

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Formal and Flexible: ASEAN and the New Strategic Disorder**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- A more aggressive China, a more unpredictable USA, deepening US-China rivalry, and the COVID-19 pandemic each has deepened worries about ASEAN's continued relevance and ability to respond to rapidly changing circumstances.
- Criticisms of ASEAN-related mechanisms and recommendations to strengthen them usually reflect a formal institutionalist approach that understates the diplomatic ecosystem comprising both formal and flexible arrangements facilitated by ASEAN's convening power.
- ASEAN+ groupings, with different yet overlapping memberships and agendas, permit each to gain prominence for different issues, allowing Southeast Asian states to cope better with the region's current flux.
- The functionally-oriented ASEAN+3 process has been the most active in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the EAS still retains its strategic significance.
- ASEAN+ groupings are facilitating a growing number of informal minilateral groupings and initiatives outside of ASEAN which advance Southeast Asian and ASEAN's interests.

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## INTRODUCTION

The unfolding competition between a more aggressive, unilateralist China and a more unpredictable, unilateralist USA heralds the end of the benign post-Cold War order that benefited Southeast Asia and ASEAN.<sup>1</sup> As the new strategic disorder sets in, ASEAN's balancing act and aspirations for centrality – both within its diverse membership and in relations with the two great powers – have become more difficult and tenuous. COVID-19, by laying bare the ever-widening chasm between the two superpowers, has heightened fears that ASEAN member states will become more disunited and ASEAN and its broader ASEAN+ groupings will be paralysed.<sup>2</sup>

From the 1990s to late 2000s, Southeast Asian states successfully engaged all the major powers and fostered their habit of dialogue and cooperation through ASEAN-led groupings. The expansion of ASEAN membership to 10 Southeast Asian states and the establishment of these ASEAN+ groupings positioned ASEAN at the centre of the broader 'regional architecture'. These two developments, made possible by the end of the Cold War, greatly increased interest in ASEAN and ASEAN+ groupings in Southeast Asia and globally.

Southeast Asian and ASEAN officials began to assert the concept of ASEAN centrality, and ASEAN dialogue partners – existing and hopeful – supported these claims rhetorically and through the establishment of dedicated ASEAN missions. In academic and think tank circles, ASEAN and ASEAN+ groupings became the major focus for the study of Southeast Asia's and Southeast Asian countries' positions in the inter-state system and global economy. ASEAN and Southeast Asia became increasingly interchangeable in diplomatic, academic, business and journalistic parlance.

This much greater focus on ASEAN and ASEAN-led groupings has largely adopted a positivist institutionalist approach. In this, groupings outside of ASEAN are routinely presented as threats to ASEAN centrality and relevance. The 'architecture' of ASEAN itself is seen to be in need of top-down redesign based on strengthening its Secretariat, and rationalising the number, memberships and functions of its ASEAN+ groupings.

This approach undersells or ignores the organic development over the last half-century of ASEAN and ASEAN+ groupings in response to changes in Southeast Asia's economic and strategic environments. ASEAN was not set up with an architectural blueprint and has not developed from one either. Tan See Seng notes, "With no semblance of grand architectural or of strategic coherence, the multilateral house that ASEAN and its external partners have built in a highly *ad hoc* fashion looks far from the finished article."<sup>3</sup>

Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific is the main theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's geopolitical contest between Washington and Beijing. It is more useful to understand ASEAN and the ASEAN+ groupings as a flexible, responsive ecosystem in the wider regional environment than as a formal purposive institution in isolation.

## ASEAN+ GROUPINGS: THE BENEFITS OF MANY

A standard institutionalist criticism of ASEAN is that it has too many ASEAN+ groupings with different memberships, levels of importance, ministerial bases and overlapping agendas (see Annex 1 below for more details). Redesign recommendations, usually from

outside Southeast Asia, range from organising these groupings hierarchically under the East Asia Summit<sup>4</sup> to dismantling one or more of these groupings.<sup>5</sup>

A more organic, historical approach to these broader groupings under ASEAN can see each one as an addition to an ASEAN-based ecosystem in response to the shifting balance of power and the evolving post-Cold War environment in the broader Asia-Pacific (or Indo-Pacific):

- The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) established in 1994 holds a special place in this evolutionary system. It marked ASEAN's transition from insularity to inclusiveness in its strategic outlook, from the prevailing mindset of regional autonomy to post-Cold War pro-active engagement with all major powers with interests in Southeast Asia. It remains the most inclusive ASEAN-led inter-state grouping in the wider region.
- The ASEAN Plus Three (APT) embodies the sense of an exclusive East Asian community that gathered momentum after the 1997 Asian financial crisis and is embedded in East Asia's integrated supply chains and trade flows. It is the most exclusive ASEAN+ grouping.
- The formative phase (2005) and subsequent expansion (2010) of the East Asia Summit (EAS) manifests how ASEAN has renegotiated East Asian regionalism. The EAS' broad-based membership includes non-East Asian powers (Australia, India, New Zealand, Russia and the USA) to balance against a potentially dominant China.
- Sharing the same membership as the EAS, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) was established in 2010 (four years after the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) in recognition of the growing need for multilateral defence diplomacy and cooperation in the region.
- ASEAN's dialogue relations with its ten Dialogue Partners (ASEAN+1) have evolved and expanded after the Cold War alongside the above broader platforms. The +1 format allows individual external powers to engage with ASEAN in a more customised way that suits both sides' needs and capacities.

Several institutionalist attempts to streamline this 'messy' architecture, especially between the EAS and ADMM-Plus given their overlapping membership, have been unsuccessful. Yet, despite, or due to, their overlapping mandates and agendas, Southeast Asian states continue to benefit from this multiplicity of ASEAN+ groupings. The involvement of different levels of political representation and outside powers combines overall flexibility with individual groupings' niche capabilities to better cope with the regional flux in these uncertain times.<sup>6</sup>

The EAS is often hailed as the "crown jewel" of ASEAN centrality as it brings together the leaders of all the major powers in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as President Trump's absenteeism from the EAS has become the expectation rather than the exception,<sup>8</sup> the ARF and the ADMM-Plus permit the US Secretaries of State and Defense to promote American staying power in the region.

Revolving around its “leaders-led” nature, the focus of the EAS is the annual summit where the leaders discuss broad issues of strategic significance instead of functional cooperation. Cooperation on global health issues and pandemic diseases is listed as an EAS priority area but implementation has been lacklustre due to the lack of clearly defined follow-up mechanisms. However, the EAS’ value should not be dismissed going forward. The forthcoming EAS in late 2020 is a good opportunity to lobby and secure the agreement of all EAS members, many of which have made advances in COVID-19 vaccine development, to ensure equitable and timely access to these vaccines when they become available.

The APT with 67 sectoral mechanisms<sup>9</sup> is better positioned for functional cooperation, thanks to its more manageable membership base that is bound together by geographical proximity, similar time zones, extensive people mobility and integrated East Asian supply chains. Born out of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the APT is better equipped to deal with crises and emergencies that require swift and coordinated actions and ready-made funds and facilities.<sup>10</sup>

The APT’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its collateral economic damage has therefore yielded tangible results while the EAS is largely absent. Before the Special APT Summit on COVID-19 held on 14 April 2020, APT health crisis response mechanisms were activated, including video conferences of APT Senior Officials’ Meetings on Health Developments and APT Health Ministers as well as regular exchanges of information at the technical level. The APT Economic Ministers issued a joint statement on 4 June 2020, pledging a coordinated response to mitigate the pandemic’s economic impact, including drawing on the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR) to help ensure food security during emergencies.<sup>11</sup>

Although the APT has proven to be the most useful ASEAN+ grouping in response to the COVID-19 crisis, this does not necessarily translate into its augmented strategic weight in relation to the EAS. While leveraging the APT for practical purposes, ASEAN member states have not lost sight of the need to embrace all Dialogue Partners for broader geopolitical reasons. One pertinent example is the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. It was initially proposed to rely on seed funding from the ASEAN Development Fund and the APT Cooperation Fund. Instead, reflecting ASEAN’s multi-directional engagement strategy, the response fund is open to contributions from all external partners. A number of ASEAN+1 processes have also responded to the crisis, including through special foreign ministers meetings with Australia, China, the EU, Russia and the US. In late July, ASEAN and Japanese economic ministers met virtually and adopted 52 strategic measures to mitigate the COVID-19’s economic impact and ensure their post-pandemic economic resilience.

Institutional balancing is inherent within and between all ASEAN+ groupings. It is within this system of ASEAN-led multilateral diplomacy that ASEAN and its member states constantly navigate to their benefit between cooperation and competition among the major powers. Currently, the competitive dynamic is paramount in US-China relations while other bilateral relations amongst ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners are also under strain (China-Australia, China-India, China-EU, China-Canada, China-Japan, Japan-ROK). In this uncertain and dangerous environment, ASEAN member states must assert their own voice and exercise even greater agency and dexterity in ASEAN+ groupings, making use of the existing channels and facilities under these mechanisms for cooperative ends.

## NON-ASEAN GROUPINGS

Analysts and officials involved with ASEAN, reflecting the dominant positivist, institutionalist approach, consistently present formal and informal groupings outside of ASEAN with interest in Southeast Asia as challengers to ASEAN+ groupings and ASEAN centrality. This is despite many of these groupings having developed out of the interactions in ASEAN+ ones, and benefitting the interests of Southeast Asian states.

The participation of Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam in the mega-regional Comprehensive and Progressive Partnership for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) agreement is frequently presented as a challenge to ASEAN centrality and the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade negotiations process.<sup>12</sup> Yet, these non-ASEAN negotiations and 2018 agreement have sped up RCEP negotiations and made them more comprehensive and potentially market-altering.

This tendency to see non-ASEAN-based groupings as threats to ASEAN has coloured the Southeast Asian response to the formation of the Quad consultative process between the USA, Japan, Australia and India. Much of the commentary in Southeast Asia on the Quad frets about its potential to undermine ASEAN's relevance, despite this informal minilateral grouping not including any ASEAN member states.

The Quad process developed organically from the vital humanitarian and disaster relief cooperation between these four states in response to the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that hammered Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India. Since then, Quad consultations have frequently taken place on the sidelines of the ARF and EAS meetings. They have focused on issues promoted by ASEAN and the EAS, including the freedom of navigation and overflight and the peaceful settlement of territorial and maritime rights disputes in accordance with international law in the South China Sea. ASEAN+ groupings facilitate the Quad process rather than the Quad process threatening ASEAN.

Counter-terrorism cooperation outside of ASEAN has benefitted in a similar manner from the existence of ASEAN+ groupings. In response to the 2017 terrorist siege of Marawi City, Australia took the lead in bringing together relevant officials from the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Australia and New Zealand for consultations on the Marawi siege and the terrorist threat in the Sulu and Celebes Sea.<sup>13</sup> Australia and New Zealand's close work with ASEAN member states on countering organised crime, human trafficking and violent extremism through the respective ASEAN+1 processes greatly facilitated this meeting.

The nexus between ASEAN and other minilateral arrangements works in both directions as ASEAN also benefits from the latter. The ASEAN Our Eyes (AOE) information exchange system on violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism under the purview of the ADMM builds on existing sub-regional cooperation such as the Malacca Strait Patrols (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore), the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement in the Sulu Sea (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines) and the Our Eyes Initiative (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand).

Sub-regional economic cooperation mechanisms in the Mekong region also benefit from the ASEAN-based diplomatic ecosystem, and vice versa. The annual gathering of ASEAN

foreign ministers and their dialogue counterparts offers the regional milieu for ministerial and senior officials meetings of the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) involving India, the US-initiated Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), the Mekong-ROK Cooperation, and the Mekong-Japan Cooperation processes.

The more recent and better resourced Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) process was proposed by China at the 17<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-China Summit in 2014 and includes China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. While the LMI looks into transnational human security and development challenges in the Mekong region, the LMC focusses more on infrastructure development. These mechanisms can contribute to the economic and social development of these riverine Southeast Asian states and reduce the development divide between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, a key ASEAN goal.

Finally, the COVID-19 shock to the regional public health and economic environment has seen a proliferation of initiatives outside of ASEAN between Southeast Asian states and ASEAN dialogue partners.<sup>14</sup> None of them challenge, but instead all support, the pandemic responses through the ASEAN+1 and the APT processes.

## **ASEAN AND THE NEW STRATEGIC DISORDER**

This new era of major power assertiveness and rivalry does threaten to paralyse the formal ASEAN+ groupings. Regional shocks like the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, the 2008-9 global financial crisis, the 2017 terrorist siege of Marawi City and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic also challenge these formal groupings that are often targets for criticism during crises. At the same time, redesigning these formal ASEAN processes or developing new ones in line with the formal institutional approach is not feasible.

Instead, in this new era of strategic disorder, the multiplicity and overlapping of ASEAN+ groupings and the informal minilateral initiatives and groupings they facilitate will likely become more important for Southeast Asian states, ASEAN and the region. ASEAN's cooperative ecosystem rather than ASEAN's formal institutions alone should be the focus.

**Annex 1: ASEAN+ Groupings<sup>15</sup>**

<p>Membership</p>	<p><b>EAS:</b> 18 members – 10 ASEAN member states, Australia, China, India, ROK, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, USA</p> <p><b>APT:</b> 13 members – 10 ASEAN member states, China, ROK, Japan</p> <p><b>ARF:</b> 27 members – 10 ASEAN member states, Timor-Leste, China, Japan, DPRK, ROK, Mongolia, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, EU, Russia, Canada, USA</p> <p><b>ADMM-Plus:</b> Same membership as the EAS</p> <p><b>ASEAN+1:</b> Bilateral ASEAN Dialogue Partnerships with Australia, Canada, China, EU, India, ROK, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, USA</p>
<p>Institutional set-up</p>	<p><b>EAS:</b> Annual Leaders’ summit, supported by the EAS Foreign Ministers Meeting and EAS Senior Officials Meeting (SOM), EAS Ambassadors Meeting in Jakarta (EAMJ), EAS ministerial mechanisms on economic, finance, energy and education.</p> <p><u>Deliverables:</u> Regularly issue the chair statement at the annual summit, joint statements by leaders on specific issues, foreign ministers meeting chair statements, ministerial meeting joint statements.</p> <p><b>APT:</b> Annual Leaders’ summit, supported by 15 ministerial mechanisms (including the APT Foreign Ministers Meeting), APT SOM and 19 other sectoral SOMs, 2 Director-General level mechanisms, CPR Plus Three Meeting, 23 technical level meetings and 5 other track meetings.</p> <p><u>Deliverables:</u> Regularly issue the chair statement at the annual summit, joint statements by leaders on specific issues, foreign minister meeting chair statements, ministerial meeting joint statements.</p> <p><b>ARF:</b> Annual forum among ARF Foreign Ministers, supported by the ARF SOM, Inter-sessional Support Group on Confidence Building Measures and Preventive Diplomacy (ISG on CBMs and PD), and 5 Inter-sessional Meetings (ISMs).</p> <p><u>Deliverables:</u> Regularly issue the chair statement at the annual forum, joint statements on specific issues.</p> <p><b>ADMM-Plus:</b> Annual meeting of the Defence Ministers, supported by the ADMM-Plus SOM, ADMM-Plus Working Group and 7 Experts Working Groups (EWGs).</p> <p><u>Deliverables:</u> Issue chair statements and joint statements on specific issues at the annual meeting.</p> <p><b>ASEAN+1:</b> Annual Leaders’ summits (with China, India, ROK, Japan, USA), Biennial Leaders’ summit with Australia and <i>ad hoc</i> special summits (Canada, New Zealand, Russia, EU), supported by respective foreign and economic</p>

	<p>ministers meetings and SOM on political-security and economic cooperation, ambassador-level joint cooperation committees, sectoral SOMs in functional cooperation where applicable.</p> <p><u>Deliverables:</u> Regularly issue chairman statements after annual summits, and ministerial meeting joint statements.</p>
<p>Priority areas</p>	<p><b>EAS:</b> Environment and energy, education, finance, health, natural disaster management, ASEAN connectivity, maritime cooperation</p> <p><b>APT:</b> Political-security, transnational crime, economic, finance, tourism, agriculture and forestry, energy, minerals, SMEs, environment, rural development and poverty education, social welfare, youth, women, civil service, labour, culture and arts, information and media, education, science, technology and innovation, public health.</p> <p><b>ARF:</b> Maritime security, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, ICTs security, disaster relief, and non-proliferation and disarmament.</p> <p><b>ADMM-Plus:</b> Maritime security, counter-terrorism, HARD, peace-keeping operations, military medicine, humanitarian mine action.</p> <p><b>ASEAN+1:</b> Full spectrum of cooperation areas, with some Dialogue Partnerships covering more than others (e.g. 47 mechanisms for ASEAN-China vis-à-vis only 12 for ASEAN-US).</p> <p>*All of these mechanisms have political-security dialogues, including the exchange of views on regional and international issues, at the annual gatherings of Leaders (EAS, APT, ASEAN+1), Foreign Ministers (ARF, ASEAN+1), and Defence Ministers (ADMM-Plus).</p>

<sup>1</sup> This Perspective builds on an earlier one, Malcolm Cook and Hoang Thi Ha, “Beyond China, the USA and ASEAN: Informal Minilateral Options”, *ISEAS Perspective No. 63/2020*, 16 June 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_63.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_63.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, “A Modern Tragedy? Covid-19 and US-China Relations”, *Brookings Policy Brief*, May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-modern-tragedy-covid-19-and-us-china-relations/>

<sup>3</sup> Tan See Seng, “From ARF to ADMM+: Is the Asia-Pacific Finally Getting Multilateralism Right?” in Christian Eehle, Patrick Rueppel, Megha Sarmah and Yeo Lay Hwee (Eds.), *Multilateralism in a Changing World*. Singapore: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018, 57-70, [https://www.kas.de/c/document\\_library/get\\_file?uuid=9a40472a-5ed4-4d1d-456a-c1572f3c82c0&groupId=288143](https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=9a40472a-5ed4-4d1d-456a-c1572f3c82c0&groupId=288143)

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- <sup>4</sup> Abe Shinzo, Prime Minister of Japan, keynote address, The 13th IISS Asian Security Summit -The Shangri-La Dialogue Singapore, 30 May 2014, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e\\_000086.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page4e_000086.html)
- <sup>5</sup> Allan Gyngell, “Design Faults: The Asia-Pacific’s Regional Architecture”, *Lowy Institute Policy Brief*, July 2007, [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Gyngell\\_Design\\_faults\\_1.pdf](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/pubfiles/Gyngell_Design_faults_1.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Evelyn Goh refers to this as ASEAN’s ‘omni-enmeshment’ strategy. Evelyn Goh. (2008). Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia. *International Security* Vol. 32 No 3, pp. 113-157. 10.1162/isec.2008.32.3.113
- <sup>7</sup> The Chinese premier, the head of the government of the People’s Republic of China, attends the EAS not the president of China, the head of state. The Russian president has only attended the EAS once in 2018 in Singapore.
- <sup>8</sup> Hoang Thi Ha, “Trump’s skip ASEAN-related summits again. It’s déjà vu for Asia”, *Channel News Asia*, 2 November 2019, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/asean-southeast-asia-us-america-donald-trump-summit-eas-12055328>
- <sup>9</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, “Overview of ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation”, *ASEAN Secretariat Information Paper*, June 2017, <https://asean.org/storage/2017/06/Overview-of-APT-Cooperation-Jun-2017.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Jayant Menon, “COVID-19 and ASEAN+3: Impacts and Responses”, *ISEAS Perspective No. 54/2020*, May 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_54.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_54.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> ASEAN Plus Three Economic Ministers' Joint Statement on Mitigating the Economic Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, 4 Jun 2020, [https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset\\_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/asean-plus-three-economic-ministers-joint-statement-on-mitigating-the-economic-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic](https://www.asean2020.vn/xem-chi-tiet1/-/asset_publisher/ynfWm23dDfpd/content/asean-plus-three-economic-ministers-joint-statement-on-mitigating-the-economic-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic)
- <sup>12</sup> Sanchita Basu Das, “RCEP and TPP: Comparisons and Concerns”, *ISEAS Perspective No. 02/2013*, 7 January 2013, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2013\\_2.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2013_2.pdf); Alice Ba, “Will the TPP and OBOR Challenge ASEAN Centrality?”, *East Asia Forum*, 20 May 2016, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/05/20/will-the-tpp-and-obor-challenge-asean-centrality/>
- <sup>13</sup> John Blaxland et al., “Marawi and After: How Australia Can Help”, *National Security College Policy Option Paper No. 6*, August 2017, [https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/nsc\\_crawford\\_anu\\_edu\\_au/2017-09/pop\\_6\\_marawi\\_and\\_after.pdf](https://nsc.crawford.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publication/nsc_crawford_anu_edu_au/2017-09/pop_6_marawi_and_after.pdf)
- <sup>14</sup> For more details, please see Malcolm Cook and Hoang Thi Ha, “Beyond China, the USA and ASEAN: Informal Minilateral Options”, *ISEAS Perspective No. 63/2020*, 16 June 2020, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2020\\_63.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_63.pdf)
- <sup>15</sup> Compiled by the authors from various sources.

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