

Security Factors behind the Decline in the US-Gulf States Relations

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Abstract

The Gulf Cooperation Council states “GCCs” have been an important partner of the United States for decades, sharing strong economic and political ties. However, recent years have seen a decline in these relations, with tensions escalating between the two. This has been further complicated by political instability in the Gulf region, including ongoing conflicts in Yemen and Syria. This article explored the security factors behind this decline and the challenges faced in navigating this complex relationship and examined the current situation of Gulf States-U.S. relations from the global security point of view. It turns out that the main reasons for the decline are divided into groups of security factors: regional and military security, economic security, and international security. The article then discussed the impact of the decline on the world order, including a shift in power dynamics and creating opportunities for other actors, such as Iran, Russia, and China, to increase their influence in the region. The article concluded by recommending that U.S. foreign policymakers need to review relations with the GCCs and formulate new strategies that keep pace with contemporary events and achieve the interests of both partners.

Keywords

Global Security, Persian Gulf, Arab Gulf, United States of America, Middle East, The World Order, International Relations, Active Powers

1. Introduction

GCC, or Gulf Cooperation Council, is a regional political and economic organization consisting of six Arab countries in the Persian Gulf region: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. These states play a significant role in shaping global affairs, especially in terms of security. Their

strategic location, vast oil reserves, and economic influence make them key players in the international arena.

The GCC was established in 1981 with the primary objective of enhancing cooperation and integration among member states. Together, GCC states “GCCs” form a collective entity that aims to address common challenges and promote stability in the region (Abdelkhalik, 2022). Over the years, the GCCs have evolved to become influential actors, not only within the Middle East but also on the global stage, especially regarding energy security (Burgos & Ghazayel, 2018).

One of the key factors contributing to the significance of GCCs in global affairs is their role in energy security. With their abundant oil and gas reserves, the GCC countries have emerged as major energy producers and exporters. Their ability to influence global energy markets and ensure a steady supply of oil has granted them considerable geopolitical leverage.

Furthermore, the GCCs serve as a critical hub for international trade and investment. Their strategic location between Europe, Asia, and Africa positions them as key transit points for goods and services. The GCCs’ thriving economies, advanced infrastructure, and business-friendly policies attract foreign investors and foster economic growth.

In addition to their economic importance, the GCCs also play a vital role in maintaining regional security (Salamey, 2009). The Gulf region has been marred by various conflicts and tensions, including territorial disputes, political rivalries, and the threat of terrorism. The GCCs actively collaborate to address these challenges through collective defence mechanisms, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Their commitment to security cooperation has not only ensured stability within the region but also contributed to wider global security efforts.

The United States has long had a complex relationship with the Gulf States, characterized by a combination of economic, military, and geopolitical interests. One key aspect of US policy towards the Gulf States is the importance of maintaining stability in the region (Khan, 2001). The United States has often acted as a mediator and facilitator in resolving conflicts and disputes between the Gulf States, recognizing that regional stability is crucial for global energy security and economic stability. Additionally, the United States has been a major player in the security arrangements of the Gulf States, providing military assistance and establishing military bases to ensure the protection of vital shipping routes and to counter potential threats. Another important aspect of US policy towards the Gulf States is promoting economic cooperation and trade. The Gulf States are major oil producers and have significant investment potential, making them important partners for the United States in terms of energy security and economic growth. Moreover, the United States has sought to deepen its diplomatic ties with the Gulf States, engaging in dialogue and fostering partnerships on a range of issues such as counter-terrorism, human rights, and regional conflicts.

However, in recent years, this relationship has been facing challenges due to various security factors, such as the rise of regional powers, oil prices, and chang-

ing geopolitical dynamics. The decline in the Gulf States and U.S. relations is a complex issue that needs to be understood from different perspectives. The Gulf States have been heavily dependent on the United States for security, and the U.S. has played a key role in shaping the political and economic landscape of the region. However, in recent years, Gulf States have become more assertive in their foreign policy, and there is a growing sense of disillusionment with the United States. This article will explore the security factors affecting GCCs-US relations. It is crucial to understand the significance of GCCs in global affairs. Their economic influence, energy resources, and security cooperation make them key players in shaping the dynamics of international relations. By delving deeper into the complexities of their relationship with the United States and with recent relations with other international powers, valuable insights into the evolving landscape of global security can be gained.

2. Methodology

The research was centred on qualitative techniques focusing on a case study design to analyze the relations between the GCCs and the U.S., in addition to using the balance of power theory in the field of international relations. One of its scholars, George Liska, believes that this balance is characterized as relatively stable and dynamic. It may be disturbed under the influence of new factors, but it allows room for other equilibria to emerge (Hoffmann, 1960: pp. 137-150). Balancing behavior is also explained by the state's attempt to enter into alliances with international powers to avoid threats and bring about changes that would establish the possibility of the emergence of international poles close to balance and support international stability (MacDougall, 2009: pp. 54-55). The article applies these concepts to the decline in GCCs-US relations and possible new GCC strategic alliances.

3. The History of Gulf States and U.S. Relations

The history of Gulf States and U.S. relations has evolved over time, shaped by geopolitical interests, energy resource dependencies, security concerns, and economic ties.

The relationship between the Gulf States and the United States dates back to the early 1930s when Standard Oil of California discovered oil in Bahrain (Long, 1979: p. 28). The United States has been an important strategic partner for Gulf countries ever since, with oil being the main factor that has brought them closer together. The Gulf States relied on American firms for infrastructure development and oil exploration (Hudson & Kirk, 2014: pp. 70-73). They also rely heavily on the US for military support, weapons, and security arrangements.

During the Cold War, the United States sought to counter Soviet influence in the region, leading to increased military and security cooperation with the Gulf States (Amanat & Bernhardsson, 2007: pp. 96-97). The relationship got stronger 1980-1991 during Iranian-Iraq war then the Persian Gulf War leading to increased

U.S. military presence and naval protection in the region (Takeyh, 2010).

After the 9/11 attacks, U.S.-Gulf relations witnessed a significant shift as the United States pursued counter-terrorism partnerships and addressed regional security concerns (Gerald et al., 2022). The U.S. military bases in the Gulf States played a crucial role in supporting U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

From the contemporary economic cooperation, there are economic ties between the Gulf States and the U.S. which have flourished, with significant investments, and trade partnerships (Scott, 2016: p. 56). The United States is a major market for Gulf countries, especially in the energy sector, where they export oil and gas.

However, relations between the two have not always been smooth. The United States has long been criticized for its foreign policy in the region, including its support for Israel and its involvement in the Iraq war. In addition to its interference in the internal affairs of the Gulf states under the pretext of protecting human rights.

4. Security Factors That Have Contributed to the Decline in Relations

The current decline in relations between the Gulf States and the United States has been a cause for concern for many people around the world. Tensions have been escalating over the past few years, and the recent events have only made the situation worse. There are several factors that have contributed to the decline in relations between the Gulf States and the United States, and all of those factors can be divided into three dimensions of security; regional and military security, economic security, and international security.

4.1. Regional and Military Security

The concept of regional security or collective defense is carried out within the framework of different political and military alliances (Kusztal, 2017: p. 22). GCCs have counted on the idea of collective security or achieving regional security through the alliance with the U.S. for decades. From the GCCs point of view, security should be achieved by the U.S. by ensuring a balance of power and preventing the main competitor (Iran) from owning nuclear weapons. Also, by military supporting GCCs to ending up the wars surrounding the region with the benefit of GCCs.

4.1.1. The Conflict in Yemen

One of the major causes of the decline in relations is the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The United States has been supporting Saudi Arabia in this conflict, providing weapons and other resources to help them fight the Houthi rebels (Kheel, 2021). However, an end of U.S. support for offensive operations in the Saudi Arabia-led war in Yemen has been announced in 2021 (Blanchard, 2021: p. 2). That support has not been enough, from the GCC's perspective, on the one hand, and controversial with a feeling that the United States should not be in-

volved in this conflict at all, from American and Western perspectives, on the other hand.

4.1.2. Iran

The recent tensions between the United States and Iran have also had a significant impact on relations with the Gulf States. Iran has been seen as a major threat in the region, and the United States has been taking steps to try and contain their influence. However, this has led to a lot of anxiety and uncertainty, and many people are worried about what the future holds.

One of the main factors is the differing opinions on Iran and its nuclear program. The Gulf States have long viewed Iran as a significant threat to their security and stability, and they have been pushing for more aggressive action by the United States to counter Iran's influence in the region as the U.S promises to do so (Institute of Peace, 2023). However, the United States has taken a lenient approach to Iran, which has led to frustration among the Gulf States.

4.1.3. Palestine

Israel's occupation has created a complex dynamic in this relationship. The GCC countries have expressed their support for the Palestinian cause and have consistently called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. This stance puts them at odds with the US, which has been a long-time ally of Israel. The GCC countries have witnessed the suffering and hardship endured by Palestinians under occupation, leading to increased pressure from their populations to take a stronger stance against Israel's actions. This has caused tensions and strained relations with the US, as the GCC countries seek to balance their commitment to the Palestinian cause with their strategic partnership with the US. Especially when there are Israeli attacks on Palestinians and holy places, as is happening these days with raids on Al-Aqsa Mosque and committing massacres against Palestinians in Gaza in the current war which started on October 2023 (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). This constitutes a terrifying security situation, not only for US-Gulf relations or for the Palestinians alone but also for the regional security of the entire region.

4.1.4. Syria Crisis

Also, the indolence of the United States in resolving the conflict in Syria and the Iranian expansion and its loyal forces, coinciding with the partial or complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, caused concern about the continuity of the role of the United States as an effective major power that the Gulf states can rely on to achieve security in the region.

The Syria crisis shaped the relationship between the GCC and the U.S., with both areas of cooperation and divergence emerging. The shared concern about extremist groups and the pursuit of stability were key areas of cooperation. However, differences in positions on the Syrian government and approaches to military intervention highlighted the complexities and challenges (Jones, 2017) in their relationship during this period of crisis particularly during the Obama

administration (Smith, 2018). The Gulf States have become increasingly frustrated with what they see as a lack of support from the United States on issues such as the Syrian civil war (Muasher, 2018) and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They feel that the United States has not done enough to support their interests in these conflicts, which has further strained relations.

4.2. Economic Security

GCCs, like any country, seek to secure their national economy against challenges that impact the national economy such as global pandemics, nature recourses market conditions, and general economic growth.

“Economic security is the ability to protect or to advance a state’s economic interests in the face of events, developments, or actions that may threaten or block these interests. These obstacles may be foreign or domestic in origin, intentional or accidental, and the consequences of human or of natural forces” (Neu & Wolf Jr., 1994: p. 13).

The alliance with the U.S. has ensured, some not all, of these economic security factors for decades but some challenges have been raised recently and contributed to the relations decline.

4.2.1. The Coronavirus Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on Gulf States and U.S. relations. The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 resulted in a global economic downturn, and the Gulf States, whose economies rely heavily on oil exports and tourism, were hit hard. The decline in oil prices and the suspension of international travel severely impacted the economies of Gulf States (AbiNader, 2021), leading to massive job losses and a rise in economic uncertainty. In addition, the pandemic also led to a decline in trade between the Gulf States and the U.S. As businesses shut down, supply chains were disrupted, and trade patterns were altered. The pandemic has also resulted in a decrease in demand for oil, which has further impacted the Gulf States’ economies.

Moreover, the Arab Gulf states and all the countries allied to the United States of America felt the failure of the United States to support its allies during the epidemic, especially with regard to medical aid, at a time when China provided enormous assistance to allied and non-allied countries.

4.2.2. The Oil

Another factor that has contributed to the decline in relations is the United States’ pressure on the Gulf states with regard to oil prices, reducing or increasing production to the detriment of the interests of the Gulf states (Krane, 2022). The United States seemed to be a country that only cared about its own interests, not the interests of its allies. The GCC states are among the world’s top oil producers and exporters, while the U.S. is one of the largest consumers of oil. The oil industry has played a significant role in shaping the political and economic relations between these two regions.

Also, the United States increased domestic oil production. The Gulf States have traditionally been major suppliers of oil to the United States, but the rise of domestic production has reduced their importance as suppliers. This has led to a shift in the balance of power, with the Gulf States feeling less important and influential in the eyes of the United States.

Moreover, the dependency on oil revenues has also posed challenges for the GCC countries in diversifying their economies. This reliance on oil has made them vulnerable to price fluctuations and economic shocks. Recognizing this, many GCC countries have embarked on economic diversification initiatives to reduce their dependence on oil and create sustainable and diversified economies. The success of these efforts will have implications for their relations with the United States, as it may open up new avenues for collaboration beyond the oil sector with new strategic allies.

4.2.3. GCC's National Economic Aspirations

The GCC countries heavily rely on oil revenues, which can make their economies vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. These countries knew that very well and seek to develop their economy because global demand is expected to slow down from around 2040, and oil revenues are expected to decline (IMF, 2016). This is due to the growing demand for renewable energy and improvements in energy efficiency. Therefore, GCCs have made efforts to avoid using financial assets accumulated over decades in sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) for future generations (Mirzoev et al., 2020). Before the pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that the GCC countries may run out of their wealth by 2034 unless they implemented substantive tax and economic reforms. The pandemic may have shortened this period (Kabbani & Ben Mimoune, 2021: pp. 1-2).

After decades of alliance with the U.S., GCC countries have reviewed the development of their economy and realized that their economy still needs to be improved. In other words, GCCs felt that the alliance had not met their desired economic requirements for long-term sustainability. Therefore, they started to diversify their international relation to faster develop robust non-oil sectors, such as tourism, manufacturing, and technology.

4.3. International Security

As a superior power, the United States should ensure international security through various means, including alliances, military presence, and involvement in international organizations (NATO, n.d.). In addition to engaging in diplomatic efforts, intelligence sharing, and economic assistance to bolster international security. However, changes in these US tasks have led to the decline in GCCs-US relations.

4.3.1. The shift in U.S. Foreign Policy

The shift in U.S. foreign policy, especially under the Trump administration, has had a significant impact on the relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) countries and the United States (Youngs, 2020). The primary factor influencing this shift has been the increasing focus of the U.S. on its domestic affairs and a desire to reduce its involvement in foreign conflicts (Commuri, 2023). This change has resulted in several noticeable effects on GCC-US relations, including changes in alliance dynamics, security cooperation, and economic ties.

One of the notable changes in GCC-US relations has been the re-alignment of alliances. Historically, the United States has been a key ally of the GCC countries, providing security assurances and military assistance. However, the Trump administration's "America First" policy, which aims to prioritize U.S. national interests, has led to a decreased emphasis on maintaining strong alliances with traditional partners (Albassam, 2018). As a result, there has been a sense of uncertainty among GCC countries about the U.S. commitment to their security and defense.

Another aspect impacted by the shift in U.S. foreign policy is security cooperation. Traditionally, the GCC countries and the United States have cooperated closely in countering common threats, such as terrorism and Iranian influence in the region. However, with the reduced U.S. involvement in the Middle East, GCC countries have been compelled to seek alternative partnerships and security arrangements. This has led to an increased reliance on regional actors like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which have assumed a more prominent role in shaping regional security dynamics.

4.3.2. Globalization Consequences

Globalization has had a profound impact on the relationship between the United States and the Gulf States. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected through trade, technology, and communication, the economic and political ties between these regions have grown stronger. However, as globalization has opened up markets around the world, including the Gulf States, Gulf companies face increased competition from international firms. This can lead to job losses and economic strain, as companies may choose to outsource production or move operations to countries with lower costs.

Additionally, globalization has also led to increased cultural exchange, which can sometimes clash with the traditional values and customs of the Gulf States. This can create tensions and misunderstandings between the two sides (Abduljaber & Kalin, 2019). Moreover, the spread of Western values and ideals through globalization has sometimes been seen as a threat to the traditional social fabric of the Gulf States, leading to resistance and the strengthening of cultural conservatism. Globalization has not been without its challenges, as cultural differences, political tensions, and economic disparities still strain the relationship between the US and the Gulf States.

Overall, while globalization may have brought about several benefits, it has also negatively influenced the US-Gulf States relationship, primarily through economic competition, cultural clashes, and vulnerability to global economic downturns.

4.3.3. International Active Powers (China-Russia)

China and Russia have had a significant impact on GCC-US relations through various security factors. One of the main ways in which China and Russia have impacted GCC-US relations is through their support of countries and organizations that are in opposition to US interests in the region. For instance, China has established robust cooperation with the GCC, particularly with Saudi Arabia, in an attempt to counterbalance the growing Indo-GCC nexus. Russia, on the other hand, has joined the Declaration of Cooperation with OPEC and has significant activities in the oil sector, similar to the GCC and the US. This alignment of interests between China, Russia, and the GCC has created a shift in the security dynamics of the region, posing challenges to the traditional GCC-US relationship.

Another way in which China and Russia have impacted GCC-US relations is through their involvement in regional conflicts. China and Russia have both supported Iran, a country seen as a major security concern by the GCC countries and the US. Their support for Iran has exacerbated tensions in the region and strained the GCC-US relationship. China and Russia have also strengthened their ties with each other, forming a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (Cheng et al., 2019). This partnership further complicates the dynamics of GCC-US relations, as it presents a united front against US dominance in the region.

5. The Impact on International Security/World Order

The decline in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-US relations can have significant implications for the world order. The GCC countries are important players in global politics due to their significant energy resources and strategic geographical location.

The United States has long been a key ally and security partner for the GCC countries. However, several factors have contributed to the recent strains in the relationship, including differences in regional strategies, human rights concerns, and the US shale oil boom reducing its reliance on Gulf oil. Moreover, after invading first Afghanistan in 2001 and then Iraq in 2003, the United States was reluctant to serve as a gendarmerie in the Middle East as it faced enormous financial burdens (Feyza, 2018).

Therefore, the future of the Gulf States and U.S. relations is an important topic of discussion because a change in central alliances may be followed by a change in the unipolarity of the United States through the formation of new alliances. Where the Gulf states find themselves forced to enter into alliances with emerging major powers such as China and Russia. Every country has the right to search for alliances to achieve its interests if the American retreat and lack of seriousness in dealing with core issues continues.

The Biden team has shown a willingness to re-engage with the Gulf States on a variety of issues. One area of focus has been the Yemen conflict, where the administration has renewed diplomatic efforts to end the war and address the hu-

manitarian crisis. Additionally, the Biden team has focused on repairing relationships with traditional U.S. allies in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which had become strained under the previous administration.

However, the Biden administration announced in 2021 an end to U.S. support for offensive operations in the Saudi Arabia-led war in Yemen (Blanchard, 2021: p. 2) and has also signalled a shift in priorities, with a greater focus on human rights and democracy promotion, which complicate relations with some Gulf States.

One of the major consequences of a decline in GCC-US relations is the potential power vacuum it could create in the region. The GCC countries have relied on the US for their security and have entered into multiple defence agreements and military partnerships over the years. If this alliance weakens, it could lead to a shift in power dynamics, creating opportunities for other actors, such as Iran, Russia, or China, to increase their influence in the region. The US has avoided similar involvement in Libya and Syria, giving other countries such as France and Russia free reign in those two countries. U.S. military power may be unrivalled, but it is questionable how wisely the United States will use it, given its largely unsuccessful missions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the severe undermining of its own credibility (Feyza, 2018).

Furthermore, a strained GCC-US relationship could also impact global energy markets. The Gulf region is a major supplier of oil and gas to the world, accounting for a significant share of global energy exports. Any disruption in the cooperation between the GCC countries and the US could lead to volatility in oil prices and potentially affect the global economy.

The decline in GCC-US relations can have far-reaching consequences for the world order. It could create power vacuums and opportunities for other actors to increase their influence in the Gulf region, impact global energy markets, and strain regional stability. As the Gulf countries reassess their relationship with the US, it will be crucial for all parties involved to find a balance that ensures their respective interests while maintaining a level of cooperation and stability (Milani, 2018).

So, the continuation of the United States on this approach has led to the possibility of a change in the international relations of the Gulf states, which is a natural change in its search for viable allies to achieve national interests.

At the regional level, the deterioration of US-Gulf relations has prompted a shift in the foreign policy of certain Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Notably, a reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran which has taken place under the auspices of China, following decades of estrangement and hostility. This development has been interpreted by many analysts as a signal of the United States' waning influence in the Middle East, and a potential shift in the balance of power at both regional and global levels, particularly given China's sponsorship of the rapprochement (Hussain, 2023).

Also, the GCCs have started a new approach to deal with intractable crises in the region such as the Syria crisis. The reintegration of Syria into the Arab community has significant implications for the stability of the Middle East and the success of ongoing de-escalation efforts. These efforts to improve bilateral relations are part of a larger regional initiative to stabilize the Middle East following a tumultuous decade (Mazzucco, 2023). With the GCCs at the forefront, tensions with longstanding regional rivals and competitors are being reduced in order to promote lasting stability in the GCC's immediate vicinity.

Moreover, at the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the GCCs maintained a stance of neutrality. However, they subsequently achieved a delicate equilibrium in their relations with both the United States and Russia, while simultaneously maintaining a cordial relationship with Ukraine (Roche, 2023). It appears that the GCC has begun to acknowledge Moscow's significance as an essential player.

The recent rapprochements suggest that Gulf states are seeking to forge alliances with international powers in order to fill the void left by the United States and advance their interests. The impact of these alliances, however, will extend beyond the Gulf region and the Middle East and will have global implications for the structure of the world order, given the significant economic and political importance and influence of the Arab Gulf states.

6. Conclusion

GCC-US relations are considered complex alliances in terms of goals and interests, in addition to regional and global issues. Because the relations of countries are based on mutual interests, any delay in achieving them leads, as a natural result, to a decline in those relations. Through this article, it has been shown that mutual interests can be dimensioned to security factors of all types, whether economic, military, political..., and at all levels, local, regional, or international.

The Gulf states felt a threat to their security when the United States was unable or refused to move forward in providing benefits to its strategic ally, as happened in the wars in Yemen, Syria, and Palestine. In addition to stopping or limiting the supply of weapons and military force with the increasing Iranian and Houthi threat. All these issues remained unresolved despite the agreements and strategic alliance with the US. All of that was accompanied by an increase in the influence of international powers such as Russia and China.

Indeed, the Gulf states are aware of the changing global balance of power and are seeking closer ties with China, Russia and India. But these powers are still unwilling to replace or even challenge the United States as a superpower. As a result, the Arab Gulf countries may continue to rely on the United States for their security for the time being. But as the United States becomes more reluctant, the Gulf Arab states may even be forced to take matters into their own hands, especially to defeat the Houthis in Yemen (Feyza, 2018).

Another development is that the US-dominated unipolar world is gradually

giving way to a multipolar world, with China's economic rise in the Far East and Russia's resurgence as a military power. China, too, has invested heavily in its military and is trying to catch up with the United States. Perhaps India will also become a serious contender for superpower status in the near future. GCC's reliance on Washington diminished and it acknowledged Moscow's significance as a key player. Both Russia and GCC share a sense of dissatisfaction with the United States, owing to the latter's repeated setbacks in the Middle East and its increasing energy self-sufficiency, which have led to a distancing of ties between Washington and GCC (Roche, 2023).

Overall, the decline in relations between the Gulf States and the United States is a complex issue with many different security factors at play. Despite all the factors that led to the decline, and despite the decline of the United States' presence in the Middle East region in general and the rise of regional and international powers, that does not mean the end of the United States as an international power. Therefore, the GCCs must exploit all these developments to achieve their interests and enhance their security by maintaining good relations with the United States in addition to forming new alliances with regional and international powers besides imposing their conditions on the dynamics of strategic relations with the United States. On the other hand, the United States should restructure its relations with the Gulf states and seriously consider the possibility of losing this important ally. Therefore, priority should be given to the GCC's security and interests in its foreign policy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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