larger factors that drive China's approach to such groups while also providing a brief insight into the type of armed non-state actors that have antagonized China before concluding the paper.

Specifically, this brief argues that China's desire to see itself as a global superpower impacts its decisions to collaborate or eschew these groups. Under this overarching goal, China's anti-US stance, its economic interests in the form of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its national security are the strongest driving factors in its policy towards armed non-state actors in the Muslim world.

### **The Taliban – Visible but cautious growth**

The Taliban has always been one of the biggest militant groups operating in Afghanistan. Having risen out of the ashes of the 1980 Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Afghan Civil War, it garnered global attention when it ruled Afghanistan for a few years between 1996 and 2001.<sup>2</sup> The group fell into disarray when the US invaded Afghanistan in retaliation for not handing over Osama bin Laden who was hiding in their territory after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>3</sup> Despite a significant military campaign against the group, it sustained itself by recruiting from disenfranchised populations and taking advantage of the poor corruption-ridden government of Afghanistan which did not improve the economic and socio-political situation of the citizens as well as the popular anger towards the US' unjustified invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

In August 2021, the group regained control of Afghanistan and re-started its rule with countries begrudgingly beginning to accept its legitimacy (in some cases, for a lack of a better option). China, however, was more open to a discussion with the Taliban, with some of the group's leaders even visiting the nation in 2021.<sup>5</sup> Several questions arise from this and subsequent exchanges regarding the relationship between the two parties.

The answer to these questions lies in Afghanistan's geo-strategic importance, China's past ties with the Taliban and the presence of various anti-Chinese militants in Taliban controlled territories. Afghanistan, which is largely within China's backyard, has been an important country for connecting China to the Middle East with Central Asia being one of the connectors between China and Afghanistan. As such, China has long set its eyes on Afghanistan as a major investment hub to increase connectivity especially for its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>6</sup>

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In addition, given Afghanistan's position in its backyard as well as sharing a small border with China, the latter has always feared for its own security. In the late 1980s, this translated into militarily funding the Mujahideen to prevent Russian forces from establishing a foothold in its sphere of influence.<sup>7</sup> This was China's first contact with the Taliban. However, these ties petered out by 2001 after which China simply cut ties with the group to avoid any trouble with the anti-Taliban coalition of Western nations.<sup>8</sup>

However, perhaps the most important issue in the relationship has been that of Uyghur militants. Throughout the 2000s, Uyghur militants used their presence in Taliban-ruled areas to launch attacks on Chinese targets. China has long controlled the Uyghur Muslim population in the Xinjiang province and has been accused of rampant oppression of citizens there. The Uyghur issue has long been a sensitive subject for China which has blocked any discussion on this issue by international observers.<sup>9</sup>

One result of its oppression of Uyghur Muslims has been the fleeing of Uyghurs to parts of Central Asia and Afghanistan where they formed Jihadist groups and coalesced under a larger movement called the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which later became the Turkistan Islamic Party.<sup>10</sup> Uyghur militants have perpetrated many attacks against China not only in Afghanistan, but also in parts of Central Asia. Given that many of these groups were also operating out of Taliban-controlled territories in Afghanistan, keeping them under control has been one of China's main concerns regarding the Taliban.<sup>11</sup>

In the 2000s, because China did not have any official contacts with the group, it relied on the two's mutual ally Pakistan to push the Taliban to rein in Uyghur militants. To this end, Pakistani officials even took Chinese diplomats to Afghanistan to meet with Taliban leaders. However, despite the Taliban stating that it did not support the Uyghurs in any way against China, various reports from organizations like the United Nations disproved these claims.<sup>12</sup>

As such, China has been quite cautious in trusting the Taliban. In many ways, for China, its three main biggest security problems have been separatist violence, ethnic nationalism, and Islamist terrorism.<sup>13</sup> In Afghanistan, all of three of these problems converge creating

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epic security problems for China. Much of this could have been avoided by the Taliban given that it controlled territory. This explains why, despite many commentators noting that China would step in to fill the vacuum left by the US in Afghanistan, it has not done so even in 2022.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, as some have observed, Chinese interests, personnel and investments which were not protected previously, continue to face threats even in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This is mainly due to China's perception that the Taliban is unwilling to control Uyghur militants with which it ideologically agrees or is incapable of fighting given its massive governance challenges.<sup>15</sup>

What stands out here for is China's approach to the Taliban's record of human rights vis-à-vis how the West views the Taliban. For nations like the US and others European nations, the Taliban's actions against women and its brutal killings of countless Afghan and other citizens are a major moral issue and a problem area when it comes to disbursing aid.<sup>16</sup> China, on the other hand, pursues a policy whereby it does not interfere in Afghanistan's domestic affairs and especially does not comment on the Taliban's human right violations as long as the Taliban reciprocates this policy of non-interference.<sup>17</sup> Verbally at least, this policy reaped rewards with Taliban spokesperson noting in 2021 that China's issue with the Uyghurs was an internal Chinese issue that he could not comment on too much (although attacks against Chinese personnel have continued).<sup>18</sup>

It is this policy of mutual non-interference that has made China a significant power broker in Afghanistan since the 2010s (where it was also on good terms with the regime). While China's relationship with the Taliban was heavily influenced by its friendship with Pakistan, China began to hold an independent relationship with the Taliban since 2014 having hosted Taliban on five different occasions for peace talks and mediations and continuing contact with the group outside of these meetings too.<sup>19</sup> This forms another leg of China's foreign policy initiative in (especially) conflict-ridden nations where it tries to act as a cordial actor that can mediate conflicts by being friendly with all parties.<sup>20</sup>

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Thus, as can be seen here, of all the three groups we examine, the Taliban are the geographically closest to China, leading to more areas where the two parties have intersected. Largely, while China's trade ambitions in the form of the BRI have given it some impetus to invest in relations with the Taliban before and after it controlled Afghanistan, the Taliban's unwillingness to acknowledge that Uyghur militants still exist in its territory frustrates these goals.<sup>21</sup> Thus, China's relationship with the Taliban is likely defined by its paradox of wanting to increase its economic footprint in Afghanistan such as in lithium mining,<sup>22</sup> while also avoiding security threats to its interests. In addition, China's engagement with the Taliban also falls within the scope of Chinese conflict resolution efforts in the war-torn nation will also continue to pursue a policy of mutual non-interference in domestic political affairs.

### **Hamis: An Instrument of Anti-US Posturing**

Hamis has been branded as a terrorist organization by most Western nations such as the US, EU nations and the UK.<sup>23</sup> Understanding the broader Chinese involvement in the Israel Palestinian conflict is key to understanding the nation's engagement with Hamis.

An interesting aspect of China's engagement in the Israeli Palestinian conflict has been its ideological history and evolution of its policy over time while retaining some of the symbolic trapping of its past position. In the early 1950s, China criticised the Israeli presence in Palestine as a colonial presence. This was in line with its anti-colonial stance that it took all over the developing world. In fact, its support for the Palestinian cause was so strong that it even armed the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the 60s to fight against Israel.<sup>24</sup> It was only after the death of General Mao Zedong in 1976 that this foreign policy shifted to one less ideologically-driven and more pragmatic. Accordingly, China scaled down its financial and military support to Palestine and opened relations with Israel. However, co-operation between the two nations were largely behind the scenes as seen in the 1980 Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Both countries held secret collaborations in their common goal to arm Afghan Mujahideen against the Russians since China (as mentioned in the previous section) opposed the Russian presence in its backyard and Israel was likely motivated to oppose the Russian presence by its alliance with the United States.<sup>25</sup>

It was only in 1992 that China officially opened an Israeli embassy in Beijing. Since then, trade ties have skyrocketed from 50 million USD in that year to about 15 billion USD by 2020

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making China one of Israel's biggest trading partners.<sup>26</sup> In addition, China has also been a major beneficiary of Israeli weapons technology long before officially establishing ties. For instance, in the 1980s, Israel was a major force in modernizing Chinese military as it provided Western technology that was otherwise forbidden to be sold to China directly from the West, which marked a massive upgrade to China's Soviet-provided defence equipment. This relationship evolved to the point where Israel is now China's top defence supplier after Russia, making special inroads into its relationship with China.<sup>27</sup>

Yet despite all of these factors, China has often proven to be in support of even groups like Hamas, which it has refused to designate as a terrorist organization. Indeed, as part of its outreach to the Muslim world, China has even engaged with Egyptian and other Arab authorities with the goal of 'freeing Palestine.'<sup>28</sup> While China has had several suggestions regarding the conflict, its suggestion to empower other factions within Palestine (such as Hamas) to ensure reconciliation and dialogue between these groups is of consequence. This is a move that is directly opposed to Israeli interests given how Hamas has always been more aggressive toward Israel compared to the ruling government in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority (PA).<sup>29</sup>

Here the driving factors behind China's approach to Hamas and its mediation of the broader conflict has been its opposition to American hegemony. Specifically, China's biggest pet peeve is the United States' singling out its treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in its Xinjiang region as a human rights violation. By positioning itself as a champion of Palestinian rights and demonstrating the United States' unwillingness to alleviate the problems of the Palestinians who are in a similar position to the Uyghur Muslims, China intends to call out American hypocrisy in its discourse of human rights.

In that respect, some of China's posturing regarding Israel is more related to its antagonism towards the United States rather than just Israel. This is why it called out the US for blocking UNSC action that would speak to Israel in one voice during the 2021 escalation of tensions between Israel and Hamas. In fact, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also noted how China had raised the issue of Palestine five times during its time as chair of the UNSC as a means to revive discussions about the conflict and show that it also cares about the Muslim world.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, Israel is also quite invested in carving out a bigger space for itself in the global arena in anticipation of a multipolar world and its own rising economic and military status. In this regard, it has often offered to hold peace talks for both parties if they were interested. This view also reflected by its diplomat Qian Minjian who noted that one major driver of Chinese foreign policy in the Middle East region is to encourage conflict mediation for the various tensions in place.<sup>31</sup>

As such, Hamas has lauded these stances by China, however opportunistic and symbolic, and has praised China's criticism of Israeli annexation of Palestinian land.<sup>32</sup> It is unsure how much of this translates to Chinese support for Hamas. Previously, in 2014 for example, Israel reported that Hamas had used Chinese designed weapons.<sup>33</sup> How much of these weapons were provided to Hamas with Chinese approval is not reported. However, it is notable that China will take an anti-Western approach to the group and definitely not proscribe it or limit its dealing with the group. Indeed, its policy of holding positively discussions with both Israel and Palestine has earned it a reputation of being one of the few nations that is respected by both parties to the conflict.<sup>34</sup> Here, unlike the case study of the Taliban, it is neither economic interests, nor security issues that underpin Chinese engagements with Hamas, but rather its antagonism towards the United States of America and its ambitions of becoming a global superpower.

### **Hezbollah – Economic interests and Filling Geopolitical Vacuums**

Hezbollah (the party of Allah), which was formed in the backdrop of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, is well known for being one of the most disciplined armed groups in the Middle East. The group is led by Hassan Nasrallah, a Lebanese Shia cleric, and has gone through several phases in its lifetime from eschewing electoral politics completely in the 1980s to gradually participating in the system to win seats. It has also accrued significant financial resources over time and taken control of many different assets across Lebanon. In time, the group also established foreign relations with many other nations such as Syria and Iran, both of which have been instrumental in arming the group's activities against Israel which include two different wars (1982 and 2006).<sup>35</sup>

China's interest in Lebanon was largely limited in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the conflict in the nation. It was only from the early 2000s that China began to engage with the slowly recovering war-torn nation. Over time, China's trade ties with Lebanon increased so drastically that it now accounts for about 40 percent of the total imports of the nation, making it Lebanon's biggest trading partner.<sup>36</sup>

Concurrently, China has also been quite reticent to involve itself in the issue of designating Hezbollah as a terrorist group despite Western actors doing so. According to various statements of the Chinese government, Hezbollah's presence in the nation and its conflict with Israel is

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an internal matter which China does not want to wade into.<sup>37</sup> This is despite an incident in the 2000s in which Chinese weapons were discovered in the possession of Hezbollah militants who had attacked Israel. According to the Chinese ambassador to Lebanon, this was not something that China officially sanctioned, and the weapons were likely sold to them via third party actors, thus absolving China of blame in the issue.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the fact that China has not been present in Lebanon and the greater Middle East till the 21<sup>st</sup> century is likely another reason that its interactions with Hezbollah were limited.

In recent years, China viewed its presence in the Lebanon as an important step in connecting the Middle East to Europe for its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Lebanon would act as an important conduit for China and Europe given the strategic location of Lebanese ports like Tripoli and Beirut. For this purpose, China has offered to invest into Lebanon's failing electricity sector to help build railway infrastructure (especially between Tripoli and Beirut) as well as help in post war reconstruction efforts.<sup>39</sup>

Within this backdrop, it is quite natural that Hezbollah has also weighed in on China's engagement with the country. In 2019, Hassan Nasrallah noted that Chinese investments in Lebanon would be an excellent step for reducing Lebanese reliance on the United States and other Western nations such as France.<sup>40</sup> This statement was made after the US placed additional sanctions on Hezbollah that year creating difficulties for the militant group's operations. Nasrallah's statements are politically significant given Hezbollah's influence in the country. Moreover, during a time when Lebanon is going through a very deep crisis economically with rising prices and a collapsing currency, it is only likely that the imperative to take Chinese funding has only increased.

Hezbollah's attitude towards China has resulted in some consternation by US dignitaries who have pointing out China's predatory lending attitude and a decline in Western support to Lebanon should the nation become closer to China.<sup>41</sup> Traditionally, despite a French colonial past, Lebanon has always come under the US' sphere of influence and Chinese influence in the nation can threaten to destabilize decades of relationships cultivated here.

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Undoubtedly, China will be watching Hezbollah's actions in Lebanon given that the nation's dispute with Israel over maritime borders (and extraction of gas from these disputed areas) has ratcheted up in 2022.<sup>42</sup> As some commentators have argued, much of Lebanon's woes regarding unemployment and rising prices can be offset by the economic activity generated by the success of an ongoing Israel – Lebanon conflict resolution leading to extraction rights.<sup>43</sup> However, Hezbollah has opposed this deal since the money flowing into the country will be disbursed by a Western actor and thus, will not be available to Hezbollah due to it being sanctioned by the United States. As such, Hezbollah recently launched three drones to the Karish gas fields where Israeli personnel were working. Although these drones were shot down, Nasrallah warned of an escalation of conflict between it and Israel in a hard attempt to regain legitimacy and derail talks.<sup>44</sup>

For China, there are several scenarios with regard to the future of relations with Hezbollah. In one scenario, Hezbollah's influence has eroded over the last few years due to its association with and support for a corrupt leadership that has engorged itself at the expense of the Lebanese public leading to the current crisis. Opposing the gas extraction is also detrimental to Hezbollah's image since it makes it appear to put its own economic interests ahead of the country's. This is also compounded by the fact that there have already been protests in 2021 by its own core Shia constituencies.<sup>45</sup> Here, China would likely try to bypass Hezbollah's influence and engage directly with the government while trying to maintain some semblances of a relationship with head honchos of Hezbollah given the latter's proclivity to China.

In another scenario, with Hezbollah continuing to maintain its presence and successfully grow off the conflict with Israel, China will likely fully consider the group's influence and engage with it fully, regardless of western sanctions. This is because, like the other groups above, China has been quite unfettered about forming ties with proscribed groups if they do not harm Chinese interests and the discussions provide more benefits to China.

In sum, China's relationship with Hezbollah was largely non-existent in the inception period of the group due to China's lack of presence in Lebanon. After the 2000s when China began to increase its footprint in the nation gradually, reports of its involvement with Hezbollah slightly increased. In the early 2020s, Hezbollah seems to have adopted a proclivity to China in order to shrug off Lebanese reliance on the West. Whether this pays off for the group is to be seen as time passes.

## **Unravelling Chinese Engagements with Non-State Armed Actors**

Studying China's policy regarding the Taliban (pre 2021), Hamas and Hezbollah is an illuminating exercise in understanding the inner dynamics of Chinese national policy. Specifically, three streams of reasonings can be charted out which dictates the reasoning of engaging with such groups being: Anti-Westernism (specifically anti-US posturing; trade/economic benefits coupled with non-interference; and finally, national security. All these three drivers are of course intertwined with each other due to the connected nature of international politics. All three also come under the overarching goals of China's aim to be a global superpower while simultaneously strengthening the CCP.

This can be seen in a brief look at its foreign policy trajectory. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, China's foreign policy was driven by Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum 'Hide your strength, bide your time.'<sup>46</sup> This led China to be more internally focused (with some caveats such as aid to other developing nations and south-south solidarity against colonialism). China was not interested in taking charge of the global order or creating rules to be followed by other nations. However, especially since the ascension of Chairman Xi Jinping as the premier of China, its foreign policy has grown to be far more assertive and, in some cases, aggressive.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, China ramped up its territory conflicts with nations like Japan and even India since 2014, leading to escalated tensions across the region.<sup>48</sup> Of course, China's growing economic presence at the same time prevented such clashes from turning into actual conflict, but the line of engagement was clearly aggressive.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, China also launched its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) referred to many times in the above sections with the aim of connecting China to many parts of the world via trade routes. In line with this, it offered many loans and exported its labour to help develop the infrastructure required for making these trade routes functional.<sup>50</sup> Lastly, from a military perspective, China also invested a significant share of its GDP not just in conventional military infrastructure, but also cyberspace capacities slowly beating out many other western nations across the world.<sup>51</sup> It is within this ambit that its key drivers become distinct and help to shape its policy with militant actors across the world.

Anti-US posturing: Among the most important aspects that can be observed in China's policy toward militant groups is that it never designated these groups as terrorist groups despite Western insistence on the issue. Indeed, as some scholars have argued, while China does stick

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to the rules of the world order and avoids disrupting it, its aim of becoming a major power and its prowess gives it the ability to reject some Western (specifically US) made norms especially if it is not consulted in the decision-making process.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, this as seen above is what pushes China to lay bare the United States' double speak on the language of human rights whereby it condemns China's treatment of the Uyghur Muslims but does not tread much on Israel's illegal actions in Palestine. This gives China scope to engage with these militant actors.

One major advantage that China has is that unlike the United States, which has spent the better part of the last two decades exporting democracy to the Middle East and interfering in various nation's domestic issues, it is not interested in replicating its governance model globally.<sup>53</sup> This is reflected in its self-description of China being a developing nation with Chinese characteristics.<sup>54</sup> This position of course offers it some positive credentials with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas which are otherwise struggling for allies in an increasingly antagonistic world. The US presence was also one of the factors that prevented China from heavily engaging with the Taliban during the time the US was fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Similarly, Hezbollah's willingness to negotiate with China is also because of US sanctions on the group demonstrating how much China's ties with these groups are affected by the presence of the Western superpower.

Trade ties: Trade is another pillar on which China's policy regarding armed non-state actors stand. With the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative across the world being one of China's biggest goals, it has had to look at nations like Lebanon and Afghanistan in a positive light due to their geo-strategic locations and their access to other important markets such as Europe and Central Asia respectively. Coupled with the fact that China does not display moral superiority on human rights issues perpetrated by armed groups such as the Taliban and Hezbollah, it has given China more leeway to act as a counterbalancing force to nations like the US otherwise involved in significant pontification to such militant groups.

National Security: Lastly, as seen in the case of the Taliban specifically, national security is a major factor that dictates how it manages such groups. In the 1990s before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, China even supported the Taliban and its allies due to its fear of Soviet

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expansion in its backyard. Later, this dynamic played out in the Uyghur militant problem that was infuriating Chinese goals in the region. This of course stems from China's treatment of Uyghurs within its national borders. While the Taliban was not specifically involved in these issues, it did not prevent Uyghur militants from using its territory to recoup and launch attacks on China. This reticence in reining in Uyghur militants continues well into the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan which is why China has not deeply invested into Afghanistan despite so many reasons to do so.

### **Understanding the Future of China's role with Militant Non State actors**

A study of Chinese engagement with three different types of Muslim non-state actors reveal that alliances and rivalries are driven by China's overarching goal to become a global superpower. Within this ambit, the US occupies the largest space among the factors influencing the Asian nation's regional involvement with non-state actors. Beyond this, trade ties, especially for the sake of the Belt and Road Initiative mixed with China's unconditional acceptance of domestic politics is a major attraction for non-state actors that have so far been hampered by US critiques and sanctions. Lastly, the national security angle especially of Chinese targets outside of the nation is another factor that directs Chinese engagement with such groups.

China's role as a growing superpower will mean that it will weigh in on many issues pertaining to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas. In all these cases, one thing is clear. China will engage with these groups on its own terms refusing to follow the United States or its allies' sanctions/directives regarding these groups. Thus, no single model can explain all Chinese policy with non-state armed groups, but several internal and international factors should be considered when trying to understand how these dynamics would play out in any country or with any such group.

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